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by **PETER LALOR**

Senior Cricket Writer, The Australian

VVS haunts Australia quietly, rising to the surface just when they think he has gone away >>>

LAXMAN! It is uncanny how the name rises, like the proverbial body in the lake, whenever cricket, India and Australia are discussed. He haunts us quietly. Rising to the surface just when we thought he'd gone away. Sachin Tendulkar hovers above, VVS Laxman sneaks up on us, quiet, confident and admirably determined.

Laxman wandered past a huddle of senior Aussies in the team hotel after winning the Mohali Test for his side. Showered, dressed, surrounded by cameras and sycophants, he was off somewhere to do something. Most probably to celebrate another innings that the visitors would talk about for years to come. Another scalp on the belt. Another notch on the bat handle. Job done.

Ricky Ponting, by comparison, was still in his kit, huddled with Justin Langer and others over diagrams and plans, trying to work out where it had all gone wrong. Why it always goes this way. Searching, as they always have, for a chink in the armour, something they have missed. Laxman, however, remains inscrutable.

The night before, Ponting had sat with some senior team mates who seemed to think India were five wickets down because Laxman was a cripple in the first innings. He had come to the wicket like an old woman coming to the kitchen in the morning, full of aches and pains, unable to straighten. Ponting is an experienced hand and told his team mates, you cannot write off the batsman, not even when he struggles to straighten.

There is a saying in Australian sport, "Beware the injured warrior." That is what the captain told his charges. "I felt that with the wounded player batting down the order, he would make a big contribution," Ponting explained. "A few of our guys felt that he might have been below his best because of the injury he had and you could see that he was restricted in his first innings, but I was trying to make sure that they would not approach the next day thinking India is going to be a batsman down in the second innings and get carried away." Ponting was asked if the side had studied Laxman coming into the game. "Have we analysed him? Sure, we've analysed him inside out," he had replied. And there they were, back at the drawing board, analysing him again.

Australian cricket writers discuss him too. The old hands go over and over a small thing that bothers them. It was around

Why Do This to Us, Mate?



Ponting after losing the Test

Craddock. Sometimes they think it was Mike Donaldson. Possibly somebody here thinks it was them.

Cricket writers all know that it was bestowed on VVS after that Kolkata Test when he rose from the black hole the Indians found themselves in and again slayed the Aussies. Maybe they are wrong.

Everyone thinks somebody else may have minted the name, but the one argument they don't have is how very very appropriate it is. I sometimes suspect that if we went to the registry and checked his birth certificate, it would say, "This baby is Very Very Special and has come to lay Australians to waste." Who knows?

Laxman has destroyed so many of our sides. It is as if it is his birthright. It was his 281 in Kolkata in 2001 against Steve Waugh's side that won an incredible Test for India and sent the Australian into retirement without a series victory in the subcontinent. A great cricket career finished unfulfilled because of that. I remember driving back from a social game up in the highlands of New South Wales, listening to that innings. It was inconceivable that a man could do that to a team that had so much momentum. It was as if he had stood in front of a charging locomotive and pushed it back up the track and into the siding with the force of his will. He followed it up with 148 in Adelaide (2003), 109 in Sydney and 200 not out in Delhi in 2008.

What does he have against us?

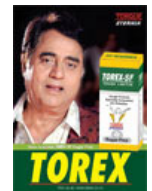
In Mohali, William Swanton of *The Daily Telegraph* dubbed him Very Very Sore Laxman after the first innings. It was a cute line. Ponting had a line too when asked to reflect on the damage the great man had done once again. "I hope his back is pretty sore for the next week and he can't play," he said with a wry grin.

As the Mohali innings progressed, email charged up the wires from our vast continent to correspondents in yours. It was uncanny the respect we had. Uncanny the inevitability of the unfolding situation that we predicted. Laxman is respected in Australia because he is a man after our own hearts, a champion who rises to the occasion when it is needed the most. Some correspondents even suggested that they would accept defeat if it came at his hands. You don't get any higher praise from down under.

Inevitably, defeat came and it was accepted because this was



Page 1



Page 2



Page 3



Page 4



Page 5



Page 6

2001 that somebody came up with the moniker "Very Very Special". Robert Craddock believes it was Peter Roebuck. Peter Roebuck believes it wasn't him and might have been Robert

a very very special innings in a very very special Test from a very very special man.
Can you believe that 73 runs could be so valuable? ●



Page 7

22 eye OCTOBER 10-16, 2010

◀ Page 22 of 36 ▶



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