

INDIA TOUR: PETER WILLEY

Eden Gardens, with snakes...

PETER WILLEY had the best view of India's historic comeback against Australia in Kolkata as one of the umpires. DAVID SMITH hears plenty of his other views too...

The tough old pro that is Peter Willey soon shatters the illusion that, as the only man to play an active role in the two greatest Test matches of modern times, he is the luckiest cricket fan on the planet. At Headingley in 1981 he played a minor part by taking only one wicket and scoring only 8 and 33, leaving the heroics to Botham and Willis. Then, in the only other Test since Sydney in 1894/95 to be won by a side following on, when India beat Australia at Eden Gardens in March, he was standing as an umpire, with the best view in the house.

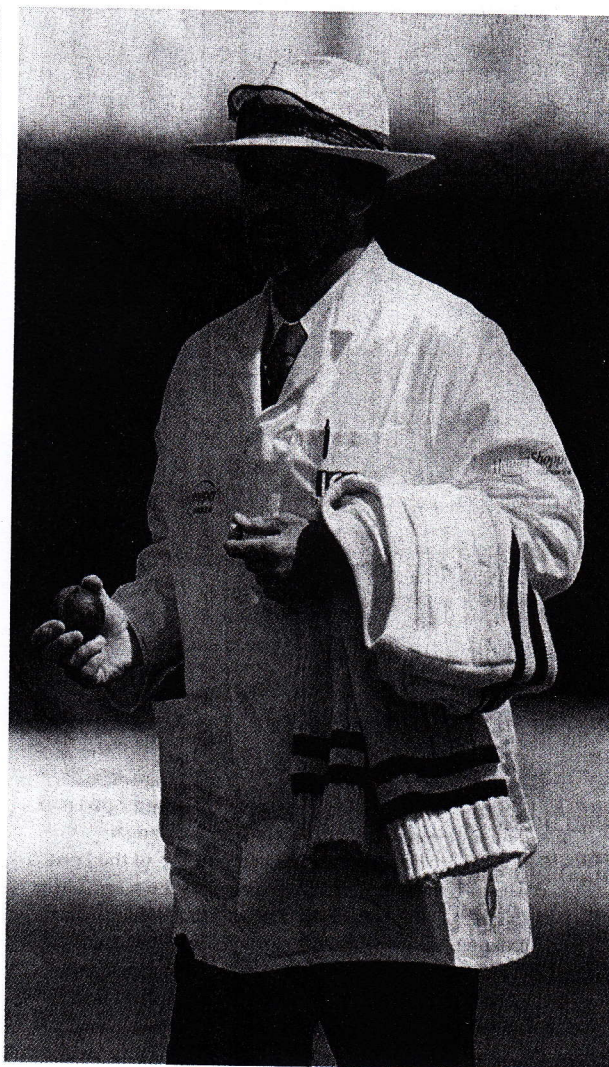
'I was just relieved when it was over, just as I am with any Test match,' he says unromantically. 'It was one of those games when your concentration had to be on a higher plane, like when you are batting at your best, as though something else takes you over.'

But then Willey, now 51, is not one to get overexcited, a phlegm displayed in both his batting and his umpiring. He is a man of frugal pleasures, listing his hobbies as walking the dog and going to the gym, and describing a flash sports car as 'my only indulgence'. But surely it must have been incredible to be part of this match? 'It wasn't until I got back to the dressing-room that I said to myself, "My God, that was a helluva game" and I started to think about what I'd seen.'

Willey settles into his armchair to reflect on that extraordinary match and on the Indian players England will soon encounter. The living room of his spacious Northampton house looks out onto a magnificent garden at the back. Willey revealed his mischievous, deadpan sense of humour in saying: 'That's the neighbour's garden. Ours is the 10 foot square plot at the front.' Then a pause. 'No, it is ours out back.'

His dry wit reveals a streak of cussedness that is characteristic of a man who was renowned for his battles with the West Indian pace attacks which brought him two Test centuries, at The Oval in 1980 and in Antigua in 1981.

That toughminded approach is also evident in his assessment of the batsmen's performances on the fourth day at Eden Gardens when the tall,



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debonair V.V.S. Laxman, who scored 281, and Rahul Dravid, with 180, batted all day without giving a chance. Their fifth-wicket stand of 376 was an Indian record and set up a 171-run victory.

Willey was impressed by Laxman's stamina and elegance, but reserves judgement on a player who has so far been inconsistent, despite this innings and another brilliant one at Sydney of 167, in 1999/2000. He actually has more admiration for Dravid's gutsy performance under pressure for his place. On reaching his hundred Dravid waved his bat dismissively at the journalists in the Press box who had said he should be dropped.

'They both batted superbly and there were only one or two half-appeals all day,' he said. 'There were

no slogs. Laxman danced down the pitch to Shane Warne and hit him over the top, and Dravid played him from the crease. Laxman was dashing, but Dravid showed such courage.' But Willey believes Sachin Tendulkar is by far the biggest threat to England. His view is that Tendulkar's feet move into position faster than any other batsman's. 'Every bad ball goes for four. It's amazing.'

Such magic means Indians treat Tendulkar like a mortal god. 'As soon as he comes in to bat the stadium floods to capacity, and thousands leave as soon as he's out,' said Willey. 'They crowd in behind where he is fielding to get a closer glimpse. But that fanaticism makes it a fantastic place to tour. If you are involved in any way with cricket, the hotel staff just can't do enough for you.'

Willey believes Tendulkar's genius is not limited to his batting and that he could become another Sobers by bowling in three different styles. 'I've seen him bowl well flighted off-spin in one-day matches, and in the Second Test he bowled a superb spell of leg-spin (taking 3 for 31) and fooled Warne with a googly. He's also a useful medium-pacer,' he adds.

England will be hoping that Tendulkar sticks to batting like a god as they have enough to worry about in the



Out of left field: the left-arm pace rookie Zaheer Khan could pose as much of a threat to England as India's spin contingent, according to Willey.



Double or quits: V.V.S. Laxman (left) and Rahul Dravid leave the field after Australia failed to take a wicket during the fourth day in Kolkata.

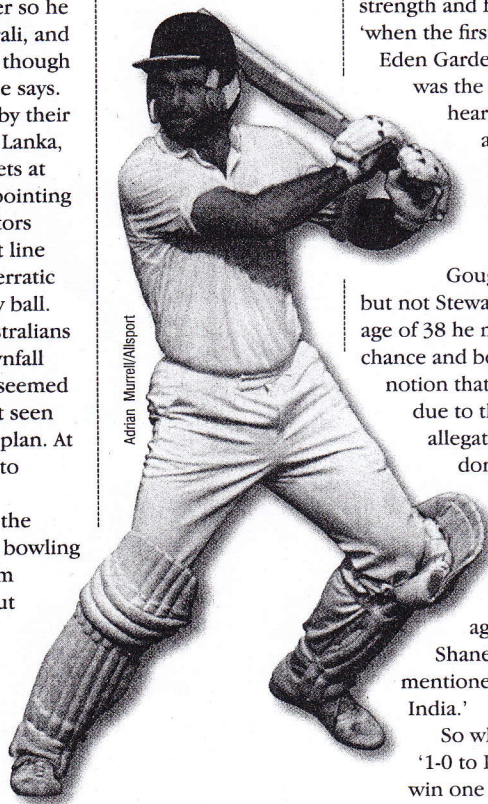
year-old off-spinner Harbhajan Singh, who took 32 wickets at 17.03 in the three-Test series against Australia. He bowled almost unchanged from Willey's end on the final day of that Kolkata match when he took 6 for 73 to add to his first-innings tally of 7 for 123.

Willey rates Harbhajan as a fine bowler but one not yet possessing Muttiah Muralitharan's mastery of flight and spin. 'He pushes it through quite quickly for an off-spinner so he doesn't loop the ball like Murali, and he doesn't turn it a long way, though he bowls a good leg-cutter,' he says. This assessment is borne out by their recent three-Test series in Sri Lanka, in which Murali took 23 wickets at 19.30 and Harbhajan a disappointing four at 73 apiece. Commentators contrasted Murali's consistent line and length with Harbhajan's erratic attempts to take wickets every ball.

Willey also believes the Australians contributed to their own downfall against Harbhajan. 'Paranoia seemed to spread because they hadn't seen him before and didn't have a plan. At times they just got out trying to wallop him,' he says.

Willey worries more about the overall strength of the Indian bowling line-up. 'They have a fine seam attack. Everybody knows about Javagal Srinath, but I was impressed by the left-armer Zaheer Khan, who bowled from my end. He's tall and pacy, gets bounce and moves the ball across the right-handers but can also

Peter Willey: 24,361 first-class runs at 30.56 and 756 wickets at 30.95; in 26 Tests he scored 1,184 runs at 26.90 and took seven wickets at 65.14.



Adrian Murrell/Alisport

swing it back.' A potential weakness in India's attack, he feels, is the captain Saurav Ganguly's aloof and overcritical attitude towards his bowlers. 'He interferes too much sometimes and loses his rag. He put a lot of pressure on Harbhajan whenever he bowled a bad ball, getting really angry. He doesn't always relate well to his players, especially when his own form is not good,' he reveals.

However, he feels India's all-round strength and fanatical home support – 'when the first ball was bowled at Eden Gardens, there was a roar that was the loudest noise I've ever heard' – as well as the

absence of Darren Gough, Alec Stewart and Andrew Caddick, make India the favourites.

He understands

Gough's decision not to tour but not Stewart's, partly because at the age of 38 he may not have another chance and because Willey rejects the notion that India is a sensitive area due to the match-fixing

allegations against Stewart. 'I don't think that can be given as an excuse. If he's innocent, and it looks like he is, why should he worry?

Similar accusations against Mark Waugh and Shane Warne weren't even mentioned when they toured India.'

So what is Willey's prediction? '1-0 to India. They will probably win one Test and shut up shop in

the other two,' he says. What about the prospect of a repeat of England's slow, attritional matches on lifeless wickets in Pakistan last year – 'the most boring Test cricket I've ever seen,' according to Steve Waugh – enlivened by a few hours of drama at the end. 'Who cares if it's boring cricket as long as you win?' replies Willey with a fierce look. 'The Indians certainly don't care. Would you rather have three exhilarating days and lose, or five boring days and win?'

In reflecting on his role in the India-Australia match, Willey's mind turns to the intolerable pressures now on umpires. 'People don't realise what it's like,' he says, revealing a vulnerability that might deeply affect more fragile characters. 'You stand 15 hours at one end, over five days, analysing 1,400 balls or so. It's exhausting. Umpiring has got a lot harder in the past five years because of technology. But I don't resent commentators criticising me because that's what they're paid for. I'm developing a thicker skin.' When asked if he is still in touch with his old England colleagues he says, only half-jokingly: 'Those are the buggers slugging me off on television.'

He does not think technology is the answer. 'All umpires say slow-motion technology is often inconclusive with bump balls and glove dismissals, and the Hawkeye system often doesn't correspond to my own perceptions of the path of the ball. It always seems to be hitting the top of leg stump.' But he is resigned to it now. 'I couldn't care less what happens with technology,' he says wearily, 'but what will happen when the telly gives players out who are clearly not out? Will the technologists move the carpet a fraction of an inch? Will they have neutral technicians? His sarcasm seems to suggest that we have lost faith in the human capacity to do the job, and will soon lose faith in technology and suspect it, too, of fallibility.'

He does not believe in rotating three umpires either. 'It always ends up with the same umpire getting all the tough parts of the game and it also disrupts the rhythm of the game and therefore the umpire's concentration.' Willey also dismisses training for umpires, feeling that no amount of advice would stop you missing a no-ball.

So what can be done to help umpires? 'Nothing. You just have to be tough, stand up to players and earn their respect.' Just the ruggedly independent mindset he displayed in his two-eyed stance, standing up to Malcolm Marshall, Michael Holding and company. **E**