



Friendly Fire

Accused of being too matey with the Poms in '05, this Ashes

BRETT LEE

is ready to let his speed-balls and passion do the talking

AND SO IT BEGINS. AFTER 14 MONTHS OF THEORIES, INJURIES, HYPE, anger, bluff, inaction and endless speculation, the most anticipated Ashes series of all time will explode, finally, into action. But for Brett Lee, Australia's unsheathed sword, it really begins a month previously, in Mumbai. Here, he sits in his hotel room, one man in a coastal city of 13 million, contemplating the revival of his life as a professional sportsman.

After a break of several months, during which time he got married, smelled the flowers and remembered how good life was, the suitcase lid is again tilted against the wall, and out spills pads, shoes and God knows what else. He is passing through on his way from practice (in preparation for the ICC Champions Trophy) to the treatment room: all the old routines that tell him it's back on. Cricket is back on.

It's funny how quickly sport gives and takes away. Lee, with his spiky blond hair and sharp, fox's grin, is now the image of the good aspects of Australian cricket. Hopes are pinned on him; he makes things happen. But it's easy to forget how things were before the last Ashes (more of that later), when Lee's routine consisted of carrying the drinks and hoping for the best. At that point, his expensive Test record saw him being used strictly as a one-day man. When the 2005 Ashes came around, says Lee, "I just had to make sure that when that chance arose, I was ready to go. I don't want to use clichés and all that type of stuff, but I really did want to make sure that I did take that opportunity and grab it with two hands."

Part of his problem, aside from convincing selectors, was the sheer quantity of injuries holding him back. "There was a time, when I made my debut, it was all going well and [then] I hurt my lower back; it wasn't long after that I was fielding [and I had] a freak accident. I was throwing a ball and completely snapped my elbow

in half, and that put me on the back foot for a long, long time. It was a 12-, 13-month period until I started feeling half-normal again, bowling-wise. I've been through a lot of ankle problems and back problems and elbow problems, but having a run free of injuries – touch wood – I'm a lot fitter."

Talking to Lee is to get the full idea of the modern sportsman: polite, determined, careful not to offend, level-headed and awesomely committed. It's the latter attributes that served him well when he was handing out the Gatorade to sweating batsmen.

"It was very hard not being chosen – I think I was the 12th man 12 times straight. But I had to be patient. The easiest thing to do would have been to get frustrated and whinge and say the whole world was against me and have every single complaint under the sun, but I didn't want to do that. I wanted to be really bubbly and keep my own personality, because I always perform my best when I'm smiling – and I didn't want to let the issues that I had about not playing affect the team. You have to be really considerate with that type of thing as well.

"I got over the frustration and disappointment and thought, 'OK, well, I just go out and train now and do everything possible.' And then you think you're getting close again and you still don't get chosen, but that's fine – I just keep working. And it finally paid off."

WORDS IVAN SMITH PHOTOGRAPH NICK SCOTT

STYLIST: RYAN LOBO. GROOMING: YOLANDA LUKOWSKI FOR DLM. LEE WEARS OWN SHIRT.