

## **Ashes 2023: Three things we learnt from the first test.**

Built up as the most anticipated Ashes series since 2005, the action over the last 5 days at Edgbaston well and truly justified the hype in the build-up. Ben Stokes' England came out swinging, determined to entertain and break new boundaries with their unique brand of cricket but Australia eventually found the answers to deal with them and on a gripping final day, Pat Cummins and Nathan Lyon steered them over the line with a terrific 55 run partnership to help them draw first blood in the series.

Despite it being played out on a fairly lacklustre wicket, the first test had everything as the balance of control ebbed and flowed throughout, creating a spectacle that will live long in the archive of Ashes epics. On the evidence of the last five days, it would be foolish to expect anything other than similar drama and tension for the next six weeks and so to try and keep track of the extraordinary action, I will be documenting the best bits and finding the five things we learn after each test match.

### **Bazball will not back down**

Besides battling a troublesome knee injury, Ben Stokes' summer has mostly been spent responding to questions about whether the expansive style of cricket he has instilled in his side and that they have showcased for the past 12 months would be stand up to the intensity of an Ashes series. Those questions were soon sent scampering to the rope as Zak Crawley creamed an exquisite cover drive off Pat Cummins for four with the first ball of the match. The attacking style continued on day one and although it wasn't a boundary fest, which was mostly due to Australia's defensive field settings, England still raced along at over 5 runs per over with Joe Root gliding and ramping his way to a 30<sup>th</sup> Test match hundred. The most amazing and possibly head-scratching moment came that evening as Ben Stokes called a declaration with 393 runs on the board, two wickets left, and their best batsman at the crease. England wanted the chance to bowl at Australia and had four overs to prize out the opening pair but were unable to do so – a decision which would ultimately be judged as either a courageous gamble or an unnecessary and brash statement costing potentially 40 or 50 further runs.

Apart from a tricky three over spell on Sunday afternoon when England lost two wickets amidst a gloomy sky and some superb seam bowling, the hosts continued with their attacking approach in an attempt to try and quickly build a substantial lead in order to give them enough time to take ten Aussie wickets. However, there were some very soft dismissals hidden in there. Joe Root, Harry Brook and Jonny Bairstow, the pillars of England's middle order each gifted their wicket away in some form or another, cutting short fruitful partnerships and slowing their progress. With a slender first innings advantage and a relatively flat pitch, England's batsman may look back at day four as a missed opportunity to bat Australia out of a win. However, they may not because they stuck by the team's principles and their attacking shots and slightly rash dismissals meant they had the time to force a result – just not the heroic victory it could have been.

### **Australia fight fire with... a hose**

For decades Australian cricket has been defined by a dominant and aggressive approach. Whether it be Dennis Lillee and Jeff Thompson's searing pace, Warney's spellbinding leg

spin or Steve Smith's hunger for runs, Australia has always been the team on the front foot forcing their opponents to fear their x-factor players. However, this team appear to be doing things differently. As Ricky Ponting and other former Aussie legends watched on in bemusement from the commentary box, Pat Cummins and co went on the defensive with four or five fielders at times patrolling the boundary on the first day of an Ashes series. It clearly highlighted that they were wary of England's top order setting their innings off like a rocket and so containment was their first thought in stopping the England train. The general consensus was that this negativity was showing far too much respect to the opposition, and it didn't follow Australian cricket's DNA as England happily picked off the easy singles and twos at will. However, maybe it was Australia's stubbornness to defend and not front up to the hosts' gung-ho style that won them the game. Whether it be the early declaration on the verge of the close on day one or the manner in which some of England's batsmen threw their wickets away, it was as if England felt a need to compensate for their opponent's lack of innovation and excitement by throwing away the Wisden manual and doing some more crazy stuff.

It will be intriguing to see if the Aussies continue with their caution first approach or whether the history of Lords and the emotion of winning their first away Ashes series in England will drive them to expand their game and fight fire with fire.

### **Captain Cummins leads the way**

Critics of his field settings and team selection may be valid, and even then, those decisions are not solely down to him, however, what cannot be denied is Pat Cummins is a world-class cricketer. The first test will always be remembered for his partnership with Lyon late on day five. With 55 runs looking like a long way off as Alex Carey departed, he began by belting the spin of Joe Root to force Stokes' hand to take the new ball, before calmly picking off the runs to guide Australia home. But all that followed on from an excellent display with the ball in England's second innings as he took four wickets, including an absolute missile of a yorker that cracked into middle stump and left Ollie Pope sprawling on the floor wondering which planet that delivery had been released from.

A fast bowling captain is a rare sight and questions still remain whether the Sydney native will have the physical capabilities to play all five tests. Yet, the evidence at Edgbaston suggests his title should read all-rounder just like his opposite number and in that personal battle round one was edged by the Aussie.

### **England Need Pace**

If you cast your mind back to the GABBA in December 2021, you may recall that Joe Root and Chris Silverwood left James Anderson and Stuart Broad bibbed up and on drinks duty as England toiled to defeat on a green-tinged strip that would have had the veteran pair salivating every time they jogged on with towels and water bottles for their teammates. That thought didn't seem to cross Ben Stokes' mind this time around but he may be left wondering whether it was the right one. With England's newfound strength being their free-scoring ability with the bat, the flat pitch on offer at Edgbaston could be a sign of what is to come rather than an anomaly. If a similar surface is offered up this time next week and England still look to target the likes of Travis Head and Khawaja with the short stuff, then

surely Mark Wood is the man for the job – especially if he can reach those 90-plus miles per hour bursts. The question is who would he replace?

Stuart Broad was his confident and boisterous self, taking six wickets, including Warner (again), Labuschagne twice and Smith too. He relishes these sorts of occasions, and his energy and passion is almost irreplaceable. Ollie Robinson didn't falter in his efforts either – perhaps he was too fired up as he exchanged in verbal battles with Usman Khawaja and Ricky Ponting of all people. However, he took his five poles at under 20 apiece and was tireless in an unfamiliar role of enforcer when line and length proved futile. As for Anderson, by his own admission, he found things tough on such a lifeless wicket as he came away with just one wicket. It would take a brave man to drop an all-time great who has 117 wickets to his name at Lords but on the basis of the first test, the searing pace of Mark Wood feels like a must and the Lancashire man would be the obvious choice to make way.

### **We'd rather lose than draw**

Throughout the Edgbaston classic, commentators and pundits seemed to be finding new ways to make comparisons to the wonderful 2005 series and in fairness they weren't wrong. But one thing is for certain is that the scoreline won't be 2-1 as draws don't seem to exist in the wonderful world of Bazball. In the 14 tests since Stokes and McCullum came together, every game has seen a result, even on the motorways on offer in Rawalpindi or Wellington, Stokes has found new ways to place fielders and engineer wickets, or his batters have been able to turn up the gears and pile on the runs at alarming rates. Even on day four when the conditions were benign and perfect for racking up a lead so they could declare on day five, England went in search of runs so they could bowl in the afternoon and into the evening. Yes it eventually backfired but it feels as if England would feel more deflated settling for a draw than playing by their principles and losing. So whatever plans you had in mind for this summer, maybe it's best to put them on hold because Ashes cricket is alive.