

JONATHAN AGNEW



It seems incredible that in just eight weeks' time the first Ashes Test will be underway in Brisbane. These back-to-back series are a one off, designed to separate the Ashes from the World Cup, and there appears to be no let up in either the hype or the interest as the teams prepare for what promises to be a hostile, bruising return to Australia.

The 2013 summer is one I will re-

member with mixed feelings. We must never take winning the Ashes for granted, and so congratulate England on their 3-0 victory. However, for all of Ian Bell's heroic innings and Stuart Broad's devastating spell at Durham, the season has ended with most pundits expecting Australia to fight back strongly on their own soil.

This feeling has definitely gained weight as a result of the one day series that followed the Ashes in which England fielded a spectacularly under-strength team. Three of those emerging cricketers – Boyd Rankin, Ben Stokes and Jos Buttler – made the most of their opportunities but the decision to rest so many key players (including the captain) when members of the public had paid up to £70 in advance to see them is a decision the England and Wales Cricket Board might regret.

The venues for that series paid hefty guarantees to the Board to stage those games, and all have recently spent millions of pounds upgrading their facilities. They desperately need the income to cover their costs, and whether

members of the public will be willing to part with their cash again without knowing who will be playing remains to be seen. I cannot believe that anyone who was rugged up against the chilly night air at the Rose Bowl for the final match would feel that they were watching a cut and thrust contest of the highest standard and, besides, if it has really come to the

stage where England are unable to field their best team for a series against Australia – our greatest rival – then something is dreadfully wrong.

Unsavoury and unnecessary incidents involving members of the England team following the final test at the Oval provided

headlines that cricket can do without, while umpiring controversies raised questions about the use of technology and the spirit of the game. And yet the popularity of cricket continues to rise with 10 times more people listening online to *Test Match Special* this summer than for last year's Olympics.

'It promises to be a bruising return to Australia'