

England in Australia 1928-29 Five Tests.

England Won 4 - 1.

Balls per over: 6

Playing Hours: 5 hr days - Timeless

Captains: J Ryder (Aus), APF Chapman (Eng)

Cricket history had turned the page in 1926 when England won back the Ashes. This induced a rather extreme response from Australian authorities, who stripped captain Collins and team manager Syd Smith from all official positions down to and including district grade level. Australian cricket strength remained fragile in 1928-29, mainly because the abundance of batting talent was not balanced by the bowling, and many batting records were being set in Sheffield Shield which still stand, notably Victoria's score of 1,107 all out. At the outset of the Test series, Australia's youngest bowler was 33 years old, and there were no fast bowlers to speak of: Jack Gregory had lost pace and would break down, sadly and irretrievably, in the first Test.

The MCC had talent in depth in all departments, with a top order – Sutcliffe, Hobbs and Hammond – as formidable as any team has ever assembled. Their style was suited to the timeless format, and the pace was measured throughout. Although it did not escape notice at the time, subsequent commentators have tended to gloss over just how slowly these players scored their runs. Hammond's utter domination of the bowling was achieved at a dull, consistent 36 runs/100 balls. At one stage, after he had scored 602 runs in the space of four innings, with only two dismissals by the bowlers (one of them a spectacular diving catch off a full-blooded drive), he still took 603 balls to score 177 in his next dig. It was made more palatable by the exceptional over rates, averaging 130 balls per hour.

A long-delayed promise was honoured, over MCC objections, when Brisbane was granted its first Test match. Not that the new venue presented any real problems to the tourists, with Patsy Hendren, 169 off 314 balls, anchoring a very healthy total. When the Australian batsmen, suddenly facing some real fast bowling (Larwood 6 for 32), collapsed, Percy Chapman chose the "grind them into dust" approach and batted again. He eventually made the first declaration in a Test in Australia, with a lead of 742 and a pitch turning nasty. Only Woodfull, carrying his bat for 30 not out, salvaged any dignity from the margin of 675 runs. In the match as a whole, Hendren scored more runs than the Australian team.

Bradman had made his now-famous failure on debut, and, in an even more famous decision, the selectors dropped him (notorious in hindsight: in their defence, the selectors *had* elevated Bradman from Bowral district cricket to Tests in barely two years, a great success surely). He fielded, as 12th man, through England's 636 in Sydney, the highest score by a visiting team in Australia. Hammond, elegant accumulator of runs, demonstrated his fantastic powers of concentration with 251 off 605 balls. Australia's batting line-up finally got into gear in the second innings, scoring 397 without Bradman or the injured Ponsford, but it was much too late.

Australia made more progress in Melbourne, where sellout crowds broke the records set at Sydney, in a match that lasted well into the seventh day. Bradman was back, and he supported centuries from Ryder and Alan Kippax (a careful but supremely stylish 100 off 255 balls). It took a second consecutive 200 from Hammond, the first batsman to achieve such a feat, to secure a first innings lead against Don Blackie's 6 for 94. When Bradman scored his first Test 100, Charles Bannerman, scorer of that very first century in 1877, was in attendance; it looked like Bradman had done more than enough when heavy rain overnight after the fifth day turned the pitch into a classic "sticky". But a remarkable opening stand of 105 by Hobbs and Sutcliffe, against balls jumping off a length, defied all expectation, and Jardine and the others supported Sutcliffe (135) as he went on to perhaps the greatest sticky-wicket innings. England reached their improbable target of 332 as Bert Ironmonger, the perfect bowler for the situation, but who had been dropped from the team, watched from the stands.

The bat reigned supreme again in Adelaide as an improving Australia forced a very close contest. A fine first-innings spell from Grimmett (5 for 102) pulled England up short, even though that awesome top order fired well, Hammond 119 not out. Then the 19-year-old Archie Jackson swept away Australia's poor start with 164 off 318 balls on debut; uncertain as he approached the 100, he was dazzling thereafter. The response of Hammond and Jardine, in a partnership of 262, was pure grit and concentration. The partnership appears to have taken more than 120 overs, and Hammond faced 977 balls in the match before he was dismissed. The only possible rival to this would be Hanif Mohammad's 337 against the West Indies at Bridgetown (but the balls faced for that innings, about 950, can only be estimated).

On a still-benign pitch, Australia made solid progress toward the target of 349. In the first Test, Hobbs had been run out for the first time in his career, by Bradman; now, at a critical moment, he took his revenge, outfoxing the young champion. It was Hobbs' eleventh run out credit in Australia, still an all-comers record. Bradman was run out with 29 runs to win, and JC "Farmer" White, 8 for 126 off 64.5 overs, did the rest. England's win by 12 runs came more than a week after the match started.

Australia gained the relief of a much-deserved win in the final Test in Sydney, even though a revamped bowling line-up could not stop England's progress to 519. The seemingly ageless Hobbs made his last Test century at the age of 46. Australia responded with an extended run crawl – Woodfull's century off 378 balls with just three 4s is the slowest ever in Australia – but Bradman, 123 off 247 balls, was more entertaining. Then the bowlers finally found a way through, new chum Tim Wall taking 5 for 66 (Hammond was ill), and Australia made the target of 287 look straightforward, even though it was not until well into the eighth day that Bradman and the much-maligned captain Jack Ryder saw off the winning runs. Although no match for that Endless Test in Durban in 1939, the Test remains the longest in Australia.