



## **Phil Hughes is Australia's danger man**

Phil Hughes is the unswervingly confident batting prodigy who has England's bowlers sweating. Nick Compton, who has been his team-mate and flatmate both Down Under and during his time at Middlesex this year, reveals the Australian's talents on the pitch, and bad habits off it

The fear of failure is a frailty most cricketers have to confront on a daily basis. Everyone has their own way of dealing with it, with some handling it better than others. Successful players are characterised by daring, a self belief and confidence that is almost disdainful of consequence. They cope with it better than the rest.

In the past eight months I have spent considerable time playing and living with Australia's latest cricketing superstar, Philip Hughes, and in this short space of time he has shown what can be achieved by someone who appears devoid of any negative thoughts. To Hughes batting is a time for fun, an opportunity to show the world just what can be accomplished.

Hughes exhibits qualities of an emerging cricketing great and I predict this summer's Ashes series will demonstrate that. He has made an explosive impact on cricketing consciousness worldwide and is living a larger than life existence at a tender age. I have never witnessed and shared in such extraordinary and audacious batting as that which he demonstrated playing for Middlesex earlier this season. It's so easy to get caught up in technique and your own game but for me his concerns are simple – where can I hit my next boundary and how can I score? His exuberance has not only reignited my own passion for batting, but his desire and hunger to score runs ("millions of 'em, mate") makes this diminutive pocket-rocket an absolute joy to watch.

In five weeks he amassed 856 runs for Middlesex, a season's worth for a lot of cricketers. "Jeez, imagine if I played the whole season," he said to me innocently one evening at our flat, "I could score 4,000 runs."

I first met Phil, now 20, in Sydney last winter while playing for Western Suburbs in the Sydney grade competition. I remember sitting in the pub one afternoon listening to his mates taking the piss out of him after he had failed to post a decent score in the first three games of the season. A lot was resting on Phil after an explosive first season with New South Wales.

Hughes was sarcastically asked: "Mate, is there any chance of you scoring some runs this summer? There are a few guys waiting in the wings for your spot." His reply was: "Yeah, whatever bro, when I get a double hundred in my next innings that'll shut everyone up!" A couple of days later I was having a morning coffee and read on the back page of The Sydney Morning Herald: "Phil Hughes scores brilliant

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I have had first-hand experience of Hughes' disregard for compliance. In Sydney we were batting together and trying to chase down a rather large total. After he had hit the first two balls for four, and knowing that his wicket was important if we were to progress in this match, I promptly walked down the wicket to remind him not to get carried away.

He looked at me like most Aussies look at Poms, with complete disdain, and said: "Whatever bro, just keep batting mate." It was the last time I attempted to give him advice.

Hughes only spent five weeks with Middlesex but he made a huge impact. Many of us saw him throw into stark relief the rather formulaic manner in which our cricket is played and run. Hughes' success during his brief stint seemed to come from divorcing himself from the accepted structure and thinking that tends to constrict individual expression on (and off) the field.

Take, for example, our championship match

against Glamorgan. It was the fourth day and we were batting to save the game. Where most of us were driven by circumspection in trying to block the game out, Phil was flailing the ball all around. At times he perhaps took things too far, changing his stance and standing at the crease like a baseball batter. Watching him we were, to a player, mesmerised.

At the end of the match a (for a change) smiling Angus Fraser, Middlesex's MD of cricket, said to him that it was an interesting way of saving a game. His response, as before, was brief: "Well, you've got to have some fun while you're

out there mate, and those blokes were never going to get me out anyway."

He is smart, too. I was astonished, when he arrived at Middlesex this season, at how quickly he understood English conditions and at his ability to adapt to what lay before him. After facing just five balls in England during his first net session, he approached me: "Yeah, seams around a bit here don't it. I think I've got to play the ball three inches later." Again, I shook my head and walked away.

But here was the working of a highly attuned brain, a fast learner with an immediate understanding of technique. And of course it worked. It wasn't long after this that I watched possibly one of the most destructive innings in a very long time in any form of cricket. I was sitting on the balcony as he tore into the Surrey bowling attack, principally the South African hot-head Andre Nel. It was as if the Twenty20 Cup had already begun. Hughes's array of cuts, front foot slaps on one knee and even tennis-like serves through midwicket showed this was a man who had never opened the MCC coaching manual. In the car, leaving The Oval, he was glowing and said to me: "Gee, cuz, I hit it good today aye ? that's the best I've ever hit it." It was a lesson in seeing the ball and hitting the ball. Simplicity defined.

In Australia I asked Neil D'Costa, Phil's agent and batting coach, how do you coach such technique? "Phil remains an athlete at all times," he said. "A player who follows technique and its finer intricacies can very easily become mechanical. I remind him that this is sport and it requires athletic ability." Fast feet remain a major facet of his game.

As for off the field. I'll open the innings with him any time but sharing a flat doesn't hold the same romance! He might come from a small town called Macksville some five hours out of Sydney, but this kid wants the big time. Since moving to the bright lights at 16, he's gained an appetite for fast cars, diamond earrings and expensive clothing – and a complete disdain for matters such as cleaning and washing-up. In his own way he tried to help England out of recession, coughing up £600 in excess baggage when he returned to Australia. Unsurprisingly, the flat has been a less cluttered place since his departure.

His name is on the tips of everyone's tongues. He is indeed as good as they say. And he should be feared by England.