

The Temptations of Ball Tampering: Steve Smith's Australian Team in South Africa

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Theme: [History](#)

There was an audacity about it, carried out with amateurish callowness. As it turned out Australian batsman Cameron Bancroft, besieged and vulnerable, had been egged on by Australian cricket captain Steve Smith and the Australian leadership to do the insufferable: tamper with the ball.

Before the remorseless eagle eyes of modern cameras, Bancroft, in the third Test against South Africa in Cape Town, was detected possessing yellow adhesive tape intended to pick up dirt and particles that would, in turn, be used on the ball's surface. This, it was assumed, was intended to give Smith's team an advantage over an increasingly dominant South Africa.

The reaction from the head of Cricket Australia, [John Sutherland](#), was one of distress.

"It's a sad day for Australian cricket." Australian veteran cricketers effused horror and disbelief. Former captain [Michael Clarke](#) wished this was "a bad dream".

One of the greatest purveyors of slow bowling in the game's history, [Shane Warne](#), expressed extreme disappointment "with the pictures I saw on our coverage here in Cape Town. If proven the alleged ball tampering is what we all think it is - then I hope Steve Smith (Captain) [and] Darren Lehmann (Coach) do the press conference to clean this mess up!"

Indignation, not to mention moral and ethical shock, should be more qualified. This, after all, is a murky area of cricket. An injunction against ball tampering may well be enforced but players have been engaged in affecting the shape and constitution of that red cherry since the game took hold on the English greens.

Festooned with regulations, norms and customs, the battle between bat and ball has often featured attempts to alter, adjust and manipulate the latter. Foreign substances have been added to one side of the ball; conventional additions of saliva and sweat are also used to give a magical sense of movement on its delivery to the batsman. Cricket, as ever, is a game of aerodynamic and environmental challenges, conditioned by human agency.

The line between tampering and permissible manipulation is, to that end, squidgy, even vague. Article 42.3 of the [ICC Standard Test Match Playing Conditions](#) covers the sins associated with ball tampering. "If the umpires together agree that the deterioration of the ball is inconsistent with the use it has received, they shall consider that there has been a contravention of this Law."

The deterioration of the ball, to that end, is salient. Bowling innovations, for one, have

triggered accusations and warnings from authorities bound by conservative instincts. The emergence of reverse swing, pioneered by Safraz Nawaz and reaching peak perfection with Wasim Akram and Waqar Younis, caused endless grief to practitioners and commentators.

Accepted now as a product of skill, even genius, it was a perceived illegality of tampering made good. As Simon Rae would note ruefully in his excellent *It's Not Cricket* on describing another exponent of reverse swing – the majestic Imran Khan – the former Pakistan captain had a certain “dedication to bringing the ball’s condition into harmony with his own ambitions for its movement in the air”.

Such tussles have taken place alongside the confected illusion that cricket is the Olympian summit of gentlemanly interaction and fair competition. The [Preamble to the Laws – Spirit of Cricket](#) reads like a sacred document chiselled on pristine marble. “Cricket owes much of its appeal and enjoyment to the fact that it should be played not only according to the Laws, but also within the Spirit of Cricket.” Heed, it would seem, that incorporeal creature, the hovering spirit.

Stress is also placed on the captain, who assumes “major responsibility for ensuring fair play”, though it “extends to all players, umpires and especially in junior cricket, teachers, coaches and parents.”

The field of battle has however, yielded its fair share of contraventions suggesting that cricket’s spirit was already well and truly disappointed before the antics of Smith’s men. To tamper, in short has proven an irresistible temptation, whether biting the seam (Pakistan’s theatrically foolish [Shahid Afridi](#) in 2010) or energetic zip rubbing (South Africa’s conscience clear [Faf du Plessis](#) in 2013).

Even demigods have been accused. India’s sanctified Sachin Tendulkar, for instance, received an initial one match suspension from match referee Mike Denness after alleged ball tampering in the second test match of India’s 2001 tour of South Africa. (He was subsequently cleared of the charge.)

A supposedly squeaky clean [Michael Atherton](#) was less fortunate, receiving a £2,000 fine for rubbing dirt from his pocket onto the ball in the 1994 Lord’s test against South Africa. The dirt itself had been extracted from the pitch.

In 2006, a Test match between Pakistan and England was forfeited after claims by umpires Darrell Hair and Billy Doctrove that ball tampering had taken place. Bitterly protracted, Hair’s judgment and the international governance of cricket, was brought into furious question by the Pakistani team.

Nor can all this be said to be a particularly modern phenomenon. The difference has been catching the sly culprit. Australia’s elusive and daring [Keith Miller](#) admitted to lifting the seam on occasion. “If you can do this without being spotted by the umpire and if you can get the ball to pitch on the seam,” he confessed in [Cricket Crossfire](#), “it will fairly fizz through.” That, in an age of less televisual scrutiny.

Talk about equity and fair play rapidly becomes comic, especially when it stems from former players, such as Warne, who gave [pitch reports to an Indian bookmaker](#) and [took diuretics](#) at the height of his career. The noble game has always boasted its ignoble rogues and its heavy disgraces.

The response to the incident has also been viewed with some dismay, not least of all regarding the insistence from the Australian captain to stay put. Smith may well feel that a call to the principal's office is in order, but he still holds the view that he is the best man for the captaincy. This view may well be challenged given his decision to saddle the young, potentially doomed Bancroft with the onerous task of executing the deed.

Australian cricket's self-advertised purity, however misplaced, has been overtly corrupted. It's "claim to playing hard but fair," wrote a resigned [Geoff Lemon](#), "has evaporated for years to come." Even [John Cleese](#), with acid accuracy, felt some remark on the affair was in order. Smith "in admitting 'ball-tampering', explained that the team leaders thought it was a way of 'gaining an advantage'. Another way of 'gaining an advantage' is to cheat."

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