

## **A fine delivery**

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If you were looking for natural orators, you might not start your search on the nation's cricket fields. Allan Border probably spoke for most of his fellow players when he said at his testimonial dinner in Sydney in 1994 that he would prefer to go bungy-jumping than stand up on his hind legs and make a speech. Steve Waugh was likewise more of a doer than a talker.

The same goes for the majority of today's players. Ricky Ponting looks more comfortable at the crease than at the lectern. Shane Warne is certainly a whole lot better at leg spin than political spin.

Furthermore, the historical record features some fairly ordinary cricketing speeches. "Full credit" is often given to the opposing team. The view that "the boys played well" seems to be a common one.

If you look more closely, however, you can find some cracking cricket speeches, even if they are not always delivered by professional cricketers. The 1938 Australian tour to England produced some superb batting and several big scores, including England's record Ashes total of 7-903 declared at the Oval. It also produced several sparkling speeches.

When the Australian touring team put into Melbourne en route to England, for instance, they were given a lunch by the Victorian Cricket Association. In a speech delivered by attorney-general Robert Menzies, which was reported in *The Age*, the audience got a glimpse of the obsession that would later make Menzies our first (but not our only) prime ministerial cricket tragic.

In his well-received remarks, Menzies claimed his speeches acted as talismans for the Australian team. He had supported a similar toast in 1930 when Australia had won the Ashes, he explained, and then again in 1934 — and he was sure that former captain Bill Woodfull, who was over at that table drinking dry ginger ale as if he liked it, would be the first to say those speeches had done a good deal towards Australia's successes.

As prime minister, Menzies became famous for timing his overseas travel to coincide with important cricket matches. That practice was obvious even in 1938. In his VCA speech, Menzies noted that by some extraordinary circumstance, prime minister Joseph Lyons had asked him to go to Britain that year to confer with ministers "about something or other", and that he had sent word to the conference organisers asking that they keep the full list of the Australian cricket fixtures next to their inkwells.

Years later, Bradman recalled a different encounter from the 1938 tour. The Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC) hosted a dinner for the Australians at which Stanley Baldwin, three-time British prime minister and president of the MCC, was the speaker.

In the course of the evening, Baldwin asked Bradman what his boyhood ambition had been. A house painter, replied Bradman. Baldwin revealed that he had wanted to be a blacksmith. "Well you see, sir," replied the great batsman, "we have both been thwarted in our ambitions."

On Bradman's death in 2001, he was farewelled at a memorial service at St Peter's Cathedral, Adelaide, which was attended by the good and the great, several thousand fans, and a number of Invincibles. The Anglican archbishop read to the congregation a lovely letter from Lucknow, India:

"God could have made a better strawberry, but he didn't; God could have made a better cricketer, but he didn't."

Richie Benaud was the eulogist on that day, and in the course of a delightful speech he recalled a Sheffield Shield match in Adelaide in 1950-51. In the dressing room after the close of play one evening, the young Benaud was "chirping away".

"You've got to bear in mind that I had just turned 20 and I knew most of what there was to be known about cricket, so I chirped ... I said to (celebrated all-rounder Keith "Nugget") Miller that because Bradman had retired the moment I came into the game, it was one of the sorrows of my life that I had never been able to bowl my leg-spinners to him ...

"Nugget never took his eyes off the cathedral. He didn't turn to me but just looked straight ahead and ruminated for a full two seconds before murmuring: 'We all have one lucky break in our lives, son, and that could have been yours.' "

One of the funniest cricketing speeches was delivered by broadcaster Andrew Denton, who gave Allan Border a terrific roasting at his 1994 testimonial.

"I've watched cricket since I was just ... a bit taller than I am now," Denton began. "I remember as a child watching NSW playing Sheffield Shield cricket on ABC television. I'm not sure who the opposition was but I do recall, as if it were yesterday, a partnership between Allan Border and Dave Colley. At the time, I thought any partnership listed as Border-Colley was pretty funny.

"Before long, though, my amusement turned to amazement as I began to watch an aggressive young left-handed batsman, stockily built, with a shock of dark hair, tear the attack apart. His whirlwind 70 that day remains one of the most exciting innings I've ever seen. Immediately, this man became my hero.

"Unlikely as it may seem, that's why I'm here tonight. You see, I've never forgotten Dave Colley. Frankly, I've become obsessed with him and I was hoping that, once all this tribute stuff is over, Allan, maybe you could tell me a little bit about him — what he was like to play with, what his favourite shots were, what he looked like in the shower, that sort of thing."

Denton went on to talk a bit about Border as well: "Truth be told, I don't just respect AB. I worship the very protector he sweats in." In language that may inspire a few of the current Australian line-up, Denton urged Border not to retire prematurely.

"You'll know the right time to get out. There'll be any number of telltale signs. One day, for instance, you'll call for a runner and they'll send out someone with a walking frame. Or maybe one day you'll find yourself prodding the pitch — not to smooth out any bumps, but to look for a nice, soft spot where you can have a nap. Or you may simply find yourself going for a quick two, turning for the second run, and then completely forgetting why it was you were running in the first place."

Denton also revealed his disdain for the commonly expressed preference for a close contest.

"Remember when scoring an Ashes Test century was considered an achievement?" he asked. "If you were an Australian in England last summer (when the Australian team had taken a stick to their hosts), it was almost unavoidable. I reckon even Jack Newton could've scored one, once he got his eye in. Australia playing England, 1993, is the worst sporting contest I've ever seen since the last time the Swans played anyone. The entire tour was an absolute bloodbath. England didn't have a hope. Australia was superior in every respect. The result was never in doubt. It was a complete mismatch — and I loved every single minute of it."

The Adelaide Test showed that Denton's speech was one for the ages. The cricketing speech may not be as newfangled as the snickometer and the hot spot. But as far as technologies go, it is just as powerful at cutting through the blather and exposing the truth.

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