

Jacques Kallis – Three trades, master of all

Neil Manthorp | 1 August 2014

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It's hard to believe, given his physique and the reputation, Jacques Kallis commanded in international cricket for almost two decades, but the reason he wasn't selected for Western Province Schools was because he was too small. His headmaster at Wynberg Boys' High, Keith Richardson, had seen beyond his lack of height and breadth, however, and asked him to net with the First XI, aged just 14. Kallis arrived in a helmet, not only a rare luxury in those days, but an apparently futile gesture at protection for one so fragile.

The leader of the attack, Aubrey Martyn, who would be selected by South Africa to tour England in 1994, started gently, but was soon curious – and peeved – enough to be charging in off his full run. Bouncers came and bouncers went, mainly out of the nets: the diminutive Kallis appeared to have an unnatural amount of time. The titters of the watching boys were quickly redirected from the batsman to the bowlers.

A couple of years later, Kallis was playing in a prestigious schools festival. For weeks, his strict but devoted father, Henry, helped him prepare, by throwing him balls in the nets after school. But now Jacques played a loose drive at a wide delivery, and was caught behind for a duck. When the match finished, he couldn't find his father. "I'm afraid he's gone, Jacques," said the master in charge. "He said you can walk home if you're going to play a shot like that." And he did – for seven miles, carrying his kit. Henry explained later that he didn't care about the score; everybody makes nought. Just as long as the bowler earns your wicket! In later years, the rest of the world would understand how seriously Kallis heeded the advice.

And his team-mates loved him for it. This would become the part of his life that was invisible and inaudible to the public, the part between player and captain, player and coach, the dialogue which takes place over a room-service bolognese on the third night of the Second Test halfway through another tour: "The batting is built around you, Jacques. You are the best we have. We need you. Please don't let us down..."

At the beginning of his career, against a background of collapses and brittleness, and with the top and middle order often relying on an endless list of allrounders to bail them out, Kallis obeyed team orders, adopting as low-risk an approach as possible. It wasn't just team orders, though. When Kallis started his Test career, not one member of South Africa's top six averaged above 40. If that did not immediately concern him and his senior colleagues, then the media's obsession with the stat would eventually drive the players to paranoia. Series against Australia were previewed around South Africa's batting inadequacies and the superiority of the opposition top six, who mostly averaged over 40 – and Steve Waugh over 50.

It became a duty, more than a desire, to increase his average, and the habit stuck. But with the establishment of Hashim Amla and A. B. de Villiers, and Graeme Smith's encouragement to express himself, Kallis's three quickest Test centuries were all made during the final three years of his career, and two of them converted into his only doubles. Selective criticism that he was unable to dominate an attack receded, as the realisation dawned that he had, in fact, been precluded from doing so. Finally, he was surrounded by players he could trust – and of similar stature. His career strike-rate by the end of 2009, from 133 Tests, was 44. In his final 33 Tests, by which time Smith, Amla and de Villiers were all well entrenched, it was 53. His tally of 97 sixes was bettered only by Adam Gilchrist. Now he can devote himself to one-day cricket.

The observation that Kallis was a great batsman – he averaged 55 – but not a great allrounder is understandable given the runs he scored. But it is hardly sustainable. Not a single regular bowler in the history of the game has been a fixture at No. 3 or 4. Great allrounders came in at No. 6 or 7. He

led the attack when necessary, taking the new ball and claiming five-wicket hauls when Allan Donald, Shaun Pollock, Makhaya Ntini and Dale Steyn were not. And that is the point: he became labelled as a fill-in fourth seamer because of the bowlers around him, not because he was unwilling or incapable. He accepted the role of bowling maidens because the team needed it, not because he didn't want to take wickets. Like his batting, his bowling genuflected to the greater good.

Granted the rare opportunity to attack, he could still approach 90mph right up until his final Test, and rarely objected to a third slip when the ball was swinging. On plenty of occasions the scorecard would tell of unremarkable analyses – two for 44, or three for 35. But they were often door-opening or innings-changing contributions. One need look only at the role he played with the ball in South Africa's historic series victories in England and Australia in 2008 to grasp his importance. His fielding, too, mainly in the slips, was calm and efficient: his 200 Test catches were bettered only by Rahul Dravid.

He was systematic and clinical in his assessment of everything he did. Kallis had the rare ability to ask himself questions dispassionately, mostly of the risk- versus-reward variety. He pondered the reverse sweep, for example, but believed he had other ways to milk a troublesome spinner. Even so, he played the shot about a dozen times in the nets, just in case. And in January 2011, with South Africa in trouble in a series-deciding Test against India at his beloved Newlands, and Harbhajan Singh – armed with a packed leg-side field – making the ball turn and bounce uncontrollably, he produced the shot. It went for four. Everyone but Kallis was stunned. He played it again soon after: four more. In all, he would reverse-sweep ten times, and only once did he fail to score. Meanwhile, M. S. Dhoni had changed the field: the stranglehold had been broken. Kallis went on to make his second century of the match and save the series.

He also had an ability to switch off. He almost never watched a game on television, and was rarely interested in results or individual performances. When the time came to engage, he was able to tune in instantly, and devoured the information supplied by video analysts.

At the age of 30, Kallis was awarded a benefit year by Western Province, during which he raised over a million Rand. He accepted none of it, preferring instead to start the Jacques Kallis Scholarship Foundation, which allowed promising youngsters from underprivileged backgrounds to finish their high-school education at a traditional cricket-playing school. The emphasis was on education. Since it began in 2005, the foundation has produced over 30 high-school graduates, and put half a dozen through university.

Kallis rarely offered unprompted advice, but was neither reticent nor reluctant when asked. He preferred actions to speak louder than words, and that will apply to his legacy. The debate about his greatness, especially when compared to others, never bothered him during his Test career, and it will not in the future. But the time has come for him to do something he always said he would. "I'll appreciate the records and enjoy what I achieved, but they are not why I played the game," he says. "Winning games and series for my country will always be the best memories, no question."