

BRETT LEE

The pre-Ashes "Lee or Kasproicz?" debate of '05 seems laughable now. The importance of Lee in the touring party grew with every match, and contrasted with the disintegration of the form and attitudes of the other key members of the confident unit that arrived at Heathrow (Clark's, Hayden's and Gilchrist's batting, Ponting's temper, Gillespie's bowling, McGrath's accident, Buchanan's mutterings). It's all very well talking about focus, taking the rough with the smooth and never giving up, but Lee is everything he says he is. Certain images linger: Lee, flying in over after over, carrying the attack in McGrath's absence; crouching on the pitch after the Edgbaston loss, Andrew Flintoff telling him he is a hero; slow-motion replays picking up every last flexing, grimacing piece of effort as Pietersen sweeps the series from view at The Oval. The fact is, Brett Lee gives everything he's got, every single time.

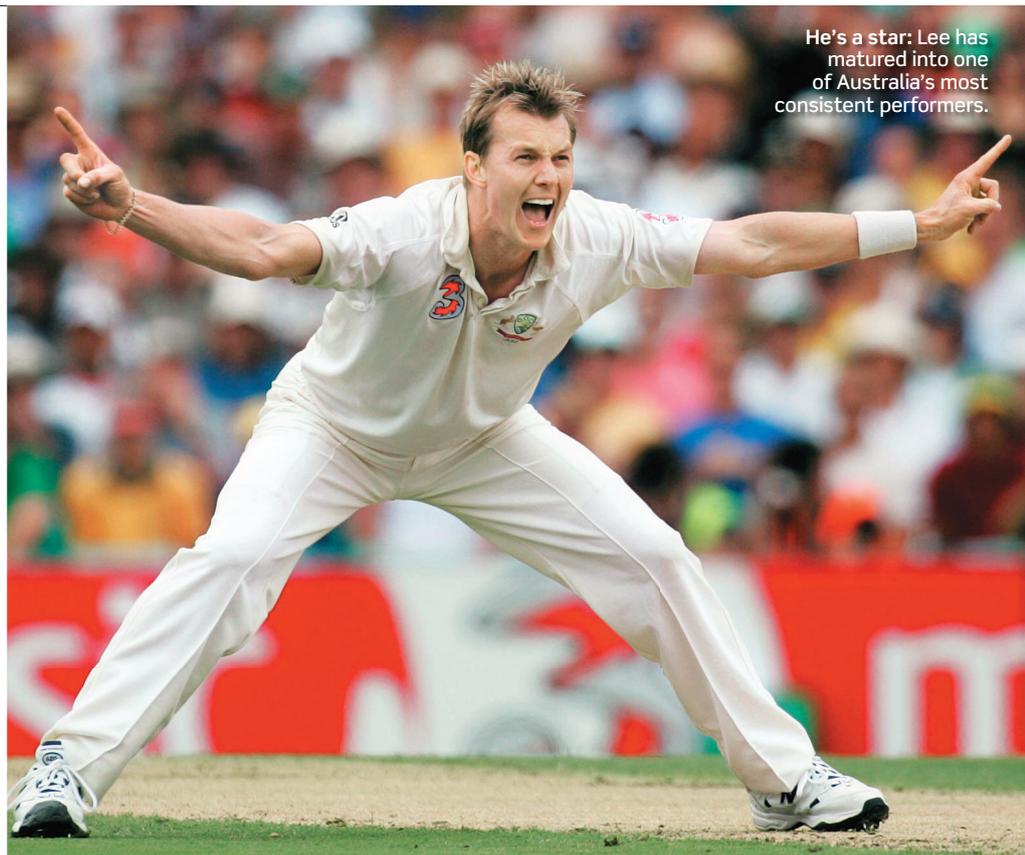
"I like bowling in England," he says now. "I prefer bowling in conditions that are a bit more overcast. But to be bluntly honest, we didn't play our best cricket last year and we have learnt from that. The way we can improve as cricketers is to deal with that, which I feel we have done. We haven't lost a Test match since, because we've been so focused."

"It really hurt us. It really affected us, losing the Ashes." Lee's level-headed nature kicks in again; experience has taught him well. "As much as anyone who plays at that top level wants to win, you've got to accept when you have been defeated. That's part of the game. If you're always blaming things, or saying we should have won, or we missed out by a run here, we could have won the series... That's fine but you don't really deal with it. [We should] accept it and say, 'We were, on this particular occasion, out-classed; they did play better cricket than us.'"

"But that was then – that was those five Test matches, and we've lost those – fair enough. We have moved on. We became very hungry, and it's been the same since then."

SO MUCH FOR LAST YEAR. LEE'S PLACE in the team is now unquestioned, but his responsibility is greater. McGrath is older, and other bowlers much younger. He sounds like a man content with his own form, at least. "I was really happy – as far as ball speed – with the way the ball came out last year. I bowled a couple of high 159s (km/h) and the fastest I ever bowled was 160.8, so if I'm getting close to where I was in 2003, when I felt really good and I bowled one of my quickest balls, I am really happy with that."

No one else but Shoaib Akhtar bowls anywhere near this fast. It's astonishing that Lee's lethal pace emerges, over after over, from such a relatively slight



He's a star: Lee has matured into one of Australia's most consistent performers.

Reverse swing is a crucial part of the fast bowler's armoury.

frame. Delivered by Akhtar, all big arse and broad shoulders, it's less surprising. How does Lee do it? "It's a very good question; it's all relative to what you're used to. I've likened it to, 'How does a person sit in front of a computer for eight hours a day?' I couldn't do it, but because they're used to doing that, they've become accustomed to it. It's the same with bowling – after a while you become 'bowling fit'. But saying that, you've also got to put the hard work in to make sure you've got the endurance behind you, and that is a credit to our fitness coach."

As a true fast bowler, it's not surprising Lee has no truck with the subtle approach to competition McGrath and Warne indulge in. Warne may indeed have developed a new shooting zooter, but not Lee. "I'm just happy to hit the cricket pitch," he laughs. "But even if I did (have a new weapon), I wouldn't go out and publicise it. I'm the type of person that likes my bowling to do the talking. I honestly just want to top up on what I did in the last two seasons."

What about a bit of gentle McGrath trash talk? Flintoff's my bunny, five-zip to the Aussies, that kind of thing. "I don't like to (publicly) set goals about knocking batsmen over. You might have a plan inside your head, or you might have goals for certain batsmen and try to get these batsmen out, but I don't want to share it with anybody else, because I've always worked best if I'm focused on what I'm doing. I don't like playing those types of prediction games – but that's just the way I operate."

The last series threw up interesting new issues, one of the most important being reverse swing – which the Poms used well, the Aussie bowlers didn't and the Aussie batsmen handled worst of all. Now it's impossible to ignore.

"Reverse swing is crucial to a cricket team as part of the fast bowler's armoury. It's so important that a fast bowler can learn how to bowl with the old ball, commonly known as reverse swing. And that's something we didn't do well last year. England did it

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