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Mr South Africa graduates with a PhD from UCT

The current Mr South Africa, Habib Noorbhai, was among the doctoral graduates at the University of Cape Town's (UCT) graduation ceremony this morning. His research into the backlift technique in cricket – an essential component of a sound batting technique – has underpinned the design of a revolutionary training bat.

As far as PhDs go, it's been a relatively short ride for Noorbhai who completed his doctoral studies in three years. But along the way he also won the Mr South Africa title in November last year, adding a little extra pressure to an already full programme of academic and humanitarian work.

Noorbhai graduated with an MPhil in biokinetics at UCT in June 2014. A month later he started his PhD under the supervision of Emeritus Professor Tim Noakes at the Division of Exercise Science and Sports Medicine (Faculty of Health Sciences), based at the Sports Science Institute of South Africa.

"I wanted to continue the momentum," he said.

Noorbhai has been a university student for 10 years, having obtained a BA in sport psychology from the University of Johannesburg, a BSpSc (Hons biokinetics) from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, and the MPhil in biokinetics from UCT.

To gather his PhD data, Noorbhai conducted video and biomechanical analyses of more than 400 cricketers from three countries and from a variety of skill levels. He hopes that his research will develop cricketing skills, especially among young players.

The backlift is the angle of the bat when batters lift it prior to making contact with the ball. It's one of six components that constitute a batsman's complete batting technique, said Noorbhai.

For more than 100 years, the majority of cricketers, when facing the bowler, have lifted their bats straight back towards the wicketkeeper or the stumps. Noorbhai's research shows that a lateral batting backlift technique (LBBT), where the bat is lifted beyond second slip or in a rotary movement showing the open face of the bat, contributes to a better batting technique.

“From this, we hope that more batsmen will take cognisance of their backlift, especially players who play at the junior and youth levels of cricket.”

New training bat

A spin-off from this research has been the development of a unique training bat with a racquet-shaped toe-end, pioneered by Noorbhai, Noakes and Russell Woolmer, son of the late former Proteas coach, Bob Woolmer. Many coaches and cricket enthusiasts around the world have already given the training bat the thumbs up and there are plans to commercialise it.

“The interest has been from small-to-medium authorities. We’re yet to introduce the bat to the bigger cricketing bodies.”

Noorbhai’s relatively short PhD journey (he worked very long hours, including weekends and holidays) wasn’t always a smooth one. He is also a lecturer in sports science at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, and the protests of 2015/16 got close and personal when he was assaulted by student protesters who shut down his lectures.

Fortunately, the disruptions had a minimal effect on his PhD work as he’d done the bulk of his data collection before the unrest.

“Working on a PhD that encompassed cricket, one of my passions, has been more than rewarding.”

Winning the Mr South Africa title in the final straights of PhD studies has been tough but also fulfilling, “a journey of growth and strength”.

“In my initial reign, it wasn’t easy to balance work, the PhD, Mr SA duties and my humanitarian work.”

On the flipside, he’s been able to meet Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa and Democratic Alliance leader Mmusi Maimane, as well as numerous sports stars and TV celebrities.

Noorbhai plans to further his academic career within the health and sports sciences arena, specifically on the backlift project, by supervising postgraduate students “so that they can answer integral questions which my thesis did not”.

“My other area of research interest is to focus on why and how the Proteas can be successful at the next International Cricket Council (ICC) tournament: the 2019 World Cup.”

Story by Helen Swingler.

Photographs are available on request.

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