

THE GREATEST



THE GREATEST

The players, the moments, the matches
1993–2008

MALCOLM KNOX



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MELBOURNE • LONDON

To SPK – Round arm, round the wicket

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INTRODUCTION

This is a book about cricket. Specifically, it is a book about cricket matches involving Australia since the early 1990s. Most are Test matches, but there have also been occasions in the past fifteen or sixteen years when a limited-overs international has risen out of the amnesic swamp to live in the open air of memory, as fresh as yesterday. There are no Twenty20 matches in this account. Like pulp fiction or Chinese food, the shorter forms of cricket can absorb and satisfy us while they have our attention, but afterwards tend to leave us hungry.

Six of the Test matches Australia played between 1993 and 2000 were included in *Wisden's* 100 Matches of the Twentieth Century. Several more they played between 2000 and 2008 will no doubt be in *Wisden's* 100 Matches of the Twenty-first. The Australian team, in this period, aroused many conflicting moods among cricket followers but indifference was not one of them. Whatever else they were, these Australian teams were constantly magnetic. In the physical sense if not always the aesthetic, they exerted an irresistible power of attraction.

Those who remember the 1980s will recall that Test cricket was quite often a dull spectacle. Scoring rates were low, bowling was attritional, and many Test matches did not just peter out to dull draws, but even petered out to dull wins and losses. By the early 1990s there was little to promise the new decade wouldn't provide more of the same. In fact, Australian Test cricket since Bradman's

time was more often than not a drab affair, punctuated by periodic flurries of excitement – 1958 to 1961, 1972 to 1977 – that were all the more memorable for their rarity. If Australian cricket followers had been told in 1991 or 1992 that we were about to be gripped by the revival of leg-spin bowling, a new variety of dynamic seam, swing and pace, at times unthinkable acts of athleticism in the field, and scoring rates regularly exceeding four runs an over, we would not have believed it until we had seen it. If told that this new era would feature Test matches won with a six off the last ball, World Cup finals won with run rates of seven an over, series decided by margins of one run, two runs and one wicket, not to mention pot-boilers involving bookmakers, strikes, chucking, drugs, organised crime and ‘sext’ messages, we would have rolled our eyes and said we were not interested in the exaggerations of escapist fiction.

The timespan of this book, 1993 to 2008, has been chosen not because fifteen years is a nice round figure. The primary reason is that Australia did not lose a Test series at home between 1993, when the West Indies won the last of its five straight undefeated series in Australia (Australia managed a draw in 1981–82), and 2008, when Graeme Smith’s South Africans sealed a two-Test lead at the Melbourne Cricket Ground. During that time, Australia was seldom beaten overseas either: 1994 in Pakistan; 1996, 1998 and 2001 in India; 1999 in Sri Lanka and 2005 in England were the only lost series. It is some record.

The secondary reason to choose 1993 and 2008 as bookends is that those years coincided more or less with the Test careers of the two most influential players of the era. Shane Warne played for Australia from January 1992 to January 2007, Glenn McGrath from December 1993 to April 2007. ‘Coincidence’ is of course the wrong word. The Australian golden era *was* Warne and McGrath. Their personalities, and those of a host of other players both major and minor, Australian and foreign, combine with the contests on the field to provide the strokes of colour between the hard outlines of events themselves.

In Gideon Haigh’s view, trying to pick and weigh up Great Test Matches is ‘the ultimate cricket fogey topic’. This book, then, is for, and possibly by, the ultimate cricket fogey. This is nothing to

be embarrassed about. We have increasing cause to remember, and talk about, and reconstruct the drama of, great Test matches. When I was a touring cricket newspaper journalist in the 1990s, print media had long renounced the first task of traditional journalism. We were no longer writing the first draft of history. We were writing about injuries, forecasts, threats, scandals and politics. Why? The orthodox belief was that television and radio were doing such a good job of bringing audiences the drama of the game itself that there was little space left for the printed word to revisit what had happened on the field. We had to do more. Instead of recounting what had happened in the game, we had to give readers ‘extra value’ on top of what they already knew of innings, scores, wickets and results. So the accent for print media became ‘throwing forward’, or producing stories that would be relevant the next day. This was how an interview in which Mark Taylor or Shane Warne said they were looking forward to pushing home their psychological edge over an opponent came to take precedence over the hundred runs Taylor may have scored, or the six wickets Warne had taken, that very day. This was how the worries about Glenn McGrath’s groin or Steve Waugh’s hamstring affecting their availability for the next Test match pushed aside a written prose record of what they had done in the present one.

I always found this an unnecessary evil of the coverage. Instead of giving more, I sensed that paradoxically we were giving less. By writing for tomorrow and skating over today, we were actually increasing the ephemerality of what we were providing. Nothing obsolesces as quickly as a forecast. Once the game has started, who cares whether Warne had been in doubt with a stiff bowling finger? I was far from the most skilful practitioner of modern sports journalism, because what happened off the field never interested me half as much as what happened on it. Speculating on tomorrow’s play never held my interest half as much as ruminating on today’s.

As a child, I had loved nothing more after going out to the SCG to watch a day’s international cricket than to stay up late that night to watch the highlights replayed on television. The next morning, I lunged for the newspaper reports. If they rehashed everything

I had seen, all the better. Just because I had lived through it once didn't mean I didn't want to live through it again. And again.

The selection of matches in this book is not a trainspotting exercise for us fogeys to dispute over our thumbed copies of *Wisden*. Some of Australia's great Test matches receive only passing mention here: against Sri Lanka in Galle in 2004, against Bangladesh in Fatullah in 2006, against New Zealand in Wellington in 2005, for instance. Conversely, there are some matches recounted in detail, such as that against England at The Oval in 2001, which were not among the great Tests in themselves. Rather, the guiding principle is to serve the dramatic needs of the story of Australian cricket through those years. The Test matches included in this book are the plot points around which that story pivots. Many of them, inevitably, also happen to be the greatest cricket contests of the time.

Richie Benaud has said that cricket is the most controversial game, but that doesn't mean cricket's controversies are the most important thing about it. Controversies are a by-product of our interest in the great game itself. Benaud might as well have said that cricket is the most fascinating game, and being so fascinating, it cannot help being controversial as well. The controversies cannot be swept to one side, because cricket is not played in a vacuum. Indeed, the boyish wish that it were, that the game is the only thing that matters, has generated a tension that has proven central to the cricketing drama. For instance, the ferocious desire to force the world outside cricket to the periphery of consciousness, a desire that drove the greatest Australian batsman and bowler of the era, inflamed the off-field controversies out of proportion and then fed back into the epic qualities of what occurred on the field. Allan Border and Shane Warne only wanted to play cricket. By wishing this so fervently, they set themselves up as magnets for controversy. Mark Taylor and, in his captaincy years, Steve Waugh, both welcomed the outside world and understood how it interlocked with cricket; as a result, they became leaders with skins of Teflon.

The view expressed in this book is that while the controversies are unignorable, they are subplot rather than main plot. They add texture, but are not the foreground narrative. The best and most memorable thing about cricket is cricket.

So, the aim of this book is to do for readers what those long-ago late-night replays did for me: immerse us back into the on-field dramas of the great modern era of Australian cricket by selecting and telling the stories of the most influential matches. We might know how these games ended up, or we might have forgotten. Does it really matter? Re-reading a favourite book can be equally riveting even though, and in some ways because, we know what is going to happen. There is an exquisite pleasure in suspending disbelief once again, even to wonder, as I once did, if *this time* it will end differently.

Asked what he missed most when he was under suspension for his positive drug test in 2003–04, Shane Warne said that he missed waking up each day to the feeling of not knowing what was going to happen on the field. 'You don't know whether you're going to knock them over or you're going to get slogged, whether you'll have a bad day or take a couple of screamers.' It is that spirit of the unknown that this book hopes to recapture: those clammy-handed moments of the cricketing past when we could not bear to look away.



THE WORRY BALL

Adelaide, January 1993

TO BORDER, HIS LAST THIRTEEN YEARS COULD HAVE SEEMED LIKE AN ENDLESS NIGHTMARE OF CARIBBEAN GIANTS HURLING BALLS AT HIS RIBS, AT HIS THROAT, AT HIS FACE. GENERATION AFTER GENERATION OF STORMS ROLLING IN LIKE A PERMANENT CYCLONE SEASON.

After all he had done, it came down to this: he was a spectator, sitting on his seat in the changing room, with no more influence than anyone else in the stands or in front of their television. Powerless. He tossed a cricket ball from hand to hand. Nothing he could do but watch, and feel his nerves burn, and pound that ball from hand to hand. Had he been Greek, he might have used beads; Catholic, a crucifix. Instead, Allan Border was a cricketer, and what he had was his worry ball.

It could seem that he had been worrying as long as he'd been playing. When he entered Test cricket, he came into the remnants of a team physically and mentally battered in the Caribbean in 1978. He'd lost to the West Indians in Australia in 1979–80, snared a drawn series in 1981–82. Lost to them away in 1984, left in the lurch by Chappell, Lillee and Marsh. Lost to them, drowned in Kim Hughes's tears, at home in 1984–85. Lost to them at home again in 1988–89. Marched onto their patch with high hopes in 1991, the last chance to beat a jaded Richards, Greenidge and Marshall – and lost again.

Never won once. Nobody else had beaten them either, barring a New Zealand fluke in 1980, but that was no consolation.



WIN THIS MATCH, THIS ONE MATCH, AND FIFTEEN YEARS OF LOSS COULD BE WIPED OUT

Border was *Australian*, and he had never beaten them. Even in the home one-day series over all those years, Australia had never beaten the West Indies in the finals. For everything else Border had achieved in cricket, he had done nothing but lose to these blokes.

Until now. Australia was one-up thanks to two draws and a Melbourne win spun from the right hand of the new boy. Two Tests to go. Win *this* match, this one match, and thirteen years of loss could be wiped out. Just this once: a win. Please.

Adelaide had played out like one of those matches both teams were too desperate to take, each freezing up when they held the advantage. Or, put another way: neither would let the other take it. In the first innings, Merv Hughes got five wickets and Australia bowled out the West Indies for 252. But they couldn't press it home. Border's 19 runs, eked out in an hour and a quarter, typified Australia's limping 213. Hughes, whose gift with bat and ball was always magnified by the when and the where of his contributions, whacked 43 to give the score some ballast.

But the West Indies couldn't grasp the initiative either, losing 6/22 and being dismissed for 146. The destroyers: Craig

LEFT: Merv Hughes, one of the most appealing characters of the Border years.

THE GREATEST 9

McDermott with three at the top of the innings, and Tim May, recalled to the team after four years, on his home pitch, tweezering out five batsmen in seven overs. May's previous Test match had been on this field against this opponent in 1989, when he'd taken two wickets in thirty-nine overs.

So: 186 to get in the last innings. One innings, one small target, and a poultice for thirteen years of Allan Border's pain.

But on the fourth day, it went wrong. Boon, Taylor, the Waughs, Border himself hadn't been able to do it. A very young debutant, Justin Langer, had almost died for his runs. Langer had only come into the team when Bob Simpson had accidentally poked Damien Martyn in the eye at training. Martyn was a prodigy; Langer, his state and junior teammate, all thick skin and thick edges. Before he'd scored a Test run, even before he'd laid bat on ball, Langer had got one from Ian Bishop that would have killed him but for his helmet. He made twenty in the first innings and was now on his way to fifty. But at the other end, Healy went, Hughes went, Warne went. Langer put on forty-two with May, but then Langer went too for 54, fine-edging a pull shot off Bishop. At 9/144, it seemed, they were all gone.

All except May and McDermott. As batsmen.

Doing the damage were the usual suspects, the merchants of battery and assault. Two wickets had gone to Courtney Walsh, who had seemed nothing more than a useful number three bowler for many years, yet now, now that they needed him, he had gone to another level and become one of the best. He jogged in, year after year, opened his chest and flung the ball from wide on the crease: there was nothing much to him except accuracy, brains and a lightness of step that resisted injury. And another four wickets had gone to Curtly Ambrose, who'd looked unpleasant from the moment he emerged out of Antigua in 1988, a frowning giant, twitching his shoulders, impatient and arrogant and mercilessly accurate. They said basketball was stealing the best young Caribbeans, but every batsman who faced him regretted the day the game of hoop and key hadn't stolen Ambrose.

Australia had owned this summer, until Dean Jones got Ambrose angry a week before the Adelaide Test. Border's men

would have won the First Test but for some umpiring decisions that saved a draw for the West Indies. The new kid had taken 7/52 in Melbourne, where Mark Waugh had backed off to square leg and helped Ambrose's bouncers on their way over slips for a one-of-a-kind century. A big win. Rain had ruined Sydney. Then Australia dominated the one-dayers – until in the first final in Sydney, Jones did one of those things that embodied his whole career: a little victory for bravado, a grand failure for commonsense.

Australia had been chasing a modest West Indian total. Jones, at number three in the one-dayers but still churlish about his omission from Test cricket, was in a pugnacious mood. Ambrose was rumbling in from the Randwick end. Jones ran down the wicket and smashed him back over his six-foot-eight head, one bounce into the straight boundary. Total courage and skill, the type of feat only Jones could pull off. And then, the stupidity to match: Jones complained to the umpires about Ambrose's wrist bands distracting him. Ambrose couldn't believe it. He flew off the handle, took five wickets that night and another three in the second final. One minute Australia were in command; the next they were out in straight sets. Border had lost a finals series to the West Indies. Again.

Still simmering, Ambrose had come to Adelaide and taken ten wickets.

Border gripped the worry ball, just an old practice ball from the kit bag, pounded it, watched McDermott and May. It's impossible to know what he was thinking – or even if he was thinking, as opposed to stewing – but at some level lurked those great tumours of pent-up frustration. Lost, lost, lost, lost, lost: thirteen years of losing.

And yet, somehow, McDermott and May were still there. Word got about. Locals were rushing from the city to the Adelaide Oval. Sections of the crowd were striking up *Waltzing Matilda* in anticipation of a great Australian theft. It was a murky summer afternoon, but the last pair were still in the middle and Border was still sitting here with the worry ball, only pausing from pounding it hand to hand to shine it on his pants. Now he wasn't daring to change his seat. Nor was anyone else. In front of Border was twelfth man Tony Dodemaide. Beside Dodemaide, Langer. Next to Border, Stephen

Waugh. In front of Waugh, Healy. Nobody move! At Lord's in the 1989 Ashes series, Border had been trapped in the shower while Steve Waugh and Boon set up the match-winning partnership – for an hour, Border had stayed under the nozzle, scared to tempt fate.

The target seemed to erode by itself, like the fourth-day pitch. It almost seemed a cruel joke that Border's fate lay in the hands of May and McDermott as batsmen.

May: class clown in a side-of-the-mouth kind of way, a drollness in his heart, as if all of this didn't mean so much in the greater scheme of things. Today was his thirty-first birthday. As a batsman, against this kind of bowling, May's pinched-up, nervous stance betrayed the battle between techniques learnt from a textbook and the human instinct to run for the hills. His Test average to that point was 13; he'd scored a total of 96 runs. You could never in a million years imagine him hitting Ambrose past mid-on. But he didn't need to. May's mainstay was the tuck behind square leg, and that's where the West Indians were bowling it, into his ribs, and, as they grew tired, onto his hip.

And McDermott. What could you say about Craig McDermott? He would take 291 Test wickets, more than Jeff Thomson, more than Merv Hughes, more than Richie Benaud, many more than

Ray Lindwall and Keith Miller and Garth McKenzie and Jack Gregory, more, when he retired, than any Australian except Dennis Lillee, and yet Craig McDermott had somehow risen without trace. He was probably the strongest athlete to have played cricket for Australia, and yet in a way, that's what he was:

an athlete, a body. He was said to regularly consume a whole roast chicken and three giant chocolate milkshakes per lunch break. He had the flowing run-up and side-on action, he had the outswinger, he had the stamina, he had the essential chip on the shoulder, but in some indefinable way he didn't have the last thing, the X-factor of a Test match winner against the highest quality. Hughes, an

inferior bowler in most ways, had it. The new kid, the leg-spinner, certainly had it. McDermott had it against England, or against India or New Zealand, but not against these blokes.

As for his batting, McDermott was a travesty of his potential. For most of his career he had looked like he should have been better than he was, almost all-rounder quality, but then he'd been hit in the face by the West Indians and his back foot had begun to twitch towards backward square. Some uncontrollable firing mechanism, or yip, had taken hold of his feet. He could barely bat now, against these blokes anyway. Too much punishment and even the best of them got punch-drunk. Except for Border; but with a bat in his hands McDermott was no Allan Border.

Yet today was different. The end of another over came up, and May and McDermott were improbably there, a few runs closer. A nick through slips for three, a tuck off the hip for a single. This is the thing about cricket: the match is always, ultimately, in the hands of the batsmen. The bowlers can apply their skill and hope, but they cannot control destiny in the way a batsman can. If only Australia had a real batsman at the crease.

The real batsmen, though, hadn't been able to finish the job. On a pitch separating into baked plates of bone-dry turf, wobbly around their crusty edges, Mark Waugh was the only one who had looked as if he could handle it. With his eye and his technique, he'd got to 26 in apparent comfort before nicking Walsh to slip. Little Langer, nine-tenths heart and stomach, unscarred by the past, battled on to 54. Border himself: a throat ball from Ambrose, a pop-up to short leg.

To Border, his last thirteen years could have seemed like an endless nightmare of Caribbean behemoths hurling balls at his ribs, at his throat, at his face. He'd survived Roberts and Holding, only to have Garner, Clarke and Croft. He'd survived them, only to have Marshall and Patterson. He'd survived them, only to have Ambrose, Walsh and Bishop. They never let up. Generation after generation of storms rolling in like a permanent cyclone season.

For all those thirteen years, he was the one who had stood up to them. In the Caribbean in 1984, the worst series, the most dismal of the drubbings, he had scored 521 runs at 74. In Trinidad, he

TOO MUCH PUNISHMENT AND EVEN THE BEST OF THEM GOT PUNCH-DRUNK

made 100 and 98. Both not out. How many of those runs would he have traded for another two today? He'd taken all the punishment, year after year, and he'd never flinched. He'd got out of the way of the nastiest and punched the hittable ones through mid-wicket or point. He was nature's bantamweight counter-puncher, crouched, nimble, ducking, ducking, ducking, then – smack! His career Test average in the Caribbean was 53. The West Indians thought he was the best. They would say he was, in fact, the best Australian to hold a bat after Bradman. And they were right.

But not today. Today it was down to McDermott and May.

Of all people.

He sat there and pounded the worry ball and refused to move. He would estimate he threw it from hand to hand 60,000 times in the eighty-eight minutes May and McDermott batted together. May had trodden on his right thumb while fielding – a very Tim May kind of injury – and it was further pulped by the balls spitting up and squashing it against the bat handle. Bishop, who'd got Warne and Langer, grew tired. May kept tucking him away. Kenny Benjamin tired. Back to Walsh and Ambrose, but they looked tired too. Richie Richardson was trying to stay cool under his umbrella-sized maroon hat, but Border allowed himself a moment of grim hope, to see a West Indies captain moving his fieldsmen around not to set up the kill but to stop the leaking.

And the target came down: ten, nine, eight. May kept playing straight. Seven, six, five. McDermott scooped an off-drive off Ambrose, and Richardson couldn't hang onto it at wide mid-off. Three runs. *Please!*

It was down to Walsh. Walsh against McDermott. Walsh, his armament an injury-proof body, a Jamaican poor boy's spirit and a bouncer with a suspect kink, the second-stringer who would take 519 Test wickets and retire with the world record. McDermott, who ran like Bernborough but couldn't quite finish his races. Walsh, running in. A smiler, a grimacer, one of those fellows whose face always looked like it was about to break into a laugh. McDermott's, into a sneer. Walsh, nothing much to look at as a bowler, but the template for a Narromine stringbean who at that moment was living in a caravan and hoping for a scholarship to the Academy. Keep

it simple, be accurate, just short of a length, don't give the batsman any free runs. Walsh, not McDermott, would be the model for the Australian fast bowler who would change things for good.

After Border.

Walsh's nineteenth over, the seventy-ninth of the innings, starts with Australia needing three to win, two to tie. Border has played in a tied Test before, at Madras in 1986. As everyone on that ground learnt, to the bowling side a tie feels like a win, to the batting side a loss. The game is in the batsmen's hands.

Off the third ball, May glances one between Desmond Haynes at short square and Ambrose at fine-leg. Two to tie? The batsmen settle for one.

Two runs to win, the last hope. Ball four: Walsh in to McDermott. A push to mid-off, the run turned down. Ball five: a loose one on the pads. McDermott turns it away, middle of the bat – yes! No. The ball takes a freakish right-angled spin out of the rough and smacks Haynes in the shin pad. No run. In the changing room, the Australian team goes up – then down.

Richardson notices Walsh looking at him as if to say something. Richardson wanders over, but Walsh changes his mind: keeps his thoughts to himself. Ball six is a bouncer that follows McDermott in from the off side. McDermott's right foot doesn't back away. It doesn't move at all, aside from a little hop. He stays in line as the ball leaps at his face. Pure animal reflexes: even with a helmet on, a human cannot help but protect his face. His hands and bat come up, he twists away to leave the ball, but the ball won't leave him. Like a heat-seeking missile it keeps following him in from Walsh's wide delivery angle.

McDermott grunts, the ball deflects, keeper Junior Murray catches it, they're all up. What did it hit? Peak of the helmet? Glove? Handle? Glove when it had come off the handle? Doesn't matter: Darrell Hair's finger points to heaven.

Reactions stagger through time. The human instinct is to linger in the immediate past, to refuse to acknowledge the present. To live in hope. Even as Walsh has taken off like a water bird towards third man, ten other West Indians chasing him, even as



ABOVE: Walsh moving to a higher plane.

McDermott trudges without protest, there is no immediate movement around Border. Steve Waugh's expression hasn't changed. Healy hasn't moved. The mouth of Ian McDonald, the team manager, opens silently.

The first to move is Border. Thirteen years of losing to these blokes. Thirteen years of losing, a whole lifetime of losing, all go into that wretched old red ball he's been gripping.

He's always had a good arm. A great left arm, a baseballer's flat bullet throw.

He turns his back on the field and down he flings his worry ball, into the wooden floor. It ricochets into the wall, the ceiling. Thirteen long years into that throw. None of the Australian team will say a word for the next fifteen minutes. Not a word. The brave or unwary will catch Border's eye, and shy away from the empty devastation in there. He will ask McDermott if the decision was all right. Then both will sit on their own. Border will confront a press conference. McDermott won't, instead sending a message: 'Tell them I didn't back away.' He didn't. If he had backed away, been a little less courageous, the ball wouldn't have hit him.

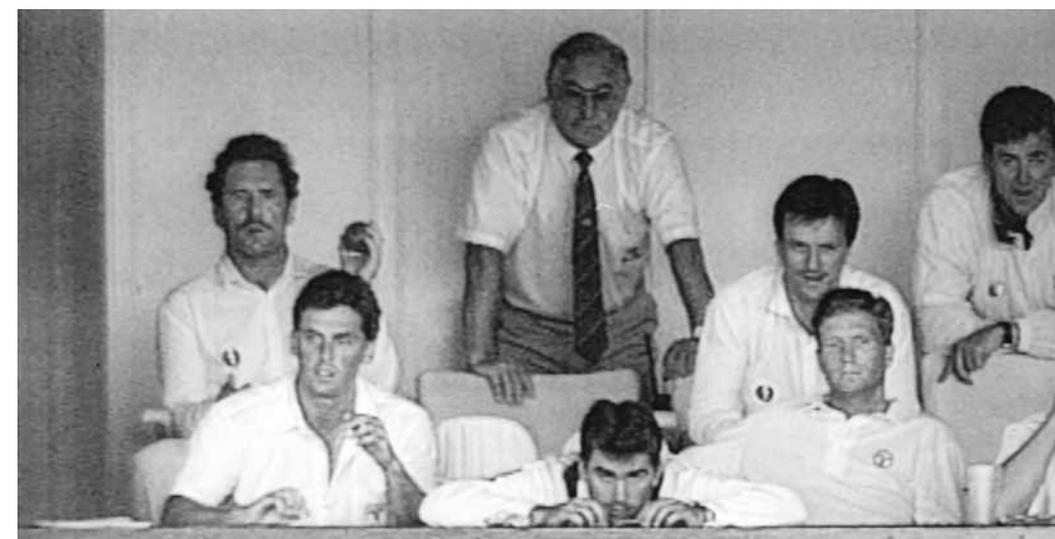
One run: this day has been chosen for the closest winning margin in 1210 matches and 116 years of Test cricket.

Three days later, Ambrose – still angry! – will take 7/1 in Perth, and that's that. Border will make his first pair in Tests. Another series lost.

Border's reputation as a batsman will, in his retirement, grow and grow. The more we think about Border, the greater he is, because of all the thousands of runs he scored in losing teams. If batting had a degree of difficulty, it would rise exponentially in situations where the team is behind in the match. The Australian greats – Bradman, Trumper, the Chappells, the Waughs, Morris, Simpson, Lawry, Ponting, Harvey, Ponsford – all played in teams that mostly won. None played under the pressure of chasing and losing, defending and failing, as much as Allan Robert Border. He is a one of a kind. But there is no reconciliation for him, this day. Those blokes have beaten him again.

26 January 1993: Australia Day.

OPPOSITE: Border always had a good arm.





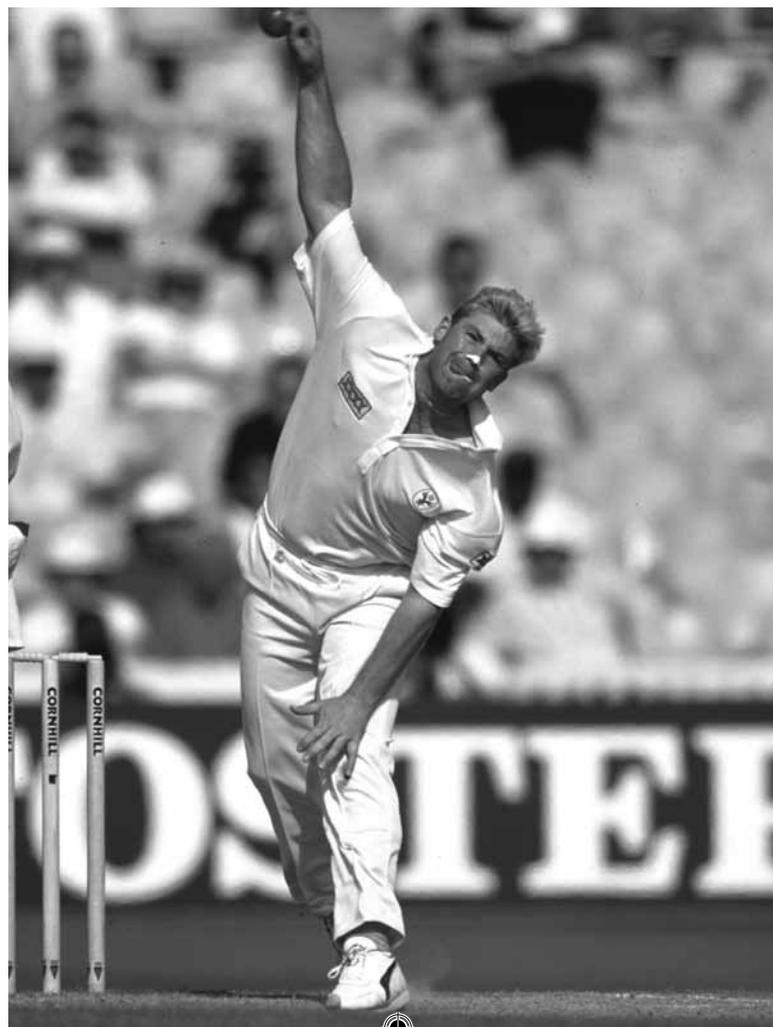
**‘BLOODY HELL, WARNEY,
WHAT HAPPENED?’**

Manchester, June 1993

**HE MIGHT HAVE LOOKED
LIKE A MIDDLESEX
BRICKLAYER, OR A SEA
CAPTAIN WHO PLAYED RUGBY
(IN THE FORWARDS), BUT
HE HAD THE QUICKNESS IN
HIS FEET AND THE TOUCH
IN HIS HANDS OF AN INDIAN
GRANDMASTER.**

The other worry ball – the ball that triggered an English neurosis that lasted fourteen years – was called the ‘ball of the century’, but it wasn’t unique, not as a piece of bowling. Shane Warne bowled hundreds of balls as good as this in Test cricket. Sometimes it resulted in a nick, a catch, a dropped chance. Sometimes the batsman came forward far enough to cover it. Sometimes it hit the pad and failed to yield a leg-before-wicket because it pitched too wide and spun too far. Sometimes it did what it did to Gattling, plucking the bail from the off-stump as precisely as William Tell shooting an apple from his son’s head.

The ball was Warne’s stock ball: the plain leg-spinner. Plain? All it did was start up the pitch in an innocent loop, then veer radically to the leg side and pitch in the area, around leg stump but beyond the batsman’s leading left shoulder, known as the ‘blind spot’. Then, all it did was grip the pitch and turn away sharply to the off side. Simple! If all went to plan, the batsman would adjust to the curvature in flight and close the face of his bat to turn the ball off his legs; because he was not presenting the bat’s full face to the ball, it had more potential to beat his outside edge. If all went to plan, the ball would hit the off stump.



BUT THE BALL ITSELF – AS ALWAYS WITH WARNE – WAS ONLY ONE PART OF THE MAGIC

This is the textbook leg-spinner, and Warne was not the first to bowl it, even if he often seemed like he was. But the ball itself – as always with Warne – was only one part of the magic.

After that gruesome, unforgettable Australia Day in Adelaide, the Australians had rebounded with a fair result in New Zealand in the autumn of 1993, squaring the Test series and winning the one-dayers. Warne, entering his second year of Test cricket, topped the wicket-taking with 17 in the three Tests, winning supporters with his 1.6-run-an-over economy rate, so unusual for a wrist spinner. But he never ripped through the New Zealanders the way he had through the West Indies in Melbourne.

Two footnotes to the New Zealand tour: in the First Test, at Lancaster Park, Christchurch, Border passed Sunil Gavaskar’s world record of 10,122 runs. He did it off the anonymous spin of Dipak Patel, miscuing a sweep shot and nearly being caught in front of a few thousand polite Cantabrians. His batting partner, Healy, didn’t know Border had passed the mark. ‘Why are they all clapping?’ he asked. The captain celebrated with a slice of ice-cream cake. Pure Border.

LEFT: The perfect combination of technique and a sense of theatre.

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Footnote two: in the Third Test, at Auckland, when they needed five wickets for less than thirty-three runs on the last day to win, the Australians made a pact to wear their baggy green caps. The tradition would be associated with later captains, who turned it into a regular ritual. But Border was the one who revived the practice, which had been initiated by Bradman in 1948. Usually these rituals grow out of superstition, but there was nothing lucky about the caps that morning in Auckland. Australia didn't take a wicket and New Zealand won easily.

The Australian squad to tour England in the northern summer was an appealing blend of three generations: the old guard represented by Border, Boon, Hughes, May, Steve Waugh, Tim Zoehrer and McDermott; the next wave of Mark Waugh, Healy, Taylor and Paul Reiffel; and the youngbloods Martyn, Brendon Julian, Wayne Holdsworth, Warne and two new openers, Michael Slater and Matthew Hayden, batting off to partner Taylor. Having just played their second Sheffield Shield seasons, Slater and Hayden were part of a rising generation that also included Adam Gilchrist, Justin Langer, Greg Blewett, Michael Kasprowicz, Stuart Law, Michael Bevan and a pubescent Tasmanian named Ricky Ponting.

The trauma inflicted by the West Indies was quarantined to matches against that opponent. Since 1989, Border's team had beaten all others, and came to England full of vim. Warne's start to the tour was typically quiet. Against the England Amateur XI, now aged twenty-three (his lucky number), he nabbed only numbers X and XI. Against the Duchess of Norfolk's men, he took no wickets. Against Worcestershire he took 1/122. Graeme Hick smashed him into the crowd six times, correctly picking the standard small-spinning leg-breaks Border had asked Warne to restrict himself to bowling. He took five against Somerset but was hidden away for the one-day internationals, which Australia won 3-0. He got among the wickets against Surrey and Leicestershire, but it's fair to say that his selection for the First Test aroused interest of a mildness that would never be repeated.

For the series which would start at Old Trafford, England's curators took some heavy hints to prepare turning wickets, which might negate Australia's strong suit of McDermott and Hughes.

Accordingly, on the first day of the series, spin did the damage – in the predictable-looking off breaks of the Scotsman Peter Such, who had the best day of his eleven-Test career. Australia was strong at the top, Taylor making a century and the vivacious Slater, chosen ahead of Hayden, notching 58 on debut. Steve Waugh likened Slater to 'a balloon that had just escaped before being tied up'. Better imagery for the opening batsman would never be found. But from 0/128 they folded for 289, having aimed for a decisive opening knockout but landing only a jab before taking a solid counter-blow.

England were well into the second day, cruising at 1/80, when Border gave Warne the ball. Mike Atherton had fallen to Hughes for a struggling 19; the buccaneering, huge-appetited Victorian pantomime villain took special glee in dismissing the correct university graduate, every caricature of Australian and English sport contained in one head-to-head.

Now Graham Gooch, the indomitable captain, was batting with his predecessor, Mike Gatting. Gatting had scored four runs in eleven balls.

Gatting was a great example of the cruel law of reputation: it takes a lifetime to build and just one act to destroy. Gatting was a much better batsman than his Test average of 35 suggests: strong, straight and a delightful surprise against spin. He might have looked like a Middlesex bricklayer, or a sea captain who played rugby (in the forwards), but he had the quickness in his feet and the touch in his hands of an Indian grandmaster. He had been chosen for England as a twenty-year-old, a rare accolade attesting to his natural talent, and in 1986–87 was captain of the team that Martin Johnson famously said had only three problems – couldn't bat, couldn't bowl, couldn't field – yet came to Australia and won the Ashes.

Actually, it took more than one act to diminish Gatting's reputation. He'd played the silliest of shots – not the reverse sweep per se, but the reverse sweep that got him out – in the 1987 World Cup final. As captain he took the blame for England's loss. Then he forgot who he was and openly abused the Pakistani umpire Shakoor Rana on England's 1988 tour, doing what every cricketer would

have liked to do but which a captain of England was not permitted. Then he was involved in the English tabloid media's favourite noun – a romp – with a barmaid, was stripped of the captaincy, and stormed off with a rebel team to South Africa.

Each of those disasters was in some way of Gattling's own making. The act that would guarantee his place in cricket folklore, on 4 June 1993, wasn't. Gattling did nothing wrong. Warne bowled the ball, and Gattling was merely the wrong person in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Border had told Warne to warm up an over before. Warne didn't do much: swung the shoulders, loosened the fingers. Nothing complicated. He thought most non-cricket exercise was pointless. Later in his career, he would praise Adam Gilchrist for making a century after arriving late at the ground because it 'proves warm-ups are a waste of time'.

Warne aimed to bowl a leg-break with plenty of spin. 'For some reason,' he would write with uncharacteristic understatement, 'I've always been able to land my first few balls fairly accurately.'

The ball: the drive with the back leg, the rip from the right wrist, the snap in the fingers, the float up the pitch, the late, late curve into Gattling's blind spot; the grip and hum of it, seam biting the pitch, ball turning away. Gattling watching it all like a hawk, a presentable forward defence from one of the accredited guildsmen, yet he was still unable to get anywhere near it. One of the reasons the moment was so unforgettable was Gattling's face. Ian Botham said Gattling hadn't shown such wide-eyed horror since the day someone had stolen his lunch, but that wasn't quite it. Very often batsmen put on a show of shock and puzzlement when they get out; it helps their self-respect if the world shares their belief that they were beaten by an unplayable ball. But Gattling's wide eyes, his round mouth, were spontaneous. He covered them with a frown, but too late. He'd looked like a poker player who'd peeked at a handful of rubbish he'd been dealt, and been momentarily unable to stay in countenance. Nonplussed, he stared at the point on the wicket where the ball had pitched. He looked to the square-leg umpire, Ken Palmer, for confirmation that Ian Healy hadn't bumped the stumps by mistake. And then he turned around and

looked at his barely disturbed castle. The leg bail was still there. The dismissal was, aside from everything else, neat.

Healy's arms went up and around in twin windmills ending with a clap. Beaming, he was on the leg-side of the stumps – a sign that he had been deceived as thoroughly as Gattling. Warne smiled, right arm in the air. No need for Healy to give him a 'Bowled, Warney'. If he'd been offered retirement at that moment, Warne might have been tempted to take it: life had to be all downhill from there. Compared with the theatrics of big dismissals later in his career, Warne took this one in his stride. He looked, simply, happy. He wasn't putting on a show. He hadn't become *Shane Warne* yet. But he would now.

Between Shane Warne and the English cricket public, that ball was like eyes meeting across a crowded room. England would always love him more forgivingly than Australia, and the love was mutual. He would come to prefer living there. Everything about him that embarrassed his countrymen would endear him to the English. Not only was he a genius on the field, but off the field he was everything England wanted an Australian to be.

That ball was only the beginning. Just one perfect leg-spinner in a lifetime of perfect leg-spinners; but Warne happened to do it with his first Test delivery in England. He did it to Gattling, the number three, the best player of spin they could muster up. With the way he did it, the timing and the panache, he was waving a wand and casting a magic spell. In his opponents' minds, and more crucially in his own, Warne would with this ball transform himself into a man who could turn the course of history, who could control events with his will. This, every bit as much as the ability to drift the ball to leg and turn it away out of the blind spot, would be his weapon.

Gattling would approach Warne after that day's play on 4 June. He said, 'Bloody hell, Warney, what happened?'

Warne didn't know. He still felt that a ball in his next over, when he out-thought Robin Smith and pulled off a specific plan to get the batsman nicking to slip, was better than the Gattling ball. 'Sorry mate. Bad luck.'

And then they had a laugh, as if both had been witnesses to some marvel in a Las Vegas showroom.

IT WAS THE GREATEST DRUBBING OF ALL THE AUSTRALIA- ENGLAND DRUBBINGS

That 1993 Ashes tour would be one of the happiest for Border, notwithstanding some grumpy moments in the nervous lead-up to the First Test. He was fined for smashing his stumps after getting out against Middlesex, and a microphone picked up his on-field argument with McDermott during the Somerset game. Victory, life's own Pine-O-Cleen, would wash all that away.

In 1989 Border had climbed the mountain and won the urn back, in 1990–91 he'd kept it, but 1993, after the hell of Adelaide and

the West Indies, was pure gravy. Australia dismissed England for 210 on that second day at Old Trafford, Warne taking another two wickets after Gattling and Smith. Healy would score his first Test century in Australia's 5/432, and then Warne and his drinking buddy Hughes would rumble the English in the second innings, the main threat defused when Gooch, on 133,

couldn't help punching a deflected ball away from his stumps, and was out handled ball. Hughes was ropable when he learnt that he wouldn't be credited with the wicket.

At the end of the fourth day, Hughes gave Gattling his second memorable dismissal of the game. When Warne had bowled his 'ball of the century' in the first innings, Hughes, at backward square leg, hadn't seen how much it turned. When he asked Healy what the ball had done and why Gattling was taking so long to leave, Healy said, 'Pitched off, hit off.' Only after Hughes saw the replay did he go back to Healy, who said, 'Pitched off the wicket, hit off stump.'

In their second innings, England were 1/133 when Hughes started the last over of the fourth day. Gattling, on 23, kept out the first five balls and took strike for the last, certain that Hughes would bowl a bouncer. Hughes was thought to be predictable and none too bright. As Gattling lingered on his heels, Hughes speared a full ball into his pads. Gattling jammed down late and was bowled. More Victorian theatre.

Australia would have the series wrapped up by the Fourth Test; in a thirty-match tour they only lost two county games and the dead Sixth Test. It was the greatest drubbing of all the Australia–England drubbings between 1989 and 2005. At Lord's in the Second Test, Australia lost only four wickets and won by an innings, despite only being able to use three bowlers, McDermott having succumbed to complications from a twisted bowel. It didn't matter. In the series, England used twenty-four players, many of whose careers were either ended or beaten-up by that series: names like Emburey, McCague, Lathwell, Foster, Maynard, Watkin and Ilott would see little or no Test cricket after the 1993 Australians had done with them. Not to mention Mike Gattling, traumatised and dropped after the Second Test. Gooch's four-year captaincy wouldn't survive the series. Atherton would become the eighth England captain in the period during which Border was Australia's only one. Gooch would, however, bat on until he was forty-one and become the highest run scorer from any country in all forms of top-line cricket, without ever giving much sign that he enjoyed a minute of it.

Victory can be as exhausting as defeat, and that series also effectively finished off Merv Hughes. In McDermott's absence, Hughes carried the new-ball attack and bowled 296 overs, more than anyone on either team apart from Warne, who bowled more overs than anyone in any Ashes series to that point. Hughes took 31 wickets, all of them important. For someone who had been a laughing stock when he'd started in Test cricket, he had turned into a match-winning force, his uncouthness and sledging usually mitigated by its grotesque exaggerations. He was credited with the 'mental disintegration' of Graeme Hick, the Zimbabwean prodigy, during the first two Tests of the series. Although Hick said Hughes's sledging only consisted of three or four words, which Hick was easily able to memorise, observers couldn't help but note Hick's timidity when Hughes came on, and even Border, who knew Hick well from playing with him for Queensland, would murmur from close in, 'Make runs now Hicky, second new ball is soon and you know who'll be coming back ...'

For everyone except, perhaps, batsmen, Hughes added great life to the game. But for every Test day of the 1993 tour, he was

suffering such pain in his left knee that he popped painkilling Digesic pills before and during play. An operation after the tour would show that he had no cartilage left in the knee, just a dead piece of bone the size of a fifty-cent piece; over a twelve-week period he had bowled nearly 1800 balls, each time thundering down on a knee reduced to bone grinding against bone. His career would last another year, but in terminal decline.

At the end of his fourth and last Ashes tour, Border had many causes for satisfaction. Australia only used thirteen players, and would have used twelve if McDermott hadn't gone home. Slater had come into the team and blazed like the kid too good for his age group, which was what he had always been. Everyone had piled up runs, including Border himself who'd made his first double-century since 1987. Boon, who had never scored a hundred in England, scored three in the series. The Australians seemed to make 600 each time they batted and six of them scored more than 400 runs for the series. Then Warne and Hughes mopped up, aided and abetted by Reiffel and May. Warne took 34 wickets, more than any other Australian spinner in an Ashes series except for Arthur Mailey three-quarters of a century earlier.

It was no consolation for what had happened in Adelaide, and the West Indies remained the untied loose end of Border's cricket life, but there was something about his character that would never sit squarely with the titles 'world champion' or 'all-conquering'. As the circumstances of his retirement would show, Border was too much the common man to stage-manage his moves or finesse his image. Warne, who came into the team when it was Border's, would openly idolise his first captain. Despite their success, the captains who followed would never quite match Border in Warne's eyes. That idol worship says a lot about Warne's loyalty, and his nostalgia for those uninhibited first years. It also says something about the curious attraction of opposites.

OPPOSITE: By 1993 the strain on his knee was showing on Hughes's face.

