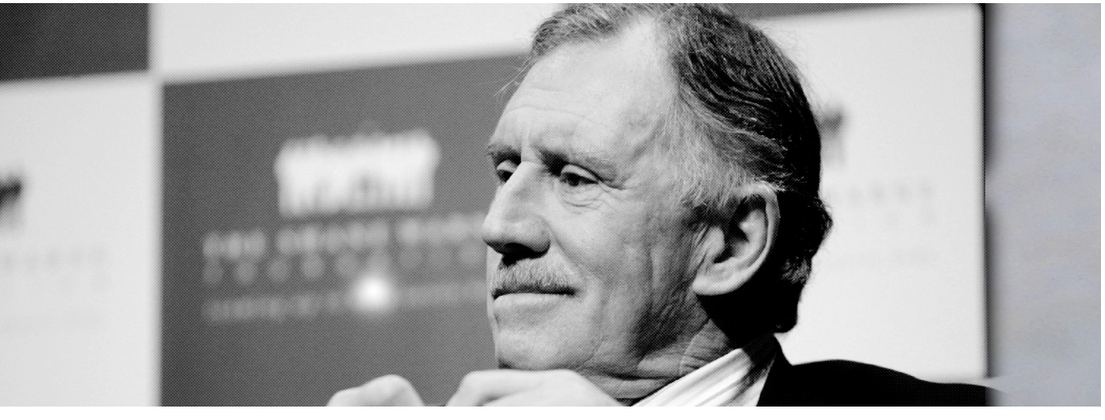
‘A WEAKNESS IN CHARACTER IS LIKE A WEAKNESS OUTSIDE OFF STUMP’



Interview by Rohit Brijnath

December 2002: *Insouciantly forthright, Ian Chappell is an interviewer’s delight. He has no time for the monosyllable; he has a sharp grasp of both the broad issues and the fine aspects of the game; he is intelligent and well versed in cricket history; most important, he is articulate and never afraid to speak his mind. He is an original thinker, often provocative: you may not agree with everything he says, but he does make you reassess commonly held opinions. He isn’t the founder of Australianism, but having done his bit to further it, he is perfectly placed to dissect it.*

There is the image of the Australian as this beer-swigging, relentless character who drinks all night and battles all day. It’s become a sort of a cliché.

The drinking all night… I guess it’s true to an extent, certainly before us and up to us, but I can’t speak for after that. You don’t really know now unless you play with them.

I think the true Australian feeling among sportsmen – and I’ve spoken to [John] Newcombe [the tennis player] about this, and he said the same about his era – was that you had a few beers, and if you had a few too many, no one wanted to hear about your hangover. Don’t moan; just shut up and play and do your best. That was the approach.

Speaking for myself, the amount you drink when playing at county level compared to what you drink before a Test is a whole lot different. With county you think, “We’ll beat this bunch of bastards no matter what we drink.” But in World Series Cricket [WSC], facing [Andy] Roberts, [Michael] Holding and [Joel] Garner, you wanted your brain working at 100%. You didn’t want any more challenges than these buggers you were facing.

The most important thing for me was getting eight hours sleep. When I talk to young guys, about life in general, I say that the more you know about yourself, the better off you’ll be. I liked beer at home, so why not on tour? I would go to bed at about 11.30 and be up by 8am. I didn’t want to go to bed at 9pm and toss and turn thinking about how I was going to face Roberts and [John] Snow. Better to go to sleep and think of it in the morning.

Half a dozen beers was part of the routine, because I was used to it. A couple of managers said to me, “Oh the boys are drinking.” And I said, “Who’s drinking? The drinkers are drinking. I’ll be worried when I see [Ian] Redpath wobbling, because he’s not a drinker.” [Rodney] Marsh and [Doug] Walters, I didn’t worry, because they’re drinkers, and drinkers know what they can handle.

Most Australian sides, apart from their considerable skills and physical fitness, have carried something seemingly intangible, something that we have come to know as Australianism.

To me it was a tradition that was handed down. It's a bit like the Southern Cross thing during 1974-75. I taught Rodney the song. He passed it on to [Allan] Border and [David] Boon, to [Ian] Healy, to [Ricky] Ponting... and he's probably passed it on.

Let me interrupt, for people who don't know. What is this Southern Cross thing?

Oh, it was a like a song, a ditty. It went it like this:

"Under the Southern Cross I stand
Sprig of wattle in my hand
A native of my native land
Australia you bloody beauty"

Or, of course, if you were in the dressing room it became "Australia you f****** beauty."

I was a kid who grew up in a cricket family, and I knew about the history of cricket – from word of mouth, because my grandfather [Vic Richardson] was captain of Australia, and from listening to matches when Australia played England and South Africa, and you just built up this image of your heroes.

Mine was [Keith] Miller. Once you got into the team, you thought of all those blokes, [Bill] O'Reilly and Miller and [Richie] Benaud... "Shit, I'm wearing the same cap as them and I better not let it down." They made [the cap] strong and gave me the opportunity to play for Australia.

It used to hit me when I showered at the Sydney Cricket Ground that all those guys showered in there. When I became captain, I

spoke to my team and told them that this game was made strong by these blokes, and when we leave we have to leave it as strong, if not better, for future generations.

Steve Waugh speaks a lot about the baggy green. For him it's very important.

A lot of it is overdone now; to wear it to Wimbledon [like Waugh did in 2000 when Pat Rafter played Pete Sampras in the final], is making a mockery of it. The cap is something that's a cricket identity. While I have a great deal of respect for the baggy green, some of the modern things are making a mockery of it.

Your teams have also been known as hard bastards, tough and uncompromising...

Bit of a tradition as well. I've heard it said that Australia is at its best as a country when its back is against the wall. It's why we have a very good reputation as soldiers in wartime. It's when we try our hardest; and if we lose, fine. You have to learn to lose.

The public and media here are also very demanding of their sporting people and that contributes... We're not going to give up. We'll be hard but fair; that's what we were taught by our father. I saw a quote from [Clive] Lloyd once, where he said he enjoyed playing the Chappells because they were hard but fair. My father wasn't alive when that was said but he would have been happy to read that because that's what he taught us. To me it comes fairly naturally.

When I was 11 years old and playing baseball, our team had won the local competition No one looked like beating us, and by virtue of winning the district we had to play other districts. We got belted, and I was sitting there bawling, and the other team was celebrating, and my father told me to go and congratulate them. I said, "No way." ... *(More in the book)*