

England in Australia 1986-87 Five Tests.

England Won 2 - 1.

Balls per Over: 6

Playing Hours: 5 days x 6 hr

Captains: AR Border (Aus), MW Gatting (Eng)

In another crowded season, quantity would substitute for quality in the international cricket arena. There were over 20 One Day Internationals, with one tournament organised for no better reason than to mark the America's Cup yachting regatta, while the Ashes Tests, promoted with a cliché: "Clashes for the Ashes", became known more sardonically as "Battle for the Wooden Spoon". It was also a season of bitter criticism in the press of almost everything to do with Australian cricket. Whether or not it had done as much damage as claimed, no one was sorry to see Kerry Packer's organisation withdrawing from a direct role in the control of the game.

Since their Ashes win in 1985, England's record had been weak, but they were still clearly the better team, and with a bit more enterprise might have won by a larger margin. The defensiveness of the England approach was not so much a matter of batting style as in the selection of batting-heavy teams, and delaying tactics.

Once they enforced the follow-on in Brisbane and won by seven wickets, it was mostly plain sailing for England. They had Botham (138 off 174 balls, 4 sixes) to thank most for putting energy into the match after a slow start, and Australia could not match it, even though Geoff Marsh (56 and 110) put up a long fight. After this, Chris Broad came in to his own with centuries in each of the next three Tests, for the most part honestly compiled but unmemorable. England were unable to force the follow-on in Perth even though they reached 592 (Gower at his most fluent with 136 off 175 balls, adding 207 in even time with wicketkeeper Richards), and a delayed declaration from Gatting on the fourth day gave Australia an escape route. An even flatter pitch in Adelaide saw only twenty wickets and thirteen scores over 40, with both bowling attacks reduced to waiting for errors; the England bowlers in particular seemed satisfied to hope for better conditions next time.

These conditions came in Melbourne, along with a more dynamic bowler in Gladstone Small, who exploited a seaming pitch to take 5 for 48, the other five going to Botham, having a now-rare good bowling day. England swept to a first-innings lead with only one wicket lost, and although they were contained, Australia's second innings was as dispiriting as the first. The Australian batting from Number Six on down contributed less than 40 runs for the match. This Boxing Day Test attracted only half the attendance of the equivalent match four years earlier.

Fortunately, Dean Jones was in form, and he batted a day and a half for 184 not out in Sydney to turn the tables on England. Australia had selected a new spinner in Peter Taylor, a player so little known that speculation that he had been selected by mistake (another Taylor from NSW, Mark, was in the running at the time) continued for years. The fairytale had a happy ending, with Taylor's 6 for 78 ensuring a first innings lead. Embury's 7 for 78 confirmed that this was a spinners pitch, and England were not equal to the task of 320 in seven hours. Peter Sleep took three wickets in the last half-hour to seize an emotional victory with just an over to spare. The Australian team's joy was understandable; they had ended Australia's longest barren spell ever – 15 matches.

Charles Davis 2001