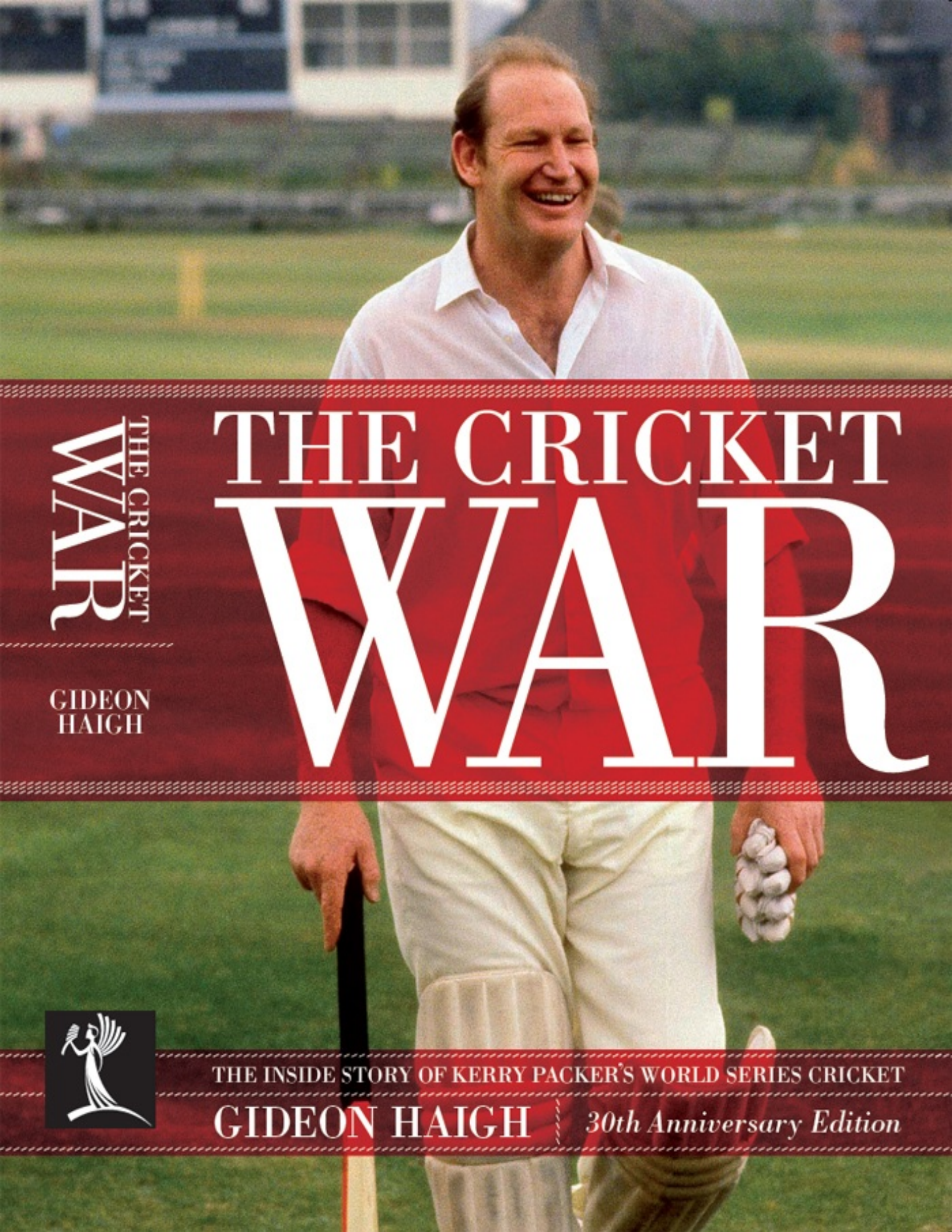




THE CRICKET
WAR

GIDEON
HAIGH

THE CRICKET WAR



THE INSIDE STORY OF KERRY PACKER'S WORLD SERIES CRICKET

GIDEON HAIGH

30th Anniversary Edition

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‘There is only a handful of sports writers whose latest book I eagerly await. Gideon Haigh is one of them ... the most elegant and thorough exponent of book-length sports journalism in this country.’ *Sun-Herald*

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THE CRICKET WAR

The inside story of
Kerry Packer's
World Series Cricket

Gideon Haigh

Statistics compiled
by Ross Dundas



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*To remember my brother,
Jasper Manton Oakley Haigh (1969–1987)*

CONTENTS

Preface to the 2007 edition

Prologue 'Jesus, it's not going to work'

- 1** 'These are not professionals'
- 2** 'You think this is a fucking democracy, do you?'
- 3** 'Where do I sign?'
- 4** 'How come you're worth all that money?'
- 5** 'War situation'
- 6** 'Just like old Aussie, eh?'
- 7** 'If you fuck it up we could lose the whole \$12 million'
- 8** 'Half a house brick at a hundred miles an hour'
- 9** 'We cannot afford to let this man down'
- 10** 'The best bunch of cricketers I've ever seen ... with one exception'
- 11** 'It's gotta be the world's most expensive cricket bat'
- 12** 'Simmo bring down a shit side'
- 13** 'Sweet reason'
- 14** 'Listen, about those helmets'
- 15** 'These people have found truth'
- 16** 'Rejected, dejected, we're sorry we're born'
- 17** 'I feel very sorry for the Australians'
- 18** 'I think this Lennie want to kill you man'
- 19** 'One to the eye, one to the bollocks'
- 20** 'We were representing our country, but it wasn't important'
- 21** 'These are professionals, and they'll behave as professionals'

Afterword to the 2007 edition

Complete World Series Cricket Statistics compiled by Ross Dundas

Bibliography

Index

PREFACE TO THE 2007 EDITION

It's fifteen years since I was involved in researching *The Cricket War*, at which time fifteen years had elapsed since the events it described. Yet the writing, and even the phenomenon of World Series Cricket, still feels disarmingly recent, perhaps because what seemed so uncompromisingly and vividly new then has become its own form of tradition. The cult of personality that so willingly enfolded the players of 1977 is still with us. The television formula of imposing narrative on the game and applying state-of-the-art broadcasting technology to elucidate the action is little altered: even the narrator-in-chief, Richie, and his longest serving lieutenant, Bill Lawry, remain.

Kerry Packer, of course, has gone to his reward—or, as he suspected, nowhere. But he wasn't easily replaced. His son James, who was learning cricket at the time in a household through which the world's most famous practitioners passed as a matter of course and right, has taken up the chairman's remote control. Yet Kerry's outsized reputation seems to keep the Nine Network captive of the twentieth century, those unmistakeable features looming spectrally from Gerald Stone's recent book-length obituary *Who Killed Channel Nine?*

In cricket, meanwhile, his name has perhaps never been more often invoked. Administrators have kept their eyes on the skies ever since, anxious that another media entrepreneur with a yen for sport should descend and make off with the best talent. The nearest equivalent were the 'rebel tours' of South Africa between 1982 and 1989, which plundered players from England, Australia, the West Indies and Sri Lanka, although these offered no head-to-head competition with the established game on its own soil. Although Rupert Murdoch cast a long shadow over Australian cricket in the aftermath of his formation of rugby's Super League, he was content merely to spook everyone in cooe. Now, in the form of the Texan billionaire Allen Stanford and Subhash Chandra of Zee Telefilms, we are watching the formations of new professional tours. Even the reaction of the authorities is tempered by the lessons of World Series Cricket, Packer having proved that cricket is a premium media franchise. The churchmouse-poor West Indies Cricket Board feels it might gain from making space for a savvy businessman; the filthy-rich Board of Control for Cricket in India believes it has too much to lose from the division of its lucrative market.

Stanford and Chandra, moreover, have proceeded in unconscious emulation of Packer by basing their enterprises on the game's new Twenty20 variant, just as Packer thirty years ago homed in on 50-over cricket, hitherto underexploited, as the growth end of the market. The International Cricket Council has also learned its lesson. Where the establishment in 1977 stood back in consternation and let Packer make use of the limited-overs template they had pressed, the ICC has this time staked out its turf with the recent World Twenty20 Championship in South Africa. But we can expect more of the same, explained with airy invocations of Packer, who made the unthinkable thinkable: that men would play for money rather than merely for national pride.

Sometimes it is argued that the establishment should have seen Packer coming; that World Series Cricket was inevitable. The statement is essentially weightless. The end of the world is inevitable. That does not mean we must begin planning for it. One's death is unavoidable. But from this it might be inferred that one should live for the present—and this is what cricket's authorities chiefly did. In the 1970s, world cricket was a group of autarkic city states, whose overriding end was raising sufficient revenues to cover their operating costs, and whose honorary administrators were strangers to strategic planning. It was a system little changed in a hundred years, and systems enduring so long might as well carve their by-laws into clay tablets for all the likelihood of their voluntary revision. Since *The Cricket War*, I have been involved in writing the official history of Cricket Australia, previously the Australian Cricket Board. It is striking just how precisely the external impression of the organisation tallies with its internal workings: its ink-dense minutes are like reading those of a big cricket club, absorbed in minutiae, building by accretion, taking it one season at a time, assuming that there'd always be players, confident there'd always be fans.

It's truer to say that World Series Cricket originated in an enduring tension. In its pioneering days, Australian cricket was a players' game. The original tours of England were entrepreneurial expeditions, returning home laden with honours and financial spoils. The players, with the commercial and moral support of the powerful Melbourne Cricket Club, were mainly their own masters. That changed with the foundation of the Australian Board of Control for International Cricket in May 1905. The eighteen months of wrangling that ensued subdued the players and marginalised the club, capturing the proceeds of Ashes competition for the game—or, at least, the game as it was constituted by the state associations whose members composed the board. With the Big Six dispute of 1912, when

Australian cricket's half-dozen leading exponents stood out of a tour of England because the Board had denied them their choice of manager, the players were permanently shut from the game's organisation. I well remember Ian Chappell's words when I was talking to him about *The Cricket War*. 'There's three events that matter in the history of Australian cricket: 1912, Bodyline and World Series Cricket.' I would qualify that judgement only by remarking that 1912 was a final efflorescence of player power: the Board had really cornered their cricketers in 1906.

It adds some piquancy to the events of 1977 if you recall that the roles were reversed seventy-one years earlier. In 1906, the fourteen best cricketers in New South Wales quietly signed with the Melbourne Cricket Club to participate in a Test series against a visiting team from England. When this alliance was revealed, the new Board moved quickly to establish their authority: the NSW Cricket Association banned the players, the Victorian Cricket Association moved to destabilise the club's tenure at Jolimont, and the conversion of the South Australian Cricket Association to the cause of a national cricket government left the allies isolated. Packer turned the tables, exploiting the discontent of the players at the power and privileges of which the Board had stripped them all those decades before.

The time was also ripe socially: after Vietnam, after Whitlam, an era of trade union militance and of high inflation eroding the value of slow-growing rewards. In the aftermath of the blood feuds surrounding the Board's foundation, the players had become an obedient, complaisant lot. But by the 1970s, they were developing a renewed taste for contestation, personified by Ian Chappell, while the members of his unshaven, unkempt XI had acquired an anti-authoritarian aura that extended beyond the cricket field. Bandido moustaches, salty repartee, snappy threads, winning ways: they were a far cry from the short-back-and-sides sportsmen of the 1960s, even though Chappell and Doug Walters had themselves emerged from that time. The abiding age and experience gap between Australian cricketers and their administrators widened so starkly in the 1970s that it could almost have been measured in parsecs.

Writing *The Cricket War* was an unusual personal experience, because I was constantly comparing my findings with my own juvenile recollections. In 1977, I was eleven years old, had played my first few junior seasons in Geelong and was uncompromisingly crazy for cricket. Suddenly not merely the players but the game itself and all it stood for were up for grabs. I had attended the Centenary Test, basked in the warm glow of that century of tradition; now, it seemed, these

things had meant nothing to the players involved. I wasn't so militant as my erstwhile colleague Mark Ray, who returned from England that year with a T-shirt reading 'Death to the Circus'. But I was certainly affronted: nothing is so shockable as a youthful prude.

All the same, what I recall mainly is the excitement. I attended World Series games as well as Tests, watched both on television, saw David Hookes absorb his fearful blow from Andy Roberts, was stirred by Bob Simpson's Cincinnatus-like return to the colours, and fretted that Lillee and Thomson might never again bowl in harness. At an age where too much cricket wasn't enough, I had a lot to thank Kerry Packer for. That spirit shaped *The Cricket War*. At the time of its research, there remained a good deal of residual antagonism towards the World Series *sans-cullottes*, and I sensed that a reconsideration was overdue: a retelling of the story without the censorious tone of the contemporaneous accounts. The book became, I suspect, part of a generational reconsideration underway, which culminated perhaps on news of Packer's death on Boxing Day 2005, when the players in a Melbourne Test formed two solemn lines during a minute's silence, and tributes poured forth from all quarters. Where the senior administrators in Australia in 1977 had been incapable even of enunciating his name—preferring to call him simply 'the private promotor'—Cricket Australia chairman Creagh O'Connor extolled his Bradmanesque stature. 'That cricket is today taken for granted as a natural part of the Australian way of life is in no small measure due to his influence,' he said. 'The so-called "Packer Revolution" in the 1970s has left a lasting legacy in the way the game is played, administered and presented to the public via the influential Channel Nine telecast.' This legacy continues to yield unexpected dividends, and will be debated for some time to come. Meanwhile, this is how it happened, those thirty years ago.

Gideon Haigh
Melbourne 2007

PROLOGUE

‘Jesus, it’s not going to work’

Ian Chappell rarely watched his openers’ preparatory rites, but on the morning of 2 December 1977 he could not help studying Ian Davis. Moments before stepping into a crossfire of West Indian pace, Davis was a hyperactive blur.

‘Wiz was getting ready and I watched him put on a thigh pad,’ Chappell recalls. Then he got this other thigh pad and put it round his chest. But then he had a look at himself in the mirror and took it off. Then he put it back on. And took it off again.’

Davis turned to him seeking advice. ‘Whatever you feel comfortable in, Wiz,’ Chappell said lightly. But even he, after seventy-two Test match first mornings, could feel the weight of the occasion. Because this wasn’t a Test.

It was fourteen months since Chappell had heard talk of an international cricket series independent of the game’s existing rulers, and six since he’d signed a contract to play the Supertests of the upstart World Series Cricket.

He’d joined his rival captain Clive Lloyd in the centre of a cavernous football stadium on Melbourne’s outskirts called VFL Park fifteen minutes earlier, and lost a toss superintended by Sir Garfield Sobers. Not a single photographer had been on hand to record the occasion, and there seemed hardly a soul around. Fewer than 500 people were strewn round concrete tiers that could hold 80,000.

Accompanied by Rick McCosker as he ascended the ramp from the underground dressing room, Ian Davis was about to take in the same vacuum. Seven months earlier he’d joined McCosker on the first morning of the Centenary Test against England to the roars of more than 50,000 at the MCG. Now only the cap was different—gold rather than green—but he could hear his own breathing, ‘Here I am, playing with all these great players,’ Davis thought.

‘And no-one’s here. Jesus, it’s not going to work.’

As he watched McCosker take guard and West Indian Andy Roberts recede into the distance, the twenty-four-yearold collected himself. He felt in form. A stint of weight training had put muscle on his slender ten-and-a-half-stone frame. A few days earlier his captain had told Davis that he’d never seen him hit the ball so hard.

McCosker was more phlegmatic. In a week he’d be thirty-one, a late bloomer who’d taken five years to graft his way into the New South Wales side but then just a year to become a Test batsman. His mind was full of Roberts, who’d rolled him three times in four previous meetings. Roberts would be on him quickly, and he’d get nothing loose.

It was swift to be sure. Umpire Jack Collins had said ‘Play’, and that was exactly what he had to do, stabbing an exploratory short ball to gully. The second ball left him in the air, and kissed his committed bat on its way to Vivian Richards at third slip. West Indian cries filled the still air.

That was Roberts. Crestfallen as he was, McCosker admired the pace man’s craft. Two to play at straight away,’ he thought disgustedly, pulling off his gloves. ‘It’s not supposed to happen like that, but it does against Andy. One day he’ll give me a half-volley.’



Vern Stone didn’t know much about cricket, but WSC’s general manager knew a bad start when he saw it. It was already a bad day. How could that stew at the gate with the photographers have happened? His offsider, Ern Steet, had been following orders to keep reporters from the square, but the priceless moment of WSC’s first toss had been missed when it needed all the good publicity it could get.

Stone could imagine what his master Kerry Packer was now thinking. Taciturn among a group in the VIP area including Victorian Governor, Sir Henry Winneke, the Sydney businessman was studying the empty stands with features tight. Stone’s own face was red as he passed the official response to requests for an audience. ‘No interviews today. Mr Packer wants to enjoy the cricket.’

The tall blonde figure by Packer’s side, Tony Greig, could sense Packer’s distress as well. The South African-born cricketer had been intimately involved with WSC for eight months and was closer to Packer than any member of his star troupe. Now the curtain had risen on the big occasion and there seemed more heads in the VIP area than in the stands.

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Ian Chappell tugged at his cap at the non-striker's end and turned to studying Roberts' twenty-three-year-old scion Michael Holding. His range was rusty, but the boy was quicker straightaway than in Australia two years before, and getting faster by the ball.

What's more, he mused, Holding's front foot landed an unvarying nine inches behind the front crease. 'Shit,' Chappell thought. 'Hope he doesn't wake up to that. Better he bowls from nine inches further away if he's going to bowl that fast.'

The captain re-examined the artificially grown and transplanted pitch he'd first played on a week before against Greig's World XI. Its salient feature—the junction of its two halves—was still easy to see. The fuller length of the World's fast bowlers had saved him discovering what might happen if a ball pitched there. Today, likely as not, he'd find out.

Chappell and Davis settled, Lloyd replacing Holding with Wayne Daniel after three overs. Adopting his captain's businesslike cross-step, Davis moved smartly into line, though he could still recall the reason for his chest pad dilemma. Two years earlier he'd batted in a Brisbane grade match for Toombul with a young wicket-keeper then dossing in the Woolloowin flat Davis shared with the fast bowler Jeff Thomson. Twenty-two-year-old Martin Bedkoher had waved away assistance after allowing the short ball to strike his chest. Then, to Davis' horror, Bedkoher crumpled.

'I'd been the one who'd organised for Martin to come to Brisbane in the first place and he'd only been there a couple of months,' says Davis. 'And I was the first bloke to find out he was dead. I can remember going behind the curtain at the hospital and the doctor telling me. And I can still remember what he had for breakfast that morning and sending his dirty washing home to his mother.' Davis looked up to see the slippery Holding reappear at the outer end.

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Holding himself was apprehensive about second spells. A shoulder injury he'd carried for a year had still to heal, and he nursed it carefully. 'I could bowl fast for five or six overs but after that I could hardly lift my arm up,' he recalls. 'So those first couple of spells always counted. I knew I might not be able to come back for a second spell that day.'

He saw Davis moving swiftly back and across as he let go at 1–33, and was puzzled momentarily by the sound of crashing timber. The little opener pulled away, his eyes shut tight. He had hit his stumps. ‘I can’t understand it to this day,’ Davis recalls. ‘I felt I’d been going quite well but I guess I’d been creeping further and further back, just a few inches, to give myself extra time to play. I must have knocked nearly an inch of wood off the end of my bat.’

Now Holding had found his range, he zeroed in on the pitch’s fault line. Greg Chappell’s first delivery exploded from the crack and fizzed past his nose; his third did the same and bounced to gully from a flinching glove.

At first sight of the left-handed wunderkind, David Hookes, Holding swung to round the wicket. ‘I was still learning, still experimenting,’ Holding says. ‘And I found it difficult to get the ball to straighten to the left-handers from over the wicket. It would pitch and go straight across the body. From round I could get the ball coming into them.’

Hookes scratched his guard, recalling that Bob Willis had recently used the same tactic against him in England. It took three balls to learn the differences. ‘Bob was a fucking off-spinner compared to Michael,’ he says. ‘And that was as quick as Michael got that summer.’ His off drive had barely commenced as his off stump toppled, Hookes stumbling forward like a man pushed down a flight of stairs.



The sight of Doug Walters joining him would normally have cheered Ian Chappell. But Dougie had looked out of sorts in practice, eagle-eye no longer quick enough to disguise his homespun technique. It was possible to enjoy one heel-clicking straight drive from Walters, but Chappell knew this was a different ball game. You had to pounce on anything loose and run like blazes, for Lloyd’s fielding side contained no malingerers.

Sweating on 34 for two hours’ graft as lunch approached, Chappell seized a Holding half-volley with relief. It skimmed in the air behind square leg, where Daniel had been sent to graze after his morning spell. The fast bowler’s stoop was deceptively casual, the catch never in doubt.

As he headed for the players’ race, Chappell noticed he had company. He recognised David Grant, an interviewer recruited to eavesdrop on players’ self-diagnoses of dismissal, who was clearly intent on a word. Grant’s morning preparations had been so rushed that he’d missed McCosker’s early exit altogether. Chappell wasn’t about to change his luck. Not today, or ever. The