

Cricket's greatest encounter

This summer's Ashes series has been hotly awaited since the day Australia handed over the treasured urn to England in 2005. With that thrilling battle still firmly etched in the memories of players and fans alike, and with England harbouring injuries to key players and Australia fielding an ageing team, expectation is rife for another dramatic showdown. **Chris Canty** previews the series.

Every two years they meet in the most eagerly anticipated contest in world cricket. Two nations, England and Australia, one the former imperial leader of the other, do battle in an event that has gone beyond the game itself.

It began in 1882, when after a shock defeat, the English team burnt the bails and put them in an urn, some said to symbolise the death of English cricket. For more than a century since, the Ashes has been at the forefront of Australia's crusade for identity, from unifying a divided country before Australian federation, to the infamous Bodyline series when a depression-hit country struck out against its bullying former leader.

This summer, the battle continues with extra venom as Australia fights to regain its superiority after the poets narrowly snatched victory on their home turf two years ago, ending 18 years of Australian dominance.

In that series, widely regarded as one of the best in cricket's history, Australia won the first Test, then lost the second by just two runs, the smallest margin in Ashes history. The third ended in a draw, before England won the fourth after forcing Australia to follow on. The fifth and final Test came down to the last session on the last day, where England held on for a draw, and won the series.

More importantly, it means Australia needs to win one more Test match than their opponents this summer to regain the Ashes.

It's no mean feat, with Australia's champion team ageing and England enjoying plenty of young stars among their ranks, in particular the charismatic Andrew 'Freddie' Flintoff.

ENGLAND'S STAR

In the 2005 Ashes series England all-rounder Freddie Flintoff emerged as the hero, reaping 402 runs and 24 wickets and was named player of the series, drawing comparisons with England legend Ian Botham. With excellent batting and bowling figures to his credit, Flintoff went on to win the Sir Garfield Sobers Trophy for the ICC player of the year, and the Wisden Cricketer of the Year. In a country often starved of success and where sporting heroes are hard to find, he was put up on a pedestal. He was named BBC Sports Personality of the Year for 2005. To cap things off, in the 2006 New Year's Honours List, Flintoff was also awarded the MBE for his role in the successful Ashes side.

But despite the accolades, none compare to him being named captain for this summer's Ashes, a decision that surprised many on both sides of the fence. England's 2005 Ashes-winning captain Michael Vaughan is sidelined with a career-threatening knee injury, and many thought the captaincy for the summer would remain with stand-in Andrew Strauss, who led the team for most of 2006.



Australian skipper Ricky Ponting again looks on as key player in his team's quest to regain the Ashes.



WHAT THEY'RE PLAYING FOR

The Ashes urn is the symbol of cricket's greatest contest, but many Australians have never seen it, or rather its owner, the Marylebone Cricket Club, doesn't like it leaving the MCC Museum at Lord's Cricket Ground. In fact, the urn has only appeared in Australia twice, the most recent in 1988 as part of bicentennial celebrations, but it has never toured the country for the public to see it. However such has been the continuous outcry from Australians, the MCC has finally agreed to fly the urn over for a 94-day tour.

Yet Flintoff has been chosen in the hope he can again inspire his team against the dogged Australians, just as he did in 2005. "The Australians fear him," explained England chairman of selectors David Graveney after Flintoff was announced captain in September.

But Flintoff isn't the only player the Aussies should fear. Flintoff will be well supported by established batsmen Strauss, Paul Collingwood and Kevin Pieterston, and two highly promising 24-year-olds, Muthusiden Panesar and Alastair Cook, who both have yet to play Australia in a Test match.

STARS IN THE MAKING

Muthusiden 'Monty' Panesar is England's newest cult hero, and the first-ever Sikh to play for England. After just a handful of Tests he has emerged as one of the best spin bowlers in the world, recently taking 17 wickets in a series against Pakistan. His obvious love for the game, and continual exuberance after every delivery, have made him a favourite with the fans, but he must be ready for what the Aussie crowds dish out to him for his appalling fielding. Media here have already dubbed him the new Phil Tufnell, who continually dropped catches and misfielded throughout his career.

Batsman Alastair Cook, the steady left-hander who made his debut for England earlier this year, is also likely to cause problems for the Australians. After an incredible junior career, Cook has slotted well into the side, earning a very respectable average of 54.35 after nine Tests. He was the second-highest run scorer in the English side in the Test series against Pakistan this year, where he scored two centuries in consecutive Tests. The Australian tour will be his biggest test so far, and an indication if he really does have what it takes to be a world-class batsman.

WALKING WOUNDED

While England has some very special players ready to take on the Aussies, the side is also suffering some major injury queries. Of the 16-man squad named to play Australia, over a third are under an injury cloud, reviving memories of the ill-fated 2002-2003 series where an injury-struck England team was trounced 4-1. Simon Jones, who proved troublesome in the last Ashes with both the ball and bat, and skipper Vaughan have already been ruled out. Further, with the series set to start in November, there were five frontline bowlers battling injury as late as October - James



Shaun Warne will be looking to repeat his deeds of past Ashes series.

Anderson (back), Liam Plunkett (side strain), Steve Harmison (back) and Ashley Giles (hip), while Flintoff had ankle surgery in July. Adding to England's woes, higher up in the order, one of their premier batsmen, Marcus Trescothick, has been receiving treatment for an unknown stress-related condition, which also kept him out of the India tour in March. Despite criticism from fans and media, England selectors insist the team will be fit and ready to perform on cricket's biggest stage this summer.

THE AUSSIES MEAN BUSINESS

It was game on for captain Ricky Ponting's men, who attended a compulsory 'Ashes Boot Camp' in the Beerwah State Forest in Queensland in August. Led by former SAS soldiers, the players were put through a series of exercises, widely used in army training in order to improve team bonding and strengthen them psychologically. In no uncertain terms, Australia wants the Ashes back.

THE VETERANS

Australia's team is ageing, yet the players have lost none of the determination and skill has seen them regarded as the leading Test match nation by the International Cricket Council. Still scarred by their shock defeat in the last Ashes series, our boys are ready to settle the score.

While many of the players are growing a little long in the tooth, there's still plenty to like about the Australian line-up. Glenn McGrath, Australia's highest-ever wicket taker for a fast bowler, is ready to rumble, already declaring his 'bummy' (a batsman he often successfully dismisses throughout the series) will be Andrew Strauss. McGrath has been especially successful against all the England batsmen, taking 136 wickets at 20.47 throughout his career. And this time he has more motivation than ever to blast through the England order, after he missed the two matches with injury in which



Australia was beaten in the last series. At 36, McGrath is fighting fit after he took most of the year to care for his wife, Jane, who was diagnosed with a recurrence of breast cancer in February.

And then there's Warne, Cricket's highest Test wicket taker. Shane Warne may be getting on (he turned 37 in September), but cricket lovers know he saves his best for the Ashes. His first-ever ball against England is now remembered as 'the ball of the century', as a bewildered Mike Gatting was clean bowled in the 1993 Ashes series. In the 2005 series Warne was again at his best, taking 40 wickets at an average of 19.92. There's no way the tourists will take him lightly. He is fit, motivated and ready to give England hell.

Ponting, the world's leading batsman, and vice-captain, batsman and wicket keeper Adam Gilchrist, will be strong guiding forces for the team in the quest to regain the Ashes.

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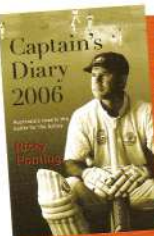
THE EAGER

While there's plenty of experience, not everyone in the Australian camp is beyond 30. There are some exciting young players such as 25-year-old batsman Michael Clarke, who made a century on debut against India in 2004, fast-bowler Brett Lee, who turns 29 during the series, and up-and-coming English-born Phillip Jaques, 26. Jaques had a taste of Test cricket when he debuted on the world's biggest stage at the Boxing Day Test at the MCG last year. He was called up as a replacement for Justin Langer, and while he didn't perform that well (scoring 2 and 28), he is still considered by many to be Australia's next great batsman. After a stellar season, Jaques was awarded the 05/06 Australian Domestic Cricketer of the Year and now hopes to continue that form against England, a team he could have played for if he hadn't chosen Australia.

Yet to play a Test match, 24-year-old speedster Mitchell Johnson may be Australia's surprise packet. He has overcome injuries that at one point threatened to end his career. Giving an indication of how dangerous he could be, in a tri-series tournament in September he took four wickets in eight balls against India – dismissing Sachin Tendulkar and Rahul Dravid in the process. Former bowling great Dennis Lillee called him a 'once-in-a-generation bowler'. Perhaps the Ashes series will be the place for him to shine.

WHO WILL WIN?

The Aussies will. After years of dominance the Australian team is desperate to overcome its minor setback two years ago and claim back the Ashes, especially on home soil. They have two of their highest-ever wicket-takers in Warne and McGrath fit and refreshed, and a host of younger players eager to cement a place in the team. The England team has one true star and a couple that could be after this series, but if their gamble on injured players doesn't pay off it could be a whitewash. Whatever the case, it has become one of the most eagerly anticipated encounters in the history of modern cricket and thousands will want to see it. ■



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