

THE LITTLE STATE THAT COULD

TASMANIA IS UNLIKE ANY OTHER AUSTRALIAN CRICKET STATE ... THE LOCALS SAY THAT'S WHY THEY KEEP WINNING TROPHIES AND PRODUCING CHAMPIONS.

By
MATT
CLEARY



PHOTO BY Getty Images

T'S DAY ONE of Tasmania's first home Sheffield Shield match and Bellerive is nasty. Southerly squalls are whipping salt licks off the Derwent and low fog drapes across the ground like a wet, woolly doona. The water is grey-slate, choppy, Loch Ness. Certainly there is nobody boating. As the winds ease and the rain turns to mist (as it does hereabouts), South Australia's cricketers – the "Sackas" – emerge from their dressing room like meerkats sniffing the breeze. They wander to the middle of Blundstone Arena (so-named, but still and forever "Bellerive", like the WACA, the 'Gabba and the MCG) and huddle around the covers, hands in pockets, shoulders hunched, hopping on toes.

Ground staff mill about the square as the Sackas await the Great Unveiling. It's a new deck here, and the word is it's juicy. For years Bellerive was The Nullarbor. Last few years it's been sporting, a dinkum cricket wicket. Today the covers come off to reveal ... Christ. It's Ireland.

The first Tasmanian emerges from the sheds, former Adelaide boy Mark Cosgrove, tooling about with a Sherrin. Bunch of ex-pats here. Like the Brumbies of ACT Rugby, Tassie has long made a home for those the "big" states can't fit in.

The umpires come out sans hats for cricket's version of slow food, a ritual lap of the ground and pitch inspection. Then it rains again. Lunch is called. (Americans will never understand this.) The rain stops and holds off and we're looking close to a start.

Players warm up. Tassie Tigers coach Tim Coyle takes a knee with half a bat, whipping catches off an edge at speed. Six-stitchers whack into meaty palms. Fingers are fearful. Tough school here. As Coyle says: "It can be unpleasant."

Yet from this cold, wet, wind-buffed ground has emerged the best first-class cricket team in the land. Since 2004-05 Tasmania has won two Sheffield Shields and three one-day titles. In eight seasons it's played in eight finals. And they're churning out internationals like the



Ed Cowan: Australian Test opener, via Tasmania.

TASMANIA IS AUSTRALIA'S BEST CRICKET STATE.



George Bailey: Australian T20 captain, via Tasmania.

AIS crossed with a sausage factory.

Two days before our wild and woolly Shield game, the Tigers XI for the Ryobi Cup match featured ten (yes, 10) Australian reps. Australia's current Test team includes the Tigers' opening batsman, opening bowler and champion No.3. The wicket-keeper, Matthew Wade, came up from Clarence CC, based in Bellerive. Wade moved to Victoria because he was behind Tim Paine, who was then behind Brad Haddin. Such are fate's fickle fingers. George Bailey is T20 captain. The Tigers are chockas.

Cue the Boag's ad about the magic water. How can they tip in "ordinary" horse-flesh and emerge with a crack team of thoroughbreds? How does Tasmania, with competitions in Hobart, Launceston and the north-west coast and just 240 first grade players (NSW has a total catchment of 53,000 male players) so box above its weight?

The locals don't like the phrase, are tired of being patronised, being "underdogs". They're happy enough to fly under the radar. But if anyone rubs the kid brother's head, more fool them. Tasmania is Australia's best cricket state.

And they want more. They want to dominate for a decade.

BELLERIVE

Tasmania sells itself as a "boutique" place to visit, a sort of mini-New Zealand with breweries, oysters, trout and a wide selection of cheeses. Whiskey is smoked with peat. Pigs hunt truffles. It's crisp and rustic, with rugged inlets and coves, and fine, winding drives. Its smallness is its appeal. It's also a boon (perhaps also a Boon) for state cricketers. "The players all live five or ten minutes from the ground," says Coyle. "They're accessible to the coaching staff, available to prepare and get better. Our players can spend a lot of time 'on task', more time with grass under their feet. The lifestyle of Hobart in a professional sport is a very good one. It's massively underestimated how much of an advantage that is."

With a smaller player base comes less competition. Rather than a hindrance, it helps players relax. They have tenure. Job security can free a man up to express himself. There isn't pressure to score a hundred, knowing there are 20 blokes in grade cricket hoping you'll "fail". "I think it's a question of culture. It's not just a question of talent pool depth," says opener Ed Cowan. "At NSW, I personally felt I was always playing for my spot. And

PHOTOS BY Rick Smith.

when that happens, you probably want to survive rather than score runs, which is a dangerous attitude for a top-order batsman."

The wicket at Bellerive is a huge factor. When once "Bellerive runs" were discounted in the minds of selectors (as Jamie Cox and Dene Hills might tell you), today, if you can score at Bellerive, you can score anywhere. Usman Khawaja's 138 was that Shield game's highest score by 98 runs. He outscored Tassie's first innings by 43 runs. Throw in a top score of 78 in the one-dayer and he's right back in the frame.

Cricket Tasmania (TCA) CEO David Johnston says the TCA "deliberately" changed the nature of the wicket. "It was a batting paradise. Four-day games, you had teams declaring to force a run chase; it wasn't really a good cricket wicket. A previous curator tried to dry it out, make it crumble and spin day four, but it just wasn't happening. The conditions wouldn't allow it.

"In recent years, there's more grass and it nibbles around early and sets the game up. We don't think there's unfairness in that. The quality batters get through that. Some games we've made 250 first dig, next day knocked them over for 150. Second innings it'll flatten out."

The nature of the wicket is dependant on unpredictable overhead conditions. It's hard for groundsmen, but another plus for the players. They learn to adapt to a surface with many faces. Coyle points to Cowan again. "Part of Ed's success is based on learning to bat at Bellerive. He's batting on wickets that are bowler-friendly. But he's been able to get himself 'in' in testing circumstances. And he's been able to capitalise when the wicket flattens out."

Says Cowan: "Having grown up in Sydney, I feel like I've done an apprenticeship on turning wickets. To come down to Tasmania and find a way to bat on wickets conducive to fast bowling was really good for my game. It's made me narrow my scoring focus and work really hard on defence. To bring it back to basics and be disciplined to score runs was really good for my game.

"As a group we call it 'The Bellerive batting mentality'. We can get a bit lazy on good batting wickets. But even on brilliantly true wickets, it's so important to get in. And you can't take it for granted against any bowler on any surface. It's been really good for our batting group to work hard at Bellerive – where your mental intensity has to be sharp for 20, 50, ▶



Mark Cosgrove: rejuvenated belter of bowlers, via Tasmania.

100 balls – and transfer those skills on better batting wickets."

THE FACTORY

We're in Reception at Blundstone Arena, where a FedEx courier has dropped off three "coffins"; Australian cricketers' kit bags. Each giant, green bag is labelled with Cricket Australia insignia, and a tag that reads "Hilfy" or "Ed" or "Punter" for the three Tasmanians in the Test team. Long time since it was just Roger Woolley.

We head to the nets and hear that beautiful sound of summer: the *thock* of the cricket ball off the centre of a bat. There's Dan Marsh, mannerisms of his old man, a body built like a good-sized beer fridge. He's hoicking throw-downs with a white hoicking stick, the ball flinging out at speed. Michael Di Venuto's doing the same.

The coaches are pelting pills at George Bailey and Mark Cosgrove, the first a technician, the latter all soft hands and sweet timin'. Either way, both can bludgeon. The white ball thocks off their blades and whistles across the turf. Cricket nerdos could watch them for hours.

We head back to the Players' Area and meet coach Coyle, a small man in the way of several down here – Boon, Ponting, Matty Wade. Steel-hard cricket-heads made in Tassie, like cold-climate wine. We put it to Coyle: how has the state with the least players won so many titles, produced these internationals? "Last few years, we've concentrated on getting the right people into our system," says Coyle. "Obviously, they need to have skill to contribute to the culture, but it's always been a 'people first' environment."

Coyle doesn't buy into the idea that Tasmania is "punching above its weight". "Rather than say that, I say – in fact, I *know* – that we *think* better than the rest. We're a state of 500,000. If we're doing things – preparation, recruitment, style of play, facilities – better than the rest, we give ourselves a better than even chance."

Marsh says Tasmania is in "an amazing era" of home-grown talent. "From our youth system, we've had a group of guys who've come through together: Bailey, Butterworth, Geeves, Paine, Doherty, Wade. When you've got a core group of quality cricketers, you can build a team around them."

A small state means scouts have to eke out talent, unlike in NSW, where it comes to you. "Tim Paine, we contracted aged 16," says Johnston. "He was a good footballer. We saw he could play cricket, we *wanted* him to play cricket. We can pick a guy out like that and nurture him and keep him in the system more than other states. The players we've recruited have been quality people and cricketers. That's important. The guys call it a No Dickhead policy. And it doesn't mean there haven't been challenges.

But they're quality guys, quality players and they fit the culture."

And the ex-pats feel the love.

"When you come down here, it's up to you," says Cowan. "There's no pressure to come down. They said to me, 'You

LOCALS WANT TO PROVE THEMSELVES AND IMPORTS WANT TO PROVE BASTARDS WRONG.

can stay there [in Sydney]. But we think you'd be a perfect fit."

For Cowan, it was a "career changing" move. "The opportunity to improve and play consistent, first-class cricket underpins every inch of improvement I've made. Learning about myself under pressure at the highest level rather than grade cricket, the exposure through opportunity has been great for me."

And Cowan's going nowhere. "I've got no interest in playing cricket for any other state. Absolutely love the team, love the people, the coaching set-up. I'll finish my cricket down here without a doubt."

THE CLUB

A mix of ex-pats and locals in a small town produces a "club" feel more than that of a state rep side. And for all the talk of Tasmania wanting to shed its underdog tag, locals want to prove themselves and imports want to prove bastards wrong. Cowan wasn't born here, but he has been made. "The general culture of the team, which is as strong as any team I've ever played in, is really reliant on people being close. Not only physically, but being friends with those people you play cricket with. And that's just made easier by the fact that Hobart is a small town. I know great people in NSW and really ▶



AD

Ricky Ponting: Australia superstar, via Tasmania. Above Former Tassie captain Dan Marsh now instructs.



ABOVE PHOTO BY Rick Smith BELOW PHOTO BY Getty Images

AD

enjoy their company, but when I played there, they were an hour-and-a-half away in traffic. It was hard to socialise with them. In Hobart, things like that aren't obstacles."

Tim Coyle says: "There are a number of things that Tasmania does differently, and we do that because we can. That's the uniqueness. The players spend so much time together. Many of them share houses. Their wives and girlfriends are mates, they socialise when the players are away. There's a 'family' feel. And that produces something that's really important.

"The 'club' feel is correct.

But there's a balance. We all know it's professional. It's the players' livelihood and they have an opportunity to invest heavily in their game and make sure they protect that livelihood. It's a big motivating factor."

Says Marsh: "The staff and senior players are willing to help and try to get blokes to become better players." Cowan reckons that "some of the larger states probably have it the other way; people see others as competition and would almost prefer to see them fail so their career can progress".

The Club circled wagons when former paceman Brett Geeves wrote a pair of revealing yarns in this very journal last year. In the first one, describing an occasionally fraught journey as a first-class cricketer, he talked of "coming to a point where I couldn't stand to be around the squad or cricket in general". In the second – a treatise on captaincy – a disagreement with Bailey "put an end to any respect I had for George as a leader and with it went my enjoyment of the game".

Incendiary stuff. And Geeves was hammered. Players texted tirades, shredded him on Twitter. The Club, like any tight-knit group, doesn't appreciate people pissing back into the tent, particularly if it sprays their hugely respected leader. Says Marsh: "It's no secret [Geeves and Bailey] struggled to get on. Brett is a passionate guy who wanted to do the best he could. But he had some injuries and he'd have liked to play longer. But they just didn't gel as you would've liked. And that's one that unfortunately didn't work out for Tassie cricket.

"But that's professional sport. You're not going to get along with *everyone*.

"THERE ARE A NUMBER OF THINGS THAT TASMANIA DOES DIFFERENTLY."

You can't be naive enough to think everyone's going to be happy all the time."

After interviewing Andrew Dykes, he light-heartedly asks whether I'd be getting any quotes from Geeves. Before telling Dykes I'm actually a mate of Geeves' and would be *staying at his place*, I ask what The Club made of the articles. Dykes smiles, shrugs, acrimony-free. "Brett's opinion would be shared by pretty much him and him alone. But in saying that, you know, it'd be a boring world if we all agreed."

THE MONKEY

From the time Bruce Doolan faced Tasmania's first-ever first-class delivery (from Terry Alderman at the WACA ground on October 29, 1977), Tasmania yearned for the Shield named after the 3rd Earl of Sheffield. And they haven't been afraid to ask for help. They had seasons from Michael Holding, Richard Hadlee, Winston Davis and Patrick Patterson. Michael Bevan plundered Bellerive like a jilted lover. Shane Watson was a young man in a hurry. Colin Miller bowled all-sorts, won a baggy green cap. They even thawed out Dennis Lillee.

Home-grown Test caps were sparse. Roger Woolley played two Tests in '83-84. David Boon so tonked the Windies in the '83 PM's XI, it was good enough for a Test call-up. Greg Campbell played the first Test of the '89 Ashes series, remains best-known as Ricky Ponting's uncle. Sean

Young had one Test in '97, was good enough for 50. Jamie Cox should've had a hundred.

David Johnston came to Tasmania from South Australia in 1997-98 and Tasmania made the Shield final, losing to WA in Perth. Then for seven years, *nada*. And though they won the ING Cup in 2004-05, the state's first title since the '78-79 Gillette Cup, Dan Marsh describes the year as a nadir. "Our Shield form was diabolical," says Marsh. "We lost eight of ten games. We snuck into the Cup final and played a blinder on the day. But the season was very disappointing."

The board swung the axe. Long-time coach Greg Shipperd was punted. Johnston says it was his most difficult time in the chair. "Greg had been here for ten years. And the board made the decision that we needed a change. And Greg didn't see it that way. And that was difficult, telling him that it was time to move on. And some of the players who were close to Greg found that difficult.

"We had Young, Cox, Hills, Boon, Rod Tucker, Mark Ridgeway, Colin Miller. It was a pretty good side. Then 'Ship' didn't get re-appointed while these guys were coming to the end. There was a natural turnover."

The board appointed Tim Coyle, a man who'd played seven games for Tasmania over several seasons. "Tim came in and gave a lot of the older players a new lease of life," says Marsh. "He dragged a few ▶

Coach Tim Coyle can take a lot of credit for the great Tassie turnaround.



PHOTO BY RICK SMITH

blokes along, guys who may have been towards the end of our careers to get the best out of ourselves. Getting Coyle on board was a turning point, no doubt."

Coyle says winning that ING Cup gave people belief. "They also got a taste for winning. With that came a change of mindset. We made a decision to change the way we played. We changed the way we *thought* about playing. The mind-shift went from survival to competing and winning."

Two years later, Tassie won the Shield. The monkey was slaughtered.

GOOD TIMES

One of the great gigs this journo's had is writing ball-by-ball commentary for the website Cricinfo dot com. You watch a game of cricket, "commentate" on the action and throw in smart-arse quips. That's a job, friend. And the best game I covered was Tassie's first Shield win. Ben Hilfenhaus was immense. The 22-year-old was the Shield's leading wicket-taker with 60, third-most all-time. Each time Marsh tossed him the cherry, there was danger. Luke Butterworth had a blinder, scored 66

"WE HAVE A CHANCE TO HAVE THE BEST DECADE OF ALL TIME BY ONE TEAM."

and 106 fighting, rearguard runs. On paper it looks like Tasmania flogged NSW (and they did, by 421 runs). But there were knife-edge moments when, as Coyle says, previous Tasmanian teams might've turned up their toes. "That was when we finally arrived as a cricketing state," says Dykes. "Thirty years since we'd entered the competition and to finally win it meant, yep, we are here now, we're a serious state and we're winning trophies and producing Australian players."

Today, in the office space at Bellerive, there's a huge oil painting of the team that won the first Shield. There's a museum with a section dedicated to them and to those who won the state's second title in 2010-11. They've played the last three Ryobi Cup finals for one win, and were Shield finalists last year. But Coyle wants more. "We have a chance in the next few years, with a good bunch of players in their late 20s and

early 30s, to have the best decade of all time by one team. To be able to look back on a decade from 2004 to 2014 and see Tasmania as the most successful team. It's not a written goal. But it's something we'd like to do." ■



Michael Di Venuto: coaching support staffer. Below: The fruits: Shield winners in 2010-11.



ABOVE PHOTO BY Rick Smith. BELOW PHOTO BY Getty Images