

The Politics and History of Cricket: “Give Me that Flipper Shane”

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For more terrestrially grounded people, writing about cricket can be seen as an exercise in distant planetary speculation. The Nobel laureate Harold Pinter did not think so, calling this old English game “the greatest thing that God ever created on earth.” Others might disagree with mild disgust, finding it archaic, jargon heavy and slow.

In the early 1990s, one figure broke through the stuffiness of willow bats, pads, leather balls and white flannel. When life left the overly worked body of Australia’s **Shane Warne**, who expired in Thailand at 52, the reaction was global. In India and Pakistan, hundreds of millions mourned. This most celebrated of error-prone buffoons was, as the emperor Vespasian might have said, becoming a god.

The Melbourne Cricket Ground, on March 30, became the venue for one such occasion: a [state memorial service](#) held in honour of the cricketer. For a brief spell, a sporting stadium had become a cathedral, the occasion heavy with solemnity. In it, Warne’s followers and admirers communed.

When Sir Elton John appears to commemorate you, the celebrity value is bound to inflate and discombobulate. There were others from the Hollywood set with recorded speeches (fittingly, Warne, with his peroxide hair, ear adornments and lifestyle had been given the name of “Hollywood”). The more cynical observer might wonder whether these people

would necessarily know what a cricket pitch looked like, let alone what Warne's expertise entailed. But sport in this era can enable a figure to move beyond fringes, catapulted to permanent, social media dissemination. Even prior to the advent of the tech giant platform, Warne had already broken the mould.

Nothing can be taken away from his expertise, in so far as it was practised on the cricket ground. The smell of leather whirring and whizzing upon flattened grass. Deception and guile, packed into the movement of the delivery. A mastery of tactics, field placements, with a sublime ability that enabled him to execute the ["ball of the century"](#) in 1993 against England's bemused Mike Gatting.

Memorials, however, always risk going too far, slipping into sappy hagiography. Malcolm Knox tearily glistens by [claiming](#) that the cricketer was "a force of nature and an everyman". Writing like a starstruck admirer, Knox is dewey. "If you ever walked behind Shane Warne through a crowded place, you might get an idea of what it was like. Some deferred by looking away again. Others grappled with their phones to take a quick shot."

Another admirer of Warne's, sports commentator Sam Newman, was aghast about Warne's other, lesser-known activities. It came out during the memorial service itself. Warne, Andrea Egan of the UN Development Programme revealed, had joined its wildlife fund, Lion's Share, in 2021. Her address seemed to transform the late sports figure into a modern incarnation of St. Francis of Assisi. She explained how his legacy lived on "in the people of Sri Lanka promoting sea turtle conservation, in an all-female anti-poaching unit in South Africa and the team of the Byron Bay hospital, who were supported in the wake of the bushfires."

Egan's appearance [stunned](#) Newman. "They had a representative from the United Nations! I tell you what, if that man has not taken all before him, I'd like to see someone who can top that." It's not often you hear a good word about the UN in these circles - Newman is as parochially soaked as they come - but he had to concede that Warne's involvement, and the acknowledgment, "nearly blew me out of the water".

Memorial services also serve to iron out wrinkles and add cosmetic touch-ups. Brilliance, or genius, can be mistaken as being broad rather than confined, somehow seeping into other areas of life. Unless you have a particular affection for laddish and occasionally loutish behaviour, for acts of spectacular stupidity in public life, cricket remains the throne upon which Warne sat most comfortably. But when he got off it and wandered around without orb and sceptre, the messiness began.

Warne made no secret of this tendency, though he proved unapologetic about it. In one of his three ghost written autobiographies, [No Spin](#), he conceded to having "made a number of mistakes in my life and I will continue to make them. This is what it means to be human."

With that standard in mind, Warne proved particularly human [in accepting](#) \$5,000 in 1994 during a one-day tournament in Sri Lanka from a shady Indian bookmaker by the name of "John". This was a stroke of good luck - Warne had frittered away about that same amount at the hotel's casino in Colombo. This "gift" with "no strings attached" transpired because Warne's own Australian teammate, Mark Waugh, had received \$4000 from "John" for supplying weather and pitch reports.

In reflecting upon this incident, Warne gave one of his famously baffling reasons. He did not

wish to insult John, who was offering the money to a figure he described as “a great player”. He would recall that this was “the sort of conversation I might have had with my dad and brother.” This dubious family analogy did not extend to the Pakistani cricketer Saleem Malik, who, fortunately for the slow bowler, [failed in an attempt](#) to make Warne throw a match for \$200,000.

Family, however, makes an appearance again in 2003. The occasion was the injudicious taking of tablets, which pushed Warne, and Australia, into the less than flattering light of sports doping. That year, Warne was found to have taken a banned diuretic. Like many an idiot son in the lurch, [he blamed his unwitting mother](#), who wished him to look “nice” when facing the media.

At the time, Dick Pound, former vice-president of the International Olympic Committee, [found that explanation](#) incorrigible, “laughable” and on par with the excuse, “I got it from the toilet seat”. In February 2003, the Australian Cricket Board drugs panel imposed a twelve-month ban.

An unrelenting Pound would continue to find Warne’s account dubious. In his 2006 book [Inside Dope](#), the former sporting administrator is withering to the cricketer. Pointing the finger at his mother for wishing to see a more streamlined version of her son before the cameras concealed the fact that Warne was nursing a shoulder injury. “The diuretic was a masking agent that could have hidden the possible use of steroids that would help the injury cure faster. He had returned to play almost twice as quickly as the experts had predicted.”

With Warne’s entry into the pantheon of cricket’s immortals, ethicists and philosophers will have no reason to lose sleep. Dick Pound will remain unconvinced. The most profitable exercise will be to regard the player’s talent on the field with admiration, and his ability to command loyalty as remarkable. Keep him on cricket’s throne. He looks best there.

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