

Does the Pressure Tell?

There was a sporting meltdown earlier this year. After a very successful Ashes series, the Australian team fell into sudden disarray during a tour of South Africa; it all ended in a thrashing, a public humiliation of senior players and massive penalties.

How it all went so wrong might require the input from a team of sports psychologists. That's out of my province, but I did do a little statistical investigation into the pressures modern players may be put under, in terms of playing workload. In this respect, how does Steve Smith compare to his predecessors?

A feature of the 2017-18 Ashes series was the ubiquity of Steve Smith. He batted on 13 different days in the series, and 25 different sessions. He was on the field, batting or captaining in the field, during 56 sessions. Overall, he batted for 2137 minutes, the most by any captain in a Test series.

Most Minutes batted in a Five-Test Series

Minutes batted		Balls Faced	
2150	AN Cook	1438	England in Australia 2010-11
2137	SPD Smith	1416	Australia v England 2017-18
2067	S Chanderpaul	1477	West Indies v India 2001
2041	GM Turner	2100(<i>est.</i>)	New Zealand in West Indies 1972
1981	DC Boon	1548	Australia v India 1991-92
1963	GS Sobers	1550 (<i>est.</i>)	West Indies v England 1960
1912	WR Hammond	2519	England in Australia 1928-29

The most time at the crease in a series (of any length) is 2283 minutes by Mark Taylor in the six-Test Ashes series in 1989. Sunil Gavaskar batted for 1996 minutes in four Tests in the West Indies in 1971.

The actual time players spend on the field has increased over the years, thanks largely to slower over rates. While the amount of cricket has not necessarily increased (look at the balls faced by Hammond!) the time commitment has. A day of six and a half hours is now considered routine.

Smith is the only captain in the above table. The nearest captain to Smith is Gavaskar, who captained India in a six-Test series in 1981-82 and batted 1974 minutes.

Even when multiple tours are added together, the 2137 minutes batted by Smith is the most by an Australian captain in a home season of Tests. Ricky Ponting came very close in 2005-06, when he batted for 2124 minutes against South Africa, West Indies and the ICC 'World XI' (7 Tests). The fast-scoring Ponting scored a lot more runs than Smith, 944 to 687. Ponting also went on to tour South Africa (and Bangladesh) in the same season, but unlike Smith he went from strength to strength.

Nevertheless, an Ashes series followed immediately by a tour of South Africa was a tough ask for Smith, especially given the long hours spent at the crease.

It is possible, and illuminating, to look at combined totals for the amount of senior cricket in different eras. Scanning through the calendar years, I have assessed the career peaks of various

Australian captains and some other important batsmen. The values are the days' play per year, averaged over a four-year cycle. The survey spanned more than 50 years of senior cricket.

Senior Cricket in Days per Year: Major Australian batsmen.

	Career peak days/year	4-year cycle
WM Lawry	93	1961-1964
GS Chappell	100	1972-1975
AR Border	140	1985-1988
MA Taylor	108	1991-1994
ME Waugh	146	1992-1995
SR Waugh	120	1986-1989
RT Ponting	92	2001-2004
ML Hayden	112	1997-2000
MJ Clarke	86	2004-2007
MEK Hussey	119	2001-2004
SPD Smith	88	2013-2016
DA Warner	85	2013-2016

Totals are number of days' play, combining first-class cricket (including Tests) with List A One-Day matches, including ODIs. Twenty20 matches have been included, although I have taken the liberty of assigning a value of 0.5 to such games. Note that Smith and Warner would have values in the mid-90s if T20 games were given a value of 1 rather than 0.5.

There is no particular trend towards increasing amounts of cricket in this data. If anything, the load on players rose to a peak in the late 1980s and 1990s, and has eased off since. In all eras, some players are given greater workloads than others. Mark Taylor did not play as much as some contemporaries because he was not a fixture in the One-Day team. Mark Waugh's workload was his own choice: he would play county cricket in England if there were no internationals scheduled. I don't think that Waugh ever complained, but I remember other Australian cricketers complaining about home workloads, and then heading to England for a county season or two.

The greatest single-year workload for an Australian player was 183 days by Allan Border in 1986. Perhaps it need not be said, but that is quite a long time ago.

But even prior to Border, the workloads on captains could be considerable. Greg Chappell was certainly no shirker when it came to contributing to ODIs. Chappell acted as Australia's fifth bowler when he was captain and would repeatedly bowl his full quota of overs in addition to his batting and captaincy duties. In November 1980, he scored 138* against New Zealand at the SCG and then bowled his full 10 overs. In the thousands of ODIs since then, no captain has scored more runs as well as bowling 10 overs in a 50-over match (although Kapil Dev combined 175 with 11 overs in a 1983 World Cup match).

It was in that 1980-81 season that ODIs first began to dominate Australian season; some 19 were played, in addition to six Tests. By the end of it, the pressure was telling on Chappell. It was in order to avoid yet another game that Chappell ordered his brother Trevor to bowl that infamous underarm

ball against New Zealand at the MCG. Greg has argued, with some justification, that the decision was influenced by the pressures of a very long season, and that he was not in a fit mental state at that point to be captain.

While there may be something about the stress of the job leading to Smith's (and his colleague's) failure of judgement, there are also past cases of captains standing up to similar or greater pressure. In fact, Smith's great success with the bat, and the Ashes victories, should actually have reduced the pressure he was under. If he had failed against England and the team had lost, it might have made the brain fade in South Africa more understandable.

Charles Davis

September 2018