



How's That?

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The greatness of test match cricket has been on full display over the Ashes series between Australia and England, hosted by England throughout August and September. The five-test series—which took the teams to London twice, Birmingham, Leeds, and Manchester—had the usual twists and turns of test match cricket. There were bouts of outstanding individual performance, such as the batting of Australian Steve Smith, controversy with English paceman Jofra Archer's bouncing of Steve Smith in the second test, and, well, boredom, with persistent rain delays during the English summer.

But something deeper and endearing about the Australian cricket team animated the series. This was the first series that former captain Steve Smith, opening batsman David Warner, and batsman Cameron Bancroft had played since their suspension for ball-tampering against South Africa in March 2018. Yes, there were questions about how the players would perform individually. But more interesting was the team's ability to hold itself together for the duration of the tour, which

for some players totalled four-and-a-half months.

The team not only stuck together, but drew the series 2-2. Since Australia already held the Ashes urn, Australia retained the urn while competing on foreign soil for the first time in 18 years. They succeeded because of the nature and character of the individual players: a team of relatable and identifiably Australian blokes doing what they love.

Steve Smith is so obsessed with batting that even after batting all day on the field he pretends to bat in his hotel room into the small hours. Smith loves batting and hates watching other people bat, so he refuses to get out. When Smith is batting, he is not thinking he is batting to stop climate change, end Third World hunger, or support more inclusive and diverse workplaces. He is just batting. This is as it should be. Sport is enjoyable in itself, not for what it 'does'. Once activities become only about serving a bigger purpose, they can lose their intrinsic meaning and become utilitarian. Things ought to be permitted for what they are, not just for what they serve.

Playing cricket or football, or any other sport, is inherently enjoyable. Yes, they can teach an array of lessons, such as that life is not always fair, sometimes people cheat, you need to learn to play by the rules. Sports provide benefits such as fitness and social interaction. But these benefits and lessons are ancillary to the main point: sport is enjoyable and if it wasn't, these ancillary benefits would never be realised because no one would play—let alone watch.

Contrast test cricket to the Australian Football League (AFL). Test cricket is everything the AFL no longer is. The AFL has become an exercise in utilitarian social and human engineering. The sport has been taken from the players, clubs, and fans, and turned into a tool for administrators to engineer whatever outcome they deem right at any given moment. The rot set in when the AFL took the game away from the suburban ovals which provided character, and mandated the Melbourne-based teams play at either the MCG or what is currently called Marvel Stadium. For all of the talk the AFL has of diversity, it has consciously eliminated the most important diversity of sport: the diversity of game play that comes with different ovals, crowds, and conditions.

The undermining of the game has continued with the constant rule changes between seasons, and sometimes even within them. The corporate imperative for the AFL behind these rule changes is clear: design the game so there are as many goals as possible. More goals means more breaks for advertisements, which means more revenue. Only in their bid for more revenue the AFL—like the *Gospian* central planners of the Soviet Union—were unable to anticipate the ways players and coaches would respond. As a consequence, 2019 was the lowest-scoring year since the AFL began in 1990.

Not only are the planners in AFL House ill-motivated, they apparently are not very bright. This will not deter them, though. Just one more rule change here, a tweak to umpire's interpretation there, and the perfect, Platonic ideal game of football will be played. Eventually, the AFL will have innovated the game away from anything recognisable as football. This will be sold as "clearing up the game", "making it easier to watch", and "reducing congestion"—as if football was the same as crawling over the West Gate Bridge or along the M7 motorway at 8am.

Michael Atherton, former English cricket captain, writing for *The Times* ('The photo that sums up the ashes: play hard—then share a beer', 17 September 2019), perhaps said it best when he wrote "while it [the Ashes] is important and all-consuming for those involved, it remains just sport in all its glorious irrelevance."

Irrelevant in that test cricket doesn't need to be something other than itself to have enduring value to those who play and watch it.

See how test cricket has remained gloriously irrelevant. Internationally, there are two other forms of the game: one-day cricket, with 50 overs per side to bat and, as the name suggests, lasts one day; and T-20, or twenty- twenty, with 20 overs per side to bat and lasts around three hours. Both forms were designed as entertainment products. The word "cricket" is not even mentioned in advertising or the official paraphernalia of Australia's domestic T-20 competition, the "Big Bash". The website's pitch promises "3 hours of non- stop action, fireworks, great music and loads more entertainment, the KFC BBL [Big Bash League] is the ultimate family night out."



That's just not cricket, but these forms have enabled the central planners to get their fill of social engineering without impacting the main course—test cricket—unlike with the AFL, of which there is only one format. Test cricket's glorious irrelevance, the nuffy culture, and weird blokes who play the game provide a welcome departure from the highly choreographed and sanitised times we live in.

Spin bowler Nathan Lyon is small, balding, and very slender, yet now Australia's third highest wicket taker. Lyon was a groundskeeper before making the national team. Loves the game. Patrick Cummins is the world's best bowler, but would never say so. Australia's down-to-earth, accidental captain Tim Paine considered giving up professional cricket at the end of 2016 to take up a job with cricket equipment manufacturer Kookaburra.

If they weren't at Lords, they would be playing at a local oval, having just as much fun. Nuffies. The lot. When you watch test cricket, you are watching players who love the game. There is little fanfare, few distractions, and almost nothing political. Cricket is bigger than any one of them, and will outlast them. As former Australian captain-turned-broadcaster, the late Richie Benaud, once said, "Cricket has so many meanings to so many Australians. It has become precisely that—an Australian way of life. And what a life it is. Some would even go as far to say, 'marvellous'." Indeed



it is.

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Photo credit: "Dan Wild vs ZZ Top", courtesy Deepdene Uniting Cricket Club.*