



Batting for Australia

A spoof on the infamous Body-Line Test Series of the thirties.



Atticus Carey is a very pleasant man, Internal Auditor at the Melbourne and Ballarat Bank. He has a great nose for anyone trying to milk the Bank peter. He's uncovered major fraud in the ranks down to malfeasance by office girls dipping into the stamp register.

The Bank have employed him since he left school and were quick to promote him through the ranks. He spends about 60% of his working time in Melbourne and suburbs and the rest in the field in country districts. The period we are talking about is in the depressed thirties. He travels between branches strictly by train and thus spends a lot of weekends in the confines of the Victorian bush.

He is a single man and at age 31, has shown no leaning towards matrimony. But he is no misogynist and is well regarded by his female workmates and often takes out the handiest office girl and they have quite good times. He's never in any one branch of the bank to get serious and in fact he has no inclination to do so. From the girls' point of view, he is a biggish chap, easy on the eye and very lively company.

Atticus, or 'Atti' as he's generally called, always looks for a cricket match when he's weekendening in the summer in the bush. He's not a bowler, fields well with a very strong throw and bats unbelievably well as a defending player, blunting the bowlers charge, but making no runs. He plays at various cricket clubs in the sticks and they can't understand his style, but they know it works and after a game, over a few ales, they tell him they're thinking of making a book on him as to when he makes even one run.

"Not in my plans," he says.

"What are your plans?" they ask.

"Umm...to be the best opener in the game and to carry my bat."

And he does this in Hamilton, opening for them in their finals game against Portland.

Being an Auditor, he is on the lookout for flaws in whatever he is auditing and he treats cricket in the same fashion. He is not against sinking the slipper in verbally to opposing players who absolutely hate his stoic stance to the game and whose bowlers spit chips after a fruitless effort to put Atti at a disadvantage.

His approach is quite simple. He blocks any ball that looks likely to be on target and ignores anything else. Even to the extent of nonchalantly turning his back

on bad balls. In effect, anything loose, he just lets through. There are plenty of occasions where he can take runs due to fielding fumbles. To the spectator, it just seems that he is wasting opportunities. But he always consults with the other batsmen, who don't push him when opportunities occur. He simply says to them,

"If you're tempted to take a run, just remember you will have to allow enough time to run down and back, as I don't plan to run under any circumstances."

At the Hamilton final, he opens for his team, but not until he strikes a deal with his captain.

"I'm happy to play for you," he says, "and despite the price the bookies are offering on this game, we can win it. But I want young Dinnie Calder to open with me."

"No way," the captain says. "He's a bowler, not a batsman. They will roust him very quickly and we don't want these bastards to get on a roll."

"You underestimate Dinnie," he says. "You have never given him the opportunity his abilities deserve."

"No, I can't do it," the captain says.

"Okay," says Atti and starts to remove his pads.

"Och aye," the captain says, "What the hell are you doing?"

Atti laughs. "If you want me in the team, you've got to play my game plan."

The captain buckles. Young Dinnie is called in to hastily pad up. They go out together in front of quite a decent crowd. They pause in the middle.

"What's the plan, Atti?" Dinnie asks.

"Easy peasy, I'll block his dangerous balls and ignore the rest. Keep an eye on him. By the time he gets to you, you'll have a good picture of how to handle him. Now, all you have to do in this over is when the last ball is bowled, cut it for a single and that will leave me on strike for the slower ones. There's a helluva lot of pace on this chaps deliveries, just aim at, say, a leg glance and the power behind it will take it well out."

And this happens. Atti calls another midwicket consultation. They take their time about this and bang their bats lightly as they talk.

"Ok," says Atti, "here's your chance, Dinnie. Knock this bastard to the boundary every shot. The fields so close in the outfield is very fair game."

Dinnie settles in and bashes the slower bowler all over the lot. The crowd liven up. The fast bowler comes on, Atti is once again on strike. He looks at the first thunderbolt with disdain, puts his bat between his legs and sits on it. The crowd love this show of contempt. Atti continues to play heart-breaking blocking cricket and Dinnie, being given the chance of his young life, plays shots all over the shop, the runs mount.

At 87, Dinnie skys one and is out. There is a bit of confusion at who replaces him. The captain comes out to consult with Atti.

"Carmichael," Atti says. "He'll do."

"Another tail-ender," the captain says.

"Hmm," Atti muses, "you said the same about Dinnie and now you've discovered a new opener."

"Touché," the man says and goes in to send Carmichael out.

The new chap shows scintillating form and does well. Atti plugs along, the Hamilton players come and eventually all go leaving Atti to shoulder his bat and walk in. The crowd give him a very handsome clap. Atti collects £90 from the local bookie for his £10 investment and a week later, his audit completed, returns to Melbourne.

Several weeks later, Atticus is down at the St Kilda Cricket Ground watching a rather intense game of cricket, when a short man wearing dark trousers, white shirt and red braces comes along.

“May I join you?” he asks politely.

“Surely,” Atti says.

The man sits for a moment, then says, “Please pardon this intrusion, but I’m Stephen Shroy, partner in Shroy and Finkelstein, the accountants.”

The firm is known to Atti. It’s been a successful partnership of a Yugoslav and a Melbourne Jew. They’re big, specialists in both auditing and bankruptcy administration. It’s an odd combination of partners, but they are well respected in Victorian professional circles.

“We’ve had very good reports, both on your work and on your cricketing ability.”

Atti laughs. “There’s some generous minded people around if you’re gleaning that sort of praise for me.”

“This....,” says Shroy, “is a double handed approach. Tom Davis, at the bank you work for (Tom’s the Staffing Manager) says you are good at what you do and that you have long service leave due. We’d like to do you a deal. We live in a money strapped world just now, but we, that is, our firm, has work piling in the doors. That may be secondary, as my real want is for you to join the Cricket Club here.”

“I’ve thought about it,” Atti says, “and there’s no other club I’d prefer to join as a player, but I’m in the bush on bank work so much, it’s not possible.”

“Umm,” Shroy says, “here’s the deal....take your long service leave and come in and work with us for a while. We can spring you £40 a week.” (Big money in these times).

“Nuh,” says Atti. “Yorkshire have offered me a 12 week contract for the finals period next summer – their summer, that is. It’s an interesting offer.”

Shroy waves his hand. “Fair enough,” he says, “but Yorkshire is really only an Indian summer. Stay in tough, eh?”

The Poms come out to play for The Ashes. Old Jardine, in his Harlequin cap, is the boss cocky. He’s out to win and has subverted Harold Larwood to his leg trap theory. They keep this dark in the usual lead up games, but unleash it at the first test, which by dint of terror tactic, they win.

The Australian Cricket Board are staggered, complaints fly to the MCC. Complaints about body-line bowling. The press love it, the Aussie fans are bemused and somewhat staggered. The second test is much of the same and again the Aussies go down.

Atticus is auditing a branch at Horsham. He has a fine nose for things that are out of kilter. He knows there’s a bad apple in the Bank’s operation here – but he only gets whiffs of the scam. ‘The suspect must be extra smart,’ Atti thinks. He redoubles his efforts, but hasn’t cracked the case. He is called to the phone, it’s Shroy.

“Atticus,” he says, “you no doubt are well aware of the contretemps masquerading as a Test Series here in Bleak City. Are you amenable to a call up?”

“What for?” Atti asks. “To carry the drinks as 12th man?”

“The situation,” Shroy says, “calls for drastic measures, but the selectors seem to prefer to lose the Series rather than be creative. I can’t get you any better than number 6 spot in the batting order.”

“It may not be enough to retrieve the situation,” Atti says, “but if you put Dinnie Calder in at number 5, I’ll give it a go.”

“Christ on a mountain,” Shroy says, “that young goyen, brilliant as he is, isn’t on the Boards radar.”

Atti laughs. “Ring up the President of the Hamilton Cricket Club and ask him about my partnership with Calder there a year or two back. It did make the Melbourne Age at the time.”

Commonsense prevails and Atti walks onto the MCG, where Dinnie is holding up one end and the batting partner whom he’s put a few runs together with has just fallen to Larwood’s bouncers. Atti is relaxed. He’s passed up on a helmet or cap and is bare-headed except for a tennis shade. He walks nonchalantly to his end of the pitch, giving an affable ‘Good Afternoon, Gents,’ to those of the English team he passes. Larwood is glowering at him. He’s raring to go.

Atti says to him, “Watcha cock, I do hope you haven’t given up your day job in good old Yorkshire.”

“Sod you,” Larwood says.

“Steady on,” Atti says, “there’s laws against that sort of thing here, despite what you may be getting up to back in the foggy isles.”

He arrives at his crease, puts up his bat and calls Dinnie down to the midway point of the pitch for a conflag. Dinnie arrives looking at him curiously.

In a low voice, Atti says, “Tell me your latest and best joke.” Dinnie does.

“Now,” Atti says, “point out spots in the field you wouldn’t dream of batting to.” He does. “Ok,” Atti says, “now wave your arms around a bit.”

Finally Atti says, “Just remember Hamilton. I won’t be running at all, but work out your game plan for the over after this one and Larwood’s replacement is not in the same street and you should be able to milk him a bit for runs.”

Bradman himself walks over, the boys reconvene in the middle.

“We’re up against it,” the Don says, “but if you can blunt Larwood a bit and frustrate him, his bowling will lose accuracy and if you, Mr Calder, can for a change, concentrate on hitting the ball along the ground, instead of trying to make the clouds rain, this little, but oh so important schmozzle may yet turn up trumps.”

By this time, Jardine is complaining to the nearest umpire about quite unnecessary time wasting.

“England expects us to get on with the job of teaching these convicts a lesson,” he says, or rather fulminates, “why all the holdups?”

Atticus is back in his crease watching all this and wishing he could lip-read, but he gets the gist of Jardine’s intense talk with the umpire and decides to really toss the fat in the fire. He holds up his bat, walks away from the crease and pulls out of the back pocket of his flannels a colourful Harlequin Cricket Club cap and spends a bit of time putting this on and handing his eyeshade to the umpire.

Larwood, languishing in front of the sight screen, now lengthens his run up and zips a thunderbolt at Atti’s head. It roars over the keeper’s head to the boundary. In any given scenario like this, the batsmen should be notching up runs. But as their game plan is focussed, Atti just does a little saunter behind the wicket and Dinnie does the unheard of thing of lighting up a small cheroot.

Atti and Dinnie have demonstrated their contempt and indifference to what the Poms are doing their best to serve up. Larwood now serves up the fastest bumper in history. Atti pits his audit brain focus on how high the bouncer will get and making a value judgement, turns his back on this fiendish effort. The crowd start applauding and keep it up for five minutes. The English side buzz like bees. They call in the players to confer. Only two balls have been bowled in this session so far. Atti calls Dinnie back to the centre of the pitch and bums a cheroot off him. They light up and chat and then take strike. Larwood takes an even longer run up. Atti puts his bat up

and walks away from the pitch and takes a little time adjusting the visor of his Harlequin cap.

What's going on is now hardly cricket, particularly world class cricket. Larwood steams down to the crease in an overzealous manner and trips over his big feet and ends up flat on his chest on the pitch. As quick as a flash, Dinnie Calder cradles his bat across his chest and adopting the stance of a big game hunter, puts his foot on Larwood. It ends up as one of the most famous photos ever taken in the sporting field. Larwood leaves the field, Jardine walks with him to the boundary. It's likely he will pull his field off, but he doesn't. Plum Warner talks to him hard. Bradman walks over to talk with them. A deal is struck. Atti retires hurt and the game resumes very sedately. It ends in a draw.

Atticus finally makes it into County Cricket in England, playing for Yorkshire. At the end of the season, realising his very unique talent, they organise a full time job on audit work based with a Yorkshire firm, but working on occasion as far away as London. He doesn't look like returning to Oz and to be perfectly honest, the Australian Cricket Board are delighted to have him in Pommy Land and available for major selection for Australia if needed.

Felicity Jarvis, who both worked and played with Atticus in Melbourne Town, writes to him.

'Atti,' she writes, 'perhaps it's time you took up bowling and concentrated on bowling Maiden overs and speaking just for me, I'm missing you, you bustard and I'm a Maiden perhaps receptive to being bowled over or some such.'

There's a bit of a delay until a cream envelope arrives on her desk. She recognises Atti's handwriting easily, especially as its been written in the violet coloured ink much favoured by Auditors.

'Come over,' it reads, 'here is an open ticket with the P&O Line. Bring some Melbourne winter clothes. I have a quite comfortable pitch set up in which to play – cricket.'