

An Aussie Out

“Aussie Aussie Aussie, Oi Oi Oi! Aussie Aussie Aussie, OI OI OI!” The brilliant and articulate cheer rang down from the stands as I took my place at the head of the cricket pitch. Really, how on earth was such a complex chant developed? Wait. Focus. One more out and we’d win the finals. It was more than a little distracting through. I mean, it was an under twelve league and we were all Australian. Were they just cheering for all of us? Regardless, the cheer restored at least a little energy. The searing Australian heat meant we had to play all our sports in the winter. But after a particularly long season, the forty degree spring was wearing a little thin after three hours of cricket.

“Focus James!” My Dad was excellent at recognizing when I became... distracted. Honestly, I would have preferred to be out in the field, wandering around as the rest of the players dashed and heaved and sweated their way through the match. But, once again, this was an under twelve league. Even in the finals we all had to participate. “Ya got this one, son.”

At least the sun didn’t seem to be discouraging his fervour. It wasn’t really helping though. The great cricket legend Pete Anderson drew stares as he shouted, and in turn the crowd joined in. “James, James, James!” Fantastic. Now there was pressure. The coach called a time out.

We trotted over to the portly, red faced man, our white uniforms striking across the field. The team surrounding him in their pristine cricket whites resembled something somewhat more... regal than his own outfit. The singlet and, what I can only call “booty shorts,” were not exactly the embodiment of an inspiring leader. He gestured us inwards, lowering his voice so the other team couldn’t hear his complex strategy.

“Alright mates. They’re on their last batter. James will bowl him out.” He threw his arms up. “On ya, lads.” Inspiring speech. I’m not sure it was necessary, but I suppose it was a brief relief from the heat.

As we trotted out, our team captain, Hamish McGrath, moved up beside me. We got to the pitch and he gave me a slap across the shoulders. “You’re a fair dinkum Aussie. Ya got this one mate. We believe in ya.”

There’s this odd sense of reverence we tend to give to children older than ourselves. While Hamish was twelve, only a year older than myself, he made for something of an inspiring figure. Freckled, ginger, tall and solid for his age, he was easily the most rousing figure on our team. And he absolutely knew it. My Dad and the coach still yelled at me from the sidelines, but it was somewhat easier to focus now. I shot a glance at Hamish. He winked at me and nodded.

There’s a lot I could say about this next part. That I gathered my focus and thundered the ball down the pitch. Maybe I utilized the energy of the crowd and channeled it into the ball. Or maybe, I was just so giddy at the thought of an older child believing in me, that I wanted to validate his belief. All I can really say is that, somehow, I bowled the last batter out.

The crowd thundered again. “Aussie Aussie Aussie, OI OI OI!” and my team swarmed in to congratulate me. The white press of adolescent bodies formed a blazing beacon under that relentless Australian sun. I was the singular, central focus. But the moment that stood out is when Hamish came forward to congratulate me. Not with a high five, as all the other children had. Nor a fist bump, as was proffered by the oddly Americanized coach. No, he shook my hand. “On ya, mate. I knew you’d do it.”

I found out after the match that when I bowled the out, we’d already roughly tripled our opponent’s score. The coach knew this when he called us in, as did most of the parents in the stands. I initially thought that their excitement at the win was fake, because how could such a decisive victory really cause that

uproarious a response. But there was just something so Australian about that day. We all got caught up in the moment.

Unlike countries that actually have perceptible moisture in their air, Australia is an arid wasteland. The one thing we care about is our cricket pitches. So as the mob of people charged that field in celebration; it was more than just getting lost in the moment, it was more than just celebrating a child's rather well done bowl. It was this recognition of a core Australian moment. We may disagree about everything under that oh so scorching sun, but we're all able to share in the ecstatic moment that comes with the conclusion of a cricket match. Sure, that may just be because we're finally allowed out of the sun. But perhaps it has something to do with actually coming together for once. Not to celebrate a specific person, but ourselves as Australians. It took four hours, but it was a moment worth fighting for. I nearly passed out from the heat that day. And I'd never felt more Australian.

The rest of the day passed somewhat in a blur. It was probably the heatstroke. Still, I somehow managed to snap back into lucidity as we entered the Cobar cricket club. The club bore all the typical signs of small town disrepair: a dart-hole studded wall, an oddly sweet stench from the years of spilt alcohol, the tattered remains of a once white carpet. It made for an absurdly welcoming environment. Small town rivalries run deep; this was the one place we could put them aside. Especially tonight. This was the time to bury those rivalries. At least temporarily.

Across the club, under the brightest of the dim fluorescent bulbs that dotted their way around the yellow roof, sat the trophy table, groaning under the weight it bore. The previous year had been quite empty by comparison, but this was the first instance I can recall of tossing participation trophies out to all the... non-winners.

I reverently approached, taking care not to trip over the flayed carpet and send everything flying. There was already a group of children around the table, gaping at its contents. But none of us focused on the first place trophy in the centre. Instead, our attention was drawn to a small, black trophy, worn away from its years of being passed around the club. The trophy apparently once held the form of Marshall Raciborski, the most legendary cricket player to ever come from our town. He'd never made it to the national level, but he was the greatest the town had ever known. Not because he was the most talented. Nor even the hardest training. No, Raciborski was legendary because he was the ultimate sportsman.

We'd all been raised on the tales of his sportsmanship. Even when it hurt his own team, he'd go out of his way to make sure everyone was treated with respect and dignity. Our greatest players were forgotten long ago. But none of us wanted to be one of those legends. We wanted to be the greatest sportsman. Our parents made sure of that. But the trophy could only go to one person that night. The player of the match.

A loud whistle rang out from the dais to the left of the table. "Alright ya fu-... ya little drongos. Get ya fu-... get away from the table there." The club's president, Hayley Raciborski, great granddaughter of our hero, yelled over at us. I used to think she had a speech impediment. Then, I noticed it only ever happened around children. Then, I learnt how to swear. "Get your sh-... stuff and sit down." She was already red-faced from her restraint.

I lingered for a moment too long as the other children took their seats in front of the dais. The small space rapidly filled up, and I was left alone and out of place. I considered heading back to sit with my parents, but I was acutely aware of the social suicide I would be committing by such an action. As so often happened, my knees began to shake. If I'd only moved faster. If there was more room. If there was something I could do to maybe clear space? Maybe, if I grabbed a chair, I could clear a small space in the throng of children? Maybe, if...

“Oi James, get ya arse over here.” Hamish stood up and gestured to the space he’d cleared. He reddened as his mother shot a disapproving look his way. “Er, I mean get over here mate. Saved ya a spot.”

I carefully navigated my way through the dense foliage of children’s legs. Hamish clapped me over the shoulders and pushed me to the ground. “Wasn’t about to let our star player miss his spot, right mates?” The rest of my team was gathered around him. They nodded in unison. “Now, eyes up. Don’t wanna miss them saying how amazing we are.” If only.

Instead, we got to sit through the drear of a pre-awards ceremony. We had to acknowledge all the sponsors. In theory, this gesture makes sense, but ultimately it loses something of its value when the minimum donation amount to receive thanks is \$50. The cricket club mercilessly harangued everyone in the town for donations. To not support cricket was as un-Aussie as you could be. We had a lot of names to get through.

Enough time passed by that I was able to stretch a hole in the carpet from one inch to around four, and the awards finally began. First, the... non-winners received their trophies. The first team to get theirs was the Joeys. Well, they were actually the Redback Spiders, but the random draw somehow put all the youngest players on one team. They did not do well.

Then, the Pies got their trophies. Originally, they were the Platypuses, but they didn’t like that. So they went by Platypi. That was apparently too complex. So they then went by the Pies. They were a friendly bunch. Terrible players though.

The next three teams nobody liked enough to bother nicknaming, and they received their trophies in relative silence.

Then came the bronze medalists. We lived in a copper mining town, so they were literally called the Bronze Team. That was the moment I understood what people meant by self-fulfilling prophecy.

The silvers followed soon after. Even as we sat there, we struggled to remember their name. They'd been so thoroughly smashed in the finals that it wasn't really worth our time to recall.

Then, we were called up. The champions. The golden gods of that day. The most fierce, bloodthirsty, and victory driven team in the league. We were the best, and we knew it. We were the Koalas! As fierce as could be.

We got our slightly larger trophies without too much fuss, and once more took our seats. The babbling room collapsed into silence as the last, blackened trophy remained on the table. To my side, Hamish's eyes gleamed as he took it in. He was the captain of the winning team. Respected. Admired. It was his to win.

Raciborski gingerly lifted the trophy and stepped up to the dais once more. All eyes were on her as she held the trophy aloft.

"Every year, we award this trophy to the player of the match in the final game of the season. Above all else, the player of the match must exemplify what it means to be Australian. Only the player who demonstrated the most skillful play, balanced head, and respect towards his or her fellow Australians receives this award. This year was our toughest time deciding yet. All the players were exceptional, both on and off the field. But there has to be one winner. So I'm happy to announce that this year's "Aussie of the Match" award goes to James Anderson!"

"Haha! On ya, mate!" Hamish exulted from beside me. "Ya did it!" The crowd cheered as I shakily made my way up to the dais. Raciborski handed me the trophy and gestured to the microphone. Oh. Right. The winner of the Aussie of the Match was forced to make a speech. That seemed rather cruel to inflict upon a child. My mind was blank, so I fearfully vomited out the first thing that came to mind. "Aussie Aussie Aussie!"

"OI OI OI!" The crowd cheered. I left that stage grinning like a roo. My team crowded around me, jumping up and down with excitement. In true Aussie

fashion, even though they didn't win the award themselves, they were almost as excited as they could be. They represented the truest form of what it meant to be Australian. But somehow, at that moment, I was the most Australian of them all.

The next hour or so went by somewhat indistinctly. There was a tremendous amount of photography done in a relatively short amount of time, and I was blinded from the flashes to such a degree that I wondered if I'd ever actually be able to see a cricket ball again. Although, that was somewhat irrelevant now that I'd won the highest honour possible. My only worry was that I'd stolen something that Hamish was more deserving of, but, in the fashion of a true Aussie bloke, he was just as happy as the rest.

By the time the adults were smashed off their faces, the atmosphere started to die down somewhat. Generally, by this point my family would have gone home, but my Dad was too preoccupied with celebrating his, and I suppose his son's, glory days. I started to head out to look for my Mum, but Hamish gestured me over to join a group of boys.

"Right mates, we head out to the field in five, it's the perfect time to hunt some canies. Buggers been messing with Aus for too long. Let's round 'em up."

Now, I'd heard from my Dad about the cane toad plague in Australia, but we didn't exactly live in a heavily toad populated area. They mostly inhabited northern Australia; specifically the sugar cane fields. They were originally shipped over from the Amazon for the singular purpose of hunting cane beetles that were demolishing crops. Why someone thought a toad that could jump only two feet high would be able to reach beetles that hovered mainly around the six foot mark is beyond me, but it's safe to say they were less than effective. The local wildlife, however, was somewhat less resistant to them. Since then, all Australians have had something of a personal vendetta against the toads. For as long as I can remember, my Dad reinforced that fact. As such, I was pretty stoked

to go on my first cany hunt. I'd never seen one, but that didn't mean I couldn't hate them.

We slowly sidled out of the building, hoping not to arouse too much attention, and began our cany hunting around the cricket pitch. It was late enough that they might actually make an appearance. Unfortunately, we didn't find any on the field, so we split off into groups and started searching the nearby bush. We found a couple of holes here and there, and reached our arms into them to try to find something (a supremely intelligent move in Australia, of course), but had no luck.

After a half hour of hopeless bush rummaging, Hamish's high pitched whistle summoned us all back to the pitch. Someone must have seen our stealthy exodus by this point, as one of the previously darkened lights now illuminated a fair stretch of the field. A circle of children stood around Hamish, who was holding a half foot long cane toad. The slimy thing was wriggling back and forth in his hands, but his grip was unrelenting.

"Right mates, this is how Aussies deal with these buggers." Hamish gestured to one of the other boys, another rather large twelve year-old who was holding of all things, a can of Coke. Hamish held the toad aloft and pried its jaw open. The other boy opened the Coke, took a quick sip, and poured it into the beast's maw. Hamish shook it for a second and threw it to the centre of the group, hastily backing away.

I expected the toad to run, but it just sat there, shaking ever so slightly. What happened next is... difficult to say. Originally, I would have said the toad exploded, but that's not really accurate. When boiling hot dogs, they have the same reaction each time to over-boiling. This particular "hotdog" was certainly past its boiling point. Except instead of splitting down the middle, the reaction closer resembled both ends suddenly and explosively blasting off.

As what I can only imagine was the entirety of the toad's internals sprayed out either end, a few spurts of caramel liquid churned forth, showering the group. I was spattered with a relatively small amount, but the shock knocked me to the ground. As I lay there, the others whooped and hollered around the still shrinking mass of the toad's body, as its innards, now browned from the Coke, continued to pour out. It made a series of piteous groans, and then fell still. I couldn't get up.

Hamish walked over and held out a hand. The stadium lights created a halo around his head, darkening his eyes as he helped me up. "Happens to the best of us, mate." His eyes lit up as he turned back towards the crowd. With a nod, one of the older girls stepped forwards. She was holding another toad. "Who's up for another!" laughed Hamish. The crowd cheered.

I ran from that circle, looking for someone to stop this. The toad's last groans echoed in my mind as I frantically dashed across the dry, grass field. If my Dad was nearby, I could get his attention and stop this. Fortunately, I saw him and a few of his mates playing cricket nearby. Unfortunately, they weren't using a ball.

I moved to Canada just under two years later. Six years after that, I got my citizenship. It may have taken eight years to make it official, but after that night on the pitch, I was no longer Australian. Aussie Aussie Aussie. Oi. Oi. Oi.