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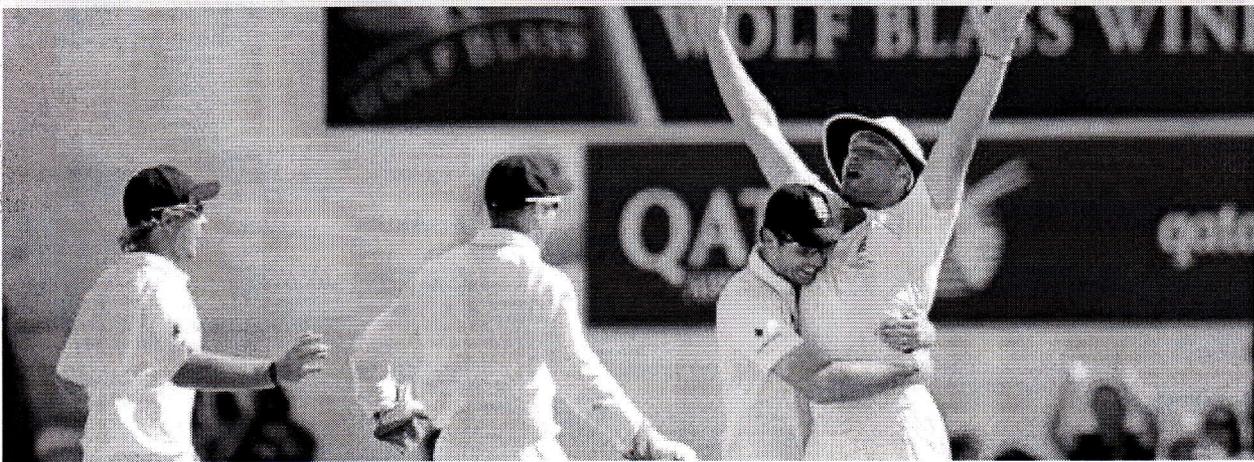
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England regain Ashes after 197-run victory



By David Smith

England bowled Australia out for 348 at 5.48pm on the fourth day of the fifth Test to win the Ashes back 2-1 for the second time in four years amid scenes of great joy at The Oval. A crowd which had begun the match tense, disbelieving in the possibility of an England victory after the Leeds debacle, ended as a seething cauldron of national celebration. The last five wickets fell for 21 runs and the eventual margin of defeat was a massive 197 runs, but the day was not without tension. Australia at one point stood at 217-2 with Ricky Ponting and Mike Hussey - who made a career-saving 121 - in full flow.

England's win sent Australia plunging from first to fourth in the Test world rankings, just ahead of England, who remain fifth, not that they will care much when they start celebrating the return of the urn.

The man of the match was Stuart Broad for his match-turning five-wicket burst in the first innings and England's man of the series was Andrew Strauss, so unflustered throughout as batsman and leader that he can now stand shoulder to shoulder with Kevin Pietersen as England's most important player.

Asked if England's win was an anomaly in a series dominated statistically by the opposition, Strauss smiled and said: "I guess when we were bad we were very bad and when we were good we were just good enough."

For his part, Australia's captain, Ponting, joked that he would take many happy memories away of Ashes series in England, but none of them would be from The Oval. He also warned that he may be back in 2013, when he would be 38, although his injured back may prevent that ambition. Australia had begun the day needing a mammoth 446 further runs to win.

The early wickets of Watson and Katich opened the door for England, but Ponting and Hussey dug in and began to put together a stand that could have undermined England hopes. By mid-afternoon they had added 127 in fine style against relatively harmless bowling, though a chance and a half-chance were spilled by Collingwood off Swann, and Australia's target had been cut to 329.

There was hope for Australia and the England fans' nerves were fraying.

What happened next was one of the most dramatic moments of any Ashes Test match. With the iconic Ponting in full flow, carrying the hopes of his side, Andrew Flintoff threw down the stumps from mid wicket - where Hussey had bunted Harmison before setting off for a rash single - to dismiss him for 66 and effectively settle the Ashes in the blink of an eye.

There are moments in sport when time is seemingly suspended before the audience erupts in sheer disbelief at what they have seen. Flintoff's baseball-style pitch at lightening speed, hurled at destiny like a Greek God's thunderbolt, was one of those moments. One instant, Ponting was in supreme command, the next his head was hanging in disbelief while the crowd surged to their feet in one mass movement. Flintoff's massive legs stood like Ozymandias's rooted in the desert while he raised his arms as teammates submerged him. Shouts of Super Fred echoed round the ground.

Let us not underestimate the importance of the run out because the ultimate margin of victory was wide. The great Ponting was in full command and the fact that Hussey made a hundred lends credence to the argument that this was the moment when England won the Ashes.

There were parallels with Gary Pratt's run out of Ponting at Trent Bridge in 2005, but this was more special. Flintoff, the most treasured of modern English cricketers, in his last Test match, his broken body unable to summon the fire of old with the ball, somehow found a way to leave his mark on the game.

Ponting's disbelief matched the crowd's. He trudged disconsolately from the ground oblivious to the crowd's standing ovation on what will probably be his final Test match in England. He must have known he had conceded the Ashes at that point, for the second time in England, the first Australian captain to lose two series here since Billy Murdoch in the 19th century.

We can compare the run out with other sporting moments. Jonny Wilkinson's drop-kick to win the World Cup for England in 2003 was magical, but Wilkinson was waiting for the opportunity and we all saw it coming. No one saw Flintoff's javelin throw coming.

Tiger Woods' chip in at the 16th hole of the 2005 masters was another jawdropping moment, but Woods is an individual and part of cricket's charm is that the individual is representative of the team, and the nation. No teammates engulfed the fist-pumping Woods.

Flintoff's statistics, like England's as a whole, are nothing special in the series. But there have been crucial performances - a five-wicket burst at Lord's, a fifty and a run out. And, without him, at Leeds, England's morale fell apart.

The crowd had little time to catch its breath before the freak run-out of Michael Clarke for a duck caused them to erupt again. His drive off Swann ricocheted off Bell to Strauss at slip, who flicked it onto the stumps. Australia could have folded but they don't do that. A stand of 91 between Haddin and Hussey exposed England's raw nerves once again. But the wickets inevitably came, Harmison dismissing Johnson and Clark in successive balls to be on a hat-trick. He celebrated wildly as though taking two tail-end wickets made him a hero. The truth is he is not the player he once was and should be discarded.

More deserving of praise was Swann, under pressure, expected to be the main man. He bowled almost unchanged all day to finish with 4-120 off 40.2 overs. How long he will remain England's first-choice spinner, with Adil Rashid breathing down his neck, is another question.

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