

Reflections on a Long Season: 2015-16

It would take a long cricketing memory to recall the last summer when international cricket did not take centre stage in Australia, but one would be forgiven for feeling we have just experienced it once again. We have watched as a pallid and one-sided international season seemed to disappear under the wheels of the Twenty20 juggernaut.

It was far from all negative. More people are going to the cricket in Australia than ever before. In the past, it has taken an exceptional international season to garner more than one million spectators; now the Big Bash, for the first time, has passed that figure on its own.

The challenge remains to channel these new chums into seats in the more traditional forms of the game, so that all may thrive. Among other things, this will need a more competitive international season than we have just witnessed. It is not just hindsight to observe the West Indies team as a sad reflection of former glory; there were plenty of advance warning signs, and some very low expectations were fully met. We must hope that Cricket Australia's error in giving prime time to a team in crisis, and which could not call on a number of senior players, will not be repeated. The saddest aspect of the season was seeing a team being repeatedly outclassed – they were even thrashed by 10 wickets by a cobbled-together opposition of non-first-class players in a lead-up match – while their erstwhile team mates hoovered up runs and dollars for their BBL franchises.

It may be long time between Boxing Day Tests for the West Indies, one can only say.

There was a statistical highlight of sorts when Sean Marsh and Adam Voges set a world record for the fourth wicket of 449 runs at Bellerive Oval. For such a significant record, the reaction was actually quite muted; as a statistician, I felt only disappointment that such a record should be set in such a one-sided series. The selectors were similarly unmoved, removing Sean Marsh from the team for the next Test, since he had been only holding a place for the injured Usman Khawaja. So Marsh picked up another record: his 182 the highest score in Australia by a player who was subsequently dropped. (Jason Gillespie was dropped after his 201* in Bangladesh in 2006.)

The New Zealanders copped a partnership record as well, an opening stand of 503 by Ryan Carters and Aaron Finch in a lead-up match at Blacktown Oval, under bizarre circumstances. Much of it was bowled by second-string bowlers on a crumbling, failing pitch, and the match was called off when Carters was out. Even the worst wickets in the international season seemed to benefit the batsmen. It is perhaps a pity that such matches cannot be expunged from records.

The blossoming of Usman Khawaja into a batting powerhouse was one of the most impressive features of the season. He averaged over 100 in the season's Tests including the matches in New Zealand, and his mastery of all forms was highlighted by exceptional results in the Big Bash.

The star turn for the international season was undoubtedly at Adelaide Oval, with the first day/night Test. An unqualified success? Very nearly so. In only three days the match attracted the second-largest attendance ever (123,736) for any Australia-New Zealand Test, exceeded only by a five-day match at the MCG in 1987/88. The major question remaining is the longevity of the pink ball. Let's call on the authorities to throw all possible resources into the development of the best possible ball for this purpose; this is the 21st Century, surely it can be done!

The Adelaide Test also provided the only competitive match of the Test season. The New Zealand tourists were always going to need some luck to overcome Australia, but it was not forthcoming. It is actually a good sign when a match hinges on umpiring decisions – it must mean that the cricket is competitive – but this one hinged on a baffling mistake, where the third umpire could not see the obvious, that Nathan Lyon was out. I happened to be in New Zealand at the time, and believe me, this was one hot issue over there.

From a Spectator's Perspective

As an aside, something has happened to the experience of going to the Test match. The heavy hand of authority is omnipresent; every spectator is looked on as a potential criminal. The cost of the security apparatus must be enormous, and I note with some relief that the AFL, in a flash of common sense, has removed the massive fences and metal detectors that girt the MCG in cricket season. Inside the ground, patrons are browbeaten into passivity by frequent threats, and most of the day, by past standards, is dull and quiet. The simple act of inflating a beach ball will get you thrown out of the ground, and cops seem to outnumber robbers in the once unruly Bay 13. And woe betide the schmuck who sets foot on the ground; the fines are monstrous – many thousands of dollars. No one tried it, the police would be pleased to tell you.

Not that it would be so easy to spot an intruder. Nowadays, at any one time there may be fifty people on the ground who are not actually playing the game. Fetchers and carriers, water boys, photographers, and security staff abound in the ring between rope and fence.

Security and good behaviour are desirable, but has the pendulum swung back too far? Even forty thousand people in the giant MCG cauldron seemed to generate insufficient atmosphere to make it a memorable day for the live spectator. Noise and colour is often provided by supporters of the visiting team, but, with the West Indies in decline, they were fewer in number at the MCG. Without wishing for a return to the bad old days, when 864,000 beer cans were cleared from the ground in a single Test match (SCG 1974-75), the game seems to have lost something.

There is 'colour' of one sort everywhere you look. In quieter moments, I tried to estimate the number of advertisements visible from my seat. I stopped counting at one thousand.

I did not go to the day/night Test, but I did attend one of the pilot games, a Shield match at the MCG. One factor that is underrated (in my opinion) is that in large stadiums, even in broad daylight, it can be hard for distant spectators to see the red ball. The pink ball, like the white ball, really does improve visibility, in good lighting as well as dull, and offers a substantial improvement for spectators. Under lights the pink ball was good but not great. Is it going too far to consider putting in extra lights? The current light levels are designed for TV cameras; I couldn't help noticing that the pink ball was more visible, and the picture much brighter, on the replay screens at the ground than in real life.

Overall, though, this was success. At the Shield game it even attracted a few spectators, raising the attendance from 'practically non-existent' to merely 'tiny'.

Apart from Adelaide, the Tests were a procession of giant scores by the Australian batsmen, who have marched beyond 500 in eight Tests in the past two home seasons, usually with plenty of wickets to spare. Easy runs were available to anyone who could get a bat, and sometimes this did not even include the lower middle-order. The relentless torrent eased the burden on the bowlers, who only needed to hold the line to ensure heavy victories.

With first crack at the bowling, David Warner led the run charge. His 818 runs for an Australian home season was higher than Bradman's best of 810 in 1936-37 (although Warner played six Tests but Bradman never played more than five). For proof of the ease of scoring in Australia in this century, one only has to note that, in addition to Warner, Ricky Ponting (twice), Matthew Hayden and Michael Clarke have also exceeded Bradman's peak. The only batsmen from the 20th Century to do so were Wally Hammond in 1928-29 and Neil Harvey in 1952-53.

Most Test runs in an Australian Home Season

2003/04	RT Ponting (6 Tests)	965
2003/04	ML Hayden (6)	952
1928/29	WR Hammond (5)	905
2012/13	MJ Clarke (6)	892
2005/06	RT Ponting (6)	844*
1952/53	RN Harvey (5)	834
2015/16	DA Warner (6)	818
1936/37	DG Bradman (5)	810

**Excludes the so-called World XI "Test", also off-season Tests.*

The statistical crown for the season, though, went to Adam Voges, who smashed all previous records by recording 614 runs in a row without a dismissal (surpassing Tendulkar's record of 497): 269* and 106* against West Indies, followed by 239 in New Zealand, mostly scored at Bradmanesque speed or better. Speaking once again of The Don, Voges is now second all-time to Bradman for best average after 15 Tests (95.5 to Bradman's 100.7). How Voges found such an imperious purple patch at age 35 is a bit of a mystery. It must be said, though, that this is not confined to easy-scoring Tests; his performances in the Shield in the past two seasons have also been outstanding (1703 runs at 94.6), remarkable figures that have set him apart in a competition that has still seen good contests between bat and ball.

The cookie-cutter flat pitches certainly encouraged repeated heavy scoring; hard to imagine that this was much the same batting team that was bowled out for 39 (plus 21 sundries) on a moderate seamer at Trent Bridge just last August, with Voges out fourth ball for one.

Australia was able to field a uniformly good rather than brilliant pace attack, and they put in some lion-hearted efforts on some discouraging pitches. There was a familiar 'rotation' of the bowlers, but more through injury than selectors' strategy. The effort required to get results ultimately told on Mitchell Johnson, who retired rather suddenly after New Zealand accumulated 624 on a Perth pitch unrecognisable from its glory days. Johnson had a splendid career to reflect on, 313 wickets strong.

Among the pacemen, Josh Hazlewood was able to front for all the Tests of the summer, including the New Zealand tour, but none of the others played more than half the matches. The other bowling fixture was Nathan Lyon, who has by now (195 wickets) established himself as an outstanding spinner for Australia, a smart bowler with a knack for picking up wickets even when there seem to be few on offer.

In the 50-over series against India, visiting bowlers were largely reduced to cannon fodder, reflecting the pattern in the Tests. Australia averaged a score of 318 in the five matches, with a lowest score of 296. The 200-run mark was reached for the loss of 2, 2, 4, 1, and 4 wickets respectively, with plenty of overs to spare as well; any slight wobbles from the main men were hungrily mopped up by Glenn Maxwell and Mitchell Marsh further down the order. In past times 318 would be regarded as good scoring even in unlimited Tests, but Australia is scoring 500 in home Tests now. The Indians had spun rings around South Africa at home not long before, but their spinners were brushed aside here, and powerful scoring from Kohli was not enough to establish a balance.

Watching it, one felt for the bowlers. One waited, and waited, in forlorn hope, for a ball that bounced awkwardly, or turned, or did anything that the batsman did not expect.

In the Big Bash (BBL), results were generally much less predictable, and that certainly came as a relief from the internationals. Six of the eight teams won either three, four, or five games, with only Adelaide out in front on seven. Adelaide came unstuck in the finals, however, thanks to that rich vein

of form found by Sydney Thunder's Usman Khawaja. Khawaja's four innings of 109*, 62, 104*, and a 70 in the final, all at a strike rate of 164, propelled the Thunder to the trophy. Thunder travelled to Perth and beat the defending champions in the semi-final, probably the critical performance of the tournament. Chris Lynn of Brisbane Heat won the Player of the Series award for his efforts in the Round Robin, but his team did not make the finals. Sean Marsh popped up in the partnership record books again, with the highest opening stand to win any T20 game (171 unbroken with Michael Klinger for Scorchers v Renegades at Etihad Stadium).

Cricket Australia and the broadcasters were more than happy with the outcome. So were most patrons, who enjoyed the glitz and the atmosphere; for families, the rapid-fire action, early finishes, and very reasonable ticket prices (\$20 for adults, \$50 for families at the MCG) made the cricket a fine night out. On the field, one had to wonder, though, if we were watching senior cricket or 'seniors' cricket. The physically unchallenging format of Twenty20 cricket, along with the financial rewards, has certainly encouraged many well-known retirees to stay on.

This in turn gives the franchises more big name cachet, but there are drawbacks. We see this when senior West Indians turn their back on their Test team; will this spread to other teams? Another effect is that there is almost no bleeding of younger players in T20. In its early years, debutants would regularly pop up in the T20 teams, but in the entire 2015-16 BBL, even though there were eight teams, we saw just four new players who had not previously played senior cricket. These four – Cameron Stevenson, Greg West, Guy Walker, and Nathan McAndrew – made only fleeting appearances as fill-in bowlers. Not one of them scored a run.

In eight matches in the BBL, Ashton Agar bowled nine overs and took three wickets, and he did not play in the home Twenty20 international series against India, yet was then selected as Australia's spinner in the World T20. There must be something unprecedented in this, especially as Nathan Lyon picked up 5 for 23 in one of his only BBL appearances.

Bookending the season, for the True Believers, was the old Sheffield Shield. (Yes, there was also the Matador 50-over Cup in October, relegated entirely to suburban grounds in Sydney. I can't quite remember what happened.) The Shield produced plenty of intense and competitive cricket, with a surprisingly even balance between bat and ball. I say surprising, because they were using the same balls as the internationals, and those balls, and the frequent need to change them, were cited as a source of some of the problems in the Tests.

The opening innings of the 31 Shield matches produced an average score of 310, a healthy number. Four of the six teams finished the season equal on five wins; the competitiveness was illustrated by the selection of players from all six states in the New Zealand touring team (first time since 2009). Places in the Shield final came down to bonus points. Thanks to these, South Australia hosted the final, in spite of only two home wins, one of which was a perilous one-wicket win against Western Australia.

The final was a hard-fought affair, with Victoria prevailing, handing the Redbacks another home defeat. Coming more than a week after all other cricket in this long season had finished, there had been calls for abolishing the Shield final, especially after a dreadful match in 2014-15, but this one was a fine match with Victoria eventually proving the better team.

There was one remarkable statistic to emerge during the season. Travis Dean of Victoria started his career with scores of 154*, 109* and 84, giving him, briefly, an average of 347.0. This is the highest average at the end of an innings ever recorded in first-class cricket, not just in Australia but worldwide, topping the 325.0 by W.S. Jaffer and 320.0 by P.S. Clifford. Bear in mind that there have been nearly 50,000 players in first-class cricket history. Of course, Dean, like Jaffer and Clifford and others before him, came back to earth – statisticians call this ‘regression to the mean’ – but he enjoyed an excellent Shield Final, his 111 and 54 making a critical difference.

A gulf between first-class and Test cricket remains. Brydon Coverdale at *Cricinfo* pointed out that of the five highest wicket-takers in Shield in the last ten years, only two, Ben Hilfenhaus and Doug Bollinger, had played Test cricket. The others deserve mention: James Hopes, Luke Butterworth, and Michael Hogan. All three joined Hilfenhaus and Mitchell Johnson in retirement at the end of the season; Bollinger is now the senior citizen of Shield bowlers. And so the guard changes.

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