

MCG gutted

INTERNET, undated

A fire believed to have been caused by workers' welding torches caused an estimated 38,000 dollars damage to the Melbourne Cricket Ground on Wednesday.

The fire, which started mid-morning, damaged about 20 plastic chairs, several window panels and a section of the roof. Commander Lou Mele of Melbourne's Metropolitan Fire Brigade said. Seven fire trucks were sent to the blaze.

"It could have been a lot worse," Mele said. "Our crews arrived four or five minutes after the fire and quickly got a couple of lines on and got it under control very quickly."

"The roof is damaged. Not majorly, but there is quite a bit of damage."

The 85,000-seat stadium, which will host one of Ashes Tests between Australia and England beginning December 26, recently underwent a 330-million-dollar refurbishment ahead of March's Commonwealth Games.

Gibbs coming to India?

CRICINFO, undated

South Africa's Herschelle Gibbs is likely to travel to India for the Champions Trophy in October as significant efforts are being made to resolve any legal issues regarding his and Nicky Boje's questioning by Indian police in the match-fixing scandal.

In an interview with Sports Illustrated in South Africa, Gibbs said that he would make the trip.

"Ja, I am going to go," he told features editor Mark van Dijk. "But my lawyer's coming with me. I've put forward a proposal to Cricket South Africa, which was discussed on Thursday. I've proposed that my lawyer and I will travel with the team, and once we get to the hotel, they can then do the questioning at the hotel."

"I've got the 18 questions that they want to ask me. It's basically exactly the same stuff that I answered at the King Commission. I'll just be repeating myself."

Gibbs said that the delays were all at the Indian end. "They haven't really played their part," he shrugged. "You know, we've asked them many a time to come question me on neutral territory, and they refuse. So it's not like I haven't made the effort. It's them being hard-arsed. That's it."

However, KK Paul, the Delhi Police commissioner, rebutted the claim. "I haven't received any such communication," he told Cricinfo, "if he has to say anything, let him communicate through the board. So far, I haven't received any such offers from the board or from him."

Greg reduces

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In their fast bowlers," said Chappell. "We have to simulate as much as possible."

The Indians are desperate for action after spending a fruitless two weeks in earlier this month in Sri Lanka, where a bomb blast and bad weather prevented any matches from being held.

South Africa withdrew from a scheduled tri-series due to security fears before heavy rain in Colombo washed out a hurriedly arranged bilateral series between India and the hosts.

"Sri Lanka was disappointing but there was nothing much we could do about it," Chappell said. "We have to make the most of the opportunities now."

India are scheduled to host the ICC Champions Trophy in October-November, the second biggest tournament after the World Cup featuring all 10 Test-playing nations.

Hair

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the match with what is going on," confirmed Chris Kelly, the ECB's umpires and match operations manager.

"There are lots and lots of issues."

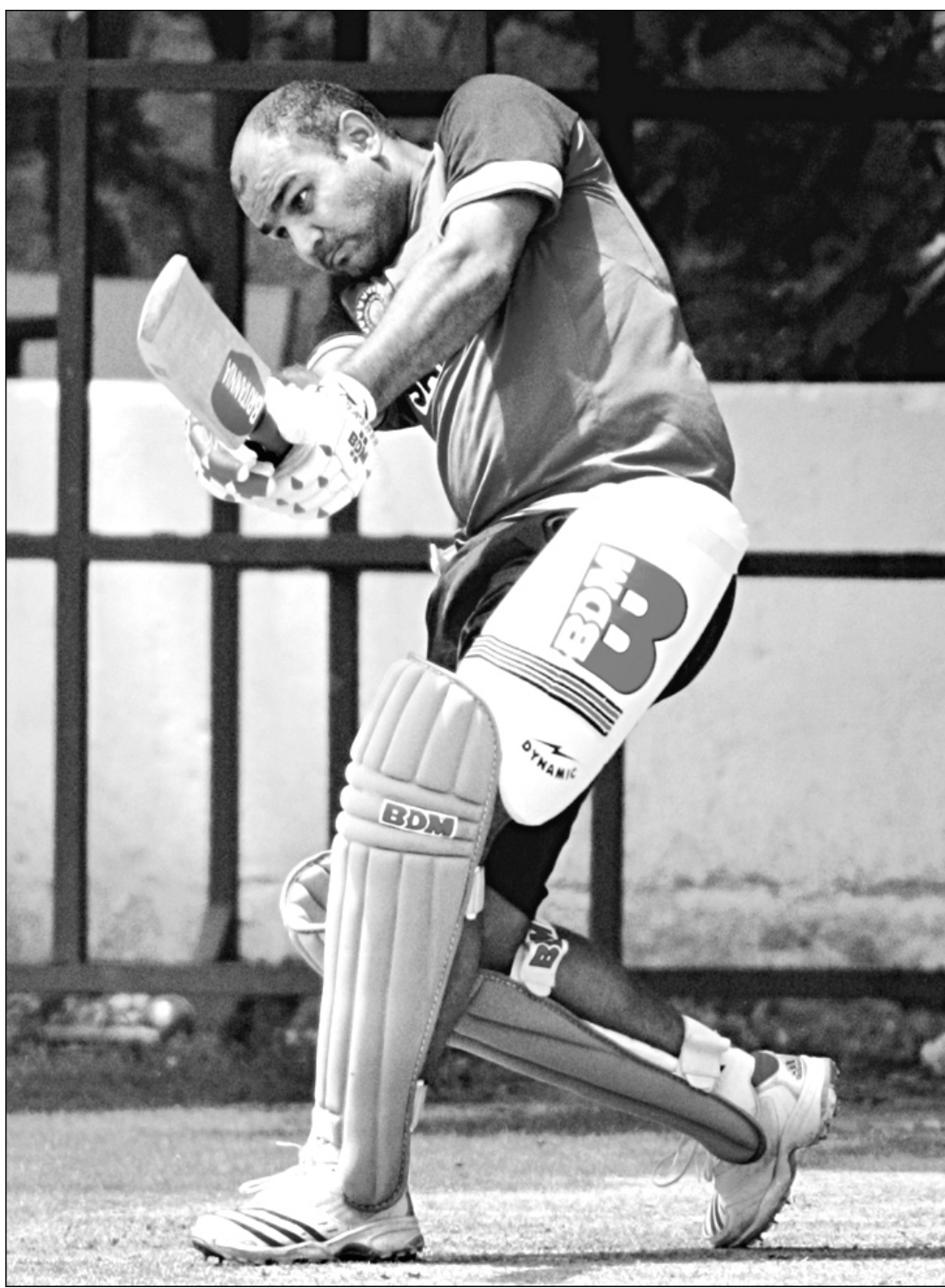
Ever since the ICC made public Friday what Hair regarded as a "confidential" e-mail, he and the global governing body have been in dispute about the amount of encouragement, if any, he was given by officials to put an offer, described by ICC chief executive Malcolm Speed as "totally inappropriate" in writing.

With his future career in doubt, Hair issued a statement saying: "I wish to apologise to all my family, friends and supporters, because I somehow feel that I may have let them down, simply by sending an ill-advised but entirely confidential e-mail."

But Hair added that he had been "stunned and gratified" by the number of messages of support he had received.

Pakistan returned to action with a five-wicket win in their inaugural Twenty20 international, against England, at Bristol on Monday.

The teams are due to begin a five-match one-day series with a day-night fixture at Cardiff on Wednesday where Doctrove is scheduled to be one of the on-field umpires.



Indian batsman Virender Sehwag drives at a ball during a practice session at the National Cricket Academy (NCA) in Bangalore on Wednesday.

Pup eyes the runs

AFP, Sydney

Michael Clarke says getting runs in October's ICC Champions Trophy in India is crucial to his chances of playing in the much-anticipated Ashes cricket series against England later this year.

The 25-year-old Australian right-hander, who exploded on to the Test cricket stage with a century on his debut in India followed by a hundred in his first home Test against New Zealand two years ago, says he must build an undeniable case for selectors to choose him in the first Test team.

His star waned last year after a series of low scores against the Rest of the World and the West Indies before he was dropped after the second Test against the West Indies in Hobart.

He got back into the team for two Tests in Bangladesh last April, but his Test batting average has slumped from 75.75 in his third Test in 2004 to a current 36.23 after 22 Test appearances.

Clarke, or 'Pup' as he is known, must post more big scores in the ICC Champions' Trophy one-day tournament to force his claims for what is shaping up as one of the biggest Test series in Australia for

many years. "For me, the Kuala Lumpur (leadup) tour and the tour to India are crucial, they're very major tournaments for me because if I don't perform there then I will have no case to put forward to be selected for the Ashes," Clarke said at the Australian team camp in Queensland Wednesday.

"I will have to try to get some runs in this one-day series then I will have a case to take to the selectors and say 'I've got runs on the board, pick me for the first Test'."

Australia take on England in the first of five Tests at Brisbane's Gabba ground on November 23.

Clarke, who concedes his axing after last year's Hobart Test was a massive jolt he needed, knows he may not get a second chance at Test level if he doesn't get amongst the runs in India.

"You have to perform, if you want to play at the top level, if you don't perform someone else will take your spot, it's as simple as that," Clarke said.

"For me my opportunity is in one-day cricket, that's the only real chance I have before the Ashes in the two one-day tournaments, so I have to perform in them."

Clarke speaks candidly about how he has learnt much about his cricket after the hurt of being discarded by selectors.

"I've had the opportunity to look back on what I have achieved and where I was going in my short career, I've only played 22 Tests," he said.

"As much as I hate to say getting dropped is a good thing, because at the time it's the worst feeling in the world, but when I look back now I feel it was probably the kick up the bum that I needed."

"It hurt but it did give me the opportunity to go back and be out of the limelight and out of the media spotlight."

"I guess I learned a lot about my preparation. The reason I believe I have been successful in one-day cricket and Tests for Australia is because my preparation has always been spot on."

"When I got dropped I believed my preparation was sliding, I was training as hard as I normally do, but I was so busy with other things, I didn't have the time."

"I realised that this is what got me to this level, working and training as hard as I can, being so prepared."

"I see it as the game testing me, I'm a young guy trying to get to a place in a hurry when maybe it does take time to become the best you can be."

The New South Wales batsman has scored 1,123 Test runs from 34 innings.

Greece to face US stars

AFP, Saitama

European champion Greece broke away in the final period for a 73-56 quarterfinal win over France on Wednesday at the World Basketball Championship, sustaining hope for a first-ever global medal.

Lazaros Papadopoulos and Antonis Fotsis, both big men at the Russian club Dynamo Moscow, led the Greek scoring with 14 points each while Real Madrid forward Mickael Gelabale hit 12 to pace France.

Greece, which finished a best of fourth at the worlds in 1998 and 1994 and has no Olympic medal to its name, advanced to a semi-final on Friday against the United States which trounced Germany 85-65 in another last-eight match.

Greece coach Panagiotis Yannakis admitted the semi-final would be his team's toughest challenge after its seven straight wins in the tournament.

"In front of us, we see the best team in the last year. The US team has a lot of concentration, a lot of basketball in open court," he said.

"If the United States plays open court, there is an opportunity for them to play an easy game against any opponent."

The match against France was one sided but Greece struggled to widen the gap as both sides lacked shooting precision.

"We put our rhythm in the game

from the beginning," Greek point guard Dimitris Diamantidis said. "We forced them to make some turnovers. We scored when it mattered."

France fought without starting point guard Tony Parker of the National Basketball Association San Antonio Spurs. Parker pulled out with a broken finger days before the championship.

"Greece was such a strong team. I don't know if Tony Parker could have helped us in this case," France coach Claude Bergeaud said.

Greece beat France in last year's European semi-finals.

Greek "man mountain" center Sofoklis Schortsanitis, nicknamed "Baby Shaq", sank five free throws and Fotsis hit the basket with an open shot and a free throw as Greece stretched its lead in the second period.

The Greeks finished the first half ahead 34-24 with a buzzer-beating long shot by Diamantidis from the right wing.

The two sides went tit-for-tat for a 19-19 run in the third quarter with Boris Diaw, a swingman with the NBA Phoenix Suns, scoring two free throws and a 3-pointer to bring France back from a 48-33 deficit.

With a 53-43 lead going into the final period, Greece pulled away with Vassilis Spanoulis hitting two two-point shots and a 3-pointer.

Greek coach Yannakis said that he would tell his side ahead of the US match "Don't pass the ball to their hands. Keep rebounds."

Pakistan restrict

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Younis Khan's hands at second slip on 9 - but also played with power through the off side. He reached a well-paced fifty off 71 balls, but lost Paul Collingwood just before the half-way mark as he was trapped plumb in front by Shahid Afridi's fourth ball.

England made one change for the first game of a five-match series at Sophia Gardens from the side that lost Monday's Twenty20 international against Pakistan by five wickets at Bristol with Rizki Clarke, a medium-pace bowling all-rounder, replacing spin bowling all-rounder Michael Yardy.

Clarke was playing his first one-day international in more than two years since making the last of his previous 17 appearances against the West Indies at Trent Bridge in June 2004.

Fast bowler Stuart Broad made his full England one-day international debut after taking two wickets in two balls in the Twenty20 match.

Pakistan however fielded an unchanged team that won Monday's Twenty20.

England have won just four of their last 19 one-day internationals.

West Indian umpire Billy Doctrove was appearing in his first match since standing alongside Darrell Hair in Pakistan's controversial forfeit of the fourth Test against England at The Oval on August 20.

ICC confirms Pak request

AFP, Cardiff

The International Cricket Council (ICC) confirmed Tuesday they had received a request from the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) to hold an inquiry into the conduct of Darrell Hair regarding the Australian umpire's role in the ball-tampering row which helped end the fourth Test against England.

An ICC spokesman told AFP in Cardiff via telephone that PCB chairman Shaharyar Khan had written to the global governing body asking that Hair's conduct be "thoroughly investigated" and that such an inquiry should take place before disciplinary charges against Pakistan captain Inzamamul Haq were heard.

Warne planning ahead of time

REUTERS, Coolom

The Ashes are still almost three months away but Shane Warne is already busy plotting Australia's revenge.

Warne has spent the off-season playing county cricket in England to get a closer look at their top batsmen and the master leg-spinner likes what he has seen.

Warne said England's new bold approach to batting unwittingly played into his hands because the risk of chasing quick runs increased his chances of getting wickets.

"It used to be a lot harder to get wickets because they used to pad me away and try and wear me down," Warne told reporters at a training camp in Queensland.

"Now they try to go after me, which is fantastic. It means I might go for a few more runs but it means I get a lot more wickets, which was proven in the last series."

Warne was easily Australia's most effective bowler in the last Ashes series in England in 2005, capturing 40 wickets, but his impressive performances were still not enough to stop England winning the series 2-1.

BCCI to film

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the rival teams' captains and the match referee. But at times we have found that winning captains give top marks to the same umpires who have been rated as poor by losing teams' captains," BCCI Joint Secretary MP Pandove said.

"The special committee formed to assess the umpires and consisting of Srinivas Venkataraughavan, SK Bansal and VK Ramaswamy has recommended that we video shoot all the matches to help them in grading the umpires and recommending suitable ones to the ICC panel," Pandove, also the convenor of the umpires' sub-committee of the BCCI, said.

BFF postpones

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With such uncertainty, it seems that this year's football season is unlikely to roll onto the field and so the players, who have already submitted a memorandum to the federation where they mentioned that they would take to the street and boycott all national duties if the federation failed to start the transfer as per schedule, will be the ultimate sufferers.

It's more than a year now that there has not been any inter-club players' transfer after the Premier Division Football League in August last year.

It's raining

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Azarenka of Belarus, 1-0; No. 24 Na Li of China held a 4-3 edge over Spaniard Maria Sanchez Lorenzo; American Meghann Shaughnessy opened a 3-0 lead over Italian Roberta Vinci; and American Jamea Jackson jumped to a 4-1 lead over Bulgarian Tsvetana Pironkova.

It was the second straight day that play had been affected by rain. On Monday morning, play was suspended for approximately 90 minutes, but the rain disappeared and all scheduled matches were completed.

Buffon slams

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Marco was a scandalous compromise," Buffon said as he prepared for the Euro 2008 qualifiers against Lithuania and France.

"It was an absurd precedent and totally unacceptable."

FIFA were adamant the punishment given to Materazzi was in line with its rules which states: "Anyone who insults someone in anyway, especially by using offensive gestures or language, will be sanctioned with a match suspension."

"If the perpetrator is a player, he will be suspended from at least two matches."

Materazzi has admitted abusing Zidane during extra-time. Zidane, who retired from football after the World Cup final, claimed in a television interview that Materazzi had insulted his mother and sister.

'Criterion should be merit, not colour'

AFP, London

Kevin Pietersen says heartbreaking racial quotas forced him into making the biggest decision of his life, to quit his native South Africa and move to England.

The batsman said his starring role in last summer's Ashes triumph only happened when racial discrimination resulted in him being left out of the Natal side because of the colour of his skin.

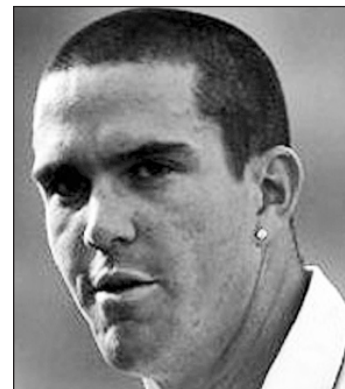
Pietersen made the decision to move to England - his mother's place of birth - and impressed for Nottinghamshire then Hampshire to earn a call-up to the national side of the Natal side because of the colour of his skin.

He told Wednesday's Daily Mail: "I had taken wickets against Nasser Hussain's touring England side in 1999-2000 and I had spoken to him about playing cricket in England."

"Yet there was a huge setback around the corner which forced me

into the biggest decision of my life.

"I was dropped from the Natal first team for political reasons. I was dropped because of the quota



KEVIN PIETERSEN

system brought into South African cricket to positively discriminate in favour of 'players of colour' and to fast-track the racial integration of cricket in the country.

"To me, every single person in this world needs to be treated exactly the same and that should have included me, as a promising 20-year-old cricketer."

"If you do well you should play on merit. That goes for any person of any colour."

"It was heartbreaking," he said. "I'd always been aware I had other options. England was my mum's birthplace. I had a British passport and I had often thought about playing cricket in England," he added.

"And even though it was very hard for me to take in at the time, it turned out it was the best thing that could have happened."

"If it hadn't, I wouldn't have been standing at The Oval as part of an Ashes-winning England team and I wouldn't have been named one-day player of the year at the ICC awards dinner in 2005, or been standing on a Sydney stage in front of the best cricketers in the world."

Cole urged to be positive

AFP, London



With the transfer deadline almost up Arsenal chairman Peter Hill-

Wood has urged Ashley Cole to adopt the right attitude if his move to Chelsea falls through.

The England left-back has been linked to a move to the Premiership champions but the two London clubs have failed to reach agreement over the player's value.

The protracted saga has been

running for more than 12 months and Hill-Wood admits he hopes Cole will now dedicate himself to the Gunners if the transfer is not concluded by the time the transfer window closes at midnight on Thursday.

"He is a very good player and if he is going to stay I hope his attitude is right," Hill-Wood told the club's official website on Wednesday.

"If he is going to be miserable and sour there is no point. Hopefully he will get his head right."

Cole, who has been left out of Arsenal's opening two Premiership games - one draw and one loss, is

set to join Chelsea if they up their 16-million-pound offer closer to Arsenal's 20 million pound asking price.

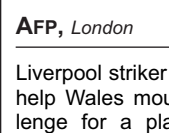
Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger insists he is not frustrated by the continuing uncertainty over his star defender's future.

"If it happens, it happens," he said this week.

"And if not, we will carry on. I don't find the situation annoying. If a player wants to leave a club, he generally goes."

Bellamy can be Welsh ace

AFP, London



Liverpool striker Craig Bellamy can help Wales mount a serious challenge for a place at Euro 2008 according to his international teammate Danny Gabbidon.

Bellamy has made an impressive start at Anfield following his pre-season move from Blackburn and West Ham defender Gabbidon believes his long-time friend has raised his game to a higher level.

"That can only be good news for John Toshack's side as they begin their European Championships qualifying campaign with a tough assignment against the Euro 2004 semifinalists the Czech Republic in Teplice on Saturday."

Gabbidon knows better than most just what a threat Bellamy can

pose after playing with him at all levels for Wales from youth football onwards, and also against him when Liverpool defeated West Ham 2-1 in the Premiership last weekend.

He said: "Craig has been on fire this season, he can be our key man. It is good to see how much he has improved in the last 18 months and going to Liverpool will improve him even more."

"Their coaching and the whole club can only be of benefit to him. It will take his game on even more and that can only help Wales with him on form and firing up front."

"He has been on fire at the start of the season and that can only be good for Wales. He is a fit lad, he can run all day and he has that skill to be a good finisher."

"It was a good battle on Saturday, he's a great player and I love facing the best because it only improves

my game. "It was a good competition between us. I know all about his pace and what he can do to a team, so it will be good to have him at the sharp end for us rather than coming at me."

Wales have a testing qualifying group which also includes Germany, Republic of Ireland, Slovakia, Cyprus and San Marino, but Gabbidon expects his side to hold their own.

He added: "I am looking forward to the real thing now, we have had a few decent friendlies and they have gone OK so we are all determined now to get the group off to a good start."

"You have to go into any game believing we can win, we have gelled well and the new lads who have come in have done well in a short space of time."

Aussies differ with Pak idea

AFP, London



Australia's cricketers are opposed to a Pakistan proposal to abolish the laws on ball tampering.

Pakistan coach Bob Woolmer has called for the existing rules to be scrapped after his captain Inzamamul Haq was charged with ball tampering and bringing the game into disrepute for forfeiting the final Test against England.

Woolmer has received the vocal backing of several former Test players, including Australia's Jeff Thompson, but Australia's current players believe the rules should not be changed.

"I don't agree we should scrap the rule," fast bowler Glenn McGrath told reporters at a training camp. "The umpires out in the middle have to call it as they see it."

McGrath also backed Australian umpire Darrell Hair, who has been vilified in parts of Asia and Britain for his role in the ball tampering crisis.

Accepting the umpire's decision is an integral part of cricket and McGrath said the authorities needed to support their umpires to ensure that most basic of principles survives.

"They have to be given the confidence to call it as they see it and be backed in their decisions," he said.

Australian vice-captain Adam Gilchrist, regarded as one of the standard bearers of fair play and sportsmanship after walking in a World Cup semi-final, agrees.

"It's a grey area but I think the rules are pretty close to doing an adequate job," he said.

"At the end of the day, part of the spirit is that the umpire's decision is final and that's the standards we set as a team."

Ball tampering, which is commonly associated with reverse

swing, is perceived as one of cricket's great sins because it amounts to cheating.

Opening batsman Justin Langer said Australia's batsmen had often been surprised when opposition bowlers were able to make the ball reverse swing but always gave them the benefit of the doubt.

"There's been times in my career when I thought that's unusual when the ball's been reverse swinging, but maybe I've

just been using that as an excuse for getting out," he said.

"That's the beauty of the game of cricket, unusual things happen. At the end of the day I think the crucial element of reverse swing bowling is the abrasive surface of the wicket."

England credited the ability of their seamers to bowl reverse swing as one of the crucial factors behind their upset Ashes win over Australia last year.