Ian Botham

A larger-than-life character on and off the cricket field in the '80s, Ian "Beefy" Botham is still making his presence felt

One of the greatest all-round cricketers, Ian Botham hails from an age when the Poms regularly held their own against the Aussies and were no strangers to Ashes glory. His greatest hour was the Headingley Ashes Test of 1981, when his heroic batting helped steal the match from the Australian team of Kim Hughes, Lillee and Marsh. But Botham's career was astoundingly controversial for a cricketer: studded with regular sex and drugs scandals, run-ins with the law and cricketing authorities, sackings and a lengthy battle with the tabloid media.

Now a cricket commentator for Sky TV in the UK, his new autobiography (*see review, p128*) attempts to set straight much of the controversy. *Alpha* speaks to Botham as he prepares to receive a knighthood from the Queen.

How does it feel to be part of the establishment?
I don't look at it that way. The people I rebelled against were certainly not the royal family. I've been a magnificent supporter, as your Mr Keating will tell you if you chat with him.

You said he had no heritage.
Exactly. My beef is with the authorities of the game, about the way the game is run – you only have to look at the recent England (Ashes) debacle in Australia; it was embarrassing. England have to make some changes and we'll see how significant those are as time goes on. We have a long way to go.

Have you mellowed at all?
I don't think you're ever going to change that side of me, because that's what keeps me ticking over.

From your book, it seems you've learned some hard lessons.
I did the book because so many people have preconceived ideas about what Ian Botham is about. And that's usually because they get it from the tabloids. I thought, I've had one hell of a life and it's been great fun, but what about telling it as I see it, through my eyes?

Most cricketers go on tour, play a bit of cricket and go home again. But with you: drugs, women, violence...
(*Laughs*) There was more than that.

Occasionally some cricket?
There's been so much speculation and so many people who thought they knew this and knew that, and I laugh at them. Sometimes I wasn't even on the same continent at the time [the stories were supposed to have taken place].

But why did it always happen to you?
In England, when we get a world champion – someone like Nick Faldo, who wins six Majors, probably more than anyone else in England in the history of the game – what do we do? We knock him. We get Nigel Mansell, a world champion, we knock him: he's a "boring man from Birmingham". Talk me through that one.

Will you and Ian Chappell ever make up?
Why? If you look at the book, he gets a couple of mentions and why? Because I really don't care. I'm past worrying about all that. He's tried to change his stories a few times.

The story he told us is very different to yours...
(Botham's version of the infamous bar argument: "I gave him three official warnings. The next time he started, I just flattened him. He made a bolt for the exit." Chappell's version, as told to *Alpha*: "Anyone who puts a beer glass in your face and says they're going to cut you from ear to ear doesn't impress me.")
Yeah, it's changed quite a lot in the past 10 years. I don't worry about him one iota and, to be honest, I don't know too many people who give a toss about him anyway.

Do you have any regrets?
No, I always try to look forwards. I listened to what Seve Ballesteros said a few years ago, when he was Ryder Cup captain. He said: "I never have regrets, because if you have one big picture and you take out one little bit in the middle, the bit you regret can change the whole picture." You can highlight all the good areas, but you can't walk away from the bad areas. You've got to cop it on the chin.

Has that temperament helped you as a sportsman? The ability to draw a line and move on?
Absolutely. I play golf and I never hit a bad shot: it's always a bad lie, a dodgy bounce, what kind of a read was that for the putt...

After what they've put you through, is it strange you now write a column for a tabloid?
I've been working for that tabloid (*The Sun*) for about 20 years. I've a magnificent relationship with them – they've never tried to turn me over, and the editor is a great guy. The problem in England, from the late '70s to the mid-'80s, was there was a tabloid war. The attitude of some editors was: why let the truth ruin a good story? It's a sad reflection of the attitude over here. It comes down to jealousy.

Do you like being in the public eye?
I don't know anything else. I have escape routes; I can disappear to the river, go fishing. The rest of the time, my job's in the media. And I'm very lucky – a lot of guys when they retire, they lose the banter and the comradeship of the dressing-room. I had a short break when I retired and now I'm in the commentary box with the guys I played with. I've never lost that feeling. I wouldn't swap anything.

If you look at someone like Andrew Flintoff, who's injured a lot, how would your body have stood up to the amount of cricket that's played today?
I'm going to check you on that one: "The amount of cricket that's played." The amount of international cricket that's played, maybe, but these guys don't play county cricket.

You were back on the treadmill with Somerset every season...
Correct. You played a Test match, finished on a Tuesday night; you drove through the night to play on the Wednesday. And this was day in, day out, so I don't buy into this "too much cricket". If guys want to play less, take less money, and then you might find they're not so tired. It's not bad money, and what a way to make a living.

You used to hold an Ashes barbecue for both squads; seems unimaginable now.
Wouldn't happen now.

When did the game stop being so friendly?
With the teams in the mid-'80s; we still have the barbecue and get a few of the England players to pop in. But it's not en masse like before.

Is that better or worse?
It's not good for the game. When we came off the field at the end of a day's play, by the time you got your boots off, the opposition would walk in with a few cold beers and you sat down for half an hour. Generally, you ended up policing the game and sorting out a lot of problems. Also, you learnt a lot as a young player. That's gone out of the game, and I would rather have sat in a dressing-room listening to Dennis Lillee talk about bowling than in an ice-bath having a Powerade.

Allan Border was blamed for that friendliness stopping – is that fair?
I don't think that's fair. With "AB", Australia needed a kick in the teeth – like England did with Nasser Hussain when he took over. You've got to be ruthless sometimes, particularly if you come through the ranks. You go from being a player to a captain. Suddenly, you've got to forget about that matey bit, because I might have to drop you tomorrow. You have to cut yourself off a bit, and I think AB got a rough deal. He was one of the best players Australia's produced and one of the best captains.

Do you think Australians love or hate you?
Some of my best mates are Australian. The crowds are all part and parcel of the game. The bigger the atmosphere, the more fun it is. I've been called a pommy something-or-other for God-knows how many years, so I'm not going to worry about it now; a lot of it's very funny.

Who today compares with the great all-rounders?
I don't think there's an all-rounder who competes with the (Kapil) Devs, (Imran) Khans, (Richard) Hadlee, (Ian) Botham... Not at the moment, but they will come along. It's not, "Where have they gone?" It's, "Why haven't you got another Shane Warne?" It doesn't happen every day of the week. You've got to make the most of these things when they happen.

Do you have good memories of your time playing in Australia?
I loved it; loved Australia and loved playing against Australians; I think they're the ultimate competitors.

Head On: Ian Botham, The Autobiography *by Sir Ian Botham, Ebury Press, $35.*

Smokin' hot: Botham was no dope on the grass of Australian ovals. In New Zealand, however...

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