

HAMPSHIRE CRICKET SOCIETY
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NEWSLETTER No. 410 – MARCH 2022 (1)

SHANE WARNE - An Appreciation

The announcement that Shane Warne had died on 4 March 2022, at the age of 52, whilst in Thailand, stunned the cricket world. Indeed, it resonated beyond. After days of blanket coverage of the awful events in Ukraine, his passing shared the front pages of this country's newspapers. The inside pages were crammed with tributes to a unique individual who had transformed the sport.

It is difficult to remember just how the domination of the West Indian pace attack was brutalising Test Cricket during the late 1970s and throughout the following decade. Batsmen were subject to hour upon hour of unremitting fast bowling directed at the body, throat and cranium. Run scoring opportunities were few and far between. Bravery and patience were the order of the day. It was genuinely a mind-numbing spectacle for the onlooker. Occasionally, bowlers such as Terry Alderman posed different challenges as he swung the ball both ways. In the early 90s, the Pakistan pair of Wasim Akram and Waker Younis allied both pace and swing which, with devastating yorkers, especially with the old ball, made them fearsome but arresting propositions.

Spin bowling, seemed to be a lost art. Apart from the very odd occasion, the role of the spin bowler was to keep an end quiet, in order to enable the quick bowlers to rest between spells. They were no longer match-winners. Heavy bats were further threatening their existence as even mishits cleared the boundary ropes. Almost single-handedly, Abdul Qadir had carried the spin bowlers' torch during the 1980s, but as injury gradually brought his career to an end, it seemed as if spin bowlers would become an obsolete species, especially at test level.

And then along came Shane Warne. After the most inauspicious of debuts against India at Sydney in 1992, when he conceded 150 runs in taking one wicket in 45 overs, his first match-winning performance came eight months later in Sri Lanka. At Colombo, captain Allan Border gave him the ball in what was effectively the last throw of the dice. Warne responded by taking three quick wickets and Australia scraped home.

It was during the following summer that he gave notice that the currency of Test cricket was about to change. Just one ball – his first in an Ashes Test, at Old Trafford – resulted in the birth of a legend. When the ball drifted to pitch well outside leg-stump, then dipped and whipped across many inches to hit Mike Gatting's off-stump, the whole cricket world sat up, blinked and stared in disbelief. They had never seen a man turn a cricket ball as far. The delivery was replayed time and again. By the end of the summer, the world over were ambling to the bowling crease with cocked wrists. Club coaches were confronted with net full of budding leg-spinners. Warne had captured the imagination like no other cricketer since Ian Botham in 1981.

Having re-established the leg-spinning heritage which ran through Arthur Mailey, Clarrie Grimmett, Bill O'Reilly, and Richie Benaud, Australia then dominated world cricket for the next ten years or more. With an array of fast-scoring and formidably consistent batsmen, cemented by Steve Waugh in the pivotal stabilising role, Australia were able to post high totals quickly and then set attacking fields for Glenn McGrath early on, and then Warne, to torment the opposition. It was a simple, yet highly effective strategy.

Shane Warne made some of the best batsmen in the world look novices. Only the supremely talented Indian batsmen, used to playing wrist and finger spin in their own country, notably Sachin Tendulkar, Rahul Dravid and V V S Laxman were able to master him. Brian Lara also came into that category. Warne analysed the techniques of his opponents during the course of their innings and stored the knowledge in his memory bank. Many batsmen started confidently, but as Warne systematically probed their weaknesses and varied his field accordingly, their assurance was notably eroded. Runs became harder to come by. Batsmen became more uncertain and tentative. It was only a matter of time before they were snared.

Really there were never – despite his rhetoric – that number of variations. The googly was surprisingly easy to pick and after a succession of shoulder ailments, it was rarely employed. The flipper was a potent weapon as it fizzed off the pitch from generally back of a length, or even shorter, surprising the batsman and bowling him or trapping him leg-before. It was his phenomenal accuracy, coupled with the variations in spin, and hence turn, as well as his agile and wonderful cricket brain, that set him apart. As his reputation grew, so did his psychological hold on batsmen. He also never knew when he was beaten; he never regarded any cause as being lost until the final ball was bowled.

Shane Warne first brought these assets and philosophy to Hampshire in 2000. By that time he had been nominated as one of *Wisden's Five Cricketers of the 20th Century*. He bowled outstandingly, taking over 100 wickets in all matches, but Hampshire endured a poor season. However, in mid-July the County faithful at Portsmouth were able to enjoy one of the finest and most fascinating duels ever seen on a cricket field. The encounter between Shane Warne and Rahul Dravid that day will live for ever in the memory of those who were there. They both knew that the fortunes of their side, and probably the fate of the match, lay in their respective hands. Warne wheeled away for much of the day, teasing and testing Dravid with his wiles and variation of flight and turn. Initially, the great Indian batsman was content to defend. As he gained the measure of the pitch, and Warne, he increased his attacking shots with masterful footwork, and superb placement. In the end it was Dravid who prevailed as he composed the most serene of centuries. It was the most compelling contest.

When Warne returned to Hampshire in 2004, as captain, he immediately galvanised the County's cricket. They gained promotion to Division 1 of the Championship and finished third in the National League. The side was stronger than three years earlier. It was, though, his captaincy that transformed the County's cricket. His bravado and confidence rubbed off onto the players. As a consequence they displayed new self belief. The opposition were confronted with a set of new and very different challenges, not only arising from his bowling but also his field placings, which were invariably designed to take wickets rather than prevent runs. He had introduced, and

imposed, a completely different mindset in both his own players and Hampshire's opponents. He carried those attributes into 2005.

Despite all his achievements in his career to date, 2005 was undoubtedly his *annus mirabilis*. Ninety-six Test wickets, a staggering 40 of which were in a losing Ashes side, and a stunning maiden century at Canterbury – he later added another at Southgate – all contributed to a truly distinguished year. He was still capable of producing the magic ball that turned substantially more than the width of the stumps. If the ball that bowled Gattling was the ball of the last century, then surely that which bowled Andrew Strauss at Edgbaston is already a candidate for the ball of the 21st.

However, for Hampshire supporters, it was his captaincy and selfless spirit that stood out above all his other achievements. He has never spared himself in Hampshire's cause. His workload and commitment is on a par with that of another great – Malcolm Marshall. There can be no higher praise. And, of course, like Macko, he was so sadly taken from us far too early.

Many observers thought Hampshire's fortunes would decline when he joined the Australian squad. It was not the case. The County defied the pundits by continuing to play positive and delightfully vibrant cricket as they turned around matches from losing positions to record impressive victories, particularly Sussex at home and the following game at Cheltenham. Also, of course, Hampshire put together a famous quartet of victories in his absence to win the C&G Final. It is doubtful they would have done so without his all-pervading influence.

It has been said that he is the best captain Australia never had. But for well-publicised and documented on and off field foibles, he must certainly have captained his country. Genius, though, rarely comes in conforming packages and is invariably flawed. For many years he was the Aussie that English cricket fans loved to hate. But in 2005, they took him to their hearts. For most of The Ashes series, he was Australia's bowling and he won over English crowds with his courage, fortitude and sheer force of personality. Many will have shared his disappointment when he was narrowly deprived of a maiden Test century at Old Trafford. It was the ultimate irony that his dropped slip catch at The Oval, enabled Kevin Pieterse to prosper and effectively allow England to regain The Ashes.

Also in 2005, when available, he led Hampshire to second place in the County Championship, behind Nottinghamshire. They missed out on winning the competition by 2.5 points. Warne was incensed that in the penultimate round of matches, Kent, in order to satisfy Sky television, set a target that would have been generous in the 1960's, let alone the current era, as Nottinghamshire won at Canterbury. Warne said "I think that's one of the dumbest things I've ever seen". The last match of the season was against the new Champions and Hampshire won by an innings and 198 runs. Warne declared the Hampshire innings with John Crawley undefeated on 311, only five runs behind R H Moore's highest individual score for the County. It seemed an insensitive decision, though, publicly at least, Crawley always supported it.

In 2007, Shane Warne took Hampshire to The Friends Provident Final at Lord's. Hampshire were clear favourites but were comprehensively outplayed by Durham. Between that match and the end of the season, it was clear from his body language that his time with Hampshire had run its course. He found it impossible to mask his

disappointment, and it was no surprise that he did not return in 2008. Indeed, he never played first-class cricket again after 2007. He had played for 17 years; his body could not take anymore. In that context, Hampshire were privileged that he had decided to sign for them. His commitment to the Club's cricket was unstinting and his contribution immense. He was to have a Stand named after him at the Ageas Bowl.

He made the game intriguing, and what's more, fun. The tributes that poured in from all over the world have illustrated just how popular he was. He was one of the most pivotal players in cricket history.

At the time of writing, his family has accepted the offer of a state funeral from the Australian government. A stand at the Melbourne Cricket Ground is also to bear his name.

Shane Keith Warne was born in Ferntree Gully, Victoria, on 4 March 2022.

He played in 66 matches for Hampshire, scoring 2040 runs (avge. 25.50), including two centuries and eight fifties. The editor was fortunate enough to be at Canterbury in 2005, when he recorded his first hundred. As with most things he did, it was out of the ordinary. It was scored off 72 balls, incorporating 15 fours and three sixes. Such was the ferocity of his hitting, he broke two bats along the way! It remained his highest score in first-class cricket.

He took 276 wickets for Hampshire at an average of 25.58. He claimed five wickets in an innings on 18 occasions, his best figures being 7 for 99 against Middlesex at the then Rose Bowl, and ten wickets in a match once: 11-133 versus Durham, also on the same ground, in 2007.

He was a very fine slip fielder, holding 69 catches (an average of more than one a match).

His final appearance in first-class cricket was in a rain ruined match at Headingley. He bowled out quietly, bowling just two overs-though he did hold three catches.

He also played in 71 List A matches for the County, taking 120 wickets (avge. 19.72). His best figures were 6 for 42 against Surrey at Whitgift School, Croydon, in 2006.

He generally sat out Twenty20 matches and only played for Hampshire twice. However, it is worth noting that he led the Rajasthan Royals to an IPL title in 2008, the year after leaving Hampshire. It proved to be a fitting swansong. As he had been the case throughout his glittering career, he ended a winner.

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