

# THE ASHES

## MATCH OF MY LIFE

Fourteen Ashes Legends Relive Their Greatest Test



**“One of the greatest ever books on the Ashes”**

Frank Keating, *The Guardian*

**Sam Pilger and Rob Wightman**

## *Introduction*

THERE WAS A sick feeling in the pit of my stomach as I sat on the top deck of the number three bus winding its way towards The Oval in September 2005.

I was headed to the final day of the fifth Ashes Test aware I could be about to encounter the sight I had gleefully avoided since I was at school: an England captain holding the Ashes.

For 16 years I had enjoyed a succession of Australian victories; I had been at Lord's in 1989 to watch Allan Border's side begin this era of dominance and then at the SCG in 2003 as Steve Waugh's team collected the Ashes after an eighth consecutive series win.

Every two years, five or six Tests were played, and then a group of men wearing baggy green caps got to have their picture taken with the urn.

But on that day eight years ago my fears were realised as I watched Michael Vaughan lift the Ashes and lead his side on a lap of honour. As I left The Oval an electronic sign above the Hobbs Gate flashed 'The Ashes are Home' in to the night sky, while England fans spilled out of the surrounding pubs.

Since then this scene of English joy has become quite common and been repeated twice more with Andrew Strauss holding aloft the Ashes at The Oval in 2009, and again at the Sydney Cricket Ground in 2011 to usher in a new era of England dominance.

I hope the following chapters have captured both the unique spirit and the enduring appeal of the Ashes. The long history of the battle for the urn has, for the most part, been about the pursuit of glory, and not about humiliating the other side. The concept of 'Mateship' extends to the opposition dressing room.

Each player in this book speaks about their all-consuming desire to triumph, but also to win the respect, and sometimes friendship, of the opposition players and fans. Without sacrificing any passion, and there remains plenty of rancour, the Ashes have managed to avoid much of the pettiness and ugliness of other sports.

As the former England captain Andrew Strauss has so neatly said, 'The Ashes represents all that is best about cricket.'

The Ashes have provided the stage for some of England and Australia's finest ever players to prove themselves, and here, those that I worked with give a fascinating insight in to the struggle behind their triumphs.

A year after being humbled by the West Indies, David Gower captained England to the Ashes in 1985; Mark Taylor was on the brink of becoming a surveyor before the tour of 1989 turned him in to one of the game's greats; Merv Hughes overcame a poor start to his Test career and a succession of injuries to bowl Australia to the Ashes in 1993.

Justin Langer recounts his decade-long journey from being what he calls 'the invisible man of Australian cricket' to scoring 250 at the MCG in 2002.

After being out of the game for a year with an ankle injury it was assumed Glenn McGrath was finished, but he returned to take his 500th wicket during a devastating spell at Lord's in 2005, while Ashley Giles was branded not good enough after defeat in that first Test, but seven weeks later was out in the middle guiding England to the Ashes at The Oval.

Mike Hussey had long given up on ever playing Test cricket for Australia, but found himself hitting the winning runs at the Adelaide Oval to complete Australia's greatest ever Ashes comeback at Adelaide in 2006.

Paul Collingwood endured the pain of being whitewashed 5-0 in that series in 2006/07, but four years later he returned triumphant, helping England to win the Ashes in Australia for the first time in 24 years in the final Test of his career.

Wickets and runs against every other Test nation have always been gratefully accepted, but each of these players has found that real greatness can only truly be grasped in the Ashes.

**Sam Pilger**  
**March 2013**

## *Introduction*

LIKE MANY ENGLISH and Australian cricket fans, I have a JFK moment. I remember exactly where I was when the Ashes first caught my imagination. It was a Monday afternoon in July 1981 and, by chance, I switched on my family's portable black-and-white television to see Ian Botham smashing the increasingly frustrated Australians to all parts of Headingley.

As a nine-year-old, I knew little about the intricacies of Test cricket but sensed from Botham's swagger and Dennis Lillee's scowl that I was witnessing something special. My eyes were then fully opened to the rich entertainment and raw emotion of the Ashes when Bob Willis's devastating spell of fast bowling completed England's sensational comeback.

During the rest of that memorable series I began to appreciate why the ebb and flow of England–Australia series has enthralled millions of cricket followers for over a century.

Despite being a team sport, cricket is based on individual showdowns, and Ashes matches consistently provide compelling sub-plots that are great events in their own right, like Lillee v Botham, Thomson v Boycott and McGrath v Pietersen.

But however intense the rivalry and clash of sporting cultures, there is generally a healthy dose of mutual respect between the two sides. England and Australia slug it out on the field, sometimes employing the most ruthless tactics to gain an advantage, and afterwards the teams have a laugh over a few beers.

By speaking to cricketers from a period that spans five decades, I quickly learned that from Bradman's 1948 Invincibles to Mike Gatting's 1986/87 winners, the Ashes inspired as much pride and passion in the players as the spectators.

This book provides evocative insider accounts of the agony, ecstasy, controversy and camaraderie of the most fiercely contested series from 1948 to the most recent battles. Each chapter reflects an individual character, voice and era of the game, while giving enormous insight into the thoughts of many of England and Australia's finest post-war players during the key matches of their careers.

There is Neil Harvey's fresh-faced ebullience on his first tour; Ray Illingworth's ingenuity in becoming the first England captain since the 1930s to reclaim the Ashes in Australia; Jeff Thomson's super-confidence in just his second Test; Geoff

## THE ASHES: MATCH OF MY LIFE

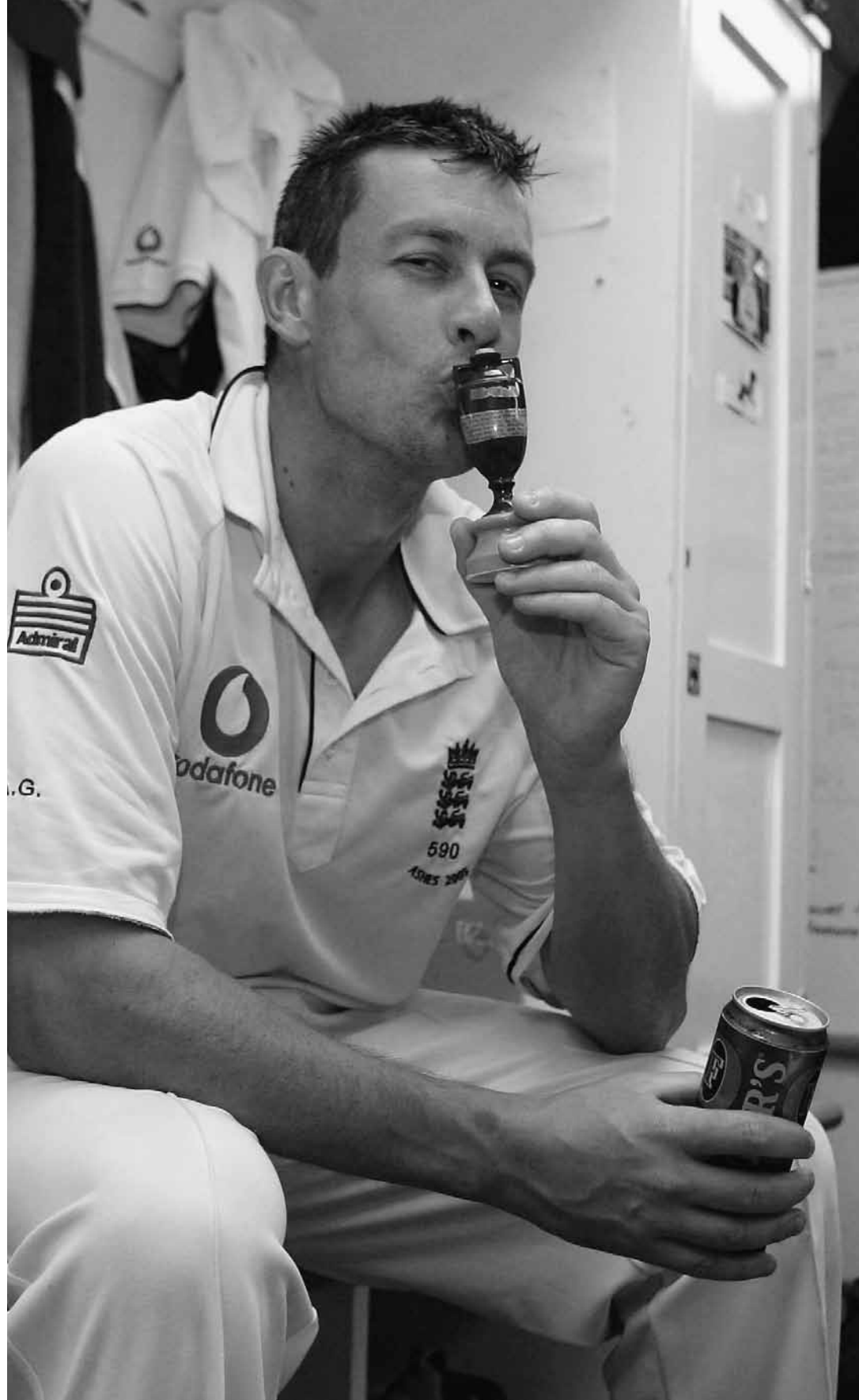
Boycott's relentless desire to succeed on his return from three years in exile; Bob Willis's commitment to the cause and John Emburey's pure love of the game.

Although many of the contributors have long retired, their enthusiasm for the Ashes is undiminished. I hope you will now enjoy reliving many of the classic Ashes encounters through the eyes of the players who made them great.

**Rob Wightman**

**March 2013**

ASHLEY GILES



## Ashley Giles – Fifth Test, The Oval, 8-12 September 2005

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Ashley Giles began his career as a seam bowler, but after moving from Surrey to Warwickshire in 1992 he was converted into a left-arm spinner. After making his Test debut in 1998, he was England's leading spinner from the tour to Pakistan in 2000 until the Ashes of 2005. The 'King of Spain', a nickname he has enjoyed since a spelling mistake on a souvenir mug, played a major role in England's revival with 31 wickets as they won seven consecutive Tests in the summer of 2004. He is one of only ten Englishmen to take 100 wickets and score 1,000 runs in Test cricket. By far the most important runs were the seven he scored at Trent Bridge and the 59 at The Oval to help England win the Ashes in 2005.

Slow left-arm bowler, right-handed batsman

Born: 9 March 1973, Chertsey, Surrey

Test debut: July 1998 v South Africa

Last Test: December 2006 v Australia

Test record: 52 matches, 140 wickets at an average of 39.60; 1,347 runs at an average of 20.72

### *The state of play*

Kevin Pietersen and Ashley Giles guided England towards their first Ashes triumph for 18 years in a thrilling climax to the greatest Test match series of all time.

# THE ASHES: MATCH OF MY LIFE

## Scoreboard

England first innings			
M.E. Trescothick	c Hayden	b Warne	43
A.J. Strauss	c Katich	b Warne	129
M.P. Vaughan	c Clarke	b Warne	11
I.R. Bell	lbw	b Warne	0
K.P. Pietersen		b Warne	14
A. Flintoff	c Warne	b McGrath	72
P.D. Collingwood	lbw	b Tait	7
G.O. Jones		b Lee	25
A.F. Giles	lbw	b Warne	32
M.J. Hoggard	c Martyn	b McGrath	2
S.J. Harmison		not out	20
Extras	(b 4, lb 6, w 1, nb 7)		18
Total	(all out, 105.3 overs)		373

Bowling	O	M	R	W
McGrath	27	5	72	2
Lee	23	3	94	1
Tait	15	1	61	1
Warne	37.3	5	122	6
Katich	3	0	14	0

## Australia first innings

J.L. Langer		b Harmison	105
M.L. Hayden	lbw	b Flintoff	138
R.T. Ponting	c Strauss	b Flintoff	35
D.R. Martyn	c Collingwood	b Flintoff	10
M.J. Clarke	lbw	b Hoggard	25
S.M. Katich	lbw	b Flintoff	1
A.C. Gilchrist	lbw	b Hoggard	23
S.K. Warne	c Vaughan	b Flintoff	0
B. Lee	c Giles	b Hoggard	6
G.D. McGrath	c Strauss	b Hoggard	0
S.W. Tait		not out	1
Extras	(b 4, lb 8, w 2, nb 9)		23
Total	(all out, 107.1 overs)		367

Bowling	O	M	R	W
Harmison	22	2	87	1
Hoggard	24.1	2	97	4
Flintoff	34	10	78	5
Giles	23	1	76	0
Collingwood	4	0	17	0



ASHLEY GILES

England second innings

M.E. Trescothick	lbw	b Warne	33
A.J. Strauss	c Katich	b Warne	1
M.P. Vaughan	c Gilchrist	b McGrath	45
I.R. Bell	c Warne	b McGrath	0
K.P. Pietersen		b McGrath	158
A. Flintoff		c & b Warne	8
P.D. Collingwood	c Ponting	b Warne	10
G.O. Jones		b Tait	1
A.F. Giles		b Warne	59
M.J. Hoggard		not out	4
S.J. Harmison	c Hayden	b Warne	0
Extras	(b 4, w 7, nb 5)		16
Total	(all out, 91.3 overs)		335

Bowling	O	M	R	W
McGrath	26	3	85	3
Lee	20	4	88	0
Warne	38.3	3	124	6
Clarke	2	0	6	0
Tait	5	0	28	1

Australia second innings (target: 342 runs)

J.L. Langer		not out	0
M.L. Hayden		not out	0
Extras	(lb 4)		4
Total	(0 wickets, 0.4 overs)		4

Bowling	O	M	R	W
Harmison	0.4	0	0	0

## *Ashley Giles*

I WANTED TO slow down this moment. I wanted to make it last forever. As I walked off the field with 23,000 people on their feet at The Oval I thought, 'Look at this, I better milk it' but it went by in a flash. It was late on the final day of the series, we were 335/9 and I was out, having made my highest ever Test score, but above all, we had regained the Ashes. It felt like my face was going to explode with happiness.

Not long after, Australia began their second innings. It was a mere formality, they faced four balls before taking the light. But it gave us the chance to come out as a team wearing our caps and all experience this emotionally charged atmosphere. For just a few minutes we could stand in the centre, before the madness really began, and look around as The Oval celebrated the return of the Ashes. We all had silly smiles on our faces and couldn't stop giggling. We had done it. We had really done it. The Ashes were home.

At the start of the summer we seriously believed this could happen. Why not? In the previous two years we had enjoyed almost continuous success under Michael Vaughan and Duncan Fletcher, winning a record eight consecutive Tests in 2004, and a series in South Africa for the first time in 40 years. We hadn't just stumbled on this form; we had brought together the right players, worked hard and executed our plans. We knew the Aussies would be tougher than the West Indies or New Zealand, but there was a feeling we were peaking at just the right time.

Crucially, guys like Kevin Pietersen and Freddie Flintoff had never played Test cricket against the Aussies. I myself had only faced them in two Tests in different series. This meant we weren't weighed down by bad history. In other eras it would have been very difficult for the old guard of Nasser Hussain, Michael Atherton and Alec Stewart to be so positive ahead of an Ashes series because they had been ground down by so many beatings. We didn't have that problem.

We had also met the Aussies in the ICC Champions Trophy semi-final at Edgbaston in September 2004 and didn't have too much trouble beating them by six wickets. That was a huge stepping-stone because it proved we could overcome them. Our confidence grew even more during the one-day series in the month before the Ashes. We beat Australia twice and salvaged a tie in the NatWest Series final at Lord's when I grabbed two runs off the final ball. We also beat them in a Twenty20

game at the Rose Bowl by 100 runs. It was dawning on all of us, 'These guys aren't that big and tough, we can take them on.'

Of course, Glenn McGrath still predicted a 5-0 whitewash, but that didn't bother us. He is a lovely bloke off the field, but he is known for these big statements. We brushed it off as typical Aussie confidence. Did it have us trembling with fear? No chance. It was just banter, and to be honest, I thought we could beat them 5-0 as well.

On the opening morning of the first Test the England team arrived at Lord's on foot. We had been told we couldn't drive to the ground as there was a hospitality tent on our car park, and then we had trouble hailing a taxi, so we walked the mile from the Landmark Hotel in Marylebone, drawing more than a few curious glances as we strode up Park Road.

I have never experienced such an atmosphere at Lord's. When we walked through the Long Room the MCC members were shouting and patting us on the back. They are usually such a reserved bunch. On the field we wanted to hit the Aussies hard from the very first ball. Steve Harmison did that with a spell that saw Justin Langer hit on the elbow and Ricky Ponting on the helmet with such force that it cut his cheek. I don't know if it was a conscious decision, but none of us went to see if he was OK. Normally we're good lads, but maybe this was a show of strength. 'Just get on with it' was our attitude. I asked how he was afterwards, but at the time it was tense and we didn't want to break that. He was on his feet and looked all right. If he had gone down we would have all been around him.

That first day was the most draining I have ever had on a cricket field and I didn't even bowl a single ball. For the first three hours, the Aussie wickets kept tumbling until we had them all out for 190. We were on a real high and they were going crazy in the Long Room again. Then McGrath went and spoiled the party. He took our first five wickets with only 21 runs on the board. From delirious joy to despair in ten overs. I was the last of the 17 wickets to fall that day as we finished on a pitiful 92/7. We would never recover.

By the Saturday morning the Australians were batting well in their second innings and setting us a daunting target that would eventually reach 420. Michael Vaughan later told us he could see us physically shrinking and becoming intimidated again. He wasn't wrong. We were still drained from the first day and the thought running through my head was, 'Fucking hell, what have we done? We've thrown away this game already.'

That was confirmed on a drizzly Sunday afternoon as we slumped to 180 all out to lose by 239 runs. I lasted just two balls before McGrath got me. Some of the Aussies, certainly not all of them, were quite disrespectful, chirping away as we headed to a heavy defeat. When they knew they were going to win, there was no need to rub our faces in it. I hadn't forgotten that at The Oval, which made victory even sweeter.

But back then a horrible silence descended on the dressing room. It was dreadful to lose so easily after all the hype. Maybe that got to us, but either way, we were all shocked. We didn't join the Aussies for a drink at the end of play because we were too embarrassed. We had been compared to them and yet they had thrashed us easily.

Then the criticism from the papers and former players began to rain down. Suddenly we were all rubbish. They said we weren't good enough to beat Australia and could even lose 5-0. In one Test we had gone from heroes to zeroes, the success of the last year forgotten. Myself, Geraint Jones and Ian Bell were pushed to the end of the plank as the chosen scapegoats. I was disappointed with my performance, I hadn't taken a wicket, but I wasn't on my own, and with the exception of Harmy and KP we had all failed.

Two days after Lord's I was sitting at home flicking through *The Times* when I came across a piece entitled 'Why playing Giles is akin to taking the field with only ten men'. It quoted the former Zimbabwe Test player and current director of cricket at Derbyshire, Dave Houghton, saying, 'What use is [Ashley Giles] in the side? He's not going to get wickets against the Aussie batsmen and he's not going to make any runs against their bowlers. With him, England are effectively playing ten against 11. They should either include another specialist batsman or pick a spinner who can bat.' Already painfully raw, this really hurt me. I had enjoyed a good couple of years, but one bad Test and I was set upon. All I wanted was some respect, but it felt like I was pissing against the wind.

The next day I played for Warwickshire in a one-day game against Kent at Canterbury. The crowd were dreadful to me, which was upsetting as they were English supporters. I also received a letter from a fan, which I thought might say 'keep your head up, Gilo' but instead it said, 'Stop your fucking whingeing, you're not good enough.'

At Edgbaston, Chris Foy from the *Daily Mail* asked for a few words. In my state of mind, I should have said no, because I was still upset and angry. Instead, I had a bite back at my critics. 'Unfortunately, it feels like a lot of ex-players don't want us to win the Ashes, either because they didn't or because they were the last people to do it,' I told him. 'That might sound bitter, but that's the way it feels.'

I really got nailed after that. The abuse got worse because I had the temerity to answer back. The attitude was who is he to have a go at us, what does he know? I felt like the world was on top of me. It just went on and on. People who had never met me started having a go. It really descended into personal abuse. I was called 'dead wood', 'a namby pamby', and 'precious'.

My head was full of rubbish when I arrived at Edgbaston for the second Test. I walked in to the dressing room and the first person I saw was Michael Vaughan. 'Alright Gilo, had a good week?' 'To be honest, it hasn't been the best one of my life,' I laughed. 'Why, what's wrong?' He didn't have a clue; he had been away with his family and ignored the press. Vaughany was right when he told me I looked haggard.

It had been one of the hardest weeks of my life. I kept thinking, 'Why does everyone think I'm shit? Maybe it is because they're right.'

I felt my head was going to explode. On the Wednesday night I started to clear my mind and focus on the game with the help of our team psychologist Steve Bull. He said, 'I'm not letting you out of my sight until I am convinced you have got the rubbish out of your head and are focusing on this Test.' I felt better when I left him.

I was still incredibly nervous on the first morning, but I knew my home crowd at Edgbaston would support me. They are always a raucous and fiercely patriotic bunch, so it is a great place to come when you're down. I knew they would look after me, and I wanted to give them something to shout about.

We got off to a flyer on the first day with KP, Tres and Freddie sending the ball to all points of the ground as we finished on 407 all out. In the Australian reply on the second day Ricky Ponting had effortlessly made his way to 61 off 76 balls and seemed destined for another hundred when I tempted him to sweep and he top-edged the ball to Vaughan at short fine leg. That wicket meant a lot. It offered a tremendous release, which you could see in my reaction. I loved the fact that the rest of the guys swarmed around, rubbing my head. I then got Michael Clarke and Shane Warne as we knocked them over for 308. The troubles of the previous week began to float away.

Though we only made 182 in our second innings, by the end of the Saturday Australia were 175/8 chasing a target of 282. They needed 107 more runs with only Warney, Brett Lee and Michael Kasprovicz left, so there was a superb mood among the guys. We thought we had won. It had taken three days and we were back in the series. We went out for dinner that night excited about being on the brink of squaring it at 1-1.

That last day was ridiculous. You don't take anything for granted against the Aussies, but we only needed two good balls to win. When we stepped on the field it felt as though the crowd were already celebrating. But as Warney and Brett whittled down the target we all grew quiet. We were beginning to feel uncomfortable until Warney trod on his stumps 62 runs short. I thought it was then curtains for the Aussies. Freddie was charging in and reversing the ball, so he would surely quickly get that final wicket. But it didn't happen and their target kept getting smaller; 50, 40, 30.

When they needed 20 I started to feel sick. Brett and Kasprovicz were batting well and their edges and mis-hits were falling safely. Standing at gully, I glanced over at Andrew Strauss, who said, 'This is getting tricky.' The rest of the boys were looking at each other in disbelief. We thought it would be 1-1, but we were about to go 2-0 down. Vaughany remembers us all going missing. That wasn't because we had given up, but we were away in our own thoughts like, 'How the fuck have we thrown this game away? How are we going to get off the field because we will be murdered if we throw this away?'

I had another more immediate problem. I couldn't see a bloody thing. It was very bright, the crowd was packed in right at my level, and if anyone cut Freddie, the ball was coming straight out of the crowd. I was thinking, 'How the fuck am I going to see this ball?' I have to catch it, anything else was unthinkable.

When they needed 15 Simon Jones dropped a chance at third man from Kasprovicz. 'That's it, that was our one chance and we've blown it,' I cursed to myself. For what would prove to be the last over I was down at fine leg, I remember Brett driving Harmy through the covers and I thought that was it, it had gone for four and we had lost, but I hadn't seen we had a man at deep point, so it was just a single.

Finally, with Australia needing just three to win, in came Harmy and forced Kasprovicz to glove one to Jonah [Geraint Jones]. At first I wasn't sure if he was out, but when the boys went up I knew we had done it. I remember running around in circles on my own for about a minute lost in my own little world. Realising I looked a complete idiot, I thought I should join my team-mates. What a fine line between defeat and victory, and we were just the right side of it. We couldn't have come back from 2-0 down against this side, no chance.

That afternoon we went out on Broad Street in Birmingham, and everywhere we went we were applauded. But if the Aussies had got three more runs we wouldn't have been able to show our faces. Sitting with our beers we were all still in a state of shock, we kept puffing out our cheeks and saying, 'That was close.'

Four days later we took the momentum of Edgbaston in to the third Test at Old Trafford. After winning the toss we were treated to a wonderful innings of 166 from Michael Vaughan. He shocked me, because he had been struggling for form and had ten other guys to worry about, but managed to play a brilliant knock. When he does it, he does it big. He was aggressive and his timing was superb, but his running was ordinary, so you can't have everything. This set the foundation for a first-innings total of 444.

The Australians didn't look so confident now. They clearly weren't used to dealing with this pressure. In their reply I removed both openers. I got Langer when he edged the ball for Belly to claim with a lightning reaction catch at short leg and then Hayden lbw. The most satisfying wicket was Damien Martyn with a ball that pitched outside leg stump, but clipped the outside of his off stump.

Rain ruined much of Saturday, so we finally got the Aussies out for 302 on the Sunday before we scored quickly to declare on 280/6. It meant Australia needed 423 runs to win, or more pertinently they had 108 overs to survive. Hayden and Langer kept us at bay on the Sunday night to set up an extraordinary final day.

On the Monday morning 20,000 people were turned away from the gates of Old Trafford. I got there early, full of nerves because I wanted to get on with it, and couldn't believe the mass of people. Those that did make it in saw Australia offer plenty of resistance, chiefly through their captain Ricky Ponting, but we were taking

wickets regularly enough to feel confident we would win. When we got rid of the normally obdurate Jason Gillespie for a duck it left Australia at 264/7 at 4.20pm.

More than two hours later we were getting desperate. We had finally seen off Ponting for 156, and now needed the wicket of Lee or McGrath in the final 24 balls. I stood in an England field of seven slips, a short leg and a silly mid-off, hoping Freddie, who continued to amaze me, or Harmy could get a nick. It never came.

There was some consolation, but not much, from the sight of the whole Australian squad jumping around on their balcony celebrating a draw. But, above all, this was a lost opportunity. I had let the team and myself down. We needed one wicket, but I couldn't deliver it. I didn't even get one in the entire second innings. That night driving home to Birmingham I felt terribly low, and the sense of disappointment stayed with me for a couple of days. A few sessions on the piss and playing golf with my mates helped get it out of my system. And I had learned my lesson. I didn't pick up a paper.

At the start of the fourth Test in Nottingham we were more convinced than ever we could win the series. The Australians were on the run. After winning the toss Strauss and Trescott put on 105 for the first wicket, but the Aussies came back to have us 241/5 early on the second day. The key to winning the whole series was the 177-run partnership between Freddie and Jonah, which began at this point and helped us finish on 477.

Freddie's innings of 102 saw him come of age. If you play like he did against the best team in the world you have earned the right to greatness. On television they might look daunting, but in the flesh they weren't. As soon as he shared a field with the Aussies he quickly realised, 'These guys aren't that great.'

After Australia had finished the second day wobbling on 99/5 Adam Gilchrist was hoping to guide them away from trouble the next morning when he nicked a ball towards Strauss at second slip. I was at gully and thought he had no chance, but he hung in the air to grab the ball before holding on to it when he hit the floor. I thought, 'It is all going our way.' They never recovered and were all out for 218, allowing us to ask them to bat again for the first time since 1988. None of them had ever had to follow on before; they didn't know what was happening.

Further evidence they were rattled came when Ponting was run out by our substitute fielder Gary Pratt in their second innings. He was not at all happy. While waiting for the third umpire's decision he started shouting at us. He also had a go at Fletch on his way back to the dressing room, though I don't think Fletch helped by coming out on the balcony. Ponting felt we were using too many substitute fielders, but on this occasion Simon Jones was having a scan in hospital, so we didn't have a choice. And we're not exactly going to have the worst fielder in the world patrolling cover. For Ponting to react like that was ridiculous and showed they were under the cosh. All the way through that game they had whinged about decisions. We were clearly getting under their skin.

On the fourth morning Australia resumed on 222/4, and while we didn't take a wicket for a while, there was no panicking, we continued to bowl with discipline, so they couldn't come at us. Eventually Warney cut loose and gave me a bit of a clout, but I got him stumped by Jonah for 45. They were all out for 387 and we now needed just 129 to go 2-1 up.

'Come on, lads, finish it for us,' was how the rest of us felt towards the openers. We wanted a nice easy finish. We made a good start, cheering every run, but then Warney got Vaughan and Tres and suddenly we were 36/2. The nerves began to get worse. Somehow I knew I was going to have to play a part in this game. Waiting to do that, I have never known nerves like it. I was literally shaking.

I couldn't sit still, so I went in to the coaches' office to be with Duncan and Troy Cooley, our bowling coach. 'I am absolutely shitting myself ... I'm not sure how I am going to cope,' I told Fletch. He looked me in the eye. 'At least you can do something about it if you're called upon.' 'Yeah, but I don't want to, I want the other guys to do it.' It didn't look like I was going to get my way as Strauss and Bell were both out in the space of three balls to leave us 57/4.

The coming together of Freddie and KP brought some relief as they made their way past 100. We got all boisterous in the dressing room, but it soon fell flat when Lee removed KP. When that happened I left the coaches' office to sit in the main dressing room with my pads on.

Fifteen balls later Lee got Freddie too and I was in. It was 111/6. I got up and remember everyone looked at me without any confidence because of my famously miserable record against Warne.

Heading down the stairs with my helmet and gloves on, my nerves evaporated. I put my cricket head on to get ready for Warne. 'Right, keep your leg out the way, and if he bowls in line look out for the quicker ones,' I told myself. 'Brett Lee is bowling quickly, it is reversing and keeping low, so keep your head up and don't fall over. Get over the bounce.'

I had been in the middle for just eight balls when Jonah played a shot to break the game, but only succeeded in putting it down Kasprowicz's throat at long off. We were 116/7. In marched Hoggy, he is a gutsy bugger who knows how to hold a bat. He had a stupid grin on his face. 'Come on, me and you will get it done,' he said. 'I should warn you Brett Lee is bowling 95 mph in-duckers, good luck!' The Aussies were chirping a bit, but it wasn't personal, they were just trying to keep a tight handle on the game. I shut everything else out, there were only the four of us, me, Hoggy, Brett and Warney, out there.

We needed 13 runs. Warney had already got me out four times in the series, so I was naturally wary of him. I thought he would bowl a lot of sliders and try to line me up for an lbw and he should have thrown in a lot more of his big leg breaks too. I was making a conscious effort to keep my front foot on leg stump so if he sent down something straight and quick I could play it. 'Come on, you twat, concentrate,' I kept



saying to myself. 'Keep your head up, keep your leg out the way, watch the ball, watch the ball.'

Hoggy relieved the tension with a wonderful drive through extra cover for four, and after I had taken two from a shot to long leg we needed just two more runs. Warney then bowled me one on the leg stump, I clipped it, frankly I timed the shit out of it, but it hit Simon Katich at short leg. I had decided when the target got down to two, anything up there I was going to try and hit hard and if it missed a fielder it was all over. But I got the next delivery wrong, it was a slider, so I went for a big drive only for it to go through the gap of my bat and pad. I thought he had bowled me, but it missed off stump.

Then Warney tossed another one up at me, which I just tried to lean on. It wasn't the best timed shot, but there was no one there apart from mid-on, so we ran two. We had won. Oh, that felt good. That meant everything. I clenched my fist, lifted my bat to the sky and hugged Hoggy. We were in front with one to go. God, it felt good.

Back in the dressing room everyone was slapping me on the head, there were loads of cuddles, everyone was going mad, Freddie looked particularly demented. Before I knew it, I had a big Geordie on top of me; Harmy dived on me and wrestled me to the floor. The whole team naturally had a big night out in Nottingham before Hoggy and me got up early to speak to the press. We both had terrible hangovers and looked a bit shabby in front of the cameras, but I didn't mind, I could get quite used to this hero thing.

In the aftermath of Trent Bridge, we all mentioned the fact that if we had got that wicket at Old Trafford we would have won the Ashes by now and could have gone on the piss for the week before The Oval. Instead we had to face up to the hardest week of our lives. The country had gone cricket-mad. You couldn't turn anywhere without being recognised, which is unusual for cricketers. I tried to stay away from anything to do with the Ashes, which was tough as it was being hyped as the biggest sporting event in England since the 1966 World Cup Final and plastered all over the newspapers, radio and television. Even the weather reports came live from The Oval.

My wife Stine had something of a premonition in the week of the fifth Test. She woke up one morning and said, 'I've just had the strangest dream, you were all on a bus and everyone was waving at you.' I had heard brief mention about an open-top bus tour if we won, but I had never mentioned it to her. Weird. She can be funny like that.

At the back of my mind I feared there could be a cruel twist with the Aussies snatching it at the end. I was looking up at the sky, hoping a monsoon would descend on London for the next week. But on the first day the sun shone and Warney spun his magic to take five wickets. Even so we were reasonably pleased to finish on 319/7 with Straussy getting a century.

On the second morning I resumed on five and progressed to 32 as we finished on 373 all out. It was crucial to drag it out for a little bit longer. While I had only got seven at Trent Bridge, it was a huge step to overcome the Warney factor, and in the build-up to The Oval I had enjoyed a prolonged session with Merlyn, the bowling machine which attempts to simulate his bowling action. I was patient and played myself in to a bit of form, which would prove more than useful for the second innings.

We never expected the Aussies to make it easy and Langer and Hayden then scored 112 without loss as we failed to take a wicket in an uninterrupted session for the first time in the series. After tea, before a ball had been bowled, Australia returned to the field, but then took the surprising decision to leave due to poor light. Walking off, we kept our heads down, so they couldn't see the glee on our faces. It wasn't our problem. The longer they stayed off the field the more chance we had of winning.

On the Saturday Langer and Hayden both reached centuries, but rain and poor light came to our aid again, washing out 53 overs. By the Sunday morning the Aussies had no choice but to bat in the gloom. It was great for bowling, but awful for fielding. At one point I was at fourth slip when Freddie was bowling and I couldn't see a thing. If it came my way the ball was going to clean me up.

Australia started the day on 277/2, but an amazing spell from Freddie and Hoggie got them all out for 367. They lost their last seven wickets in just 90 balls. Freddie was awesome; we couldn't get the ball out of his hand. His attitude was this was the final Test and there was no point in leaving anything behind. It was all or nothing now. Their innings came to a close when I caught Lee's slog deep on the long-on boundary.

On the Sunday night six of us went to a Pizza Express near the hotel with our wives. Around the table we were all distant, thinking about the following day. At various times we all weren't there. You had to shout to get us out of our trance. You couldn't avoid thinking we were on the brink of the biggest day of our lives.

I got to my hotel door on Monday morning and didn't want to leave. I did, but I didn't. I was almost overpowered by nerves, it was like going to the gallows. I know Fletch had a wobble too. Everything I did, taking the lift, walking through the lobby, I thought the next time I do it the Ashes will have been decided and our lives might have changed forever.

At The Oval Fletch took the chat and he was visibly shaken. You don't normally get that from him, but you could hear the tension in his voice. Looking around all the guys had a mask of anxiety, and were clearing their throats and fidgeting a lot. It promised to be both the worst and the best day. We needed to bat for around 60 of the 98 overs to make sure of a draw. If I was shaking and nervous at Nottingham, I was far worse now, I was a physical wreck at the start of our innings.

After resuming on 34/1, the sight of McGrath removing Vaughan and Bell in successive balls to leave us 67/3 made me worse. The Ashes were slipping away.

Hoggy and I went in to the dining room at The Oval to hide from the action. We started playing rummy, something we had never done before. Then someone put their head around the door to tell us Tres was out. This can't be happening, we don't deserve this.

By lunch we had lost Freddie too and were 126/5. At the start of the afternoon session I went and sat in the coaches' office with my pads on. I was gently shaking and felt sick. The fitness coach Nigel Stockill came in and said, 'Are you alright?' and got me a glass of water. 'Can you just sit down and talk to me for a while, not about cricket, just about anything,' I asked him. We had some general chit-chat before Geraint Jones got tumbled by Shaun Tait. I was in.

It was 199/7 and we were in serious danger of throwing away the Ashes. My mouth was dry and I was breathing quickly as I walked down the steps to join Kevin Pietersen, but as I stepped over the rope it all became clearer again. I was focused and cricket thoughts flooded my head: Tait is reversing it, get your legs out of the way, watch the ball, get your face straight.

I had to stay with Kev, that was my job. We just tried to relax each other, he kept saying 'keep going, George' to make me laugh. It has been said a few times I look like the actor George Clooney, something I am not going to argue with. Together we would count our way through every ball in an over, five, four, three, two, one, and then again. We then counted down 12 balls over two overs and kept upping it as our confidence grew.

At tea we had made it to 221. Everyone was really chuffed, but I knew we weren't there yet. I went and sat in the coaches' room again and kept telling myself to focus. I wanted no part in the premature celebrations. You never know when you're safe with the Aussies. Even if it got down to them needing ten an over for 25 overs they could still do it.

After tea we began to gradually pull away. The Ashes were getting closer every time Kev struck the ball to the boundary as he made his way to 158. It was a joy to watch such raw power and supreme confidence up close. Kevin was very relaxed, he is just incredibly confident all the time. Some of the shots he played were ridiculous, he took on Warney, hitting him for a succession of sixes and fours.

Brett Lee was bowling at 95 mph, but I didn't feel any fear. I thought, 'You are going to have to kill me to get me out because I'm not going anywhere.' I would do whatever it took to stay in. I wanted the Ashes that much. During the same spell Kev nonchalantly hit Brett over the longest boundary in to the crowd in front of square. How on earth did he do that?

Incredibly, Kev had been under some pressure before this Test as he hadn't scored a century so far in the series. He is always going to fall in to that trap because of his confidence, but I love that about him. We need to create more Kevin Pietersens. When he first joined the side I remember thinking if this bloke thinks he can be bolshie in this dressing room he has got another thing coming, but he fitted in

straight away and gave us a new lease of life. He is full of the odd bit of bullshit, but it doesn't harm anyone, it is good fun. Beyond the bravado, he is a very professional man and a brilliant cricketer.

When we reached 300 I began to feel pretty good. There wasn't a specific moment I thought we had done it, just a gradual easing of the tension. But I know I was there on the field when we won the Ashes. You can't buy that. It will stay with me forever.

My role was to be Kev's chaperone, but I also managed my highest Test score of 59. I was proud as I gave everything against the best bowlers in the world in a pressurised situation. That told the real story of Ashley Giles, and whatever the doubters had said earlier in the series they couldn't take that knock away from me. I had proved what I could do for the team.

After I was ninth man out we didn't add any more runs to finish 335 all out. Australia then faced those four balls in their second innings before taking the offer of bad light. Back in the dressing room there was a bit of confusion about what was happening until the umpires Rudi Koertzen and Billy Bowden popped their heads around the door, and said, 'We want you to keep it quiet, but we're going to call the game off, congratulations.' We all jumped up and down and went mad. Job done. There is a bond between the 12 players that will remain forever because we feel like we have been through a couple of world wars together.

Of course, we had a big night out. I remember being drunk, but the adrenaline was still running through me so I didn't feel so bad. Arriving back at the hotel in the early hours, I woke up my two kids and whispered, 'We won the Ashes, we won the Ashes.' After three hours' sleep, I jumped straight out of bed with no hangover. I was so excited. 'Let's get breakfast, let's get the kids ready,' I told Stine. 'It is only 6am, go back to sleep,' she said. But I couldn't wait to continue the celebrations. I put the telly on and the first thing I saw was a live shot of a reporter in our hotel reception saying Andrew Flintoff was still in the bar. What sort of state would he be in?

Later on we all stumbled on to an open-top bus, slightly concerned there would only be a few people on the streets. But our fears were allayed when we turned the first corner and saw people five deep along the route, and others hanging out of windows and standing on roofs. Strauss and I looked at each other like kids, we couldn't believe it. We got off at Trafalgar Square to greet the 20,000 who had gathered under Nelson's Column. It was a moment I wished could last forever.

Afterwards we made our way down Whitehall to meet the Prime Minister at Downing Street. It was basically a photo opportunity for Tony Blair. We were exhausted and disappointed to discover they didn't have any alcohol, but they soon managed to find some. KP chatted to Cherie Blair like they were best mates, but when she moved on, he asked, 'Who was she?'

Then it was on to Lord's for a few presentations, by which time we were rocking again and had found our second wind. Back at the hotel I had a choice between falling in to bed and sleeping for 16 hours or jumping in to the shower and getting

ready for another night out. You only win the Ashes for the first time once, so I jumped in the shower and headed down to the hotel bar.

On the Wednesday lunchtime I drove home to Birmingham, which finally gave me a few hours to myself. Listening to the James Blunt CD I had played all summer, I had the opportunity to think back to everything we had been through over the last seven weeks. That really was a lovely moment, just letting it all sink in. We had won the Ashes.