

The Ashes are Back! A View from Down Under

By Peter Redding

with Paul Nemes (formerly of Golcar) and Jeremy Brown (Golcar)

Its been 14 long months but the wait is over as the world's top two cricket teams resume their famous rivalry. While plenty of cricket has been played during this time it has always been the Ashes that has been at the back of the minds of the players, coaches and supporters of both countries. The 2005 series was widely regarded as the greatest series of all as England finally regained the urn after 16 years of hurt. It was a see saw series that kept the eyes of a nation glued even as the football season began in August. Everyone was talking about cricket, even those that had probably never watched the game before. It was the number one sport in the country for a summer and the magnitude of England's achievement was there for all to see at Trafalgar Square as thousands turned out to greet the players at the victory parade.

The form of the two teams has taken very different paths since the 2005 Ashes series. England have struggled to reach the same levels of performance and have been beset by injuries. Australia have regrouped and improved in some areas. Mike Hussey has been introduced into the side and strengthened the batting and Brett Lee has become more consistent having assumed the responsibility of leading Australia's attack in the absence of Glenn McGrath. Reading into the form guide would draw the conclusion that Australia are clear favourites but then again that was the case going into the last Ashes series. Australia also have a strong record at home and they haven't lost a series since 1988/89 against the all conquering West Indians. Winning in Australia is always the ultimate challenge of an England team particularly when they are defending the Ashes because the Australians are all the more determined when they aren't in possession of the urn. It is for this reason that the build up to this Ashes Series has carried on in the same vein as the last series in terms of the amount of coverage it has received. The media and the public are eager to see just how good this England team actually are. For Australia the upcoming series presents a new challenge and a new situation. For the first time since 1989 they are on a mission to regain the Ashes and are very much under pressure to achieve this, particularly as this series could be the last for several of their team. So what is the atmosphere like in Australia ahead of the series? To get an Australian perspective on the Ashes I spoke to Paul Nemes and Jeremy Brown, two Australians who both played for Golcar CC. Nemes in the late 1980's and Brown who has played at Swallow Lane for the past couple of seasons.

What is the atmosphere like in Australia ahead of the Ashes Series?

PN: Its fantastic !! Everyone here is looking forward to the series. It's the first time in a long while that we believe we will see a true contest and not some one sided affair which we have been generally getting for the best part of 20 years. I think most true Aussie cricket supporters would agree that we have been blessed having the likes of Warne, McGrath, the Waugh's and Mark

Taylor for many years and we have had a pretty easy ride due to their ability. Now its challenge time and we are all really looking forward to it.

JB: The atmosphere is unbelievable! In Brisbane for the first test there are banners hanging from high rise buildings. Cricket has taken over both the print and television media, and billboards are awash with pre-ashes hype! Believe it or not this is what Australian people have been waiting for for a long time. A genuine contest between two good teams!

What do the Australian public think about the England team?

PN: Total respect !! We know that England can play and play well. You have talent with both the bat and the ball and we know that England will do everything they can to retain the Ashes. I think the early tour form has made people wonder a little bit and your injury scare with Harmison could make you look a little thin there but you do have some depth to cover it, but experience could be a problem there.

JB: Because the Australian public hasn't seen a lot of the English team, apart from last year's ashes, there is still some uncertainty about what they will do and how they will perform. A player like Kevin Pietersen has such a big reputation in England, but plenty of players have toured here with big reputations and failed, so if he is to do well, then he will win the Australian fans over I'm sure! Flintoff is the player most have been talking about, possibly because a lot of Australians relate to his character. A big hearted fast bowler, who hits the ball a long way. In general though, most people are reserving their opinion till at least the 2nd test.

How much stick did you get in the dressing room during Ashes summers?

PN: When I played with Meltham in 1987 and the Golcar in 1988 England had the Ashes, so I copped PLENTY. "You Aussie, convicts can't play. You're hopeless, only beat us in the World Cup final because of a terrible reverse sweep that Gooch or Gatting tried to play and changed the game, other than that we would have thrashed you"

It was always in good fun and taken in the same way it was given.

How much stick did you get in the dressing room during the 2005 Ashes?

JB: Plenty – although I got the most stick when we got wiped in the 20/20 at the start of the series! I was back home for the last test, and the series wasn't decided before then so I think some of the boys were a bit hesitant to say too much before the 'fat lady had sung'!! I must say that when we won the first test I had a bit to say in the dressing rooms!! So I probably deserved what I got!

How do you rate the two teams going into this series?

PN: If Harmison is fit then its pretty even. Warne as always is the trump card and I am glad we have him. Your top order is sound and with bowlers like Flintoff and Anderson it's a good attack. If you guys can "reverse swing" the ball again it will certainly bring back some bad memories for our batsmen and you can gain the upper hand there maybe. We will be playing at least one inexperienced bowler and that could also be in your advantage.

If Gilchrist is in form then I believe we also have the edge in being able to score quickly at the end of an innings and force a result.

JB: That's a tough one. I personally would play Jacques instead of Langer, Clarke instead of Watson (which will happen now anyway) and Tait for the last bowler. I think that would give the Australians a better balanced team. I think this and the World Cup will be the last time this generation of the Australian team play together, so they will be keen to go out on a high.

I rate some of the players in the English team very highly. Strauss, Flintoff etc are world class players. I will be very interested to see how players like Panesar, Hoggard, Harmison, Cook and Bell stand up in Australia. I think Panesar will have to adjust to the Australian wickets, and flight the ball more. Hoggard may not swing the ball like he does in England if it is stinking hot, Harmison will have to sort his homesickness out. Cook and Bell are both fine young batsmen, playing in a new country which has a tendency to have either fast and bouncy wickets (Gabba) or real turners on days 3,4 and 5 like Sydney. If they perform well in all conditions they get my tick of approval!

Who do you reckon will be the leading performing players in the series?

PN: Warne, Bell, Flintoff, Hussey, Pietersen, Anderson, Lee, Johnson

JB: Obviously Warne will be crucial to Australia. No doubting that. Also when MacGill plays, if he and Warne can run through England that will go a long way to winning games. McGrath and Lee getting early wickets will also be decisive. On the batting front I think Hayden and Langer have to stand up – especially Hayden. He was the most disappointing player in the last series in my book.

England will rely heavily on Flintoff, which is why Australia will target his batting, which some believe can be a bit suspect at times. Strauss and Cook (if he opens) will need to get the team off to a good start in order to take the pressure off your middle order. If Pietersen is coming in at 3/250 then that is when he is at his most dangerous. 3/50 is a different story!

What are your hopes for the series?

PN: Obviously, from an Aussie perspective I would like to win the Ashes back as a main hope. But if we can have a series as exciting and evenly matched as the 2005 series in England that would be great.

JB: -Gilchrist to prove that he can play around the wicket bowling.
-The crowds to stop racially taunting opposition players, gives a poor perception of the average Australian person
-Pietersen to make less than 100 runs for the series (He walks around like he owns the place)
-Warne to dominate
-Hayden to stop thinking he owns the place and not walk around like Pietersen – ha-ha

Have you got any predictions for the upcoming series?

PN: -Australia 3-1
-Ian Bell to surprise a lot of people over here.
-Shaun Tait to bowl really quick !!
-Warne to be the first player in test history to take 700 test wickets.
-And, it wouldn't be an Ashes test series without some controversy, don't know what it will be but there will be something.

JB: Australia to win to nil – hope and prediction! My heart says Australia, obviously. But my head says it will be very even. I fear a drawn series.

Did you ever put money down in the Golcar dressing room during Ashes series'?

PN: No, I was not that silly !!! You held the Ashes and we didn't look like getting them back at the time. I lost money to the boys on other things !!!

JB: No money on this series, and didn't bet any of the boys in the dressing room on last years series that I can remember.

Will there be banter next summer in the aftermath of this series?

JB: I think there will always be banter. The English seem to like the sarcastic banter a lot more than Australians, probably as an influence of the soccer crowds and chanting. Without wanting to sound arrogant, Australians have expected the Ashes to be won easily for the past number of years, so have been more competitive against the stronger sides like South Africa. Now that England is the 2nd best team in the world the banter will grow stronger and stronger by the years! Which is fantastic!

So you've heard the opinions of two Australians and an Englishman. We'll have to wait to see what happens on Thursday 23rd November when all the talking stops and the action begins.