



THE MAKING OF MICHAEL

AUSTRALIAN CRICKETER MICHAEL CLARKE IS LEARNING THAT THE ROAD TO STARDOM ACTUALLY BEGINS WHEN HE STEPS OFF THE PITCH, WRITES **SHANE CONROY**.

Michael Clarke is wearing black undies. I know this because I'm meeting him on the set of his latest Bonds menswear shoot and I've arrived early for the interview. There are no less than a dozen serious fashion types looking on as the 28-year-old cricket star models the new winter range under the glare of hot studio lights. Between shots Clarke goofs around with retired tennis star and fellow Bonds ambassador Patrick Rafter, but both men snap back into stern expressions and faraway looks on cue. I stand in the corner trying not to get in the way, wondering if the knockabout teenage boy who dreamed of playing cricket for Australia ever envisioned this scenario. He later assures me that he definitely did not.

The photographer calls for a lunchbreak and agents and assistants descend on two long tables, where they serve themselves from large platters of food. I'm ushered to the far end of one of the tables where Clarke and Rafter are eating together, trading casual banter. I'm introduced to the Australian Test vice captain and I offer to wait until he finishes his lunch before we begin the interview, but his minders tell me there is not enough time and that I should go right ahead. Rafter knows the drill and slides further down the table, away from us. Clarke straightens in his chair. Break time is over before it really began.

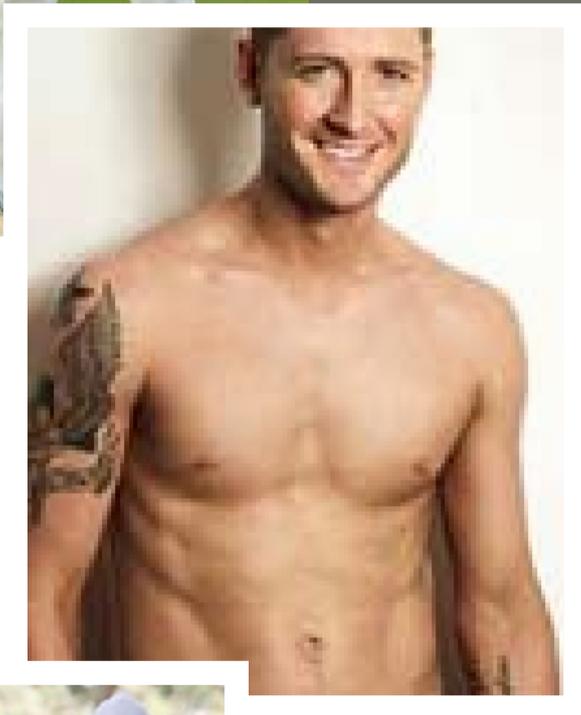
IN THE BEGINNING

This is business as usual for Australian cricket's perpetually rising star. It seems the working-class boy had been destined for great things since his dad, Les, strode onto the pitch during a childhood match to remove him from the crease so the other boys could have a go. At 16 he was playing first grade cricket for his local Western Suburbs club in Sydney, and before he was out of his teens he'd made his first-class debut for New South Wales. He was presented with his first baggy green shortly after his 21st birthday. So promising was the young cricketer that he was being touted as Australia's next captain before he'd even played his first Test. He also signed a \$1 million-plus Slazenger sponsorship deal before his Test debut. ▶

Michael Clarke makes the transition between cricket star and model, but playing cricket is where his heart is.



Above: Clarke and Ponting talk tactics at Lords in England; Right: Cheeky Clarke isn't shy about posing in his undies; Below: Clarke and Bingle are Australia's Posh and Becks.



Clarke didn't disappoint. On his Test debut in India in 2004 he stunned the cricket world when he smacked 151 runs like it was nothing. Then he backed it up with an impressive century in Brisbane the following month. The boy his teammates called 'Pup' had arrived on the international scene, and senior players such as current Test captain Ricky Ponting and retired bowling legend Shane Warne quickly took him under their wing. Together they helped to teach the young batsman perhaps the most important lesson of modern-day professional sport: an athlete is judged as harshly by how he acts off the field as his on-field performance. As Warne well knows, off-field transgressions linger much longer than on-field triumphs.

PRIDE BEFORE A FALL

Indeed, the young cricketer understands how to handle himself in the media scrum and knows that the brands he represents have little patience for a tarnished public image. He also seems to realise that his ability to score runs is only part of his long-term marketability. His current off-field commitments include major sponsorship deals with Bonds, Gillette and Slazenger, as well as media obligations as part of his role as Australian Test and One-Day vice captain and Twenty20 captain. And then there's the increasing time he spends on the red carpet – and in the tabloids – with his fiancée of more than 18 months, model Lara Bingle, as their profile grows into this country's version of Posh and Becks.

However, that's not to say Clarke isn't committed to getting the job done on the field too. He knows what can happen when he takes his eye off the ball. Following a form slump in 2005, it all came crashing down

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for the promising batsman when he was sacked from the Test team. It came as a real shock to the then 24-year-old star who, despite his relative inexperience, was being compared to some of the greatest batsmen to have ever played the game.

"I was looking too far ahead and that's partly why I was dropped," he says. "I was busy with off-field commitments and some of my focus went off my game. This other stuff I do on the side is really fantastic, but now that I've been through the sacking I'll always make sure cricket is first and foremost."

Clarke returned to state cricket, where he successfully regained his focus and found his form once again. When his Test replacement, Shane Watson, succumbed to injury, he got the call back up to the national team, where he has stayed since. ▶

BACKCHAT

Michael Clarke talks about his relationship with Ricky Ponting, whether he'll play in India and what it's like to be in the spotlight with Lara Bingle.

:: ON THE CAPTAINCY

"I've been Test vice captain for a couple of years now and that has meant I've been able to work more closely with Ricky [Ponting]. I don't think my taking on the Twenty20 captaincy will change [our relationship] at all. Ricky is still my leader and someone I look up to. I will continue to learn as much as I can from him."

:: ON SHANE WARNE

"He's a wonderful guy and a great friend. He's been very open and honest with me and has helped me so much since I came to the Australian team."

:: ON HIS BACK INJURY

"I had three bulging discs and a little tear. I have to be disciplined in my training and make sure that I'm doing all the right exercises and rehab to stay fit and stay on the park. It's about being vigilant."

:: ON THE INDIAN PREMIER LEAGUE (IPL)

"Playing for my country is my priority, but if the timing is right and my body is going well, then I'd love to take part in the IPL. I believe there is room for all three forms of the game."

:: ON THE SPOTLIGHT

"The media are generally pretty complimentary, to be honest. Lara [Bingle] and I accept that we are in the limelight. I can certainly speak for myself and Lara when I say we wouldn't change anything in our lives."

“I'm one of the few guys who gets to go to work and chase his dreams, so I'll never complain.”

THEN THERE WAS LIGHT

Keeping his full attention on cricket, however, is a challenge as Clarke's packed schedule grows. Then there's the stress of the chronic back injury that has kept him off the field of late, the pending negotiations to play more cricket in the Indian Premier League and his father's battle with Hodgkin's disease.

"Dad and I are very close. He's in remission. He's smiling and living life," Clarke says. "And there's no real concern that my back is a huge issue. All professional athletes have niggles throughout their careers, so to me it's no different than if I had a bad knee."

While always remaining positive, Clarke does admit dealing with his dad's illness and the tragic passing of Bingle's father has given him a chance to reflect on what is most important in life, providing him with a new perspective when dealing with the media interest in his relationship with Bingle. Paparazzi now routinely camp outside the couple's Bondi apartment, and he laughs when I mention a photo of him scooping up dog poo that recently appeared in the national press.

"There are a million more important things that should be in the paper, but media attention is part of what Lara [Bingle] and I do. The media plays a big part in our careers, so we can't have them when we want them and make them disappear when we don't."

"I'm one of the few guys who gets to go to work and chase his dreams, so I'll never complain about what I do. If I kick every stone I come across I'll have very sore toes. Life's too short for that. There are too many good things happening in my life."

With that we shake hands, he pushes his half-eaten lunch to the side and goes back to work. When I leave the studio Michael Clarke is wearing black undies. This time he's smiling. **MA**



Above: Clarke makes scoring runs for Australia look like child's play; Right: The slashie model and master of faraway looks shows us his stuff.

