England in Australia 1976-77 The Centenary Test. ***Australia Won by 45 Runs.***

Balls per over: 8 Playing Hours: 5 days x 6 hr Captains: GS Chappell (Aus), AW Greig (Eng)

The idea of a match to mark the centenary of the first ever Test in 1877 had been around for some years before it generated any enthusiasm in official circles, but once it caught on, it was organised with gusto, with Hans Ebeling and David Richards piloting an event that was a brilliant success throughout. Nearly all of the living Ashes Test players who could travel accepted invitations, some 244 in all, "splendour and much camaraderie" resulting. Without a public hint of the storm which would soon break over cricket, the cricket too was brilliant and absorbing, finally producing a famous coincidence: Australia's win by 45 runs was exactly the same margin seen in that original match 100 years before. They remain the only two Tests ever decided by exactly this margin.

On the first two days it appeared that some of the celebrations might have to be cut short, as the batsmen of Australia and England were routed in turn. "Overwhelmed by the occasion" was offered as the explanation, although it didn't seem to trouble the bowlers, but Chappell for one looked out of sorts in spite of batting for four hours. McCosker was bowled by a Willis bouncer that smashed his jaw en route to the stumps. England captain Tony Greig was overjoyed at the way his bowlers had combined to dismiss Australia for 138; he had rather less to say the following evening after England failed even to match that score. Lillee and Walker bowled all but unchanged to put England out for 95; Lillee's 6 for 26 polished his reputation as the finest bowler in the world, and Walker's four wickets including Greig bowled by an awesome inswinger.

With Australia losing their first three second-inning wickets for 53 and McCosker in hospital, great credit must go to Ian Davis and Walters for stabilising matters and changing the character of the match with a run-a-minute partneship of 132. Debutant David Hookes created an unforgettable moment when he hit five consecutive fours off Greig on his way to 56, while Marsh produced a tough-as-nails century. Even so, he needed help from McCosker, jaw wired, head swathed in bandages – a bizarre yet inspiring sight – to add 54 and seemingly put the match beyond England. Chappell declared on a lead of 462 with 630 minutes to play.

With nothing but history to play for, Randall and Amiss produced a fine stand of 166, cautious yet never too slow to preclude victory, Randall's antics (backward rolls when avoiding bouncers etc) keeping matters lively even at their most tense. O'Keeffe finally enticed an error from Randall (174 from 353 balls), but at tea on the final day England, at 5 for 354 with Greig and Knott at the crease, had the impossible in their sights. One final effort from Lillee, however, kept it out of reach, and it was fitting that Lillee trapped Knott to end the match. Lillee was chaired off the MCG by his teammates, but it was Randall who took Man of the Match, or *Man of La Mancha* , as Whitington put it, for dreaming the impossible dream.

The following day, Kerry Packer completed the signing up of 28 Australian players for his rebel series. By May, the story was public, and there was a new perspective on the historical significance of the Centenary Test: it could now be seen as the end of an era.