

JONATHAN AGNEW



It is appropriate that Adelaide is the venue for this week's Test match between Australia and England. With deep resentment grumbling in both camps, and England's Jonathan Trott having returned home with a stress related illness following England's massive defeat in Brisbane, the Ashes returns to the ground where the most ill-tem-

pered Test match in cricket's history was played.

It was 80 years ago, when England's controversial Bodyline tactic was employed to counter Australia's master batsman, Don Bradman, that relations between the two teams, and also between the two countries, reached breaking point. England's fast bowler, Harold Larwood, hit and seriously injured two Australian batsmen and the crowd threatened to riot. The Australian captain, Bill Woodfull, famously observed: 'There are two teams out there. One of them is playing cricket, the other is not.'

This tour has not quite reached that level of nastiness, but it is not far off. The central issue is 'sledging', which is best translated as verbal abuse. This has always been a part of cricket, which despite its genteel image is, in fact, hostile and physically intimidating.

In most cases, sledging is little more than banter, which a bowler employs as a means of disturbing a batsman's concentration but it can quickly degenerate. Towards the end of the Brisbane Test, Australia's captain, Michael Clarke, warned England's James Anderson that he was

about to have his arm broken by the fast bowler Mitchell Johnson. Clarke was fined, not so much for what he said, but because it was picked up and broadcast by the pitch microphones.

I have been involved with professional cricket for nearly 40 years, and sledging has always been part of the game. I have been threatened with 'having my head knocked off' and I have certainly said

the same to batsmen. Either way you shrug it off and, in those days, we were able to settle scores amicably over a drink after play. Sadly that does not happen now, and there is no opportunity for the heat to be taken out of situations that quite

naturally occur during the course of a combative day.

With so much at stake now, neither team is prepared to make the first goodwill gesture for fear of being perceived weak. But it is not weak to respect your opponent or the game, and sledging is not macho. This week, I sincerely hope both sets of players step back from the brink.

***'It's not
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