Smith, Proteas at odds over 'personal' sledging

Australia captain denies his side crossed the line but Proteas air conflicting view as fallout continues from stairwell exchange

Sam Ferris, at Kingsmead, Durban
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In the wake of the staircase incident that has overshadowed Australia’s first Test win in Durban, captain Steve Smith denied his players got personal on the field despite claims from the Proteas’ camp that both sides crossed the line.

After the fifth day’s play wrapped up in less than 20 minutes, captains Steve Smith and Faf du Plessis fronted the media with different versions of what had occurred in the lead up to the altercation outside the players’ dressing rooms at tea on day four.

CCTV footage leaked to South African media showed an agitated David Warner being physically restrained from Quinton de Kock as the pair exchanged heated verbal barbs.
While Smith said he wasn't aware of any sledging from his players that got personal, du Plessis said both parties had committed that crime.

And in a bizarre sequence shortly after the Australian captain spoke, South Africa team manager Dr Mohammed Moosajee told reporters the Australians "most definitely" got personal.

The incident was allegedly sparked by de Kock making derogatory comments about Warner's wife, Candice, which Smith said was crossing the line.

"What was said and done during that interval was regrettable on both sides," Smith told reporters.

"Obviously, Quinton got quite personal and provoked an emotional response from Davey.

"I think those things are not on from both sides. Getting personal on the field is not on, that's crossing the line in my opinion."
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Du Plessis said he was unsure who started the incident, but was disappointed the animosity between the teams wasn't left out in the middle.

"All I've heard is there was a lot of personal stuff on the field already, to and from (both sides)," du Plessis said.

"Who started it I don't know. If it was happening on the field it probably should have been nipped in the bud on the field already.

"The fact that it spilled over off the field, that shouldn't have happened."

QUICK SINGLE


Smith countered, saying: "We were certainly very chirpy out on the field as well. As far as I'm aware we didn't get personal towards Quinton.

"But look — what he said got a little bit personal towards Davey — and as we saw it certainly provoked an emotional response.

"That's from my opinion — and what I've heard from the guys as well.

"I'm not 100 per cent sure but as far as I'm aware I don't think we got personal."

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Former South Africa captain and SuperSport commentator Graeme Smith tweeted to say Warner crossed "many personal boundaries" with the Proteas players and wasn't surprised to see a hostile reaction.
"I know what I heard in the mics yesterday and some of it was quite close to the boundaries of what should be said," Smith told cricket.com.au in Durban on Monday.

"Play the game hard, play the game competitively.

"Any bit of banter or anything which is in the spirit of the game is good.

"I played the game hard myself. It was part and parcel of how you do it.

"I think there are just certain boundaries that are unnecessary to cross."

Sledging, or "mental disintegration" as former captain Steve Waugh put it, has long been part of the DNA of Australian cricket teams.

At times it has found those in the Baggy Green in hot water, but Steve Smith does not believe there is an ugly stigma attached to the Australians about how they play their cricket.

"I think that's the way we play our best cricket, when we're aggressive, we're in the fight together, we're hunting as a pack and we're working for each other and backing out mates up on the field," Smith said.

"That's part of being an Australian in my opinion."
"I'm comfortable where it's all at, it's just ensuring we stay within the spirit of the game."

Du Plessis said he expected the intense banter on the field coming up against the Australians, and that relations between the two teams has not changed after the incident.

"As I said before the series, every single match that I've played against Australia you expect it," du Plessis said.

"So, I'm certainly not sitting here complaining about it. It's the way we play our cricket against them. We expect it. For me, that's not a surprise.

"Two teams trying to bash it out. Disappointed to see how it unfolded yesterday, but we expect a tough series and we look forward to a battle."

Proteas legend weighs in on stairway incident

The second Test starts in Port Elizabeth on Friday.

Qantas tour of South Africa

South Africa squad: Faf du Plessis (c), Hashim Amla, Temba Bavuma, Quinton de Kock, Theunis de Bruyn, AB de Villiers, Dean Elgar, Heinrich Klaasen, Keshav Maharaj, Aiden Markram, Morne Morkel, Wiaan Mulder, Lungi Ngidi, Vernon Philander, Kagiso Rabada.

Australia squad: Steve Smith (c), David Warner (vc), Cameron Bancroft, Pat Cummins, Peter Handscomb, Josh Hazlewood, Jon Holland, Usman Khawaja, Nathan Lyon, Mitchell Marsh, Shaun Marsh, Tim Paine, Jhye Richardson, Chadd Sayers, Mitchell Starc.


Sam Ferris is a Sydney-based journalist for cricket.com.au. He started in 2011 as a Big Bash League correspondent and continues to monitor the domestic scene and national sides closely.

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Every Australian first-class cricketer, and a few English ones too, should read Andrew Webster’s piercing analysis of the sledging issue. Webster joined the dots between the tragic death of Phillip Hughes and the words of NSW state coroner, Michael Barnes, at the subsequent inquest; the words of players about the impact of the Hughes tragedy on them, and, ultimately, their apparent failure to match those words with actions.

That, within his findings, Michael Barnes felt moved to touch on sledging was an uncomfortable issue for Australian cricket. Many players and administrators would strenuously resist any connection between words spoken on the field and a death brought about by a batsman’s shot that went wrong.

In a ruthless display, Australia’s bowlers allowed just 57 of the 178 runs England needed to win the test on day five with six wickets in hand.
discomfort of the entire Australian cricket community. That such words were spoken can be denied, or their relevance to what transpired dismissed, but the fact that they were believable to the grieving family of a deceased cricketer emerged as the harsh reality.

And the words were believable because it seems this is the way cricket in this country is played. Not just high-level cricket either. This has become our culture and it's being passed from generation to generation.

Illustration: John Shakespeare

These days, I'm involved in covering Tests in this country with Macquarie Radio and among my colleagues is the popular and gently spoken former England off-spinner, John Emburey. "Embers" has been a member of our commentary team for a number of seasons and in that time has not rushed to judgment on Australian teams.

In Adelaide, though, he said his piece. His fundamental point was that when on-field trouble breaks out in international cricket the common denominator tends to be Australia. Not that other countries don't engage. Our teams regard it as their mission to play the game in a more robust manner than the rest and, so, it erupts.

During Australia's first innings in Adelaide, umpire Aleem Dar deliberately stood between England's Jimmy Anderson and the Australian captain, Steven Smith. The inference was that Dar felt compelled to ensure the players didn't come together physically.
Steve Smith has words with Stuart Broad at the end of his over in Adelaide.

*Photo: AAP*

Former England wicketkeeper, Matt Prior, claims there is a calculated approach by the Australians to unsettle their opponents. "Simple sledging doesn't really work on these top international players ... so therefore you have to go deeper if you want to try and get a reaction and say something that's going to be pretty fiery and potentially personal."

Peter Handscomb spoke after the first Test of some of Australia's efforts at unsettling their opponents as being the "smartest" they've employed.

Of course, the majority of Australian supporters simply want our team to crush the Poms. But that's not, and for a long time hasn't been, true of all. A few years ago, *The Age* reported on how the national cricket administration was sufficiently concerned at the level of negative feedback coming its way as to take a rather enlightened step. The report told of the players being called to a meeting where they found themselves addressed by one of the switchboard staff. She was entrusted with conveying, first-hand, the volume and nature of the criticisms she received about their on-field conduct.

During the latest bad-tempered Test, Cricket Australia's CEO, James Sutherland, played down the exchange between Smith and Anderson as "a little bit of what I would call banter". Rather than being concerned at umpire Dar's apparent need to keep Smith and Anderson apart, Sutherland noted that the umpires made no reports.

Sutherland also expressed pride at Australia's players: "I know our players are conscious of wanting Australian cricket fans to be proud of them, proud of the way they represent the country, proud of the way they play their cricket. Certainly, I'm very proud of our team and the way they go about it."
than any other.

Why, even the hostile pace attack is composed of wholesome characters. Pat Cummins is the most attractive cricketer seen on Australian grounds in decades. Mitch Starc is trying to be meaner but still has an unmistakeable decency. And as Josh Hazlewood walks back to his mark he could be a bush cricketer with a stem of grass dangling from his lips.

The Marshes and Usman Khawaja don’t appear to have a malicious bone in their bodies and Tim Paine looks more boy-next-door than gnarly Aussie keeper.

Yet the conflicts keep coming.

After the first Test in Brisbane, when Smith was asked whether he was comfortable with the contribution of his players to on-field sparring during the match, he said: "I think the umpires and match referees are there to determine that."

Yet the preamble to the Laws of Cricket states: The major responsibility for ensuring the spirit of fair play rests with the captains.

Smith has now led Australia as many times as Richie Benaud. His record with the bat stands comparison with any player in history other than Bradman. There remains, though, an impression of him still as a young captain learning the trade and it’s possible he hasn’t entirely shed this view of himself. His endearing admission of anguish at not enforcing the follow-on in Adelaide appeared to reinforce this.

There’s little doubt Smith will ultimately be seen as a highly successful and good skipper. He’ll be a greater one, though, if he can raise his eyes and lead with the good of the game as much his mission as the good of his team.

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