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Ashes Victory

The England Cricket Team

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Extract

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INTRODUCTION

England's coach Duncan Fletcher has little doubt that 21 September 2004 was the date when England's Ashes victory on 12 September 2005 became more than a distant dream. From the outside, laudable though England's victory over Australia in the ICC Trophy semi-final at Edgbaston was, it hardly seemed to offer conclusive proof that Michael Vaughan's side were ready to take on and beat the world champions at Test cricket. But Fletcher saw in the six-wicket victory a demonstration that this England side had no psychological scars after years of being under the Australian whip. They chased down Australia's 259 for 9 in a steady, methodical fashion, and won with 3.3 overs to spare. The victory needed no heroics, no one-man show, just solid teamwork, with Flintoff's continuing maturity giving Vaughan the edge he required.

Fletcher explains: 'From my point of view that result and the way we played there put down a marker for us and for them. Up to that point, you always thought that for us to win a game against Australia they had to have a real débâcle and play terribly for all one hundred overs, either batting or bowling. This was different: Australia didn't play badly; England just played better. We went in to bat and there was a cool calmness about the side which I liked. There was this mental strength, off the field, and you got this feeling that there was a belief that this was our time.

'Australia got 259, definitely a score they would have felt confident of defending, but Trescothick, Vaughan and Strauss clinically cut down that total and we went on to win comfortably. It was done in a manner that showed there was no fluke about it; there was no luck. One side was just better on the day, and that

side was England. It showed me there was potential there.

'I held that up as an example to the players and as a target. And we referred to it over and over again just to re-emphasise our belief. We could beat Australia because we did it there and then. We said, "No man stands alone." We could win the Ashes.'

England went on to lose the final to the West Indies at The Oval, when a ninth-wicket stand of 71 between Courtney Browne and Ian Bradshaw frustrated the home side's hopes. But that was a rare setback in a summer of success that included seven straight Test wins over New Zealand and the Windies, as well as that seminal semi-final.

The next big target for Fletcher was to win the forthcoming Test series in South Africa. England had not done that for forty years, although for half of that time South Africa had been in sporting isolation in reaction to its apartheid policy. Since the Proteas had returned to international cricket in 1992, only one team had travelled to South Africa and won. That team was Australia, and they'd done it twice.

The last England tour had been Fletcher's first as coach and Vaughan's first in Test cricket. Batting at number four and prior to facing a ball, Vaughan had looked at a scoreboard that read 2 for 4 on the first morning of the series. England lost that Test and the New Year game in Cape Town, but the Fletcher–Hussain partnership gained its first victory in dramatic (and later controversial) fashion at Centurion Park.

When Vaughan returned in 2004 he did so as England captain with a young side that had won ten out of eleven Tests in the year. That form continued at Port Elizabeth where Strauss showed he was a natural for Test cricket abroad as well as at home with 126 and 94 not out. England's fast-bowling quartet of Harmison, Flintoff, Hoggard and Simon Jones, supported by spinner Ashley Giles, continued the trend of taking twenty opposition wickets well inside the time allowed. The tourists won by seven wickets.

The winning streak came to an end in Durban, but there were still plenty of positives to take from that match. England recovered

brilliantly after being bowled out for 139 in their first innings and starting their second 193 runs behind. Centuries from Trescothick, Strauss and Thorpe would have given England victory but for bad light. The team ended the Test year with eleven wins, two draws and no defeats – a great achievement.

Unfortunately, though, Vaughan's men started 2005 in disastrous fashion as once again the Cape Town jinx saw England defeated, this time by an embarrassing 196 runs. That made it three heavy defeats at Newlands since England had started visiting again in the nineties.

Fletcher knew the setback would test his side's resolve and resilience, especially with the final two games being played in Johannesburg and Pretoria. They proved up to the task. Strauss and Trescothick provided the runs and Hoggard the wickets (an aggregate of 12 for 205) that put England back ahead in the series with a 77-run victory at the Wanderers. It was a gutsy performance, especially on the final day after Trescothick had given his team the quick runs they needed to have a chance of bowling out the South Africans.

The final match at Centurion Park was a rather scrappy affair, although Thorpe showed his class, as he and Flintoff put on 141 for the fifth wicket. There was a slight wobble on the final afternoon, but Vaughan was still there at the death and England had their fourth series win in a row when the game was drawn.

Harmison had had a quiet series, even though he still finished it with a record number of Test wickets in a year for England (67), beating Ian Botham's former mark. However, his wickets in the South Africa series cost 73.22 each. Vaughan, too, was not at his best.

'People said that England could not win unless I was taking wickets and Vaughany was scoring runs,' reflected Harmison afterwards. 'Well, we showed in South Africa that we can. The one man we cannot do without is Andrew Flintoff. England need his runs and wickets. Still, it was a great team effort, with everyone chipping in when needed. This is not a fair-weather England team.

In fact, we play better cricket when our backs are to the wall and we are under pressure. That's the sign of a good side.'

Another part of the Ashes jigsaw puzzle fell into place as Kevin Pietersen then returned to the land of his birth and, despite bucketfuls of abuse from the home support, carried all before him with the bat. England lost their way towards the end of that one-day series, but Fletcher just put that down to tiredness. The main objective of the winter, Test victory, had been achieved. The early winter problem of visiting Zimbabwe was now history. The team was united, the Ashes were only a few months away, and Flintoff, recuperating back home after the operation to cure a persistent ankle injury, was well on the road back to full fitness.

It would not have been Team England's preferred option to prepare for the best team in the world by taking on the worst, Bangladesh. To most observers the two-Test series was an utter waste of time, with Richie Benaud voicing most people's opinion that the ICC should withdraw Test status from both Bangladesh and Zimbabwe. As usual, he seemed to be talking a lot of sense when the Lord's Test ended on the Saturday with England winning by a monumental innings and 261 runs. Trescothick and Vaughan scored centuries and the four-man pace attack skittled out the visitors for 108 and 159. The Durham Test struggled into Sunday as England used the occasion for batting practice. Both Trescothick and Bell passed 150, with the latter's Test average now a 'healthy' 297! This time Bangladesh were bowled out for 104 (local boy Harmison collecting 5 for 38) and 316. In spite of that respectable second-innings knock, the winning margin was still an innings and 21 runs. It was Thorpe's 100th Test match and he sauntered through with an unbeaten 66. Some had argued that Pietersen should have played in these Tests, but the selectors saw no reason to disrupt a settled and successful side. That was their line for the time being, anyway. England had lost only six wickets in the two matches, with Strauss's 8 at the Riverside the only single-figure score.

The arguments over whether Pietersen should be risked in the

Ashes series grew heated during the two one-day series that followed. The contests against Australia got off to a cracking start, for England anyway, when the tourists were bowled out for 79 at a packed Rose Bowl when chasing 180 to win the first Twenty20 international in England. Pietersen hit 36 and took three catches, with Darren Gough and Jonathan Lewis running through the Aussies, who had been 31 for 7 at one stage, a score which had sent the fans delirious.

Later the same week Australia were defeated by Bangladesh in Cardiff. Skipper Ricky Ponting labelled his team's performance 'humiliating', while Andrew Symonds was hauled over the coals for turning up on the morning of the match clearly the worse for wear. (He'd been sampling the delights of the Welsh capital the night before.) The comparison with England couldn't be starker: they started the NatWest series with two wins. Pietersen hit an undefeated 91 in Bristol to sentence Ponting's side to back-to-back defeats over the weekend.

Paul Collingwood grabbed the limelight with a staggering display against Bangladesh at Trent Bridge. After an undefeated 112 in England's massive 391 for 4 (Strauss hit 152), the all-rounder took 6 for 31, the best one-day figures by an England bowler. Sir Vivian Richards is the only other cricketer to have managed a ton and a five-wicket haul in a one-day international.

Australia got some revenge at Durham with a 57-run victory after the home side had collapsed to 6 for 3. The papers had been full of stories of Aussies being kept awake by the ghost of Lumley Castle, their Northumbrian hotel. It was too good an opportunity for Gough to miss, and he sneaked up behind Shane Watson and gave him his best 'Boo!' during the match.

Bangladesh duly lost both matches over the second weekend of the series to set up an England–Australia final. The last group match between the two had been rained off, and Lord's was packed for this first truly significant battle of the summer. England won the toss and bowled Australia out for 196, with Mike Hussey top scoring. But Australian fears that they were way short of what was

needed faded as England collapsed to 33 for 5. The big five – Trescothick, Strauss, Vaughan, Pietersen and Flintoff – had all gone.

Collingwood and Geraint Jones led the fightback. They got England close before being dismissed, but Gough and Giles still needed 19 off the last 2 overs to win. Eleven balls later, with 3 runs required off McGrath's last delivery for an unlikely victory, Giles scrambled 2 and the match was tied. The NatWest Challenge Trophy and the series were shared.

England had a wicket to spare and felt they could have won, but yet again the team had proved it would fight to the very end. 'At 33 for 5 I thought we were out of it,' insisted Vaughan. 'I would certainly have settled for a tie then. Australia bowled well at the start and we had some poor shot selection. But Geraint and Colly batted beautifully. I always thought if we managed to reduce the target to about 60 off the last 10 overs with tail-enders to come, we would be in with a chance. It was an enthralling finish and I have never played in a tie before.'

Both sides were ready for the main event, but the Lord's Test was still nineteen days away. First there was the NatWest Challenge – three more one-day matches against Australia. (Bangladesh were presumably by now deemed surplus to requirements.) This was the series of the supersub, the latest innovation from the ICC.

At Headingley England inflicted their heaviest ever one-day defeat on Australia – winning by nine wickets – with Trescothick's century leading the way after Collingwood had run through the Aussie top order. But Vaughan's team faltered over the next two matches and handed the trophy to Australia at The Oval after a batting display that was 150 runs short of a decent score, despite Pietersen's belligerent 73. Simon Jones was dumped for supersub Vikram Solanki without ever stepping on to the field, Adam Gilchrist hit an undefeated 121 and the tourists won with more than 15 overs to spare.

Had England peaked too soon? Was delaying the Test series to late July a mistake? Should England have tried to catch Australia

cold? Gilchrist certainly thought so: 'We've had a slow start and copped it on and off the field. We've had stories made up about us, pictures of us carrying handbags in the papers and people laughing at us and all sorts of things. So the last two results have shown great character from the team. We realised that all that stuff is irrelevant as long as we focus on our cricket, and that's what we've done. Now the most important thing is to get our minds in order for next week because the Ashes is the big challenge of the summer.' Gilchrist did not need to add that the Australian squad was about to be joined by the greatest bowler in the history of the game, Shane Warne.

England, though, were far from feeling that they had missed the boat. The past year had told them they had the capacity to beat Ponting's team. Now it was simply a case of putting it into practice.

David Graveney, who celebrated 100 Tests as England's chairman of selectors during the summer, was the one member of the England set-up who had personal experience of the bad old days. Now he predicted a 2–1 win to England. Like Duncan Fletcher, he was convinced that the ICC semi-final victory was a clear sign that Vaughan's team had a chance. 'That day was the turning point, and was all the more important because this was a competition Australia had missed out on during its great run. Ponting's team were desperate to win in order to make their trophy cabinet complete. No one will admit it now, I suppose, but there must have been one dressing room thinking that they were invincible, especially against England, and the other thinking, Are we ever going to beat this lot? Our last victory in a "live" one-day day game had been way back in 1999, and our World Cup defeat four years later in Port Elizabeth was one of several setbacks. But on 21 September last year not only did England win, but the manner was emphatic. I accept it was only one victory, and in a one-day game, but after many years England's building blocks were in place.

'After our heavy defeat in Australia on Hussain's tour, when our

Ashes challenge lasted three Tests and eleven days, most pundits believed that our earliest chance for success would be in 2007. That assumption mainly rested on the fact that most of the Australian team would be too old to put on their boots by then, although don't rule out the thirty-seven-year-old Warne and McGrath just yet! I did not share that view for several reasons. First, under Michael and Duncan, the team was quickly developing into a really tight unit, ironically displaying many of the qualities that have made Australia such a force in recent times. Second, we had learned to win "ugly". We were not at our best in South Africa last winter; two of our main match-winners, Vaughan and Harmison, were below their best. Yet the team prevailed because of its team unity and every one of the squad made a contribution.

'Our early-season performances began to show that we could stand toe to toe against a formidable opposition, whoever they were. Victory at the Rose Bowl showed that we, too, could be aggressive. I also found it revealing that partisan crowds could genuinely rattle the Australian fielders. But, as interesting as these one-day games were, they were becoming more and more like the hors d'oeuvre before the main course, which seemed to be taking ages to come around. As the months became weeks, and the weeks became days in July, the media hype increased to frenetic proportions. I found Glenn McGrath's comments an interesting sideshow. By then, I am sure both sides were yearning for 21 July to arrive, for the talking to stop and for battle to commence.

'As far as the selectors were concerned, the playing of a five-man attack was crucial to our cause. It was imperative that we reduced the workload on Freddie. We also knew that Simon Jones could cause the Aussies serious problems as he was already showing the rewards of the work put in by Troy Cooley.

'It was no secret that our early-season selection meetings were dominated by the name "Kevin Pietersen" after his dazzling batting in South Africa. I have to reveal that it was not until his final one-day England knock of the summer, against the Aussies at The Oval, that we were convinced he was ready for Test cricket.

This conclusion meant leaving out Graham Thorpe. I have never found those phone calls easy, particularly when the player concerned has been such an outstanding performer. But, for me, the bottom line was that we couldn't take the risk with his fitness.

'I never felt the match venues would be such a contentious issue as many were suggesting. That said, I knew that if we could get past Lord's without too much damage, then our home crowds would have a huge part to play. What can beat the atmosphere at Birmingham on a Saturday?'

All that remained was for Fletcher and Vaughan to gather together their troops and re-emphasise the message that they had been preaching all summer. According to Fletcher: 'We use the term, "Get in their space."'

And how they did!