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François “Faf” du Plessis is a South African professional cricketer and former captain of the South Africa national cricket team. He is considered one of the greatest fielders of all time and among the best all-format batsmen of his era. He is also regarded as one of the most tactically astute and successful captains in all formats of modern cricket. In 2015, du Plessis became the first South African to score centuries in all forms of the game. He was named the South African Cricketer of the Year in 2019.

On December 12th, 2023, Aspetar hand surgeon Dr Elisabet Hagert had a chance to interview her patient, Faf, for the Aspetar Sports Medicine Journal.

Why do you love cricket? When did your passion for the sport start?

I fell in love with cricket when I was but a young boy.

From kicking around footballs to playing with plastic cricket gear, my childhood was all about the thrill of playing with any ball I could get my hands on. Picture this: a little me, armed with a plastic bat and soft balls, enthusiastically chasing after them. You could say that my first love was about the ball and playing with a ball.

My father was a professional athlete himself, a rugby player, but also a coach for both cricket and rugby. And as my father was a sportsman, he encouraged me to dedicate time to sports.

Already from the age of six, I noticed that cricket came easy to me. As a six-year-old, I would play with the nine-year-olds, as a nine-year-old with teenagers, and when I was thirteen, I decided that cricket was my life, and what I wanted to do.

After I finished school, my father told me to enrol for studies at the university. Despite a detour to sign up for courses, a 45-minute

FAF DU PLESSIS CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

- 2020** Scored his 4,000th Test cricket run finishing with an average of over 40
- 2019** Scores his 5,000th run in One-Day International cricket and named Cricketer of the Year, 74% winning as Captain in One-Day Internationals
- 2018** Defeats Australia in a back-to-back Home and Away Test series
- 2017** Named Captain of the South African team in all 3 formats of the game, and Captain of the World XI team
- 2016** Defeats Australia 5-0 in One Day internationals
- 2015** First South African to score centuries in all formats of the game
- 2012** Scores a century on debut in Test Match cricket

queue made me rethink everything. Long story short, I went back home, told Dad I wanted to be a cricketer, and the rest is history.

How did you transition into becoming a professional cricketer?

I went to England to play in teams that were at a higher level and fully immerse myself in the sport. Living in a tiny apartment away from home, was a crash course in adulthood, but also an opportunity to dedicate myself to the sport I love.

Going pro is a massive leap. Did cricket turn into more of a “job”, or did your love for the game just get stronger?

No, I always had a love for cricket. My passion for the sport was burning so deeply within myself, and I couldn't see myself doing anything else.

Even during frustrating moments, questioning my choice, taking a couple of days away from the sport rekindled the fire. Time to recharge and spend quality moments with family and friends – that's what brings me back to my passion for the game.

As you may know, we have the Aspire Academy here which is a unique facility in the Middle East to promote athleticism and sports in young boys and girls. Do you think cricket could have a place at Aspire?

Definitely! When I see the amazing resources and professional organization around athleticism and football that exists both at Aspire Academy and in Qatar at large, I know that results will come for the national teams. It is inspirational to see the dedication that exists here to having the best people, coaches, and facilities for all sorts of sports.

I'm hoping to work closer with Qatar Cricket to help establish a larger pool of professional cricketers to build the community here. As there is already a love for cricket in Qatar and the Middle East, I believe the sport will grow rapidly over the coming years.

What would you say it takes to become a professional, world-class cricketer such as yourself?

First of all – a love for the game.

Love is passion, and passion gives you the desire to do hard work.

If you don't have love and passion for the game, when the going gets tough, you will fade away.

Cricket's a game of highs and lows, and even the best stumble now and then. But loving the sport gets you through the rough patches. Talent matters, but hard graft is the real game-changer.

I've seen many talented athletes fade away because they didn't put in the grind.

What are some of the challenges that you have encountered in your career, and that you have had to overcome?

Being away from loved ones for extended periods is the biggest challenge. Cricket drags me around the globe for up to six months at a stretch.

My wife and I had to make some tough calls like her putting her career on hold to join me on these cricket adventures. Our next family challenge will come in a year when our children have to start attending school in South Africa, which again will mean time away from the family to play cricket.

Dealing with failure is another challenge. A failure in a World Cup, for instance, will end up feeling not just like a failure in the sport, but also as a personal failure. So, what happens in the game can end up spilling over into your perception of yourself as a person.

Lastly, social media and media attention can also present challenges.

I try to steer clear of politics, but as a former captain of the South African National Team, I've faced my share of personal attacks online and even in random places like restaurants. Tough as it is, we tackle it together as a family.

Being a top athlete means finding a balance—embracing both success and failure, praise and criticism.



Image: Faf du Plessis picks up runs during Day One of the First Test match between England and South Africa at SuperSport Park. December, 2019, Pretoria, South Africa.

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The strong influence of a father is something that we have seen in the case of Tiger Woods and David Beckham. Can you see similarities there?

No doubt! Our dads were our biggest fans, always supportive and at times pushing us to succeed. Parents often ask me how hard to get involved in their kids' sports, and there's no one-size-fits-all answer. My dad's love and dedication got me here but parenting nowadays leans more toward softer approaches.

Coaching's changed too—no more army drills. It's more about discovering talents and nurturing them.

If it hadn't been cricket, what other sport would you have gone for? Or what other profession would you have considered?

Honestly, I can't picture being a world-class athlete in anything else. Cricket's been my love from day one. I don't even know what else I could have done.

There was never a plan B. Cricket was always my one and only plan.

Is there a cricket skill you secretly wish you were better at?

I used to be a bowler as well. It's called being an "all-rounder" (both batting and bowling), but a few injuries nudged me to drop the bowling and focus on being a specialist batter.

I've been fortunate to have a great career as a batter, but if I could go back in time and train smarter, I would have loved to excel at both as it is rare in our sport.



Image: The Hundred match between Northern Superchargers Men and Manchester Originals Men at Headingley, August 2022, Leeds, England.

© George Wood/Getty Images



Image: Group Stage match of the ICC Cricket World Cup 2019 between South Africa and Bangladesh at The Oval. June 2019, London, England.

Working with medical professionals is part of being a professional athlete. What qualities do you value most in them?

I value the personal relationship.

Talent and experience guide diagnosis, sure, but I'm drawn to professionals who are passionate and love what they do and are dedicated to their patients. Long-term relationships and understanding matter, especially for athletes. Trust is built over time, and that's key.

Do you have any special strategies in place to prevent injuries?

With age, a structured training approach becomes crucial. While I have always been lucky enough to have a good overall physical health, a clear regimen is important in preventing injuries from happening. Identifying weaknesses and implementing rehabilitation programs, in collaboration with my team, ensures a consistent process. The key is to stick to the process, with no shortcuts.

What brought you to Aspetar and what has been your experience here?

Dealing with persistent pain in my left arm and battling tennis elbow, I sought guidance from Dr Steve Roche, my trusted orthopaedic surgeon in South Africa. Despite his invaluable assistance, we decided a second opinion could be useful. At the

suggestion of my physiotherapist, Even Speechly, we reached out to Aspetar, known for its athlete-centric approach—a wise move given the proximity to India and my current stint in the Indian Cricket League, IPL.

My initial meeting with Dr Elisabet Hagert left a lasting impression. The depth of the clinical examination and the thoughtful analysis of my concerns showcased Aspetar's unwavering professionalism. It genuinely felt like I was in a top-tier hospital dedicated to athlete care.

Eventually, the decision to undergo surgery was reached through collaborative discussions involving myself, my physios, my South African doctor, and Aspetar's surgeon. The collective focus on finding the optimal solution eased the path to surgery.

The entire journey at Aspetar, from clinic visits to surgery and rehabilitation, has been marked by a blend of personal attention and top-notch professionalism.

And my last question; considering your experiences, would you encourage your children to become professional athletes?

Whatever they fall in love with, I will support it. No force, just nurturing their passion, much like my father did for me.

Elisabet Hagert MD, PhD