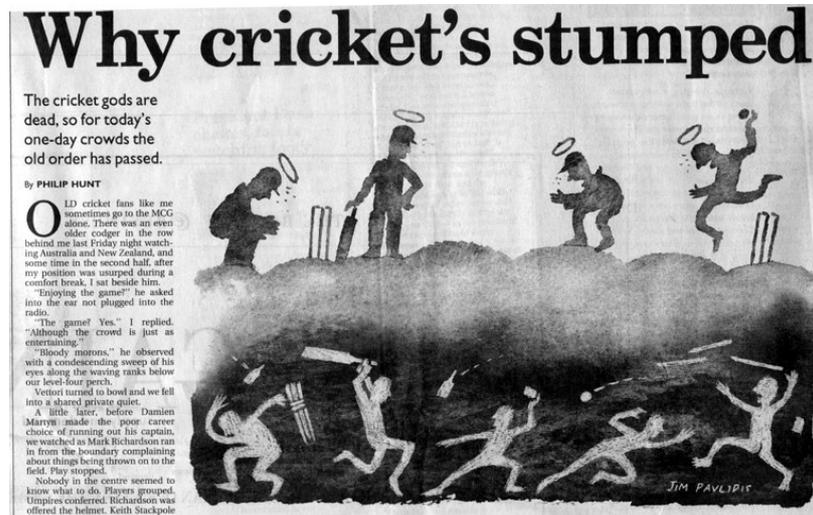


Why Cricket's Stumped

by Philip Hunt



The cricket gods are dead, so for today's one-day crowds the old order has passed.

By PHILIP HUNT

OLD cricket fans like me sometimes go to the MCG alone. There was an even older codger in the row behind me last Friday night watching Australia and New Zealand, and some time in the second half, after my position was usurped during a comfort break, I sat beside him.

"Enjoying the game?" he asked into the ear not plugged into the radio.

"The game? Yes," I replied. "Although the crowd is just as entertaining."

"Bloody morons," he observed with a condescending sweep of his eyes along the waving ranks below our level-four perch.

Vettori turned to bowl and we fell into a shared private quiet.

A little later, before Damien Martyn made the poor career choice of running out his captain, we watched as Mark Richardson ran in from the boundary complaining about things being thrown onto the field. Play stopped.

Nobody in the centre seemed to know what to do. Players grouped. Umpires conferred. Richardson was offered the helmet. Keith Stackpole expressed his embarrassment.

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"Enjoying the game?" he asked into the ear not plugged into the radio.

"The game? Yes." I replied. "Although the crowd is just as entertaining," I offered with an ironic smile.

"Bloody morons," he observed with a condescending sweep of his eyes along the waving ranks, rippling below us from our Level 4 perch.

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A little later, before Damien Martyn made the poor career choice of running out his captain, we watched as Mark Richardson ran in from the boundary complaining about things being thrown onto the field in his vicinity. Play stopped.

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Below us a minor war was playing out. A variation of the food fight—with empty plastic beer cups, coke bottles, bits of paper, tennis balls—was arcing back and forth. Different areas of the crowd would be targeted with apparent randomness, and incoming projectiles would rain down on them for a few seconds, before new targets were found and hundreds of people would shift focus with amazing speed and precision, accompanied by laughter, cheers and joy. The participants were young and clearly, for the most part, not drunk. They were having a party and a fight. Both together.

The game had stopped, but the merriment continued unabated down below in the Great Southern Stand.

Extra police and security people arrived and a few weighed in with a show of strength to remove some people. Soon things quietened down, Australia started losing wickets, and the countdown for the Mexican wave began again.

"This never happened in Bradman's Day" said the old codger with the authority of one who might have been there as a lad.

"Ah but then, cricketers were gods," I replied.

"That's right," he said with enthusiasm. "We know too much about the players these days. How can you respect these guys when we know how human they are."

"Like Warnie's phone calls?" I wondered.

"Sure. We know they're just ordinary blokes. We see how they react on close-up instant replays. We read about them in all the magazines and newspapers."

"And that's the problem," I suggested. "That's one of the reasons we have this kind of crowd violence."

"There is crowd violence because we don't see Steve Waugh in the same way we saw The Don?" He obviously thought this a stretch.

"Exactly. Sporting contests like this are cultural events," I said. I thought I might lose his interest at this point, but he surprised me.

"I know what you mean," he said, his eyes lighting up, "I did some sociology at Melbourne Uni. Taught for a while actually."

"Well, the role sporting contests play in society is to provide a socially acceptable way to let crowds get rid of their violence," I suggested.

"You mean by beating the Kiwis in this case?"

"Yes. Or in venting our anger on them for beating us," I said as Steve and Damian found themselves stranded at the same end of the pitch.

"Well, why isn't it working? Why is the crowd not satisfied just to cheer and chant?"

"I'm afraid we have to thank post-modern deconstructionism for that," I said with a smile, expecting a blank look.

"I won't let that go through to the keeper," he said with a broad grin. "All the myths of our society are being taken apart and destroyed."

"Exactly," I replied so engrossed with our conversation now I almost failed to notice Harvey, Warne and Lee come and go in quick succession. "The mechanism is called *mimetic violence*. Contagious crowd violence that seeks out a scapegoat. It needs someone to attack. And when it finds that someone, and attacks them, the violence is turned into community. A mob becomes a party."

"And Bradman's role in this?" he asked.

"Well, it's safer for society to vent its anger on mythical figures than on real targets."

"So," he theorised, "when we used to think of Bradman, and the other cricketers, as gods, the mechanism worked much better."

"Exactly," I replied, "scapegoating doesn't work as well if we know the victim. So, instead of having one really effective target, we need more and more targets to get the same feeling of release."

“That explains why the crowd shifts its focus,” the old codger offered. “One minute they are chucking things at the New Zealand fieldsman, then they are attacking each other, then they are yelling at the police.”

“And you see how the cycle ends?” I observed. “They rise as one body to point, wave and jeer at the one who is going home in the back of a Divvy Van.”

“Yeah, I always thought that was a bit unsporting.”

“And do you observe something else about this mob below us?” I asked.

“They’re drunk?” he speculated.

“No, actually they’re not any drunker than the rest of us,” I suggested. “That’s one thing the police and security people have found. A bit to their surprise, I reckon. That’s why the shift to light beer hasn’t made much difference to crowd behaviour at large.”

“Because it isn’t fuelled by alcohol,” he was finishing my sentences now. “It’s fuelled by the mob violence thing. What did you call it?”

“Mimetic violence,” I said. “The other thing I observe about this crowd is that they are all a lot younger than you and me. Mostly teenagers and young people in their twenties.”

“Why is that important?” he asked.

“Which generation has, more than any other, taken apart and exposed the mythical structures of their parents?”

“Ah-hah,” he said. “You are right. These kids don’t believe in anything any more. They don’t respect politicians, or big business, or the church. Or academics.” he added a little mournfully.

“But they still are captive to the mechanisms that used to rely on common myths for their effectiveness,” I explained. “They still are looking for scapegoats to resolve the competitiveness and violence in their spirits.”

“So you reckon we need to restore our mythical structures?” asked the old codger.

“Faint hope of that happening, I reckon.”

“No. I agree. The world has turned that corner. The question now is what shall we believe in now that the myths are decaying? And how shall we deal with violence in society when the traditional mechanisms are failing?”

We would have liked to talk some more about this, but McGrath had just snicked one to the keeper and revealed his humanness up-close to a national television audience.