

WARNE SAYS PANESAR IS ENGLAND'S BEST SPINNER.

The mirth stopped when it became apparent that Panesar was good at his main job. Very good. Being a calamity in the field is no good if you're a long-term prospect. The concern appears to have eased recently; his huge work ethic, combined with stints at Darren Lehmann's cricket academy in Adelaide, has turned him into a better all-round player. And then there's the bowling.

Picked for England's tour of India — a pretty tough place for a young Sikh to start — Panesar's first Test wicket was Sachin Tendulkar, followed shortly after by Mohammed Kaif and Rahul Dravid. His ability to turn the ball sharply — and to get out the big names — was confirmed in the home series against Pakistan, where he took bagfuls of wickets, and claimed the scalps of Inzamam-ul-Haq, Younis Khan (with a ball that turned practically square) and Mohammad Yousif, among others.

But Monty Panesar's only claim to guile is at one end of a 22-yard strip. In person he is charming and humble almost to a fault. During the 2006 Pakistan series, when UK fans were baying for an Ashes berth for Panesar, the only two unimpressed by the hype were England coach Duncan Fletcher (he later relented: "As a finger spinner there is probably no one to match him in world cricket at the moment") and Panesar himself. He still admits to being "star struck" in the England change rooms, and who else would describe his great rival (Giles — also here, fit and raring to go) as "a world-class cricketer. I just hope I can be like him one day. I don't know how I can compare myself as a competitor".

Indeed, there have been concerns that he is just too nice, too gentle and sensitive for something as rough on the mind, body and spirit as an away Ashes Series. Should he play, he will have the team psychologist, 10 teammates and the Barmy Army to help him out, but will it be enough? Others have fared less well, notably fellow spinner Phil Tufnell, of whom an English crowd member once asked if he could borrow his brain, because he was "building an idiot".

Panesar claims to have prepared himself "for the worst", and chances are he will survive and prosper. Tufnell, a talented bowler but also a cocky and unathletic smoker, inspired mixed reactions, but very few can claim to actively dislike Panesar. He also possesses one trait Australia prizes very much: he never gives up.

Panesar may only have turned his full attention to other aspects of his cricket relatively recently, but his career to date is the tale of a bowling obsessive. "I see it as something I enjoy," he has

FACT FILE

MONTY PANESAR

Born: April 25, 1982

FIRST-CLASS RECORD — BOWLING

Matches 49

Balls 11667

Runs 5428

Wickets 185 at 29.34

Best bowling 7/181

FYI

Made his Test debut against India at Nagpur in March and took 2-73 off 42 overs.

Statistics correct at time of press

said. "I don't see it as practice." At Northampton, his county side, he has been known to train so hard coaches would be forced to send him home. "Even if he has a day off, he'll be practicing," his childhood friend Nitin told *Wisden*. "So, really, he won't let himself have a day off."

Playing for England has, if anything, spurred him to greater efforts. "It makes me want to train a lot more," he said. "I become more motivated, it just makes me more hungry." During Pakistan's first innings at Headingley he bowled almost 50 overs at an economy rate of just over two. Pakistan built an enormous total — against other bowlers.

Monty Panesar may actually have a little more cunning than it first seems; spinners can't help themselves. Despite all the practice, the application of all that intelligence, he insists, is about refinement: "I just want to keep

it simple.

Get the ball to the other end, that's it." But there is clearly more to his art than that — and the Australian team is in no way fooled.

Shane Warne said Panesar is "the best spinner in England and I think he has proved it this (northern hemisphere) summer", while batsmen Ricky Ponting, Matthew Hayden and others have named Panesar as someone they'll target.

"Like any new spinner we have not seen before we'll try to get on top of him before he gets on top of us," says Adam Gilchrist. Although he added, "A lot of that will be dictated by the conditions and the match scenario."

"I faced him last year on the Ashes tour and I was impressed," admits Simon Katich. "Monty is a bowler who tries to give you a bit of air. He does try and turn it. He is bowling genuine wicket-taking balls and knocking good players over." Glenn McGrath is dismissive of Panesar's potential impact. It's all a clear sign of, well, something — a bit of psychology, mixed with a little respect.

So what can Australians expect from Monty Panesar this summer? A big smile, for sure. His trademark skipping celebration at every wicket. A few fumbles in the field, maybe, but also surprises with the bat — he has hit Murali for six, although he wouldn't tell you himself. Wickets, definitely. If given the nod over Giles, suddenly the Australians face an attacking spin bowler with the ability to do as much damage on a spinning pitch as Warne — the man for whom it has been prepared.

With the advent of Panesar, the tactics become somewhat trickier for Ponting. It has been a very long time since Australia faced an Englishman with proper spinning menace. It's yet another ingredient to make this already gripping series a little more interesting. ●

Ivan Smith is managing editor of Alpha magazine in Sydney.

