MARK PEEL

PLAYING THE GAME?

CRICKET'S TARNISHED IDEALS

From Bodyline to present

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pitch

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Chapter 1

‘Well bowled, Harold’

CRICKET has always been a controversial game, and never more so than during England’s 1932/33 tour of Australia, when Douglas Jardine’s side challenged the very bounds of sportsmanship. The sequence of events of the infamous bodyline series are too well known to recount in detail, but what’s of interest is how the ethical foundations of the game cracked all too easily.

Following the evangelical revival in early 19th-century Britain, the cult of athleticism took root in its elite public schools from 1850 onwards, with physical exercise turned into a moral virtue. According to historian Jeffrey Richards, the whole ethos of athleticism could be summed up in three words – ‘play the game’ – which meant abiding by the spirit of the game, as well as the laws, so as not to gain an unfair advantage over an opponent. ‘This morality was synonymous with that of the chivalric knight – magnanimity in victory, dignity in defeat, hatred of injustice, decency and modesty in all things.’[10] Yet according to distinguished sports historian J.A. Mangan, the idealistic world of Tom Brown seldom matched the reality of late 19th-century public schools, where kindness was often lacking. ‘The playing fields were the place where public schools put into practice their own distinctive brand of Social Darwinism; in games only the fittest survived and triumphed.’[11]

This paradox between sporting ideal and reality was later re-enacted on many a foreign field. Imperialists saw cricket as a means of civilising the Empire and reconciling the natives to

British rule, but its high moral tone concealed a more ruthless competitive streak. 'Beneath the stuffy, benign image of public service cultivated by British imperialism lay a more strident belief in the mission of the English people,' wrote historian Richard Holt. 'The English, after all, had been the first to personify the nation in the robust shape of John Bull; they were also the first to have a national anthem. Sports were not just the source of high-minded ideals, they were inseparably associated with the more down-to-earth, assertive and patriotic Englishness.'[12] W.G. Grace was an English national hero not because of his moral conscience but because of his forceful personality and will to win. According to Simon Rae, one of Grace's biographers, it was his highly competitive cricketing upbringing in the family home in Gloucestershire that bred in him a single-minded ruthlessness that overrode considerations of propriety and fair play. Notorious for his excessive appealing, abuse of opponents and hectoring of umpires, W.G. never walked, never recalled a batsman even when he knew he had been unfairly dismissed, and would exploit any chink in an opponent's armour to his own advantage. Playing for the Gentlemen against the Players in 1874 and standing at the non-striker's end, he obstructed the bowler, James Lillywhite, as he was about to catch his brother, Fred Grace; in 1893, he persuaded Nottinghamshire batsman Charles Wright to throw him back the ball, only then to get him dismissed for handling the ball; and in 1898, bowling for Gloucestershire, he caught and bowled Essex batsman Percy Perrin on the half-volley.

Grace reserved some of his most blatant gamesmanship for the Australians. At Sydney, playing for his XI against a Combined Fifteen from Victoria and New South Wales in 1873/74, he led his team off in protest when the crowd took exception to some dubious umpiring; then, against Victoria, he so abused the umpire after he'd awarded a boundary to the home team that the umpire refused to continue officiating. 'He had gone to Australia pledging to "maintain the honour of English cricket, and to uphold the high character of English cricketers" and it cannot be said he did either,' wrote Rae. 'In fact he quickly exhausted almost limitless funds

of personal goodwill towards him and his team.'[13] In the Oval Test of 1882, Grace ran out Australia's Sammy Jones, who, having completed a single, left his crease to repair the wicket – a breach of sporting etiquette that infuriated Australia's legendary fast bowler Fred Spofforth, especially since he had earlier spared England captain A.N. Hornby from a similar fate. Having told Grace that he was a cheat, Spofforth then decimated England for the second time in the match, his 7–44 propelling Australia to a historic 7-run victory, a win that heralded the birth of the Ashes.

Grace's second tour of Australia, in 1891/92, was no less acrimonious than his first, his lack of courtesy off the field matched by his gamesmanship on it. In the second Test at Sydney, he persuaded the umpire to give debutant Walter Giffen out by claiming a catch on the half-volley, and, when batting, he waved a glove at the umpire in response to a confident lbw appeal. Despite Grace's shenanigans, England lost the match and the Ashes, a blow which did nothing to lighten his mood. Against the Twenty-Two Juniors of Sydney, he so insulted umpire E.J. Briscoe with stinging barbs about his performance that the latter stood down immediately.

Grace's gamesmanship wasn't the only instance of sharp practice in these early contests for the Ashes. According to Australian journalist and cricket writer Malcolm Knox, 'the truth is that Anglo-Australian cricket up to 1914 was cricket in the raw. Cricket was never a gentleman's game. It was a highly competitive affair played with desperation for the highest stakes.'[14] On England's 1901/02 tour of Australia, their captain, Archie MacLaren, refused to lead his team out if New South Wales played their Aborigine fast bowler, Jack Marsh, who was suspected of throwing. During the first Test at Sydney in 1903/04, the controversial run-out of Australia's Clem Hill so irked the crowd that England captain Pelham Warner had to be restrained by his opposite number, Monty Noble, from leading his team off the pitch. In the Headingley Test of 1909, it was the turn of the Australians to be incensed when England's Jack Hobbs was given not out for hitting his wicket, the umpires ruling that he had completed his

stroke. The verbal tirade directed at him so disconcerted Hobbs that he gave his wicket away two balls later. In the Sydney Test of 1911/12, England batsman Phil Mead was run out while backing up without a warning; and, during that same series, England fast bowler Frank Foster riled the home crowds with his leg-theory bowling that often struck the Australian batsmen painfully on the upper thigh.

Australia's answer to W.G. Grace was Warwick Armstrong, a 21-stone giant of a man whose prickly personality and uncompromising leadership did much to shape his country's cricket during the early part of the 20th century. 'In what cricket historians now refer to as the Golden Age, the twenty years from 1894, usually depicted as the high summer of amateurism and sporting chivalry, Armstrong was the ultimate pragmatist,' wrote his biographer Gideon Haigh. 'He cheerfully played as a professional when it suited and was not averse to overt gamesmanship, verbal aggression, intimidation of umpires, disputation over playing conditions, even cheating the odd batsman out.'[15] He thought walking (the custom of the batsman leaving the crease voluntarily when out) foolhardy, he frustrated batsmen by bowling wide of the leg stump, and at the Oval in 1909, he kept debutant Frank Woolley waiting for 19 minutes to face his first ball while he bowled looseners, known as trial balls, to fielders. More significant, as captain of the victorious 1921 Australians, he deployed his formidable pair of quick bowlers, Jack Gregory and Ted McDonald, to devastating effect as they battered England into submission, a humiliation not forgotten during the bodyline series over a decade later.

After enduring heavy defeats by Australia in the first three post-war series, England finally regained the Ashes in 1926 and retained them in Australia in 1928/29, before losing them at home in 1930. This defeat was overwhelmingly due to the genius of Don Bradman, Australia's new batting sensation, his series aggregate of 974 runs coming at an average of 139.

Although the figures of Jardine and Bradman loom large in the bodyline saga, they should be seen in the context of a world that

had become ever more strident, an Empire under threat from her Dominions and a game that increasingly favoured the batsman at the expense of the bowler. As professionalism took hold in the 1920s and winning became ever more obligatory, batsmen, helped by ever-better wickets to bat on, forfeited adventure for accumulation, increasingly using their pads to combat swing. Confronted with this glut of runs, the bowlers began to fight back. Leg theory – leg-stump bowling to a strongly packed leg-side field to keep scoring in check – and short-pitched bowling became more commonplace by 1930, but up against the genius of Bradman on Australia's featherbed wickets, something more outlandish was needed if England were to bring him to heel.

The instigator behind bodyline was Jardine, England's captain since 1931, whose imperial upbringing in India and classical education at Winchester and Oxford made him the archetypal amateur in appearance and manner, although not in his approach to the game. A cold, aloof man, his ruthless desire to win knew no bounds, especially against the Australians, for whom he harboured a barely concealed antipathy. This antipathy intensified on tour there in 1928/29, when he became the object of vociferous barracking from the partisan home crowds, increasingly keen to assert their own national identity. 'As he strode out to bat, a tall, angular, acidulated and seemingly aloof Englishman, with a gaudy cap rampant and a silk handkerchief knotted around his throat,' wrote Jack Fingleton, the Australian batsman turned journalist, 'he walked into the vision of many Australians as the very personification of the old-school tie.'[16]

Jardine hadn't played against Bradman in the 1930 Tests, but, believing him to be suspect against the high-rising ball, not least against fast bowler Harold Larwood during his 232 on a drying wicket in the Oval Test, he hatched a plan in concert with Larwood and his opening partner, Bill Voce.

Although leg theory and short-pitched bowling had been on the rise, the novelty of Jardine's tactics lay in bowling at the head and upper body to a close leg-side field, waiting for the catch from the defensive prod, in addition to having two men back for

the hook. For these tactics to succeed, it needed bowlers of raw pace and relentless accuracy, and in Larwood and Voce, both ex-miners, Jardine had the perfect practitioners. Larwood was one of England's greatest-ever bowlers, combining a perfect action and phenomenal speed with swing, bounce and accuracy. A success in Australia in 1928/29, he had toiled against Bradman at home in 1930 and was clamouring for revenge against a batsman he didn't like. His partner, Voce, was less hostile – but his left-arm in-swingers, delivered from a great height, and the bounce he extracted, made him no soft touch. With support from the pace of Gubby Allen, the Australian-born Middlesex amateur who refused to bowl bodyline, and Yorkshireman Bill Bowes, combined with Hedley Verity's left-arm spin, this was a formidable England attack.

Given Jardine's hard-nosed character and steely 'professional' resolve, his attitude wasn't entirely surprising. More enigmatic was the role of manager Pelham Warner, a former captain of victorious MCC teams that toured Australia in 1903/04 and 1911/12, the chairman of the England selectors and self-proclaimed guardian of the game's best traditions. When Bowes caused ructions at the Oval in August 1932 by bowling bodyline at Surrey's great maestro, Jack Hobbs, then aged 49, Warner shared in the general indignation. 'I am a great admirer of Yorkshire Cricket,' he wrote in the *Morning Post* the next morning. 'I love their keenness and the zest with which they play, but they will find themselves a very unpopular side if there is a repetition of Saturday's play. Moreover, these things lead to reprisals, and when they begin goodness knows where they will end.'[17]

Later Warner was to pen a more damning critique in *The Cricketer*, the magazine he'd founded in 1921.

> Bowes should alter his tactics. He bowled with five men on the on side and sent down several very short-pitched balls which frequently bounced head high and more. That is not bowling. Indeed, it is not cricket, and if all fast bowlers were to adopt his methods there would be trouble and plenty of it.[18]

Warner's hostility to Bowes didn't prevent him from picking him for Australia, and once there he made little effort to stop the bodyline tactics. Some historians have attributed this inaction to Warner's loyalty to Jardine and MCC; others have depicted him as a duplicitous personality quite willing to ditch his ideals in pursuit of the victory he craved. Whatever the case, his inertia greatly undermined his reputation.

Bodyline made its first appearance in Australia against an Australian XI at Melbourne, the penultimate match before the first Test, in which neither Woodfull, the Australian captain, nor Bradman made much of an impact against Larwood and Voce. Larwood was rested for the next match against New South Wales, but his absence provided few consolations to the home team as they were pummelled by Voce, many taking painful blows on the body. Jack Fingleton, opening for New South Wales, recalled several members of the MCC close-in fielders offering condolences to his team-mates, 'but a continuation of such courtesies would, in the circumstances, have been hypocritical and embarrassing to the giver and receiver alike.' He battled through his ordeal to make a gritty undefeated century, but his achievement was overshadowed by a feeling of hurt at the methods employed by his opponents. 'It was the consciousness of a crashed ideal.'[19]

'I was revolted by that particular day's play,' recalled Herbert Evatt, the renowned Australian High Court judge and later leader of the Australian Labor Party. 'It made me feel that I never afterwards wanted to see a single day's play of that series.'[20]

It was a feeling shared by Fingleton's mother. A dedicated follower of the game, she refused to watch another day that summer, including her son's first Test against England.

The first Test at Sydney saw Australia, without Bradman because of illness, exposed to the full force of bodyline, and, despite a magnificent undefeated 187 from Stan McCabe in the first innings, they lost by ten wickets. *The Referee* (Sydney) accused Warner of double standards and called on him to 'stop this short-pitched body theory that he so strongly abhorred before he left England', but, for the most part, the Australian reaction

was relatively restrained, not least from the Australian Board of Control, which rejected Bradman's plea to 'do something'.

The critics of bodyline lay low after the second Test at Melbourne, which Australia won by 111 runs. The match was notable for the return of Bradman, who overcame his first-ball dismissal in the first innings with an undefeated century in the second. On a docile wicket that doused the fires of the England attack, Australia gained a narrow first-innings lead and after Bradman's century, and, led by leg-spinner Bill O'Reilly, who took ten wickets in the match, they dismissed England for 139.

With the series all square, the teams resumed battle at Adelaide, the city of churches, in one of the most unpleasant Tests of all time. The trouble began on the second afternoon when Australia, on the fastest pitch so far in the series, began their reply to England's 341. A vicious delivery from Larwood at the end of his second over hit Woodfull over the heart. As the Australian captain doubled up in pain and the 50,962 crowd turned hostile, Jardine walked up the wicket to Larwood to congratulate him in full earshot of Bradman, the non-striker. Yet what really riled them was the switch to the bodyline field at the beginning of Larwood's next over, the first ball knocking Woodfull's bat out of his hands. As Larwood and Voce kept up the intimidation, hitting Woodfull several more times, the England players feared that the fury of the crowd would give rise to a riot. It said something for the conventions of the time that at no stage did anyone enter the playing arena.

After his dismissal for 22, Woodfull, the Methodist schoolmaster and devotee of Corinthian values, was nursing his injuries in the Australian dressing room when he was visited by Warner to sympathise with his lot. 'I don't want to speak to you, Mr Warner,' Woodfull told him. When Warner asked why, he replied, 'There are two teams out there; one is playing cricket, the other is not. It is too great a game to spoil. The matter is in your hands.'[21]

It was a crushing rejoinder to one of the game's white knights. 'Warner – the epitome of all the game stood for;' wrote his biographer Gerald Howat, 'the quintessence of sportsmanship and high ideals; the chevalier of cricket – had been identified

with a rejection of the very standards he had devoted his life to upholding.'[22]

Woodfull's altercation with Warner, leaked to the press, intensified anti-English feeling when the match resumed after the weekend. Australia, 109/4 overnight, rallied through Bill Ponsford and wicketkeeper Bertie Oldfield until the latter, on 41, sustained a hairline fracture of the temple when trying to hook Larwood, then bowling to an orthodox field. As the highly popular Oldfield staggered from the crease, clutched his head in both hands and fell to his knees, pandemonium broke out around the ground as 32,000 spectators gave vent to their fury. Thankfully, Oldfield was soon back on his feet and able to walk unassisted from the ground.

The barracking and abuse continued throughout the rest of the Australian innings, and intensified when Jardine walked out to open England's second innings in his multi-coloured Harlequins cap and silk cravat. Undeterred by his hostile reception, Jardine composed a sedate 56 as England scored 412, setting Australia 532 to win. Despite a thrilling cameo of 66 by Bradman, making room for himself outside the leg stump to hit into the wide open spaces on the off side, and a spirited undefeated 73 from Woodfull, the home side lost by 338 runs.

The fury of the Adelaide crowd was matched by the indignation of the Australian press. 'Today the man who plays cricket in a fine sportsmanlike way that nobody in the world can excel is W.M. WOODFULL, captain of the Australian Eleven,' reported the tabloid newspaper *Smith's Weekly*. 'All the honours are with him and none are with Warner or Jardine.'[23]

In response to this pressure, the Australian Board of Control released the contents of a cable it had sent to MCC deploring the tactics of its team.

> Body-line bowling has assumed such proportions as to menace the best interests of the game, making protection of the body by the batsman the main consideration. This is causing intensely bitter feeling between the players as well as injury. In our opinion it is unsportsmanlike. Unless

> stopped at once, it is likely to upset the friendly relations existing between Australia and England.[24]

According to Fingleton, even Australians recoiled at the clumsy, blustering manner in which the Australian Board of Control cast aspersions on MCC's sportsmanship, since the charge of bodyline was a vague one, and MCC, true to form, bristled at such allegations.

In an age of sparse communication – letters took the best part of a month to arrive, there were no radio or television broadcasts, and no English national daily sent out their own cricket correspondents because of economic austerity – it was difficult for people back home to ascertain the true nature of bodyline and the furore it generated. Jack Hobbs, working for the *News Chronicle* and *The Star*, was the one witness who could have opened the nation's eyes to its perils – but, reluctant to criticise Jardine, his county captain, and his fellow professionals, not least in the face of Australian protests which he found irksome, he chose to overlook such matters. Bruce Harris, the correspondent of the London *Evening Standard*, knew little about cricket, and, as an apologist of Jardine, he tended to follow his line. *Reuters* correspondent Gilbert Mant was privately critical but kept his reports strictly factual, and although Warwick Armstrong, the former Australian captain, expressed reservations in the London *Evening News*, mainly on aesthetic grounds, his main gripe concerned the failure of Bradman and his team-mates to combat Larwood. The *Daily Herald* accused Australia of being poor losers, and Percy Fender, Jardine's predecessor as captain of Surrey, writing in the *Daily Telegraph*, dismissed the charge that bodyline was dangerous; it was just that the Australians couldn't play it.

The Times pronounced rather pompously: 'It is inconceivable that a cricketer of JARDINE's standing, chosen by the MCC to captain an English side, would ever dream of allowing or ordering the bowlers under his command to practise any system of attack that, in the time-honoured English phrase, is not cricket.'[25]

Unwilling to grasp the gravity of the situation confronting it, Lord's – recalling the damage inflicted on English cricket by

Gregory and McDonald in 1921 and assuming the Australian Board was making a mountain out of a molehill – replied in suitably lofty tones.

> We, Marylebone Cricket Club, deplore your cable. We deprecate your opinion that there has been unsportsmanlike play. We have fullest confidence in captain, team and managers and are convinced that they would do nothing to infringe either the laws of Cricket or the spirit of the game. We have no evidence that our confidence has been misplaced. Much as we regret accidents to Woodfull and Oldfield, we understand that in neither case was the bowler to blame. If the Australian Board of Control wish to propose a new Law or Rule, it shall receive our careful consideration in due course.
>
> We hope the situation is not now as serious as your cable would seem to indicate, but if it is such to jeopardise the good relations between English and Australian cricketers and you consider it desirable to cancel the remainder of the programme we would consent, but with great reluctance.[26]

Confronted by MCC's uncompromising response and reluctant to abandon a tour which had captured the public's interest and filled their coffers, the Australian Board felt compelled to partially back down. On the day before the fourth Test at Brisbane, they sent a second cable withdrawing their comments about 'unsportsmanlike play' and reiterated that the tour would continue, which it subsequently did with relatively little discord in comparison with Adelaide.

After England won the final Test at Sydney by eight wickets to take the series 4–1, Woodfull congratulated Jardine on his success, but not one of his players attended the farewell dinner for the England team or saw them off at the quayside. 'It was a jarring reminder of the bitterness that had marred the tour,' wrote Laurence Le Quesne in his book *The Bodyline Controversy*, 'and it can have left the minds of few of the MCC party entirely at peace.'[27]

'At the end of that season the nerves of all the Australian batsmen had worn thin,' wrote Fingleton. 'I do not think there was one single batsman who played in most of those bodyline games who ever afterwards recaptured his love for cricket.'[28]

Jardine returned to England to a hero's reception, with several MCC committee members there to greet him on his arrival at Euston station. He was reappointed captain of England for that summer's series against the West Indies, and was cheered to the rafters when he walked out to bat for MCC against the tourists at Lord's. Convinced that bodyline was a figment of Australian imagination, MCC dismissed the Australian Board's attempt in April 1933 to amend Law 48 outlawing deliveries intended to intimidate or injure batsmen. The Board continued to press their case, however, their persistence paying off as the exposure of the English public to the perils of bodyline that summer induced a change of opinion.

Aside from the West Indian quicks, Learie Constantine and Manny Martindale, the main exponent of bodyline was Bill Bowes. Having infuriated the crowd at Cardiff by hitting Glamorgan batsmen Maurice Turnbull and J.C. Clay, Bowes caused further uproar by knocking Lancashire's Frank Watson senseless at Old Trafford. In the Varsity match at Lord's, Cambridge fast bowler Kenneth Farnes, bowling bodyline, hit several of his opponents, including Peter Oldfield, the Oxford number eleven, bowled off his jaw, and opener David Townsend, who broke his wicket after being struck on the neck. Seven MCC members, including the cricket journalist Sir Home Gordon, wrote to *The Times* to denounce such tactics and warn that they risked destroying the spirit of the game.

Three weeks later, during the second Test against the West Indies at Old Trafford, public opinion took a further turn when Constantine and Martindale bowled bodyline. Jardine stood firm with a courageous century, but Walter Hammond, England's premier batsman, wasn't so fortunate. Hit on the chin as well as the back as he ducked into a ball from Constantine, he expressed his disgust at these tactics as he left the crease. *Wisden* called this

kind of bowling 'objectionable' and assumed that those watching it for the first time would have deemed it contrary to the spirit of the game. Warner, no longer a Test selector, also spoke out. Writing to the *Daily Telegraph*, he regretted that the West Indies had resorted to bodyline, which he described as intimidation that often gave rise to serious injury. He accepted that bodyline was legal but questioned its value if it generated controversy and bred ill-feeling, as it had between England and Australia. Should it continue, he thought, the courtesy of combat would disappear from the game and would be replaced by anger, hatred and retribution.

Fourteen out of 17 county captains agreed not to employ bodyline, and celebrated journalist Neville Cardus wrote that he had yet to meet a cricketer that summer who wanted to see that form of attack. 'Everyone is getting to hate the sight of the leg-trap and the short bumper. Bodyline would vanish tomorrow if cricketers here governed the game.'[29] At a joint meeting of the Advisory County Cricket Committee and the Board of Control for Test Matches, attended by the county captains, that November, MCC accepted that any direct attack by the bowler upon the batsman would be declared an offence against the spirit of cricket. The Australian Board pushed for something stronger, but the most that MCC would countenance was a formal understanding that the Australian tour of England in 1934 would be played in the right spirit.

Such an understanding was helped by Jardine's resignation from the England captaincy, after leading MCC in India in 1933/34, on the premise that he had no wish to play against the Australians. With Larwood also unavailable because of his refusal to renounce bodyline, as requested by the president of MCC, the series passed off without serious incident. Australia, again under Woodfull, won 2–1, but they did experience hostility in their match against Nottinghamshire, not least from the crowd. Infuriated by MCC's shabby treatment of their hero Larwood, they rallied fully behind Voce, who took 8–66 in Australia's first innings bowling bodyline. When he began their second innings with another bombardment, Woodfull told the Nottinghamshire secretary

that the county had breached the agreement underpinning that summer's tour. If Voce took the field the next day, Australia would refuse to play, an ultimatum with which Nottinghamshire complied. The county did resort to one final salvo of bodyline, against Middlesex at Lord's – Voce knocking Len Muncer, a lower-order batsman, unconscious and hitting another player. Appalled by such pugilism, the Middlesex committee protested vehemently, and the recriminations were such that Arthur Carr, Nottinghamshire's uncompromising captain, was dismissed and the county committee resigned. More importantly, MCC finally convinced themselves that legislation was necessary to outlaw this dangerous form of fast bowling. An amendment was made to the law banning 'persistent and systematic bowling of fast short-pitched balls at the batsman standing clear of his wicket'.

MCC gave umpires the power to deal with bodyline. They ruled that once the umpire adjudged a bowler to be bowling in such a manner he should caution him, and should he continue to transgress, the umpire would instruct the captain to take him off immediately and prevent him from bowling again during that innings.

Although the bodyline series stands out as the most notorious in the history of cricket, it shouldn't be seen entirely in isolation. While Larwood and Voce's assault on Australia was seen by many Englishmen as payback for the punishment meted out to them by Gregory and McDonald in 1920/21, so its legacy remained a powerful one. Bradman never forgot the humiliations of that summer, and once he had the necessary firepower to retaliate in the form of Ray Lindwall and Keith Miller post-war, he showed little mercy to England's batsmen. Other countries were to feel the full force of the whirlwind until they could respond in kind, such as the havoc wreaked by the West Indian quicks on all and sundry during the 1980s.