

England in Australia 1998-99 Five Tests.

Australia Won 3 - 1.

Balls per Over: 6

Playing Hours: 5 days x 6 hr (90 ov. minimum)

Captains: MA Taylor (Aus), AJ Stewart (Eng)

An attempt by England to build a team of greater determination and professionalism, emulating the Australian model, did not bring any real rewards. Without a great depth of talent, the omission of certain players in the name of team unity did as much harm as good, and the result was a series similar to the 1994-95 tour, although richer in memorable moments. Australia's great depth was demonstrated in the absence of Shane Warne following shoulder surgery. Stuart MacGill filled his shoes and showed, by becoming the leading bowler of the series (27 wickets at 17.7), that England had made no progress in their struggle to combat legspin.

The England batting overall was weak. Actually, the greatest problem lay with the tail: England's last four wickets never contributed more than 66 runs during the series, adding an average of 41 and batting less than an hour. (The historical average is 70-80 runs added). Thus the thunderstorm in Brisbane, which ended proceeding 150 minutes early with England 6 down, almost certainly saved them. But the match did no harm to Australian confidence, with Steve Waugh, Healy, and Slater (off 129 balls) scoring centuries. In Perth, the Australian pace men made the most of a lively pitch and took 6 English wickets before lunch on the first day. The Test only went half the distance, and Jason Gillespie had a memorable return to the Test arena, conceding an Ashes-record 23 off one over from Hick before taking the last four wickets of the match in six balls.

For the first time in Australia, the Ashes were decided before Christmas, but the match in Adelaide was overshadowed by revelations of contacts between Mark Waugh and Shane Warne and bookmakers in India. On the field, Australia was in command from the first day, when Justin Langer scored a big century as the temperature rose above 40°. Nasser Hussain (89*) tried to emulate Langer, but received much less support. It was the first time in a Test that two Number 3 batsmen had "carried their bats". (Curiously, it is a rarer feat for Number 3s than it is for opening batsmen.) In Melbourne, rain washed away a potential record Boxing Day crowd, but the three days play following provided high-intensity cricket. Alec Stewart gave up the keeping gloves and scored 107 and 52 as an opener, but it wasn't enough to set Australia much of a target – Steve Waugh and MacGill had secured a first innings lead through a ninth-wicket partnership of 88.

Chasing 175, Australia was following the script at 3/130 when Dean Headley (whose father and grandfather were both Test cricketers) suddenly took 4 for 4. With the day extending past eight hours to make up for lost time, Steve Waugh remained, but was unable to protect the tailenders from the strike bowlers, as Australia lost its last three wickets for one run and the match by twelve. The Australian Achilles heel, an inability to win close matches, remained exposed, but Australia regained command in another fine match in Sydney, thanks to a 190-run Waugh stand, and in spite of a Gough hat trick. England's bowlers put in one final effort in the second innings, only to be denied by Slater, whose 123 off 189 balls contributed over 66% of the runs, just short of Bannerman's 1877 record. In a series where there was not a single run out, Slater on 35 was lucky to survive a controversial video umpire decision. Warne had returned, but it was MacGill who had the fitness and form, finishing with 12 for the match for just 107 runs.

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