

NEWSLETTER No. 232 - DECEMBER 2002

A SENSE OF PERSPECTIVE

Much will be written about England's demise in Australia where the home team wrapped up the Ashes series on 1 December with ridiculous ease. Selection policy and planning, where logic and rationality were conspicuously absent, ought to be subject of a thorough enquiry by the ECB. Prior to the first Test, Shane Warne expressed the view that the tour management could "talk the talk" but queried whether they could "walk the walk". His scepticism was well-founded. Irrespective of the merits of the decision which was doubtful (lack of rational thinking again), England's decision to field first at Brisbane was perceived as weakness by the Australians. The Test, and the series, were lost half an hour before the first ball was even bowled.

However, despite inevitable media vitriol in the coming days and weeks it is perhaps an appropriate time to take an objective look at the quality of the opposition. Australia are so much better than the rest of the world at the moment. Last winter they defeated South Africa, second in the world rankings, 5 – 1 over two Test series. South Africa's victory came only after the Aussies had secured the second rubber.

If one was to select a current World XI, Australia would have at least 7 or 8 representatives. Tendulkar would come in for Steve Waugh, Vaughan (arguably) in for Langer and Dravid in lieu of Lehmann. A fully fit and focussed Lara would replace Martyn. And, of course, in McGrath and Warne they have two of the greatest bowlers in cricket history.

It is a similar situation to when the West Indians ruled the roost in the late 70's and 80's. Greenidge, Haynes and Richards at the top of the order, Dujon in the middle and the four fast bowlers would have been automatic choices for a World XI at that time.

A match between the two teams would have been a fascinating context. The Australians, through the inclusion of Warne, would undoubtedly have much the better balanced side. However, one feels the sheer erosion on the nerves of the Australian batsmen by the relentlessness of the four fast bowlers would give the West Indies a significant edge and that in the war of the two egos, Richards and Warne, the overpowering force of the former's personality would win the day more often than not.

Is this Australian team their best ever? Neither this current side, nor those of 1921 and 1948 were seriously challenged by quality bowling. The 1902 side had Barnes, Rhodes and Hirst to contend with on uncovered wickets and, albeit perhaps fortunately, eventually won the series 2-1. They would shade – just - the editor's vote.

MEETINGS

11 December 2002 - Meeting

This evening marks the Society's hugely popular Annual Buffet Supper. Members will be uniquely entertained by Lance Pierson.

Lance has been a cricket addict since childhood. Living in London, he is a member of Middlesex and MCC. From time to time he has to tear himself reluctantly away from watching cricket to earn a living. He does this as a performer of one-man entertainments. To his delight he includes a range of cricket shows among these. He has performed them at several cricket societies around the country, as well as at the Scarborough Cricket Festival and at the Surrey members' dining club at the Oval!

PLAYER OF THE YEAR

Members will be aware that Shaun Udal was voted the Society's Player of the Year. The award is richly deserved. It is hoped to present the award to Shaun at the meeting on 8 January at Basingstoke Rugby Club.

AUSTRALIA 02

The Editor always promised himself that, in the event of his visiting Australia, he would use Alan Ross' *Australia 55* as his guide. It is only when re-reading the book in the country in which it was written that one picks up all the nuances in his narrative. The book is still regarded as the greatest of tour books and rightly so. Given the changed nature of tours where teams now fly out for a couple of first-class matches (if that) and Tests and one-day internationals, *Australia 55* is an evocative reminder of a bygone age.

The Editor and his wife, Jennie, visited Queensland and Sydney during the summer to rendezvous with his son and fiancée who were travelling around the world. Although the stay was confined only to two states, retracing Ross' steps confirmed how the passage of time had left its mark on that unique continent. This piece was written during his stay.

In the photograph section of Brisbane there is the most distinct colonial-style building with the caption of "A Place to Stay". It is the former Belle Vue Hotel, which was located next to the Parliament Building. The latter, a resplendent edifice, still remains but the Belle Vue Hotel was demolished some 15 years ago, a victim of Brisbane political in-fighting. The building standing in its place barely deserves mention. However, the domestic houses in Brisbane's suburbs must rank as some of the most architecturally distinctive and aesthetic anywhere in the world. The majority are constructed from wood; the roads are wide and the houses are invariably set against a profusion of hibiscus, poinsettia and bouganvillea bushes and trees so beloved by Ross. Rainbow lorikeets, a variety of cockatoos, brush turkeys and mynah birds complete the setting of a sub-tropical paradise.

Brisbane is much-changed. The skyline is now dominated by glass skyscrapers on the north bank of the Brisbane River. Some of the buildings and eating outlets located

alongside the river, are frequented by tourists and the business community and are reminiscent of London's Docklands. An artificial beach has been created on the south bank, where young couples while away the hours in the sun. A thriving arts complex and university buildings confirm the impression of a confident and vibrant city in renaissance.

Though out of season thoughts never strayed far from cricket. The Gabba, of course, no longer contains the "weeping fig trees (which) curve round a wide arc of banked grass", as described by Ross. It is a modern concrete bowl which, unfortunately, is totally out of character with the colonial style architecture of the Woollongabba area which surrounds it. It is, in fact, not primarily a cricket ground. It is home to the Brisbane Lions, the local Australian Rules football side. Aussie Rules is the national sport and consumes several pages, rather than column inches of the sports sections of newspapers. The Brisbane planners are clearly struggling with this area of the city. Traffic chokes the area and car parking on match days is, apparently, the most contentious of issues. It is also an unwelcoming ground. All entrances were padlocked when we visited it and our host confirmed there was no public access on non-match days.

We were able to stay for a few days with cricketing friends, whose son came over to play for Hursley Park some 4 years ago. We went to look at his club ground, Western Suburbs at Graceville Oval. It is in a park but public access has not afflicted the facilities and amenities, as is often the case in England. Floodlights have been erected for the practice area and nets. The club's favourite son was Sam Trimble, Queensland's most prolific runmaker. An opening batsman, he was unfortunate to play in the era of Lawry and Simpson and though he toured the Caribbean in 1964/5, he never gained a Test cap. With Victoria's Jack Potter he is often regarded as the best batsman never to play Test cricket for Australia. More recent products, who did grace the Test scene were Craig McDermott, Gary Cosier, John Maguire and Carl Rackemann. Bill Brown, Australia's oldest surviving Test cricketer, also played there during the Second World War. The club's greatest servant, however, was R.J. Hartigan. He scored a century on debut – 116 – in the Ashes Series of 1907/08 and was the club's President from 1926 to 1958. He was also the driving force in Queensland gaining entry to the Sheffield Shield. The stand at Graceville Oval bears his name.

We then moved on to Hervey Bay where we watched the whales – at the closest of quarters – and the dolphins, go through their repertoire. We felt a bit like David Attenborough.

Whilst in that idyllic location, the editor purchased the Annual Review edition of Inside Edge, the foremost Australian cricket magazine. It indeed does have an "edge" and is far more hard-hitting and outspoken than either of its English counterparts, The Cricketer and Wisden Cricket Monthly. It came as a considerable surprise to learn that the majority of the magazine's correspondents felt that the Test careers of Mark and Steve Waugh were at an end and they should depart sooner rather than later. Most felt that Darren Lehmann, a confidante of the new Australian one-day captain, Ricky Ponting, was ready to replace Mark Waugh. Substitutes for his redoubtable twin brother were not so easy to identify, and one could not help but think that his judges are just being a little too hasty in giving him the thumbs down.

Steve Waugh was then featured on Channel 7 a few days later. He asked the selectors "to give him a chance". For a man who is normally so positive in outlook (his books are inspirational) and who has achieved so much with a remarkable degree of consistency (his brother has been far more variable) it seemed a somewhat defensive plea. It would seem his days at the top level are numbered. That situation can only work to England's eventual advantage.

One commentator remarked that Australia's reserve strength is overrated. Let us hope he is right. It should not be forgotten that Australia went through a trough after the Chappell/Lillee/Marsh era. Another group of great players will be leaving the scene in the next 2/3 years and will not be replaced easily. The key will be how long Shane Warne and Glenn McGrath can keep going.

The publication of Mark Waugh's autobiography coincided with our visit and the editor missed, unfortunately, his book signing in Brisbane by a matter of only 24 hours.

The magazine also covered in some detail the spectacular demise of Mark Slater, who was not now even a member of the New South Wales first XI.

After Hervey Bay and the world heritage site of Fraser Island we drove, via Rockhampton, through 700 km of flat featureless scrub to Mackay. The only compensation was the continuous presence of the Great Dividing Range to our left. Only when we travelled through the sugar cane fields just south of the latter was the monotony of the landscape broken. Rockhampton, though, was an attractive city with well kept public parks and gardens. We did not have time to find the Agriculture Showground where Hutton's team played a Queensland Country XI. Interestingly, Ross mentions that the pitch had never been played on and was prepared in the local Botanic Gardens and transplanted in 18 inch sods. This was, of course, some twenty years before the Packer era when pitches were prepared elsewhere and transplanted as a whole for the first time.

After an idyllic three days at South Molle amidst the Whitsunday Islands on the Great Barrier Reef, we spent a night in Townsville where Mike Arnold, the Society's Australian correspondent, lived for some years. We took the opportunity to visit the local Townsville Cricket Club early next morning. Although the pavilion is an unprepossessing structure the club has facilities which would be the envy of all English clubs. Set within a multi-acre sports complex, which included a superb hockey arena (Townsville play in the National Hockey League), and against a backdrop of steep brown and green hills at one end the club has three Ovals. Two have boundaries which would meet the requirements of first-class cricket. A match started on the No. 2 pitch at 9.45 am. It was only 12 August. The Australian Cricket Board in a bold and imaginative move, are seeking to redevelop the major grounds in Darwin and Cairns, so that Test cricket can be played there in the Australian winter. The weather in Queensland was perfect for our two week stay in the state. It hovered in the mid-20s on each day and we enjoyed virtually unbroken sunshine. As darkness starts to fall round about 5.30pm in the area north of the Tropic of Capricorn in August, one imagines that most matches would need to start at about 9.30am.

However, the sun will normally have long since been burned off any early morning moisture by that time.

Queensland has, in fact, been desperately short of rain for some years in some areas. The Gladstone district at the southern end of the Great Barrier Reef has not experienced appreciable rainfall for seven years and the area between Bowen and Townsville was very dry and arid. It appeared that virtually all the rivers and streams had run dry sometime ago. We were also told that Cairns had not experienced any major rainfall in three years.

And so to Sydney. It was, of course, in the second Test of 1954-55 series that Frank Tyson (10 – 120) and Brian Statham (5 – 128) stamped their authority on the series as England ran out winners in a match of changing fortunes by 38 runs. The Sydney Cricket Ground (SCG) has changed much since then. The Hill has since been replaced by the Doug Walters Stand (strange the Aussies should celebrate a man who never made a Test century in England) and The Yabba Stand (named after the famous barracker). Vast stands encircle the remainder of the ground though, thankfully, the splendid main pavilion, built in 1886, and the adjoining ladies pavilion have been spared. Both buildings, and the old scoreboard which peers over the Doug Walters Stand, are National Heritage Listed.

Rugby is no longer played on the ground; that is played at Aussie Stadium, located on the same site. The SCG did not host any of the Olympic Games in 2000. Consequently opportunity was taken to dig up the whole playing arena and lay new drains.

One splendid feature of the ground is the Walk of Honour which celebrates Sydney's sporting heroes. Among those commemorated are Trumper, Noble, Bradman, Morris, Miller, Harvey, Bill Brown, Benaud, Davidson, Simpson and O'Neill. One assumes that the Waugh twins and Glenn McGrath will receive their accolades in the not-too-distant future.

We spent some time in the Museum. It is much smaller and has fewer artefacts than Lord's. Nevertheless, there was much of interest for devotees. Australians clearly cherish the late Sir Donald Bradman and still have a fixation about Bodyline. Jardine was cast as a villain throughout our tour of the ground. One outstanding facility was holograms which brought back to life Noble, Oldfield and O'Reilly. They enjoyed a debate with Richie Benaud on the merits of limited-overs cricket. The great maestro of the commentary box had the final word!

Nellie Gregory, sister of Syd, who made eight tours to England between 1890 and 1912, recounted the contribution of her family to Australian cricket. She is also commemorated in the Walk of Honour for her contributions to women's cricket. We were also able to watch nostalgic video clips of Bradman, Grimmett, Mailey, O'Reilly and Benaud.

Whilst in the pavilion we were shown the Holy of Holies – the Australian dressing room. Our guide knew exactly which seat/locker was occupied by each member of the current Australian side.

The SCG was therefore much more accessible than the Gabba, though the tour had to be pre-booked. It was a beautiful morning. At the end of the tour, the guide allowed Jennie and I to walk all around the ground to take photographs. It was a wonderful end to yet another bright sunlit morning as we strolled around one of cricket's great venues on our own. The ground was deserted.

On the previous day we took the ferry to Manly. The journey across Sydney Heads was as scary as any sea voyage could be; mountainous waves crashed over the bow of the large vessel. We returned by bus and rail! We enjoyed our picnic lunch in Ivanhoe Park, in which Manly Oval is located. The rugby season had finished on the previous weekend and the cricket square had been duly resown. The ground is subject to refurbishment with additional stands to be provided. We talked to one of the groundsmen. Rugby is the primary sport and they have a considerable heritage. However, the cricket team play in the Sydney Grade competition and have frequently provided players for the New South Wales state side, including the great Keith Miller.

Sydney has changed significantly since the 54 - 55 tour. The harbourside area, with the glorious Opera House and the redevelopment of The Rocks and Darling Harbour have made the city a world-class tourist attraction. Alan Ross obviously spent much of his time traversing the vast, resplendent and picturesque harbour on the ferries. We did the same and it ensured a memorable holiday.

On our last morning we visited the Anzac War Memorial where there is an extensive memorial to Albert "Tibby" Cotter. He lost his life at Gallipoli whilst serving as a stretcher bearer. We then strolled across Sydney's Domain where the first major games of cricket were played in the nineteenth century.

POSTSCRIPT

In Australia 63 Ross quoted the Hungarian artist George Molner. The latter had written that "The Australian is in the making. Maybe he will be a mixture of British values, of Continental enjoyment of life, of American techniques, with a touch of Eastern mysticism." The editor's first impression was that they had truly arrived as a nation and Molner's analysis of their characteristics was largely correct. The United Kingdom's entry to the European Union had been a critical part of their development. Australia was forced to seek new economic trading partners. They are now very much part of South East Asia. Apart from sport, their ties with the UK are becoming increasingly tenuous and it can only be a matter of time before they become a Republic.

The Bali bomb will have shaken Australia's confidence profoundly and robbed them of some of their appealing naivety. However, as Ross wrote at the end of Australia 63: "You can like them, or dislike them, but no one in future will be able to ignore them". How true.