

JONATHAN AGNEW



It has been a tough week to be an England supporter. Defeats to Chile in football, New Zealand in both rugby codes and to Australia in the first Ashes Test challenge our unfailing dedication to our national teams. They also provide a never ending supply of angry material

for the inevitable radio phone-ins.

Following England's bruising defeat in Brisbane I sought out the group of travelling supporters who Graeme Swann has described as the heartbeat of the England team abroad – the Barmy Army. There they were, about 200 hundred strong, in the Pig 'N' Whistle pub, which has been transformed into their HQ for the week. They drowned their sorrows while lamenting the loss, but are clearly loving every minute of their tour of a life time.

Amongst the predominately, but not exclusively, young male travellers I met two Championship football referees from the North East who have to return home before this weekend's fixtures, several recently retired businessmen, and a man who had decided to blow what remains of his divorce settlement on this Ashes tour. Led by the Army's dedicated trumpet player, Billy Cooper, they defiantly sang their familiar songs laced, naturally, with lyrics cunningly twisted to taunt the Australians.

Surely this is the best example of supporting a team that there can be: these people are knowledgeable and dedicated, sanguine and re-

alistic. Troublemakers are immediately detected and frozen out, and in 20 years, I cannot recall their attracting a single negative headline.

Like the rest of us, they will be travelling to Alice Springs this week. The Barmy Army has organised a charity match against an Aboriginal XI the day before England play a two-day game in the outback. This is the last thing Alastair Cook's men need as preparation. Beaten into sub-

mission by the pace of Mitchell Johnson, who was destroyed by the Barmy Army on our last visit here for 'bowling to the left and to the right', England need quality work on hard and bouncy practice pitches rather than swatting flies and fielding in the

broiling heat of Australia's red centre.

I will drop in to Alice Springs en route to Adelaide, but not for long. My wife, Emma, and I are attempting the legendary Ghan train trip from Darwin to Adelaide – a journey that will take us three days and two nights. What more soothing way can there be to erase the painful memory of Brisbane?

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