

Jonathan Agnew



One year ago Michael Clarke stood in the middle of Brisbane's hostile cricket stadium directing his forces. Satisfied, the Australian captain then switched his attention to England's James Anderson: a lower order batsman who was preparing to face the fastest bowler

in the world, Mitchell Johnson. 'You get ready for a broken arm,' Clarke snarled at Anderson, wagging his finger aggressively. It was for all his players to hear, too. Anderson's warty smile was telling. He had heard it all before. He had almost certainly said something like it himself. Although graphic, it is so much part of the game that the umpires did nothing to intervene. It is known as sledging, and designed to make a batsman uncomfortable.

'Knock his head off' is one of the most common things you will hear on the professional cricket field. And, running in to bowl 30 years ago, I remember wanting to intimidate the batsman: to hit him. To frighten him. But never to hurt him. Not really.

I did hit batsmen during my career. I broke bones and struck the Sri Lankan batsman, now senior referee, Ranjan Madugalle, a horrible blow in the mouth that still bears the scar. Every fast bowler from Harold Larwood onwards might be bearing the grief inflicted upon the 22-year-old Sean Abbott whose very run-of-the-mill bouncer last week struck and killed the Australian batsman Phillip Hughes.

The ball struck an unprotected part of the neck and the tragic accident was a freak. Even recognising that, seeing a young, fit and highly skilled batsman felled like that has had a profound impact on everyone who plays sport at any level. It simply is not supposed to happen.

It can wait, but I wonder how Clarke, who is utterly devastated by the loss of the man he calls his brother, will one day feel about his on-pitch

'Every bowler might be bearing the grief of Sean Abbott'

comments now he has seen at first hand what a cricket ball can really do. And not just Clarke, but everyone who routinely shouts, 'Knock his head off!' It simply does not seem possible that cricket can be played in the same way again.

The juvenile posturing, swearing and swaggering attempts by fast bowlers to appear macho has become a blight.

We will never forget Phillip Hughes, not merely for his charm and sparkling batting but hopefully for making his fellow players take a long hard look at what cricket has become – and not liking all of what they see.