

Fourth Test

Boos greet England surrender

Series defeat leaves Test team rock bottom of the world league

David Hoggan at the Oval

Today must be an occasion for hope. There can be no more hiding, no more procrastinating, no more refusal to accept the truth. England are now confined as the worst Test side in the world. Only if despair spreads far and wide might any lasting recovery begin.

Ten minutes after lunch Alan Mullaly, with a fobbe-headed gesture of a man who wishes to get the thing over with, killed Chris Cairns to end, where an Englishman, Roger Twose, pounced the catch.

A day which had offered England a reprieve had fallen to New Zealand by 85 runs, instead. It had surrendered to them with 11 men out. New Zealand's 2-1 series win thrust England to the bottom of the Wisden Test rankings for the first time.

This long-running debate is not the failure of the 11 men selected at the Oval. Neither is it entirely the fault of past selectors and coaches.

It is predominantly the failure of the culture of a nation which builds on its few great spaces, fails to promote physical excellence among its increasingly unfit youth and designates team sports as an assault on individualism. It is equally the failure of a cricketing culture which has been forever reluctant to respond to trends, protect its club cricket in the name of tradition and persist with an overloaded first-class structure that dells the ambitions of many who play it. The choice remains simple: change the system, or forever accept mediocrity.

English cricket crowds are famous for their patience but yesterday's boos — harsh, critical, boos — rang around the Oval. The convenient target, Nasser Hussain, a new captain trapped with an old script, deserved sympathy.

Here willing with tears, as he sensed the level of disgust at England's failure, he pronounced: "The crowd of my team and the way they fought. We lost to the better team in a great Test match."

To some extent that was true: England bowled well and fielded handsily but this winter, in South Africa, England can expect to be great again.

In a better Test match, New Zealand, although brimming with purpose and togetherness, possessed the limitations of a side that previously had been rated first among the nine Test nations.

A pulsating Saturday's play had topped with English emotions. New Zealand's second-innings collapse to 85 for six, as Ed Gillies revelled in his Test debut, followed by a wonderfully vigorous counter-attack by Cairns, left 240 for victory.



New Zealand celebrate an emphatic Test victory, and a 2-1 series triumph, after Chris Cairns had captured the wicket of Alan Mullaly. Photograph by Tom Jenkins

On only eight occasions in Test history had a side triumphed by making the highest score in the match in the fourth innings: some challenge, but, at 91 for two on Saturday night, on a pitch which some imagined might be easing, England looked even moody.

For almost an hour Michael Atherton and Graham Thorpe were all composure. Atherton's perfectly executed hook against Dion Nash to bring up his half-century suggested that

only his own well-being but that of England themselves. Thorpe, too, was as fluent as he had been all summer. Those of us who have described his cricket as increasingly more weary and unfulfilled cannot fairly quibble with his announcement on Saturday that he is unavailable for the winter tour of South Africa, because of the demands of a wife and young family. When a sportsman worn down by a decade of touring announces

that "I need more balance in my life", his conclusion must be respected. The most appealing scenario would have been for Thorpe, his mind settled, to craft an England victory. That must have been how he imagined it. But with 92 added, he edged an outwinger from the left-handier Shayne O'Connor and a young family. When a sportsman worn down by a decade of touring announces

Nash then made decisive inroads. For much of the morning he had looked relatively benign, but 15 minutes before lunch he had taken three for four in 12 balls and England, 127 for seven after an interval, were between rain.

Atherton fell to an under-edged pull and Mark Boucher's admirable levels into over-land and he batted South next ball straight to Bell at square leg. Fleming, a polite and faint-minded captain, who has sport-eribless left his fast bowler's persistent abuse unrecalled, was lectured by both umpires.

Cairns's denture before lunch, caught at short leg off David Warner, brought a sense of delight from Kallis among the crowd. It was his suspension-ness was England's final refuge, one robust drive against Nash providing sustenance over lunch. But the last runs of a month: Imani caught at the wicket off Twose, and the run out of Phil Tufnell after Mullaly had occupied Twose to nullify. For the sake of the day, we thought the next over, Mullaly did.

Journey to the bottom of the earth

1979 World rankings: 1 England 1.65, 2 West Indies 1.23, 3 Pakistan 1.25, 4 Australia 0.88, 5 India 0.77, 6 New Zealand 0.69.

1989 World rankings: 1 Australia 1.71, 2 West Indies 1.29, 3 South Africa 1.27, 4 Pakistan 1.07, 5 Sri Lanka 0.87, 6 Sri Lanka 0.81, 7 Zimbabwe 0.70, 8 New Zealand 0.68, 9 England 0.57.

Based on home and away series between each team over a four-year period. Total points divided by games played decides position.

Full scoreboard from the Oval

Table with 2 columns: Team and Score. Includes England and New Zealand scores across four innings.

New Zealand batting

Table with 2 columns: Player and Runs. Lists New Zealand batsmen and their scores.

England batting

Table with 2 columns: Player and Runs. Lists England batsmen and their scores.

New Zealand bowling

Table with 2 columns: Player and Wickets. Lists New Zealand bowlers and their wicket counts.

England bowling

Table with 2 columns: Player and Wickets. Lists England bowlers and their wicket counts.

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