



"TEN LITTLE AUSSIE BOYS LAKERED IN A ROW" BY ALAN HILL

The historic, record-breaking figures of Jim Laker against Australia at Old Trafford in July 1956 still produce a surge of pride. There is also a sense of wonderment that his renowned spinning partner, Tony Lock took only one wicket amid the rout. The riposte of Sydney Barnes, another legendary bowling maestro, rather accentuated Lock's dismay. Barnes said: "No one ever got all ten when I was at t'other end."

Among the many congratulatory telegrams was one from Wembley which conveyed wit and delight. It read: "Thanks for making us feel 19 and the Australians 90." The exploit also inspired another cricket devotee and folk singer, Colin Wilkie to express his admiration in verse:

"The ball rose just like a hovering hawk
Tossed from a falconer's hand
Swooped in hunger for the kill
When the hunter did command."

There was one remarkable postscript to the happenings in Manchester. Jim Laker did not begin his journey home until nearly eight o'clock after his unforgettable day. He had been driving for about two hours when he decided to pull into a pub at Lichfield. He recalled: "Inside the crowded bar, a tiny black-and-white television set was showing the highlights of the day's play in the Test match." It can be safely said that he would not have been allowed to remain anonymous in the glare of publicity directed on sporting stars today. Yet not one single patron then recognised the tired celebrity seated behind them. He drank his beer and ate a sandwich, all the while listening to the excited gossip of the other customers.

For Laker the year of his triumph was a watershed; in cricketing terms, it was a crisis to be linked with the last despairing shout of colonialism on the banks of the Suez Canal. His sporting expedition prospered, unlike the fiasco of a shaming military manoeuvre. At 34, Laker had represented England in only 24 Tests, less than half those played in this period. His exploits against the Australians in his benefit year in 1956 were especially cherished because they dispersed the disappointment of a beginner in an unhappy trial against them eight years earlier at Headingley. His match figures on that occasion were an unflattering three wickets for 206 runs.

Laker was now the mature bowling artist and intent on resolving his status. His passage to glory in 1956 began in an ominous dress rehearsal for the forthcoming Test series. The first instalment of wickets was collected for Surrey against the Australians at The Oval in May. He had actually declared himself unfit after a sleepless night helping to nurse his sick daughter.

Stuart Surridge, the Surrey captain, persuaded him to play and he was equally determined to cajole further exertions after tea on the first day. Laker had

then taken four wickets and Surridge brushed aside the protestations of the tired bowler. “No, Jim,” he said, “there are more Australian wickets for you in this innings.” Three of them, those of Maddocks, Lindwall and Johnson, were taken without cost in two overs on the resumption. As one observer said: “Laker cut through them like a grocer’s wire cutting through Cheddar cheese.”

Laker bowled unchanged from just before half-past 12 for four hours and 20 minutes. In a spell of 46 overs from the pavilion end, broken only by the lunch and tea intervals, he took all ten wickets for 88 runs. Not since 1878, when left-arm bowler, Edward Barratt, another Surrey man, did so for the Players, had ten wickets in an innings been achieved against the Australians.

Trevor Bailey, as one fervent admirer, recalled the balance and rhythm of Laker’s action. “He was so grooved he could have run in to bowl blindfolded.” The West Indians called Laker the “praying man”. There was a succession of short steps, the pivot, and then the sharply stretched left hand, palm upwards, before the ball was delivered side-on at the strictly regulated ‘12 o’clock’ position. Micky Stewart, an observant fielding ally with Surrey, referred to the signal application of a bowling artist. “One of Jim’s major assets was that he controlled a cricket ball in all conditions.”

For a decade, in the opinion of all but a minority, Jim Laker was the best off-spinner in the world. His achievements at Old Trafford in 1956 did bring about a late reappraisal of his gifts. In Trevor Bailey’s view, it was not a moment too soon. “He is and has been for at least five years a magnificent bowler.”