

# Morné Morkel ‘retires’ at his peak

Morné Morkel announced his retirement from test cricket in March 2018, just before the third test match against Australia. In what he described as his best day on a cricket field, he comfortably passed a major milestone of 300 Test match wickets<sup>1</sup>. (It was in fact 309 over 86 matches.) He is carrying on playing for Surrey County Cricket Club

## Retiring from Test Cricket

Morne Morkel belongs to the very tiniest minority of players who leave international cricket while they are still improving. In his last 15 Tests the South African fast bowler took 67 wickets at 22, but in his last seven he collected 37 at just 17.75. It wasn't just a case of doing what he had always done, but doing it very well.

In the third Test match at Newlands South Africa surged to one of their biggest victories in Test cricket, hammering Australia by 322 runs on the fourth day of the match. Morkel claimed five for 23 as the Australian batting line-up were shot out for just 107, losing their last 10 wickets for just 50 runs. In what was his penultimate game of Test cricket before retirement, Morkel claimed the best match figures in his 85-Test career, finishing with nine for 110 and the man of the match award.

A stunning collapse by Australia of 10-50 in the final session on Sunday at Newlands resigned it to a 322-run defeat on another dramatic day in Cape Town. The Test became known for blatant ball tampering by roughening the ball by the Australian side. It consisted of. It was picked up by TV cameras which showed bowler Cameron Bancroft trying to hide a piece of adhesive tape embedded with grit in his pants when he was challenged. The scandal which led to a huge international outcry and the

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<sup>1</sup><https://citizen.co.za/sport/south-africa-sport/sa-cricket-sport/1867966/>

banishment of Steve Smith, the Australian captain, Cameron Bancroft the bowler/tamperer and his mentor David Warner overshadowed the celebration of Morné's achievement.

Morkel has been that rare breed, a good guy in a sport often inclined towards the bad and the unseemly<sup>2</sup>. He has played a straight bat to all he encountered, and the game has embraced him for it. For 12 years he has been a cricketing slave for South Africa; doing the donkey-work, softening up batsmen, running up the hill or into the wind.

Morné suffered some abdominal strain injuries and was heavily strapped when he played the fourth and final Test match at the Wanderers stadium in Johannesburg<sup>3</sup>. He dismissed both opening batsmen in an impressive eight-over spell.



**Morne Morkel of the Proteas.** *(Photo by Lee Warren/Gallo Images/Getty Images)*

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.timeslive.co.za/sport/cricket/2018-03-26-sa-will-miss-morkels-parental-guidance/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.iol.co.za/sport/cricket/proteas/morkel-bowls-through-the-pain-to-set-proteas-on-path-to-victory-14204260>

## Joining Surrey

While he has retired from Test Cricket, Morné is continuing his cricket career. He joined county championship cricket for Surrey in England on a Kolpak<sup>4</sup> arrangement. In a recent game against Yorkshire, he bowled beautifully and picked seven wickets in the game including a five-wicket haul in the second innings. He returned with the figures of 5/39 to help his team bundle out the opposition to 152 runs as his team gunned down the required target with 7 wickets in hand.

## The Morné Story<sup>5</sup>

He was “slothing” on the sofa in the family home watching television one day when Albie was gathering his kit for afternoon nets with Easterns in Benoni. “Why don’t you come along — you’re not doing anything else,” the big brother said to ‘little’ Morne. Coach Ray Jennings liked what he saw — a lot — and that was how it started, with a junior contract a year later.

Morne had a lot to learn, but at least his future was decided — it would be in cricket. Jennings loved the early rawness and encouraged it — at the same time instilling an old-school discipline in his old-style fashion that players either loved or hated. Ice baths and extra laps didn’t scare the Morkels.

The rise was rapid — he wondered whether it was too rapid. “It was the Boxing Day Test in Durban and I was standing on a field with Sachin Tendulkar. Not only that, I had to bowl my first ball to him. I couldn’t breathe properly, I didn’t know how I was going to bowl it...”

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<sup>4</sup> The [Kolpak ruling](#) was made on 8 May 2003 in favour of Slovakian hand ball player [Maroš Kolpak](#), by the [European Court of Justice](#). Maroš Kolpak had lost his contract with German handball club TSV Ostringen, as his team already had two non-EU players. Kolpak appealed to the European Court of Justice, claiming that he should not be considered as a non-EU player as he was a German resident, and Slovakia was part of the [European Union Association Agreement](#). The court ruled in favour of Kolpak, and allowed citizens of countries that had free trade treaties with the EU, and were part of European Union Association Agreements, to work in any EU country.

<sup>5</sup>Neil Manthorp <https://www.sportstarlive.com/magazine/morne-morkel-with-a-reach-exceeding-his-grasp/article23670818.ece>

There was a sense of that innocence which remained with Morne throughout his career. Various coaches, notably Jennings when he got the national job, tried to 'toughen him up'. Graeme Smith too, became frustrated from time-to-time with Morne's lack of aggression.

"We would be desperately trying to gain an edge in a Test match and Morne was all over the batsmen, on the verge of striking — then he'd apologise for hitting one of them, or smile, and the pressure was gone!" Smith says, laughing. "But I made the mistake of wanting him to be something he wasn't and soon learned that he was at his best when he was himself."



**In the fast lane: Morne Morkel, later in his career, added the full length away swinger to his arsenal that made him even more incisive. - GETTY IMAGES**

Morkel himself laughs loudly at the memory of his first attempts at sledging: “I gave it a go once or twice and I sounded (silly). I couldn’t get the words out properly, I’m too gentle to mean them and I’m Afrikaans, so the batsmen couldn’t understand my accent. It was ridiculous...it didn’t last long!”

Most fast bowlers are comfortably in decline by the time they hang up their boots, it is only natural. Some are able to time their departure just before the graphs start turning downwards. Only the very tiniest minority leave international cricket while they are still improving. In his last 15 Tests Morkel took 67 wickets at 22, but in his last seven he collected 37 at just 17.75.

It wasn’t just a case of doing what he had always done, but doing it very well. Old dogs can learn new tricks and, after a decade specialising in ‘back-of-a-length rib ticklers’ to right-handers, he added the full length away swinger and started having as many right-handers caught in the cordon to complement his extraordinary record against left-handers.

Ironically it was Proteas’ batting coach, Neil McKenzie, who was the catalyst for the addition. “He just encouraged me to try — what did I have to lose? I don’t like being driven but Mackie said ‘if you get a wicket for every three or four times you get driven you’ll soon get used to it’, and he was right,” Morkel says.

As much as he enjoys talking about bowling, there is no disguising his delight when recalling his batting highlights. As a youngster it became apparent that he had all the shots — it’s just that he didn’t always know when to play them, or play them very well. Morkel blames his two older brothers: “They never let me bat in the backyard, it was always one of them batting and me just bowling all day.” Nonetheless, he dubbed himself ‘Haydos’ and modelled his approach on the aggressive Australian opener.

There are plenty of memories he enjoys sharing, the unbroken 10th wicket partnership of 107 with AB de Villiers in Abu Dhabi being amongst his favourites. “Nobody was thinking about records when it started, we just wanted a few more runs, but as AB started to get closer to the national record it was fantastic to be there and see him get to 278 not out.” Smith’s recollection is slightly different: “When I declared Morne was on 35...the first thing he said to me as he walked in was ‘what about my 50? You cost me a Test 50, captain!’.”



**A rare breed: Various coaches, notably Ray Jennings tried to toughen up Morne Morkel, but the fast bowler was at his best when he was himself. - AP**

The closest he came was the hard-hitting 40 (63 balls, seven fours) he made in Wellington after New Zealand had a hard-earned first innings lead and had then reduced South Africa to 95-6 in 30.3 overs. Quinton de Kock and Temba Bavuma rescued the innings with a stand of 160, and the lower order all made runs. By the time Morkel walked in, the game was still in the balance but the New Zealand bowlers were tired and demoralised.

Morkel's partner, Vernon Philander made the mistake of refusing a single very early in the partnership, and Morkel lectured him at the end of the over for at least a minute. Asked what he had said after the match, which SA won by 8 wickets thanks in no small part to their stand of 57, Morkel replied: "We discussed it and Vern listened."

But the ultimate highlight for a wannabe batsman with pretensions beyond his means came, in adversity, at the SCG in 2009 after Mitchell Johnson had broken Smith's hand in the first innings. With none of the top order keen to take Smith's place in the second

innings, Morkel was surprised and delighted in equal measure when his volunteering offer was accepted. He was convinced it was his chance to shine and chatted animatedly to his partner, McKenzie, who remained resolutely in his bubble and didn't say a word as they padded up.

"Shame, Moras was trying to get some 'love' going with his new partner and he was still chatting to Neil Mac even as they walked out of the pavilion," Smith recalls. "I don't think the big man realised how serious the business of opening the batting was!"

Edge to slip? Stumps cartwheeling? No — Morkel smashed his second ball to mid-off. He says it is one of his biggest regrets.

Regrets turn to profound gratitude when it comes to the IPL: "I loved every single minute of it — and I hope to be involved again. For a quiet guy from Vereeniging to be bowling to M.S. Dhoni in front of 45,000 screaming fans — you don't understand. The travelling, the culture, the sights, I couldn't get enough of it," Morkel says.

Just as special are the friends he has made, and will continue to make as he winds his career down in county cricket, the Big Bash and, hopefully, the IPL AB de Villiers, Faf du Plessis and Dale Steyn have been lifelong companions and mentors being just a couple of years older than him. All but de Villiers have moved to Cape Town in recent years but retain their domestic allegiance to the Titans, up north.

With wife Roz Kelly and son Arias Flynn away with relatives during the Cape Town Test in which he became just the fifth South African bowler to join the 300 club, Morkel returned to an empty house to celebrate by himself. Or so he thought. "Half an hour after I got home there was a ring on the doorbell. It was Dale, standing there with some pizza and sushi and a couple of beers. He said 'you're not spending tonight alone, my friend,' so that took care of the evening. It was a lovely thing for him to do." It was Morkel's penultimate Test match and produced his career best return — 9-110.

For all that cricket has given him, and for all that he has done for the game, perhaps his most ambitious — and successful — goal was to woo his now wife, Roz. Morkel was interviewed by Roz for Channel Nine during South Africa's 2012 tour of Australia and was smitten. Love at first sight. He asked her whether there might be a chance of, well, maybe, having a drink together?

For an Afrikaans speaking, slightly awkward boy from a small town 100 kms south of Johannesburg, it was an attempt to reach beyond the stars. And Roz had heard it at least 100 times before in her professional career. But achieving beyond the stars isn't a bad metaphor for his career, either, from those school-leaving days idling on the sofa.

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Compiled by André T. Morkel  
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