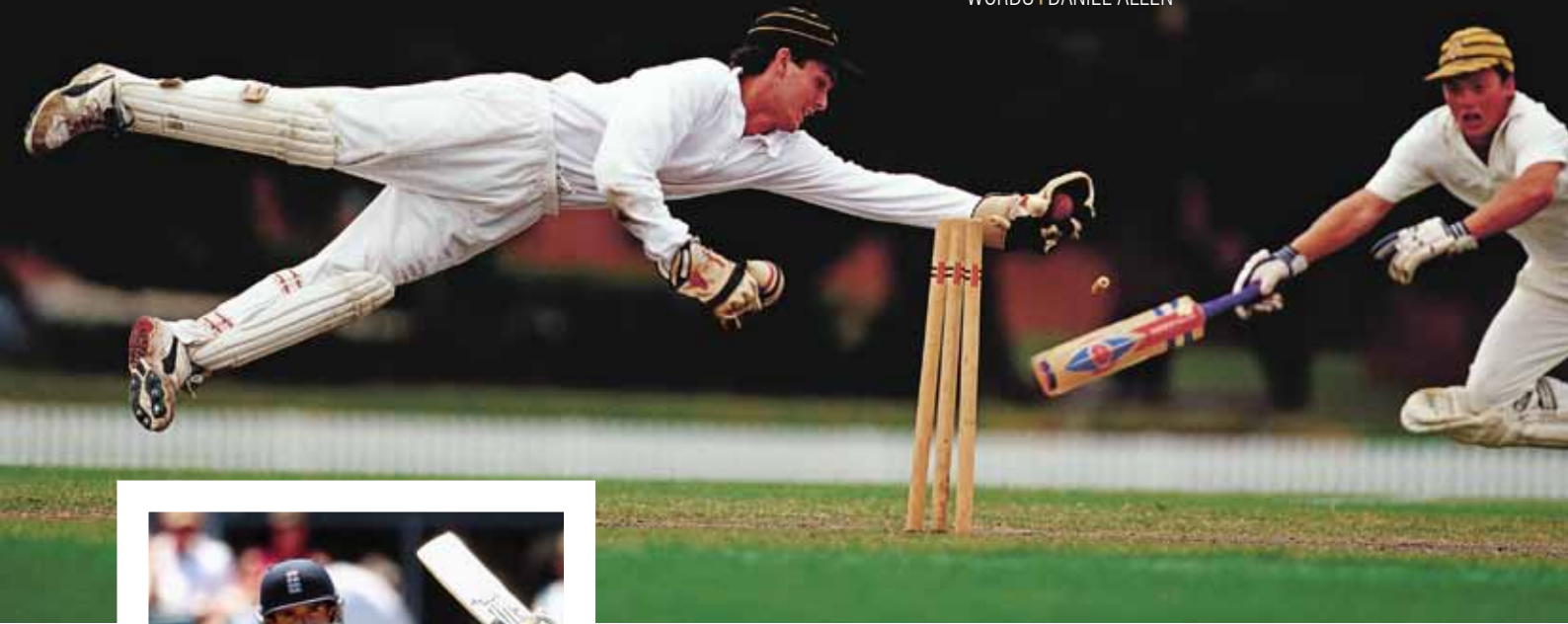


A duel down under

THIS YEAR'S ASHES SERIES PROMISES LASHINGS OF BLOOD, SWEAT AND TEARS

WORDS | DANIEL ALLEN



England's Kevin Pietersen

On 25 November, under a relentless Brisbane sun, more than 40,000 passionate spectators witnessed the resumption of one of sport's legendary rivalries. The biennial Ashes test cricket series, fiercely contested by England and Australia since 1882, is much more than a game – it's a battle between nations. The banter, the antagonism, the trickery and the gamesmanship: there's nothing like the Ashes for intensifying the love-hate relationship between an old colonial mistress and her headstrong former dependency.

For a so-called gentlemanly sport, rooted in civilised sangfroid, cricket between England and Australia infallibly gets the blood pumping. Victory in this arena brings adulation; defeat humiliation and disgrace. As the great bowler Jim Laker once remarked: "The aim of English test cricket is, in fact, mainly to beat Australia." Legions of die-hard

fans – the "Barmy Army" and "Fanatics" – live through the success or failure of their team.

"These are called 'test' matches precisely because they're the supreme test of cricketing strength," says Rhys Pullen, a cricket aficionado based in London. "If you're English or Australian and you follow cricket, there's nothing bigger than the Ashes. For players and spectators, this is the pinnacle of the sport. If my boss wasn't wise to my love of the game I'd probably go sick for six weeks. Watching in a pub can be great, but there's no substitute for supporting England live."

The seeds of animosity were sown early. In 1882, during Australia's first innings at a test match in London's Oval Cricket Ground, the extravagantly bearded all-rounder WG Grace fielded the ball. Thinking it was out of play, the Australian batsman, Sammy Jones, wandered out of his crease. Grace, belying his role as the pre-eminent Victorian sportsman, whipped off the bails, and Jones was reluctantly dismissed by an apologetic umpire.

"Unfortunately, this display of poor manners backfired," says cricket historian Gordon White. "Australia was incensed. During a ⇒

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break their great fast bowler, Fred Spofforth, stormed into the English dressing-room to accuse Grace of cheating. Nicknamed 'the Demon Bowler', Spofforth was so fired up that he took seven wickets for 44 runs as England crashed to defeat."

"England's capitulation enraged the London press," continues White. "Lamenting the 'death of English cricket', a mock obituary stated that 'the body will be cremated and the ashes taken to Australia'. These metaphorical ashes later became tangible when a terracotta urn, reputedly containing the carbonised

"Shane Warne has provided some special Ashes memories," enthuses Neil Henderson, a Melbourne cricket fan. "This genius of spin bowling changed the face of cricket. During the 1993 Ashes, in his first ever ball in test cricket, he bowled Mike Gatting with what is regarded as the ball of the century. England will be glad they're not facing him in this series."

While Australia have the lead in Ashes victories, the 2010 installment will be a closely fought affair. Before 2005, England had failed to regain the Ashes for 16 miserable years, but their heroic 2-1 win that year, coupled with

"It's certainly a tough call," says Rhys Pullen. "We only need a draw to retain the Ashes. Still, Australia are always formidable opponents in their own backyard, and for the last 25 years England have under-performed in Ashes series there. Ricky Ponting's side may be in decline, but they're not in disarray."

"It's vital England don't underestimate Australia," adds David Hayes, editor of a UK cricket website. "Sure, they've had the better run-in to the Ashes, but the Aussies know their stadiums like the back of their hands. England needs to hit the ground running, they need to get batsmen on the front foot, and they need to bowl full-length deliveries, otherwise they'll get pulled and hooked all over the park."

So, who are the key players to look out for? England's weakest link is a fragile middle

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remains of a cricket bail, was donated in 1928. To Australia's frustration, the urn was declared too delicate to move from its London home and Ashes winners today have to be content with a replica made of crystal as their trophy."

Born of such ill-humoured beginnings, it's no surprise that the 120-odd years of subsequent Ashes history are packed with emotion and high drama. During the infamous "Bodyline" tour of 1932 – 1933, English fast bowlers aimed balls at their opponents' bodies in an effort to counter Donald Bradman's prodigious talent. Having caused a near breakdown in diplomatic relations, the English captain was later sacked.

Most Ashes series have been marked by moments of individual flair, tactical brilliance and dogged determination. Back in 1936/1937, Bradman secured his reputation as cricket's greatest ever player by making 270, 212 and 169 in three consecutive matches as he propelled Australia to victory. In 1981 Ian Botham's amazing innings of 142 not out rescued the match for England, who eventually went on to win the series 3-1.

victory 15 months ago, has encouraged a new competitiveness. Despite being trounced 5-0 in the last Ashes series down under in 2007, many believe they start as favorites. Even former nemesis Shane Warne believes this is "England's best chance since 1986".

"Australia have the home advantage," says Henderson. "But England have performed a lot better. Australia goes into the Ashes in terrible form, having lost seven games on the bounce. For the first time since rankings began, Australia, in fifth place, goes into the Ashes below England."

England, meanwhile, are in great form, having just beaten Pakistan 3-1 in a test series over the summer. But it would be foolish to write the Australians off just yet. "The more games they lose, the more their confidence levels may go down," said England batsman Paul Collingwood in a recent interview. "But we're not going to read too much into it. We've got to prepare ourselves as a team to be in the best frame of mind going into the test matches. We're not going to take them lightly – it's as simple as that."

ABOVE LEFT TO RIGHT: Enthusiastic Australian spectators at the Ashes; Australian bowling legend Shane Warne; the Barmy Army; England batsman Jonathan Trott

order, and success will depend on significant contributions from the likes of Kevin Pietersen, Paul Collingwood, Eoin Morgan and Jonathan Trott. Trott and Morgan are in good form, but Kevin Pietersen, the stardust of the team, is overdue a great series. On the bowling side, spinner Graeme Swann, a consistent wicket taker, is equally vital. If he underperforms or gets injured, England will struggle.

"For Australia the key player will be Ricky Ponting," says Neil. "Despite the defeats in India he played really well. The guy's a world class batsman, and I'm really looking forward to the contest between him and Swann. If he has a great series we could repeat the triumph of 2007." Whatever the outcome of the 66th Ashes series, one thing's for sure – it will have been a fascinating and full-blooded encounter. From Warne to WG Grace, history suggests nothing less. 🏏