

Cricket Tragic

Extracts

I felt a knot in my stomach the size of a cricket ball, butterflies too; no, not delicate butterflies, more like stampeding elephants, as my daughter would say. I was being led, trying to keep up, to walk straight, but shuffling really – can't do much more these days. The door swung open, several faces turned to look at me, my heart started beating wildly. Could this really be happening?

'Bill, I would like you to meet Bruce Francis' father, Cass.'

'Cass, I would like you to meet Bill Lawry.'

'How do you do Mr Francis?'

'How do you do Bill? It is such an honour to meet you.'

And it was. I couldn't believe it. Courtesy of former England captain and Channel Nine cricket commentator, Tony Greig, I was actually meeting Bill Lawry. And he called me Mr Francis! Through Bruce, I had met other Australian captains : Ian Chappell, Kim Hughes and Graham Yallop, but as much as I admired them, I never saw them in the same magical way I viewed those of earlier eras: Jack Ryder, Bill Woodfull, Sir Donald Bradman, Lindsay Hassett, Ian Johnson, Richie Benaud, Bob Simpson, and, of course, Bill Lawry. They were like gods – all powerful, magnificent. It had taken 89 years, but here I was, meeting one of those gods, and in the Channel Nine commentary box, of all places.

Tony then introduced me to the rest of the turned, and now smiling, faces ...



Kerry had a permanent suite at the Australia Hotel and told Bruce that they could all stay there. The Hilton is opposite the Melbourne Cricket Ground and Bruce reiterated that Kerry would need to organise a room for Jamie at their hotel. Kerry immediately phoned the Hilton and when the manager, Frank Christie, was unavailable, he spoke to the acting manager:

'This is Kerry Packer. I want a suite for my son for the Centenary Test.'

'Sorry Mr Packer, you have a problem, the hotel has been fully booked for 12 months.'

'Son, let's get this in the right perspective. I don't have a problem. You do. You have to tell someone to **** off.'

'I can't do that.'

'I think you'll find that you can. Is Don Lane still staying at the Hilton?'

'Yes, Mr Packer.'

'Good. It's your lucky day. I've solved your problem. Just tell Lane ...



Despite Bruce and James' close relationship, one barrier might have remained – me. I had spoken out strongly against James' first major business proposal, and that might have left bruises. In 1980, when Jamie was about 12 years old, Muhammed Ali and Ken Norton were scheduled to fight each other for the World Heavyweight title, at Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas. Despite a huge interest in the fight in Australia, none of the television networks had been able to reach an agreement with the promoters, to televise the fight live. Kerry and Ros were both overseas for an extended period and Jamie asked Bruce whether he wanted to go 50-50 in his first business venture...



And then it happened, around a bend and suddenly the anxiety, the need to spend a penny, all of it forgotten in the awe of the moment. Suddenly there were tens of thousands of pedestrians, along the footpaths, criss-crossing the road between the traffic, people everywhere. Australian flags, English flags, green and gold streamers and even clothing, with flashes of Pommie red and white interspersing. The boxing kangaroo on huge flags, as cuddly toys, painted faces, what a fabulous spectacle, and the noise! The buzz of excitement was a crescendo of sound that increased with every tortuously slow yard we achieved along the road. And now we could see the light towers at the ground. My heart was thumping...