

Out of the Ashes the phoenix will rise... or fall

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The Ashes are lost once again. Is anyone surprised? I know I'm not. Australia had safeguarded the urn since 1989, that's 8 Ashes test series and 16 years. In the summer of 2005 England bowled Australia over and dramatically won back the 5 test match series 2-1 at home only to lose it again in 2007. But if anyone thought that was a one off blunder on behalf of the Australian team, the players or selectors, they were mistaken. Australia has lost the Ashes once again in a 2-1 series win.

Australians have basked in its cricket team's dominance of the game for the better part of two decades. Who do we blame? Like the embittered Indian fans who burnt effigies of their heroes at the Indian team's losses, the Australian public are looking for someone to blame, and who better than the first Australian captain in more than a century to lose two Ashes series in England? While Ricky Ponting has the full support of his teammates there are a handful of cricketing greats whose comments are escaping through the solidarity of support for Ponting. People who recognise that the loss of Warne, McGrath, Gilchrist and Hayden have seriously impaired what was once a golden side.

Former Australia batsman Dean Jones suggested the selectors coax Shane Warne out of retirement to replace Ponting. "If the selectors ... want to go to someone else for the captaincy, if they're thinking of that, (the options are) maybe give it to (vice captain) Michael Clarke straight away... Ask Shane Warne to come out of retirement just for two years, then give it to Michael Clarke. ... A lot of people might be thinking that's stupid but it will take him two months, three months to get himself fit, just let him play the test matches and, I tell you what, he would do it in a heartbeat."

Australians are still looking to our historical greats to resolve our current cricket crisis than the dearth of talent that plays at regional and national levels. And why shouldn't we? We are used to being the best. Australia was officially the best Test side in the world since Mark Taylor led them to a historic win against West Indies in the Caribbean in 1995. But the Ashes series loss slips Australia to No.4 in the rankings and South Africa the new number one.

If we accept the support for Ponting and alleviate blame from him, who do we blame? Former Australia opener Michael Slater and former captain Ian Chappell led the chorus for the selection panel, chaired by Andrew Hilditch, to be made accountable. The selection of part time spinners and a disregard to cultivating growing talent has led to our imminent slide.

To look at the players in the current Australian side individually, each is talented in their own way. It was not who was sent out into the field but how they were mismanaged that should be reflected upon. Stuart Clark (4 wickets at 44) Went into the series as the only Australian bowler with a strong record against England, but did not get a bowl until the fourth Test. Had immediate success, then struggled in the second innings and on the dusty Oval pitch. Phillip Hughes (57 runs at 19) struggled with England's short-pitched bowling in his three innings and was dropped after two Tests. He remains a massive talent, and should be brought back soon.

Shane Watson (240 at 48) Found himself opening the batting after being included as Australia's only back-up batsman on the tour. Barely bowled, but didn't let the selectors down with three half-centuries, a 34 and a 40. And Michael Clarke (448 at 64, two centuries) was outstanding with the bat, and should replace Hussey at No.4 and Ponting as captain following this series. Players that failed to perform and contributed to our loss include Hussey and his less than perfect batting despite a century at Lords, Haddin's frequent sloppiness behind the stumps, and Johnson's struggle with the ball.

Still, our side has players whose talent could easily have overtaken the English. Despite the performances of Flintoff, Strauss and Swann, Peiterson's non-performance and injury was a disappointment, Bopara did not live up to the expectations created by the hype surrounding his appearance and Panesar's poor bowling was saved only by his batting in his only match of the series

Who do we blame? Our players need to wake up. They need to analyse their strength and play more cohesively as a team to bring out their individual capabilities for a united win. Australian selectors need to be more mindful of cultivating new talent and providing opportunities than relying on the experience of older players. The team as a whole needs more experience on adapting to playing overseas and the palpably dry pitches.

2009 has seen Australia lose to South Africa, New Zealand and even Bangladesh. September will bring the ICC Championships Trophy and then Australia plays India, Pakistan and the West Indies to end the year. The Australian team and the selectors should take lessons learnt from the Ashes and stop looking to the past to rectify the current cricket crisis. There is a dearth of new talent on Australia's pitches which given the right amount of cultivation and exposure will help Australia rise once again to its former glory. If not, the phoenix will definitely fail to rise out of the Ashes.