



## STILL SAINTLY AFTER ALL THESE YEARS

*David Wilson on the questionable charms of Hansie Cronje*

Equipped with a theatrical streak, Hansie Cronje could recite reams of *Hamlet* by heart and seemed to embody the *Hamlet* line that reads: "One may smile, and smile, and be a villain."

Twenty years ago, the last time the World Cup was held in the UK, Cronje committed his first striking transgression when he donned an earpiece to hear tips from coach Bob Woolmer during his side's match against India, in leafy Hove of all places.

Only one month later, just before the epic 1999 World Cup semi-final against Australia, Cronje was unabashed by the incident, according to an *Electronic Telegraph* report. What's more, he said he was glad all-rounder Lance Klusener had got his first batting failure out the way - a generous remark, as the earpiece incident sank off the radar.

But two decades on, it is clear the episode presaged his downfall. On

7 April 2000, in a bombshell move, Delhi police charged Cronje with fixing the results of South Africa's one-day internationals against India the previous month. On 11 April, he was sacked as captain and promptly deserted by his sponsors. He had tarnished his country and the game.

"The damage done to South African sport is already immense, and the serious inquiry into the sordid details has not even begun. Many South Africans will have woken up this morning feeling an intensely personal hurt," wrote Mike Selvey in the *Guardian*. Circling back, Selvey said that across South Africa, banners professing love for Hansie would be unfurled.

In a June 2000 *Observer* article, analysts John Arlidge and David Shapshak took a similar angle. On the one hand, they framed Cronje as greedy and calculating. On the other,



they forecast that his legend would last – even strengthen.

“Whatever the truth behind the downfall of an Afrikaner legend, he is, in the eyes of much of the South African public, a hero,” they wrote. “The more he is flogged, the more he is loved.”

Nelson Mandela gave Cronje a thwack, saying he had made a serious mistake. Yet, as Selvey, Arlidge and Shapshak sensed at the time, the crook remains widely loved in South Africa and Asia long after his death in a plane crash in 2002 at the age of 32.

How is this so? It seems indefensible that Cronje sold out for 30 pieces of silver.

“Cronje needs to be drawn in context,” South African cricket writer Telford Vice tells the *Nightwatchman*.

He explains that a few years before Cronje’s fall, white South Africans – and Afrikaners like Cronje in particular – had seen their place in the world dissolve in South Africa’s first democratic elections.

“They couldn’t countenance that reality,” Vice continues, adding that when you refuse to accept your country is now shared and run by the people you brutally subjugated and considered beneath you, overlooking a mere cricketer’s corruption and keeping him on his pedestal is easy.

“Indeed, some people seem to think, bizarrely, that the taking down of Cronje as a cultural icon was part of the plan to blacken whiteness. Cronje remains a hero to many to

this day, because to acknowledge his wrongs for what they are would be to admit that whites are as capable of corruption as blacks.

“And that doesn’t sit well with people who want to blame all of South Africa’s current problems on ANC [African National Congress] misrule. Apartheid? What could that possibly have to do with anything?”

Christopher Shen, an organisational psychologist and leadership expert, explains Cronje’s enduring appeal in terms of hero worship tinged with a desperate wish to see someone beat the system.

“When people do not feel a great sense of control over their lives, they like to relinquish their control to more powerful individuals or entities, such as the government, God, or leaders.”

In South Africa, those who do not trust the government may relinquish control to sports leaders, come what may. “They almost prefer a leader who is attempting to manipulate the system,” says Shen.

•••

The product of a privileged background, Wessel Johannes Cronje was born on 25 September 1969. His well-to-do family, which came from Afrikaner stock, was godly and sporty. Hansie’s father, Ewie, served as an off-spinning all-rounder for Orange Free State Province in the 1960s. Hansie was educated at a top-tier boy’s school that would later pardon his wrongdoing – Grey College, in his native Bloemfontein.

A high-achiever from the get-go, Cronje served as head boy and the captain of his school’s cricket and rugby teams. He represented that former independent Boer sovereign republic, Orange Free State Province, in cricket and rugby at schools level. He earned a Bachelor of Commerce degree from the University of the Free State.

In January 1988, aged 18, he made his first-class debut for Orange Free State against Transvaal at Johannesburg. The following season, he was a regular, gracing all eight Currie Cup matches and part of the Benson and Hedges Series winning team, scoring 73 as an opener in the final. At 21 he was awarded the captaincy of Orange Free State.

In 1991–92, his second year helming the young Free State, his side finished runners-up in the Castle Bowl and won the limited-overs Nissan Shield. Castle Cup and one-day doubles followed in the next two seasons. Later years brought more one-day trophies – seven titles in five seasons.

He went on to play 68 Tests and score 3,714 runs at 36.41, also taking 43 wickets at 29.95 with his right-arm medium-pace bowling that bewitched Sachin Tendulkar.

In the early 1990s Cronje experienced a trauma: a fatal collision with a little girl who dashed in front of his car as he headed to Empangeni in Zululand for a provincial game. He became a born-again Christian and would remain so, even using Satan to excuse his later wickedness.

According to South Africa pace bowler Dale Steyn, Cronje was

“God”, at least to South African kids. Marketer Jadon Ortlepp was struck by Cronje’s good side when he met him in the mid-1990s at Newlands training ground in Cape Town, after winning a school contest to train with the South African team for the day. Cronje taught Ortlepp and his fellow ten- and 11-year-olds how to field.

“I remember distinctly him saying not to worry if the ball bounced and hit our body, as we would be taking a hit for our country,” Ortlepp told *Wisden*. “I very much enjoyed meeting him, and he was a good teacher and very pleasant and charismatic.”

Cronje had a great reputation. Outwardly honest and humble, he gave everything and came across as a top-notch, inspirational captain able to bring out the best in his players. Plus, he was a spectacular hitter. During the first one-day international against Australia in Johannesburg in 1994, Cronje thumped Shane Warne all over the ground.

During the Hyderabad Titan Cup in 1996 Cronje called back Sourav Ganguly after a collision which caused his run-out. But his downfall began that very same year, when he met the Indian bookmaker Mukesh Gupta. The meeting kick-started a lasting, bountiful dialogue, with Cronje obtaining bribes amounting to about £65,000. At the end of the third day’s play of the Kanpur Test in December 1996, Gupta asked Cronje to convince his team to throw the match for \$30,000 in cash. Cronje claimed he spoke to no one and received money for doing nothing, simply because his side happened to lose the match.

However, as was later proven, Cronje did receive something for his part in the notorious Centurion Test against England in January 2000, specifically £5,000 and a leather jacket for rigging a win for Nasser Hussain's struggling tourists when a weather-hit draw looked assured.

At the time, Cronje's willingness to engineer a result appeared to be a sporting gesture. "Our fans loved it and everyone was right behind Hansie," Hussain recalled. "I walked down the stairs of the pavilion and said to him: 'What you did was a great thing.'" Hussain added that Cronje made many friends that day.

Cronje played two more Tests before Indian police recorded him chatting with another bookmaker, Sanjeev Chawla, in March 2000. On 7 April the United Cricket Board of South Africa (UCBSA) managing director Ali Bacher said that the India reports held no substance. "Cronje is known for his unquestionable integrity and honesty," said Bacher, adding that his captain had rubbished the claims.

Two days later Cronje told a Durban news conference: "I deny ever receiving any sum of money during the one-day series in India. I want to also make it absolutely clear that I have never spoken to any member of the team about throwing a game."

The facade did not last. On 11 April Cronje called Bacher at 3am to confess he had lied about his actions in India. The board sacked Cronje.

In June 2000, under pressure to come clean in public, in line with his Christian convictions, Cronje went halfway.

"In a moment of stupidity and weakness I allowed Satan and the world to dictate terms to me. The moment I took my eyes off Jesus, my whole world turned dark," he said in a seven-page statement faxed to team chaplain Ray McCauley, who then gave Cronje spiritual counselling many times every day and defended him.

"We are all capable of falling from grace," McCauley said. "However, the Bible teaches that once we seek forgiveness, God is willing to forgive and give a second chance."

But Cronje's evasive confession came into the possession of the official King Commission match-rigging enquiry, which opened on 7 June 2000. On 15 June Cronje admitted taking about \$100,000 in bribes since 1996. At the end of his testimony Cronje was led away in tears, a pathetic figure.

In October 2000 he was slapped with a life-time cricket ban. "Cronje won't play any further part in South Africa as a player or administrator," said UCBSA president Percy Sonn.

After the ban, instead of sinking into sorrowful, bitter oblivion, Cronje rallied. He took steps to embark on a new, legitimate career in – of all things – finance. In February 2002, four months before his death, he became a financial manager at Bell Equipment, the East Rand earth-moving machinery company.

A *Guardian* article which appeared a year after his death mentioned that Cronje's portrait graced the company boardroom. Underneath ran the inscription "Our Hero". Cronje's boss

at Bell Equipment, Bokkie Kotze, remembered him fondly, citing his sparkle. Kotze also recalled fielding up to ten calls a day from citizens praising his company for giving Cronje a second chance.

Cronje's image would have been burnished by his reported willingness to drive for hours to coach in black townships. What's more, it is said that he received no money for this work.

• • •

But his efforts at redemption came to naught. In June 2002, when his chartered flight from Johannesburg was cancelled, he hitched a ride on a cargo plane operated by acquaintances. The stand-in plane lost its way amid hostile Cape weather and slammed into Cradock Peak in the Outeniqua Mountains which track South Africa's southern coast. The tragedy added more grist to the saga and, for some, seemed a suspiciously convenient bit of karma.

This time Nelson Mandela struck a conciliatory tone. "Here was a young man courageously and with dignity rebuilding his life after the setback he suffered a little while ago."

Coach Bob Woolmer eulogised his former pupil: "Hansie was thorough, professional, kind, firm, generous, hard-working – his team would have walked up Table Mountain for him. He was one of the greatest cricket captains South Africa has ever had."

Ali Bacher spoke of him as a natural, born with a tremendous ability to inspire, and Percy Sonn said he was a popular, successful leader.

At his funeral, Cronje was framed as a fine athlete and a generous, loving man with deep religious convictions.

"For the past two years I wanted to tell the world. I wanted to shout it out. I wanted to explain to people that even though Hansie made a mistake he was still the same Hansie: a kind and loving husband, a genuine friend and an honourable man," said his wife, Bertha Cronje, choking back tears. "Over the last couple of days I have come to the wonderful realisation nobody forgot the special qualities I knew he had."

Former teammate Shaun Pollock cited Cronje's impish sense of fun: "When it came to birthdays on tour, there was always a cake organised by the manager, and Hansie's famous trick was to make sure that, if not all the cake, at least a piece of the cake ended up on the birthday boy's head."

Pollock's father, former South Africa fast bowler and national selector Peter Pollock, praised Cronje for leading from the front. He added: "Sin reaps its consequences. What Hansie did was wrong, no question. But God forgives the repentant sinner, and Hansie stood with no excuses."

Viewers of the 2004 television series *Great South Africans* voted Cronje the 11th-greatest South African. Cronje was sandwiched between cleric and Nobel Peace Prize winner Desmond Tutu and the actress and Academy Award winner, Charlize Theron. It represented quite a rehabilitation, even if it owed a debt to his tragic death.

In 2014, to cap it all, news.com.au reported that the long-gone cricket

legend had more fans in his home country than a former South African skipper with an unblemished record, Graeme Smith. “Biff”, as he was called, converted his team from a bunch of underachievers to world-beaters. Yet many South Africans are apparently more willing to defend fallen battler Cronje than the unsullied Smith.

Cronje’s last laugh may be that, two decades after his Hove hiccup, he remains popular, even loved in some quarters, partly thanks to his extraordinary capacity for charm. He had what we would now call “soft skills”, an exceptional Slick-Willie-style

ability to come over well, despite the demons lurking behind the surface.

The take seems to be: hate the sin not the sinner.

“I disagree that Cronje betrayed his country, because cricketers don’t play for their countries. They play for teams who have appropriated countries’ names,” says Vice. “But he did betray his teammates, his opponents, umpires, scorers and match referees, administrators, sponsors, spectators, the press, and the game itself. That’s a long-enough rap sheet without the fake nationalism.”

...



## GREAT-UNCLE TOM’S CARDBOARD BOX

*Megan Ponsford unpacks a Boy’s Own adventure of  
Australian cricket and the Indian Raj*

I come from sporting stock. My grandfather Bill Ponsford was a good cricketer. So good that a stand at the Melbourne Cricket Ground is emblazoned with his name. Alongside his sporting talent, he also had the most amazing capacity to concentrate. Unassuming and quite ill-prepared, Bill arrived on the world stage in the 1920s and broke numerous records. If Bradman, eight years younger, hadn’t subsequently smashed the records my grandfather had broken, Bill would now be a national icon. And some digging through my family tree has unearthed a few other sporty Ponsfords. It appears that Bill wasn’t the only cricketer in the family. Me, I can barely catch a ball, and yet I still feel a real part of this lineage,

albeit as an informed bystander: watching, interpreting and making sense of largely forgotten events.

As a lover of cricket and history, I’m often asked if I’m writing a book about my grandfather. My standard answer is that, while I’m proud of his achievements, there’s a different story to tell. It’s about the first Australian cricket tour to India, in 1935–36. This tale doesn’t revolve around my grandfather – he plays only a minor role in the narrative. It does, however, involve another family member: Grandpa Bill’s brother-in-law and my great-uncle, the beautifully named Tom Leather. Amiable and enthusiastic, Tom – alongside the Maharaja of Patiala

