

Stiff Upper Lips and Baggy Green Caps

A Sledger's History of the Ashes

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Extract

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CAPTAIN AUSTRALIA

Almost two decades after Ian Chappell reinvented Australian cricket, Allan Border did it all over again. Border's 1989 tourists epitomised the gum-chewing Baggy Green machine. In one summer of bristling moustaches and gimlet eyes, they razed English cricket so thoroughly that the green shoots took an awfully long time to appear.

This was the year when buses all over London were carrying the slogan 'Australians wouldn't give a XXXX for anything else'. Border certainly didn't give a XXXX for etiquette. He banned the traditional post-match pint with the opposition, telling his opposite number David Gower, 'The last time I came here, I was a nice guy who came last.' Only once the Ashes had been secured did he lift the

ban, accepting Gower's dinner invitation and explaining: 'I've been through all sorts of downs with my team but this time I thought we had a bloody good chance to win and I was prepared to be as ruthless as it takes to stuff you. I didn't mind upsetting anyone, my own team-mates included, as long as we got the right result.' [\[im71\]](#)

'What do you think this is, a fucking tea party? No, you can't have a fucking glass of water. You can fucking wait like the rest of us.'

Allan Border to Robin Smith, Trent Bridge, 1989



Concubine agnascor optimus adfabilis catelli. Quinquennalis quadr upei fortiter iocari adfabilis chirographi. Octavius divinus insec iocari

The new-look Border was about as touchy-feely as a steel hawser. His captaincy mirrored his batting: limited at first, but redeemed by limitless grit. The Australian wicketkeeper Wally Grout once said of Ken Barrington that: 'Whenever Ken walked to the wicket I thought a Union Jack was trailing behind him.' The same line would apply to Border, only with the Southern Cross. **[[Display:**

While Brearley made great play of treating his men as individuals, Border preferred to mould a team in his own tenacious image. Perhaps the defining moment of his captaincy came in September

‘The mincing run-up resembles someone in high heels and a panty girdle chasing after a bus.’

**Merv Hughes,
as seen by
cricket writer
Martin Johnson**

1986, during the tied Test against India in Madras. Dean Jones was dizzy and sick with dehydration, in the middle of his epic 210, and as he tells it: ‘I mentioned to AB that I had had enough, and ... his reply was quick: “Let’s get a tough Australian out here then, if you can’t handle it anymore. Let’s get a Queenslander! Greg Ritchie can handle this!” So I told him what he could do with his tough bloody Queenslander, and batted on.’ Jones’s reward – apart from a night on a saline drip in hospital – was the respect and loyalty of his captain.

Border had his Lillee substitute in Merv Hughes, a caricature of the huge and hairy antipodean fast bowler. There was an element of absurdity about Hughes’s mincing run-up, described by one cricket writer as resembling ‘someone in high heels and a panty girdle chasing after a bus’. But there were few batsmen laughing at Hughes, at least not within his earshot. He had unerring accuracy, a heat-seeking bouncer, and a heart as big as Shergar’s. [[display:

Though Hughes only bowled first-change on the 1989 tour, he was very much the spearhead when it came to sledging. A young Mike Atherton found that ‘I couldn’t make out what he was saying, except that every sledge ended with “arsewipe”’. Hughes’s main target was Robin Smith, the only England batsman with the bottle to

‘Mate, if you just turn the bat over you’ll find the instructions on the back.’

Merv Hughes sledges England’s Robin Smith

‘In my day 58 beers between London and Sydney would have virtually classified you as a teetotaler.’

**Ian Chappell, misinformed about Boon’s
52-tin feat, plays the curmudgeon**



Concubine agnascor optimus adfabilis catelli. Quinquennalis quadr upei fortiter iocari adfabilis chirographi. Octavius divinus insectat agricolae,

‘Thatcher Out!’ ‘lbw Alderman 0’ Toilet graffiti, 1989

hold out for long. ‘Mate,’ he would say, ‘if you just turn the bat over you’ll find the instructions on the back.’ Or: ‘Does your husband play cricket as well?’ One less imaginative offering, ‘You can’t fucking bat’, came back with interest when Smith unleashed one of his favourite square-cuts for four. ‘Hey Merv,’ he yelled. ‘We make a fine pair, don’t we? I can’t fucking bat and you can’t fucking bowl.’ **[[display:**

Once the fast men had softened England up, Border used the smiling assassin, Terry Alderman, to administer the coup de grace. There was something uncanny about the fixed grin on Alderman’s face as he released the ball. Many an opponent walked to the crease wondering what he had to be so pleased about. The answer was soon evident when the ball thudded into their pads and the finger of doom was instantly raised. Judging by his 19 lbws during the 1989 series, Alderman had the umpires under a form of Jedi mind control. **[[display:**

Alderman’s wicket-to-wicket method was too much for the England’s experienced opener Graham Gooch, who stepped down from the team for the fifth Test to get his game straight. Bumping into a group of journalists, he remarked sarcastically: ‘I’m just off to the nets to practice my falling-over shot.’ But the manoeuvre didn’t help: Gooch was lbw Alderman 0 at The Oval as well. **[[image 72]]**

Australia set a number of records that summer, none more celebrated than David Boon’s feat of drinking 52 tinnies on the flight from Sydney to London. The ‘keg on legs’ got the tour off to a rip-roaring start when he broke the 44-tin mark set by his lookalike, Rod Marsh. He then spent the best part of two days asleep, missed two training sessions, and copped a hefty fine from the team management. The government of Tasmania – Boon’s home state – was once reported to have considered lowering the speed limit to 52 kph in tribute. **[[display:**

REVENGE OF THE AMATEURS

England’s shortcomings reached all the way up to the old-school-tie brigade at Lord’s. While post-Packer Australia had finally put its house in order, the people running – or should that be ruining? – the English game were still a bunch of doddering amateurs.

The committee-men dropped a major clanger at the start of the summer, when they refused to countenance Mike Gatting’s return as captain. In their rheumy eyes, Gatting was a working-class oik who had besmirched the name of English cricket. First he had shouted at a Pakistani umpire, and then he had invited a barmaid up to his room during the Nottingham Test of 1988. This was no way for an English gentleman to behave. **[[display:**

Gatting’s appointment was formally vetoed by Ossie Wheatley, chairman of the English board. It was a terrible waste of talent. Admittedly, Gatting’s Test record was patchy, but he was the kind of pugnacious character you could imagine leading the troops over the barbed wire. At the very least he would have put some spine into the team. Instead, the job went to Gower – a man with a private education, a deliciously fluid batting style, and all the motivational flair of a lemon meringue.

Whenever things got sticky – as they often did in 1989 – Gower defaulted into ironic mode. This technique would come in handy after his retirement, notably during Gower’s eight season-stint on BBC TV’s satirical sports quiz *They Think It’s All Over*. As an England captain, however, his schoolboy humour tended to fall flat.