

# Batting with the enemy

AFTER ENGLAND'S 5-0 ASHES DRUBBING,  
WHY WOULD AUSTRALIA BE USING THE ENGLISH LEAGUE  
SYSTEM TO HONE OUR BRIGHTEST YOUNG TALENTS?

By **CRISPIN ANDREWS**



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## Henley-on-Thames, England.

Synonymous with regattas and palatial houses. But not, until the last English summer, with Australian cricket.

On Saturday, June 1, North Mymms' opening bowler Jigar Mehta came out to bat on a hat-trick ball. The Hertfordshire side was 8-150 against the Home Counties' Premier League leaders. And, as Henley's gangly Australian left-arm spinner trotted in to bowl, an army of fielders closed in for the kill. The ball pitched outside Mehta's off stump, same as the last two. Mehta played back, same as the last two batsmen. The ball ducked back in late, same as the last two, and struck Mehta's pad plumb in front. For the third delivery in a row, the umpire's finger went up.

Six weeks later, Nasser Hussain and Ian Botham, commentating on the first Ashes Test for Sky Sports, noticed how Australian debutant Ashton Agar liked to run the ball into right handers as much as spin it away from them. Unlike the hapless North Mymms' lower order, however, Ian Bell and Kevin Pietersen had the techniques to cope...

**B**efore Ashton Agar got the call-up for last winter's England tour, he played three games for Henley Cricket Club. Agar was in England with five other young Australian cricketers hand-picked by the national selection panel to do a year's scholarship at Hampshire County Cricket Club's Elite International Cricket Academy. Their number included South Australian batsman Travis Head,

Victorian all-rounder Alex Keath, New South Wales opener Scott Henry, and the West Australian pair of middle-order bat Will Bosisto and tweaker Ashton Turner. When Agar got his Ashes call-up, Queensland leggie Cameron Boyce flew out to replace him.

All the players trained at Hampshire's Ageas Bowl and played a season in one of the local Premier Leagues. The scholarship scheme is part of the AIS' men's cricket program, funded by the Kerry Packer Foundation. While the notion of sending Australian cricketers to England to sharpen their skills is anathema to most Australian fans raised on a diet of crushing Ashes victories, the program is an acknowledgement that things have changed in the cricketing firmament.

"This was a semi-structured winter of cricket in unfamiliar conditions to help accelerate the development of young Australian cricketers," says South Australian coach Tim Nielsen, who also worked with the scholars whilst in England with Australia A. "Five months playing and living in a foreign country gave the young players a chance to develop as people as well as players."

In fact, Australian cricketers of all shapes, sizes and beer-drinking habits have been honing their skills in English club cricket for decades. Ever since Bob Simpson scored 1444 runs for Lancashire League outfit Accrington in 1959, before returning to Western Australia to notch two double tons, English league cricket has been a highly



NSW batsman Scott Henry learnt plenty on the tough Lymington deck.

fashionable nursery for young, up-and-coming Australian players.

Ian Chappell, Dennis Lillee, Allan Border, Shane Warne, Steve Waugh and Michael Clarke all played in the Lancashire League during their formative years. Adam Gilchrist, Greg Ritchie, Matthew Hayden and countless others played elsewhere in the English system. When he was 21, Hayden scored 140 not out for Greenmount Cricket Club in Bolton. At the other end, not out on 110, was 17-year-old Gary Neville, the future Manchester United defender.

Through the current AIS program, the national selectors hope to create a five to ten-year succession program for the Australian cricket team; one that identifies then deals with future areas of weakness. It's little surprise, then, that four of last winter's Hampshire scholars were batsmen while the remaining three were spinners who can also wield the willow.

The general feeling in the corridors of Australian cricketing power is that there have been too many cameos and soft dismissals over the last few seasons and not enough hundreds from our elite batsmen. CA called together former Test greats like the Chappells, Ricky Ponting and Justin Langer to a batting summit last October and told them that over the last decade Australia's top-six has converted only half as many fifties into hundreds as they did during the late 1990s

and early 2000s. In the 12 months before the start of this summer's Ashes series, only Clarke's 187 at Old Trafford and Watson's 176 in the dead rubber at the Oval could be termed "big" hundreds. Indian spinner Ravindra Jadeja hammered the point home when he noted that Australia's batsmen lacked patience during last year's India tour. He believed that a bowler could play on their egos and lure them into a rash shot by stifling their scoring.

CA's new high performance coach, Graeme Hick, wants batsmen to spend more time in the middle during Shield games. His predecessor Stuart Law blames the short forms of the game for encouraging a hectic approach and pervasive have-a-go mentality. There's talk of a former Test batsman accompanying state teams to Shield games as mentors this season. Simon Katich thinks players need to rely more on themselves while Adam Gilchrist believes players need to make good choices. Dig in when it's tough, cash in later. For Ian Chappell, faith in their technique and ability to survive gets a batsman through the tough periods. If a player doesn't have this, panic sets in when they're under pressure and they play rash shots.

For the young AIS scholars then, the winter in England was akin to university. The six of them shared a couple of flats in Southampton, played club cricket at the weekend, friendlies during the week, and travelled down to the Ageas Bowl to use the practice and fitness

facilities outside game time. Throughout, the focus was on self-sufficiency. "We pretty much ran our own sessions," says Keath. The lads were also required to find their own way to and from their clubs. For Travis Head this presented a particular challenge: he had to commandeer a boat to turn out for Ventnor Cricket Club on the Isle of Wight.

Tim Nielsen was around the group for the first six weeks and the scholars also had access to Hampshire Academy coaches, including Australian-born former-England all-rounder Craig White. But mostly, they were forced to look after themselves on and off the field. According to Henry, this enforced self-sufficiency was the primary benefit of the experience: "You get to know your game better. When things are going well you don't need a coach. But when you're not getting too many runs and there's no coach around, you have to think for yourself about what you did previously, when you were successful, and how to apply that to your current problem."

Lymington captain Ali Jaffer says that, at first, Henry tried to dominate too early in his innings. "Maybe he was over-confident, maybe trying too hard to impress," says Jaffer. "When Scott relaxed and gave himself time, the runs soon came. The Lymington pitch isn't easy. You have to be patient and select your shots carefully. You never quite feel in." Henry adds: "I was getting bowled through the gate – so I

obviously needed to change something." He decided to bat out of the crease and wait for the ball a little bit more. He eventually topped the club's run charts with 590 at 45.38.

Head was likewise the Southern Premier League's top scorer with 733 runs at 61.08. "In Australia you can back the bounce and hit through the line," he says. On slower pitches, however, against league bowlers who weren't as quick but who could work wicked movement with the razor-seamed Duke balls, all the batsmen had to work on playing later with softer hands. "I had time between games to think about how I wanted to play and what areas of my game I needed to work on," he says. For Head, this "time" to ponder on his game was a godsend. He's now confident that his time in England has made him more aware of himself, and what he needs to do to succeed both on and off the pitch.

He clearly wasn't the only one. Bosisto might have outscored Head if he hadn't torn ligaments in his ankle bowling offies for his club Totten and Elling. The former Australia U19 captain missed nine weeks mid-season but still scored 465 games in eight matches, averaging 93. Keath scored three tons and took 31 wickets, the second highest in the league. Ashton Turner scored 600 runs and took 22 wickets in the Sussex League for Chichester Park Priory. Boyce and Agar helped Henley win the Home Counties Premier League.



Ashton Agar: went from Home Counties League cricket to an Ashes Test in six weeks.

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**T**he notion of centrally organised, self-supporting overseas trips is not a new one in the cricketing world. When Ian Botham had that infamous altercation with Ian Chappell in the MCG bar during the Centenary Test, he was on a Whitbread Scholarship. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, promising young England players went to Australia to play grade cricket, whilst Esso paid for top Australian talent to play in League cricket in England. Most of the Australians played county second XIs but, according to Wayne Phillips, the goal was essentially the same as for the AIS scholars: long-term player development.

Phillips played for the MCC, met Colin Cowdrey and helped pull the covers on and off at the Lord's Ashes Test. By his own estimation, he also learnt a good deal about competing. "You had so many opportunities to bat," he says. "In Adelaide, we'd only play at weekends. Over there you could play all week if you wanted. There was time to try new things and work out how to deal with tough situations. Working through things by yourself gave you belief in your ability; a belief that you could deal with new situations that you encountered. You learned how to push yourself that little bit harder."

Carl Rackemann was with Surrey's second XI during the same season. "You get a few quick pitches, like the Oval and Hove, when I was there," he says. "But on most of them you had to learn to bowl a fuller length more often than you would playing in Australia." Craig McDermott toured England in 1983 with Australia Young Cricketers and came back two years later with

the Ashes side. "I learned how to use the crease, get closer to the stumps and hone my running style," he says. "Pitches over there meant that you had to get it fuller and hit the right line and swing it. In England it can be warm and dry or wet and cold. It's a good contrast."

At the moment, Australia has plentiful stocks of quicks but poor reserves of spinners. John Davison, Cricket Australia's spin bowling coach, believes a season in England will turn young tweekers like Agar, Boyce and Turner into better all-round bowlers. "In Australia, a spinner relies more on bounce and overspin; in England you rely more on side spin," he says, adding that spinners in particular benefit from bowling the whole year round.

Davison wants spinners coming through who can attack when conditions suit and play a holding role when they don't. He wants a crop of young players who can push Nathan Lyon for his place in the side. It's a bit much to hope for another Warne or even a MacGill, but with its current crop of quicks another Bruce Yardley or Jim Higgs might be all Australia needs.

In 2011, a Cricket Australia study found that young spinners get 25% fewer overs when they first come into senior cricket than they did for their age group teams. Captains want to win games, pitches suit seamers, so the quicks bowl all day. This, of course, does little for the development of young tweekers. In England last winter, however, Boyce, Agar and Turner got plenty of bowling. Henley captain Bjorn Moridt says that Boyce had a chance to work on his variations in match situations, and seemed more

confident by the end of the season. Moridt adds that Agar adapted to English conditions straight away. Chichester captain Richard Browning says that after a slow start, Turner came to terms with the slower pitches, varying his speed when batsmen came after him. Turner adds: "I persisted with close-in catchers a bit much. In Australia, the extra bounce brings them into play, but in England it goes a bit squarer on the slow pitches."

The young spinners also got a chance to sharpen their batting techniques. Boyce and Turner often batted in their club's top four, Agar at five. "Ideally we want multifaceted cricketers," says Davison. "If you're going to play two spinners, at least one of them has to be able to get some runs."

**S**o what's the ultimate goal of such immersive trips to Mother England?

It's certainly not to fine-tune technical skills. All of last winter's scholars had played a higher standard than they faced in the Old Dart. Most had solid experience in Futures League and U19 internationals; some had Shield games under the belt. The trip, then, was more about exposing these

teenagers to the pressure to perform; hardening them through a constant regime of matches. In England, the overseas player is expected to score lots of runs, take lots of wickets, and win games – "like a former county player coming back to club cricket after quitting the professional game," according to Browning.

Being their team's main man had a distinct advantage: the developing players could play a role in the side equivalent to the one they might one day play in the Sheffield Shield and, hopefully, Test arenas. Playing for Middlesex, for instance, Travis Head might come in behind Chris Rogers, Sam Robson, Joe Denly, Eoin Morgan and Neil Dexter. The quality of those above would, to an extent, shield the youngster from the glare of competition. At Ventnor on the Isle of Wight, meanwhile, he was pushed into the heat of the contest.

According to the local captains who lead the Australians at club level, the youngsters learnt much in the art of competition. After Henry's 105 had taken Lymington to an imposing total of 280, Travis Head hit a cool 93 not out to bring Ventnor home by eight wickets. Head's skipper, Ian Hilsum, came in at number four that day. "Travis took the pressure off me while I got myself in," he says. "He always hit one or two boundaries an over. You knew he'd be there at the end. The rest of us batted around him."

Other local skippers offered similar praise for their Aussie imports. Bournemouth

Victorian quick Alex Keath learnt the value of "bowling with a plan" on seaming English decks.



South Australia's Travis Head was forced to catch a boat to his weekend games on the Isle of Wight.

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captain Martin Miller says that Alex Keath always bowled with a plan. "We always turned to him if we needed a wicket," Miller says. Against Totton and Elling, Miller needed his death bowler to come on earlier than usual. "Alex had three overs up his sleeve and we needed to go for broke, push the run rate down from eight an over," he says. Keath didn't take a wicket in his three overs, but only went for ten runs. Totten had to hit out against the lesser bowlers, couldn't manage it, and ended up 20 runs short – despite a composed 86 from Will Bosisto.

And the results back home? How did the young scholars fare this summer? Henry believes that playing a whole winter outdoors gave him an edge when he returned to pre-season with his state. "Most of the other guys had been indoors during the winter and were itching to start again. But I was lucky, I was already in good nick and used to the constant switching-on and off that you only get from playing." He started the season with a pair of composed half centuries for the Blues in the opening two matches of the year.

Head hit two 90s and a 50 in the double-header with Western Australia, against a WACA attack that included Mitchell Johnson, Nathan Coulter-Nile and Michael Hogan. Those knocks convinced Nielsen that Head will be part of this Redbacks set-up for many years to come. Alex Keath and Ashton Turner have yet to crack their respective Shield teams, but Turner did manage a quick-fire 51 against Tasmania and another 50 for the West Australian Chairman's XI against England. Agar started steadily for the Warriors, collecting 93 against South Australia at the Adelaide Oval. Bosisto managed 44 in the Perth game against the Redbacks, but was dropped for the third round of Shield games. Cameron Boyce took 7-68 against South Australia.

But perhaps the results may take a while to crystallise. According to his mum, Wayne Phillips set out on his scholarship to England a boy and came back a man. Two years later, he made 159 in his Test debut against Pakistan in Perth. "I saw what I could be part of and wanted some of that," he says. Rackemann made his Test debut a year and a half after he came back from Surrey. Ian Chappell returned from Lancashire League duty in September 1963 and was in the Test team the following December. Dennis Lillee, with only two Tests under his belt, rolled the World XI for 59 a few months after coming back from the same league.

Ashton Agar has already shown he can handle Test cricket. Could he be the second spinner on the plane to the UAE next October to face Pakistan? Might Cameron Boyce be the third? How about Henry, Head or Bosisto as a wildcard for the Ashes in 2015?

Another cohort of young Australian players will arrive in Hampshire this year. There's talk of specific three, five and ten-day visits. There are also whispers of stints in Sri Lankan club cricket. The goal, however, remains consistent. These trips aren't about techniques – they're about hardening our young cricketers to the rigours of competition. "Players need to learn their game in a variety of conditions when they're young," says Nielsen. "That way, they're not going through this process at the highest level." 🏏



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