

Laid-back but lethal

Aussie skipper Aaron Finch's mild persona hides a competitive streak and a cricketing brain that keeps ticking overtime

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ANDRE BOROVEC remembers a bat cart-wheeling towards him when he walked out to bat at Geelong Cricket Club in Australia. A 15-year old Aaron Finch had just shown his ire after being given out lbw and Borovec, who had first met Finch three years earlier and is now the assistant coach of Melbourne Renegades — Finch's Big Bash team — had to jump out of the way.

Borovec chuckles at the memory. "It was a brief phase but those were bad days for the lad." Finch was a kid playing with men in the competitive grade cricket and the game seemed rather tough. "It was probably the toughest initiation for him. He was playing with men and things weren't going his way and the seniors at Geelong were very patient with him. We knew we had a good nice kid with talent. I remember a chat where I told him, 'Cricket is a hard game, no doubt, but you can make it harder by being in too much of a rush. By getting ahead of the game. Wait, learn, be patient, and things will change'".

That he did then, and later intermittently through his international career, waiting for the ODI call, waiting for a Test spot, learning to open in Tests though he personally believed he would have been better off in the middle order and was dropped early last year. He became Australia's ODI captain in 2017 and was hailed as the "best captain tactically" during the World Cup by the likes of Michael Vaughan. It's in the shorter formats that he has really sparkled — he is the second-fastest batsman, after Virat Kohli, to score 1,000 runs in T20Is.

Brendan McArdle, Australia's popular cricket agent in decades gone by, remembers a furious hundred by a 16-year old Finch in grade cricket. "They were 5 for 15, and then Finch comes and smokes us. There were three hooked sixes that I can still remember."

That memory would prove useful a few years later when McArdle had a chance to push and promote Finch for league cricket at Clifford Alliance Cricket Club in England. It wasn't easy, Finch had already been disciplined at the Australian Academy for reportedly keeping an untidy room, among other things, but with McArdle and support from the English club captain James Postill, he made an impressive march in England. "After some visa issues, he landed up one Saturday morning, rented a car, drove to the ground and blitzed a breezy 70," McArdle recalls.

The imagery that both Borovec and McArdle serve up is of a laid-back individual at ease with himself. Both bring up the comparison with Shane Warne. "Warne used to be like that, he became in-your-face type later during his international career. He was different as a teenager. Finch was a bit like that," McArdle says.

Sips of beer and puffs of cigarette is how Borovec remembers Finch's early days. "Back then, smoking wasn't such a big taboo as it's these days, you must realise," Borovec says. "But yeah, that was him. By and large, it still is."

"He is an interesting man. Laid-back but at the same time, very competitive on the field. Forget cricket park, be it playing cards or even swimming in the pool, he would compete. Then a beer and a cig," Borovec laughs. "He would be very cool, chilled out as they say off sport."



Finch comes from a small country town called Colac, west of Melbourne. "There are probably four pubs there," says an old ac-



FINCH-PERFECT

Aaron Finch raises his helmet after bringing up his century against India at the Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai on Tuesday. *Pradip Das*



Aaron Finch with Andre Borovec (left) and Tim Ludeman after the Melbourne Renegades's victory in the BBL last summer.

quaintance of Finch, artist Gavan Serle, who has known him as a kid. "It's a traditional country town, close to the Great Ocean Road, probably around 15,000 population. Largely a dairy-farming town, with a few in services," Serle says.

"I remember Aaron being good at footy too. Laid-back and a kid with a sense of humour. Sports was his life, he was playing senior-grade football when he was 15. Around that stage, he chose cricket — not a bad choice. Australia's captain. It's a huge badge of honour that, and coming from a small town."

About nine years back, Serle started to paint portraits and as tribute to Finch's 156 against England in 2013, he froze the batsman into a monstrous leg-side heave on a canvas. "I thought I would give it to his family but then came a charity appeal for a cancer fundraiser in memory of Colac's legend Rick Burnett. I then approached Finch, who readily agreed to sign it off and it sold well in

the auction. He is that kind of a guy; never forgets his roots, I can go on about what he does for his old clubs and neighbours but I don't think he would like me talking about them," Serle says.

Finch would also go down in Australian public imagination when he was one of the three pallbearers — along with Tom Cooper and Michael Clarke — at Phillip Hughes' funeral. He has talked about the tragedy in the past and in particular the moment when he flew down to stand by the hospital bed. "Talking to a guy you know so well, not knowing if he can hear you, if he gonna survive." Hughes' mother had called him and asked him if he would carry the coffin — "Now, you will be wearing a suit, won't you?" To know that we were as close as I thought we were, that his family knew that."



In the first ODI against India in Mumbai,

though David Warner would rush past him to get to a hundred, it was Finch who set the tone with a counter-attacking start. Warner saw it as a mistake from the Indian bowlers — "they bowled a bit full at start to Finch", but you could understand why. One of Finch's old problems was the ball angling in from a good length. At times, through his career in fact, he has had issues with weight transfer and would be troubled by that ball. Perhaps, the Indians were a bit too full but Finch also transferred his weight on to the front foot without fuss, and kept creaming them. And when Jasprit Bumrah tried to hit the deck, it was right in Finch's strong area: on his toes, punching them through cover point. The short balls don't trouble him much.

"It never did," Borovec says. "I remember at Geelong, since he was very young, the opposition bowlers would keep trying to bounce him out. He would pull fearlessly, even as a 14-16-year-old."

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early watchers is his captaincy. All those days at Geelong, sitting with adults, soaking up cricket talk, has only helped.

"Absolutely not a surprise," Borovec says. "I would remember he would keep pestering us older men to talk about the tactical side of things as a kid. He was always open. And some of the foreign fans might have been surprised when he was made captain, but not us in Australian cricket. Through his formative years, he captained a lot of his teams. And he has continued to improve."

Not long after he became Australia's ODI captain, Finch had talked about one major learning. That his team-mates would pull his leg for talking too much in meetings and how he had to cut out that trait.

"I can see that in Big Bash too," Borovec says. "He now keeps his communication precise and to the point. But he is very open and wants people to talk more, and come up with ideas. I think it's a throwback to his Geelong club days when us adults would sit with a beer and chat about the game — and he would be all ears. You can have all the ideas but (if) you can't articulate it to team-mates, then captaincy can be limited. You have to generate ideas and apply them. Finch does it."

Finch has also been lucky that he has been surrounded with mentors he respects. Not just Borovec, but also Australia's current coach Andrew McDonald (who is in charge of the India tour as Justin Langer has taken a break), who is also the coach of Finch's Big Bash team. "He goes to him for advice — from his batting to the mental side of things," Borovec says.

In Borovec's telling, McDonald is a no-nonsense type of coach, someone who wouldn't spin false hopes and dreams. Proof came on the eve of the first ODI in Mumbai when one asked him (Finch was sitting next to him) whether he thinks Finch can still make it back to Tests, especially in the middle order. McDonald didn't peddle hope; instead chose to say "I think the middle order is pretty strong now. And Finch would be grateful that he got to play in Tests as an opener and made a good fist of it."

It was McDonald who Finch turned to when he was dropped last January from the Test squad and came to captain Melbourne Renegades. Finch would go on to lead Renegades to their first Big Bash title last year. "We didn't really have to say anything as leadership took care of his Test blues," Borovec says. "Of course, McDonald spoke to him at a personal level but I don't think he was too down and out. The needs of leadership took care of his recovery. His ability isn't just tactical strength but the skill to relate to all players. He was one reason for our triumph last year."

As a captain, despite being saddled with a not-so-strong team, Finch managed to drag Australia to the world cup semifinals and now, with a blistering hundred in the first ODI, the laid-back-yet-competitive character has thrown the gauntlet to the Indians yet again.

AND THE AWARDS GO TO...

Stokes is ICC's Cricketer of the Year, Rohit best in fifty-overs format

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
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INDIA'S SWASHBUCKLING opener Rohit Sharma was on Wednesday named the ICC's 2019 ODI Cricketer of the Year for his incredible run of form through, while English all-rounder Ben Stokes walked away with the overall honours.

Indian skipper Virat Kohli was named captain of both the ICC's Test and ODI teams of the year besides winning the 'Spirit of Cricket' award for his gesture of trying to stop the fans from booing Steve Smith during a World Cup match. Smith was returning to international cricket from a one-year suspension for ball-tampering at that time.

England's World Cup-winning all-rounder Stokes got the biggest prize — the 'Sir Garfield Sobers Trophy' for Player of the Year, while Australia fast bowler Pat Cummins was named Test Player of the Year.

India seamer Deepak Chahar won the T20 International Performance of the Year, Australia's Marnus Labuschagne was named as Emerging Cricketer of the Year, while Scotland's Kyle Coetzer was declared the Associate Cricketer of the Year.

The 32-year-old Rohit hit a purple patch in the World Cup amassing 648 runs in nine games at an average of 81.00 with five hundreds and a half-century. In the United

Kingdom, he became the first batsman in World Cup history to score five centuries in a single edition.

Rohit looked forward to carrying his form in the coming year, after an aggregate of 1409 runs from 28 matches with seven hundreds in the ODI format.

"It is great to be recognised in this fashion. We are very happy with the way we performed as a team in 2019. We could have done better but we have a lot of positives and a lot to look forward to in 2020," Rohit said.

India captain Kohli was surprised to win the Spirit of Cricket Award and explained his reasons for backing Smith the way he did.

"It is part of camaraderie that sportsmen must have with each other," Kohli said.

"That moment was purely understanding an individual's situation. I don't think a guy who is coming out of a situation like that needs to be taken advantage of," he recalled. "You can sledge, can have banter on the field, you say things to the opposition in wanting to beat them. But booing someone is not in the spirit of any sport, I don't endorse it."

Chahar said his haul of six for seven against Bangladesh in Nagpur, which included a hat-trick, would always be cherished by him. "Taking six wickets conceding only seven runs was a dream performance for me and will always remain close to my heart," Chahar said.

Cummins grabbed 59 wickets in 12 Test



Ben Stokes helped England lift their maiden ODI World Cup. *Reuters*

matches during the period and finished the year as the top-ranked bowler in the Test rankings. "It's a tremendous honour to be considered the best player of last year and one which was certainly unexpected. I owe much to my team, team-mates and all those involved in Australian cricket for what was a really successful year for the

team," he said.

Stokes was rewarded after a fabulous 12 months that saw him play a decisive role in England's dramatic victory at the World Cup final along with a host of other memorable performances, including an epic Ashes hundred.

"This award is testament to my team-mates and the support staff that have been

there every step of the way. Fundamentally, without the support of these individuals, we would never achieved our objective of lifting a major trophy," he said.

Labuschagne was an easy winner of the Emerging Player award after scoring 1,104 runs in 11 Tests, which saw him zoom in the ICC Test Player Rankings from 110 at the start of the year to fourth by the end of the year.

England umpire Richard Illingworth became the seventh person to win the David Shepherd Trophy for Umpire of the Year.

Five Indians in ODI, Test Teams

Apart from Kohli, there were four other Indians who were picked in the ICC's Test and ODI Teams of the Year. While the Test team featured double-centurion Mayank Agarwal, opener Rohit Sharma, speedster Mohammed Shami and left-arm spinner Kuldeep Yadav found a place in the ODI side.

ICC Test Team of the Year (in batting order): Mayank Agarwal, Tom Latham, Marnus Labuschagne, Virat Kohli (captain), Steve Smith, Ben Stokes, BJ Watling (wicket-keeper), Pat Cummins, Mitchell Starc, Neil Wagner, Nathan Lyon.

ICC ODI Team of the Year (in batting order): Rohit Sharma, Shai Hope, Virat Kohli (captain), Babar Azam, Kane Williamson, Ben Stokes, Jos Buttler (wicketkeeper), Mitchell Starc, Trent Boult, Mohammed Shami, Kuldeep Yadav

HONOURS BOARD

BEST CRICKETER OF THE YEAR
— Ben Stokes (England)

TEST CRICKETER OF THE YEAR
— Pat Cummins (Australia)

ODI CRICKETER OF THE YEAR
— Rohit Sharma (India)

T20I PERFORMANCE OF THE YEAR
— Deepak Chahar (India, 6-7 vs Bangladesh)

EMERGING CRICKETER OF THE YEAR
— Marnus Labuschagne (Australia)

ASSOCIATE CRICKETER OF THE YEAR
— Kyle Coetzer (Scotland)

SPIRIT OF CRICKET AWARD
— Virat Kohli (India), for stopping the fans who were booing Steve Smith at the Oval during the World Cup.

UMPIRE OF THE YEAR
— Richard Illingworth

