



By Bill Ricquier

Analysis



# A Review of Men's International Cricket in 2023

**Men's international cricket had plenty to celebrate in 2023 but there was also much cause for concern.**

One thing that was confirmed beyond all doubt was the primacy of the Big Three, India, Australia and England. In 2022 England, to almost universal astonishment given their poor form of the previous twelve months or so, were the dominant side, carrying all before them in Test cricket and becoming World T20 champions (to add to the fifty-over World Cup they had won in 2019).

2023 started with Bazball turning screwball in Wellington as England became only the fourth side in Test

history to lose a match - in this case by one run - after enforcing the follow-on. In the meantime India won a hard-fought four-match home series against Australia two-one. It was Australia, though, who triumphed in the World Test Championship, beating India in the final at The Oval in June. Then came The Ashes. England and Australia produced five pulsating Test matches, at least as exciting and satisfying as contests as the epic 2005 encounter. As in 2019, England won the fifth Test at The Oval to square the series but the urn remained with the Australians and their highly impressive captain, Pat Cummins.

Then it was the fifty-over World Cup, hosted by India. England hosted the

2019 edition, and won. Australia hosted the 2015 edition, and won. India hosted the 2011 edition, and won. This time India seemed almost ludicrously ahead of the rest of the field, and stadia packed with their vociferous blue-clad supporters presented a uniquely hostile environment for opposing teams. They won all their games up to and including the semi-final, against New Zealand, without being seriously stretched. Then, at the final in Ahmedabad, before the man in whose honour the vast stadium was named, Prime Minister Modi, they seemed to freeze. The ebullient Australian left-hander Travis Head, had the satisfying experience of playing the innings of his life twice in five months; he had made a century in the first



innings of the World Test Championship final and now he did the same here. He also took the catch - a brilliant running and diving effort - which helped settle the result of the match by dismissing Rohit Sharma, India's totemic captain when it seemed he might be on the verge of a match-winning innings. So it was to Cummins that a visibly disgruntled Modi was compelled to hand over the trophy, before abruptly departing the podium, purportedly to shake hands with the other players, leaving a somewhat non-plussed Cummins, centre-stage with the trophy but on his own.

England, as it happens, made a complete mess of the defence of their title. All sorts of excuses and reasons were proffered but none was as pithy or salient as that of Ben Stokes: "We were crap".

Other countries naturally had their moments during the World Cup, notably the losing semi-finalists South Africa and New Zealand, and the romantics' favourite, Afghanistan. But generally speaking, the Big Three have it all their own way. They still play four and five match Test series, at least against each other. The two-Test series - yes it's a contradiction in terms - is becoming the default for the other countries; that New Zealand-England series in early 2023

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was a two-match affair, with England dominant in the first game at Mount Maunganui. What a shame it wasn't a five match series. New Zealand haven't played one of those since 1971-72; Sri Lanka have never played even a four-match series. By the end

of 2023 reports were emerging of Test tours of Australia and New Zealand, by, respectively, West Indies and South Africa, when the visitors would be represented by exceptionally weakened squads. For the poorer teams the attractions of the franchise tournaments are an irresistible attraction for the best players (though in this context it is South Africa's own SA20 tournament that is keeping the best players at home, at the administration's behest, a classic example of the modern game's inevitable tendency to cannibalism).

The World Cup was a curious competition. There were ten sides, each playing each other once, with the top four playing in the semi-finals. So if you were addicted to fifty-over cricket it was fantastic. Otherwise it could be a bit of a drag, going on apparently interminably through its seven-week course. Three Test countries/territories - the West Indies - it still somehow seems inconceivable that there was a World Cup for which they did not qualify - Ireland and Zimbabwe, did not qualify but only one non-Test country did: The Netherlands.

The real problem with the tournament was the shortage of exciting matches. Given the exhausting number of games it seemed almost bizarre that only three or four of them could be

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classified as genuinely close.

Not that there was a shortage of outstanding and entertaining performances. Unsung cricketers such as New Zealand's Rachin Ravindra and Sri Lanka's slipped into starring roles. South Africa's much vaunted batting attack did not disappoint; likewise India's pace attack.

And many people will contend that the competition produced the greatest innings not only in World Cup history but in the history of one-day international cricket, Glenn Maxwell's sensational 201 not out for Australia against Afghanistan at Mumbai. Remarkably, Maxwell had already hit the fastest century in World Cup history, against The Netherlands at Delhi. But the innings at Mumbai was on a different level to that or pretty much anything else. One should not devalue the innings because of the competition; Afghanistan have a highly effective and very experienced white-ball attack, and they had Australia reeling at 71 for six in pursuit of 292. Then he was almost out first ball, a hat trick ball. For the second half of his innings he was effectively batting on one leg. He just stood there and whacked it, making 201 off 128 balls. Cummins, who helped him add an unbroken 202 for the eighth wicket, made twelve off 68 balls, a masterpiece of discipline and cricketing nous. Were Australia worthy winners of the

tournament - their sixth, nobody else has won it more than twice? Well, they played eleven matches and lost two. India played eleven and lost one; the one they lost was the wrong one.

There was a lot of T20 cricket played in the year. The Pakistan Super League continued to make a case for being the strongest and most entertaining of the franchise tournaments. But in the absence of an ICC tournament little of the T20 cricket played was genuinely memorable.

There was relatively little Test match cricket played in the calendar year 2023 and, as noted above, much of it comprised unsatisfactory two-match series (one match in the case of England v Ireland and Bangladesh v Afghanistan). India went to the West Indies and won; Pakistan went to Sri Lanka and won; Ireland went all over the place and lost. It was all rather sad and predictable. Sri Lanka went to New Zealand and lost. This too was sad and predictable but Sri Lanka travelled - this was at the end of the WTC cycle that ended in June - with a theoretical hope of qualifying for the final against India. This was contingent on their beating New Zealand two-nil, which did not happen. It was also contingent on India beating Australia four-nil. That didn't happen either but when India went two-nil up after two, securing the Border-Gavaskar Trophy, it looked

as though they might do. They won the first two Tests by substantial margins, even though there were times when Australia seemed on top during the second match at Delhi. India's spinners were rampant. Even so there was a feeling that India were not quite the force they had been in previous years. But Australia were suddenly without their captain. Cummins went home after Delhi for "personal reasons". It was not clear what these were or how long he would be absent. In the event, he did not return. (It subsequently transpired that he had returned to Australia to be at the bedside of his dying mother.) The upshot was that Steve Smith captained Australia in the final two Tests, winning the first - Nathan Lyon took eight wickets in India's second innings - and drawing the second. This is a pretty good result for a team visiting India in the 2020s.

After returning to lead his team in the triumphant World Test Championship final, Cummins' next assignment was The Ashes. Like Tim Paine before him, losing the fifth Test at The Oval meant his side retained The Ashes but failed to win the series. Australia last beat England in England in 2001. It seems strange that a group of genuinely outstanding players - Smith, David Warner, Usman Khawaja, Mitchell Starc - are likely to end their careers without playing in a series victory in England. (And you can add Michael Clarke



and Mitchell Johnson to that list.)

But the visitors were equal contributors to a magnificent contest. Every game was closely contested, except the fourth at Old Trafford, which England bossed until the rain came. That does not mean England deserved to win three-two. They effectively allowed Australia to win key phases of the games at Edgbaston and Lord's. Australia were without Lyon's services after the second Test, but England had to do without vice-captain Ollie Pope, and Stokes couldn't bowl. When England went two-nil down an element of desperation set in, but also the selection of Chris Woakes and Mark Wood made a huge difference. There were so many brilliant individual performances that one cannot name them all. If one had to choose one, it would, perhaps surprisingly, be one that took place in a losing cause: Ben Stokes' utterly astonishing century on the final afternoon at Lord's. A close second would be Mitchell Marsh's blistering century at Headingley. And for pure stage management nobody could match Stuart Broad; announcing his retirement days before the final Test at The Oval, he hit his last ball received as a batsman for six and took a wicket - the winning wicket of course - with his final delivery.

Even Stokes, however, cannot rival Cummins as the outstanding male cricketer of 2023. To have captained his country to victory in the World Test Championship, and the World Cup within a few months is an outstanding achievement. His

nerveless batting on the final evening of the first Ashes Test at Edgbaston was the difference between Australia winning and losing the match. He maintained his position as one of the world's best fast bowlers, taking ten wickets in the Boxing Day Test against Pakistan at the MCG.

Cummins had more than a walk-on part in what was unquestionably the single most memorable incident in the calendar year - Alex Carey's stumping of Johnny Bairstow just before lunch on the final day of the second Ashes Test at Lord's, Carey throwing down the stumps as Bairstow ambled down the pitch at the end of an over.

England were 193 for five, chasing an improbable 371, with their last two recognised batsmen, Stokes and Bairstow, at the crease. It was a critical phase of the game.

So much has been said and written about this incident that there is not really much more to say. It was more or less universally accepted very quickly that there was no disputing the actual verdict of Out. In a way this is what makes it so extraordinary. There must have been countless instances of "wrong" dismissals in Test cricket which have caused less anguish than this one. There were three issues really. One was the attribution of blame; everybody enjoys that. Who was most at fault, Bairstow, for dozing, Carey for sharp practice, or Cummins for not withdrawing the appeal? One feels the jury is still out on this, with national preferences still to the fore.

The informed neutral observer would surely conclude that Bairstow was the author of his own misfortune.

The second issue is the reaction of the crowd, and particularly the MCC members in and around the Long Room in the Pavilion. Speaking as a member who was actually in the Long Room at the time I thought the treatment of the Australian players by a substantial number of members was an embarrassment and a disgrace.

The third issue is the impact of the incident on the match and the series. The immediate aftermath was Stokes' tremendous innings and his partnership with Broad; they both seemed energised and somehow given extra motivation by the Bairstow dismissal; Broad in particular seemed in his element. England generally seemed a much better side in the last three Tests than they were in the first two. Carey, interestingly, seemed a shadow of his former self.

There is no denying the quality of the series; it showed, repeatedly, what a wonderful thing Test cricket is. When the news was confirmed, in January, of the second-string squad South Africa would be sending to play two - of course - Tests in New Zealand, former Australian captain Steve Waugh called it "a defining moment in the death of Test cricket". Yet only a few weeks before, South Africa beat India in a superb match at Centurion before a succession of packed houses. Surely it is not beyond the wit, and the purse strings, of the ICC and the Big Three to find a way of saving the five-day game.