

The best of batting partners

*After nine years,
the hpc and CSA are
cashing in on an
unbeaten innings.*

Text: Rick de Villiers Images: Gallo Images

Between May and September each year there's a distinctly soothing sound that reverberates over the sports fields of L.C. de Villiers. It's the dull, lulling thud of leather on willow, which is only occasionally interrupted by the sickening tumble of stumps.

This sonic motif is a regular feature of the hpc's surroundings, where Cricket South Africa's (CSA) National Academy Programme has had its home for the past nine years. In this time there have been eight National Academy intakes, which have produced eleven full (Test / ODI) Proteas and dozens of quality first-class cricketers. According to CSA Manager of Coaching Anton (Yogi) Ferreira, the partnership between CSA and the hpc is a blissful one.

"The first contract was signed in 2003, and we've recently renewed it for another 10 years," Ferreira explains. "While the Academy serves the broader needs of South African cricket, the hpc serves the very specific needs of the programme. In those four months during which the National Academy Squad is in training, the hpc is our one-stop shop. There's the accommodation, the medical facilities, psychological skills training, visual skills training, and much more. All of our needs are catered for, and we can be sure that the promising young players who come through the programme each year are getting the very best."

The aim of the programme is to prepare outstanding young cricketers for the highest levels of competition. Given that players like J.P. Duminy, Faf du Plessis, Marchant de Lange and Vernon Philander are some of the programme's prime exports, CSA's goals are being realised.

"The 20-odd players that are selected each year are given the greatest attention," says Ferreira. "We help them make the leap from amateur to professional, from competent athlete to consummate cricketer. This means

not only working on aspects of the actual game, like technique and fitness, but also on rounding the individual. The players do courses in time management, media relations, cultural differences, conflict management and even HIV awareness.

"This in no way replaces proper tertiary study, and we've made it our personal duty to accommodate those students who are enrolled at universities or colleges. If they study close by, we plan our schedules around their lectures. If they have exams to write, we either courier the tests up here or fly the players down to their respective institutions. We do this because we believe in developing these young men holistically.

"When it comes to the game itself, we try and give the lads as much exposure as possible. After three months of intensive training, the players are given the chance to prove themselves on the field. This involves either travelling abroad and

playing other national academies (like Australia or Ireland), or hosting national academies here (Bangladesh have been regular visitors and strong opponents). This month-long tour normally includes two Four-Day games, three One-Days, and three T20s. In the past, our focus was on the longer format. But since the advent of T20, we've had to divide our focus, which is a difficult but worthwhile balancing act."

Ferreira believes that adaptability is the cornerstone of the programme. Its reach extends beyond the National Academy Squad, and includes the training of coaches, umpires, and specialist physiotherapists, and also the rehabilitation of injured players. Then there's the interest from the outside. Locker 2, the building that bears CSA's stamp for 365 days a year, hosts numbers of teams each year.

Soon the demand will be even higher, since CSA, the hpc and the University of Pretoria are joining forces to construct a state-of-art indoor cricket centre. The double storey facility will boast four dedicated bowling lanes, high speed cameras for analysis, cutting-edge bowling machines and offices for members of CSA. Though it's still early days, CSA hopes to establish the facility as an ICC accredited centre where suspect bowling actions will be analysed and rehabilitated.

So after an unbeaten innings of nine years, the National Academy Programme at the hpc is as strong as ever. Despite South Africa's recent disappointment at the ICC T20 World Cup, there is reason to feel optimistic about the future.

