Bum notes of rhetoric prove hard work is the bottom line for Australia

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Mitchell Marsh returned for Australia at the Oval, and usefully. The reasons were two-fold. Firstly, that Australia wished to rebalance their ***line***-up with extra bowling in view of the heavy workloads on their seamers. Secondly, the captain Tim Paine advised, it was a form of commendation: "Mitch has ***worked*** his backside off for the last six or seven months."

In Australian cricket, there is no greater approbation than that ***work***/practice/training/fighting has attenuated relations between a player and his backside. "There has been no secret recipe," Marsh confirmed after his fine first-innings bowling spell. "I just ***worked*** my arse off hoping to get another opportunity."

In his case, the expression had a literal application, for Marsh acknowledged needing to counteract a susceptibility to putting on weight. But Marsh's rigour with his backside has long been acknowledged.

During his previous Test, on Boxing Day, Marsh was praised by his colleague Travis Head for having "***worked*** his bum off today". Little did he know that said bum would cost Head his place at the Oval.

"It's always ***bottoms*** with you Americans," complained Basil Fawlty, immortally. What would he make of the press conferences of Australia's cricketers? "I knuckled down and trained my backside off, and I'm really grateful for the opportunity," David Warner said after his comeback hundred in the World Cup. "I've always felt like I've been in form and ***worked*** my backside off in the nets as well," he said, when he made his only fifty of this series.

It proved, alas, to be the waste of a good backside. But for others, Warner observed, the approach did the trick. "He's just taken the bull by its horns, he's got that opportunity and he's ***working*** his backside off to reinstate himself into the Test arena," he observed of his exuberantly loose-***bottomed*** team-mate Marnus Labuschagne.

For those by the wayside in Australian cricket, backside sacrifice seems to be a particularly necessary step. While Cameron Bancroft was suspended, his former captain Adam Voges predicted: "He'll ***work*** his butt off to try and get back into the Australian Test team and I'm sure he will at some stage."

When Peter Handscomb lost his place, he made a special dual vow: "I'll be putting my hand up and ***working*** my arse off in the nets and hopefully something comes of it."

This innovative combination of hand and arse has yet to pay off, but sooner or later it seems to. Mitchell Starc coming back for Old Trafford? "He's been ***working*** his backside off in the nets and he's good to go," Paine said.

Then, of course, Starc was mysteriously omitted for The Oval. Had his backside remanifested? More likely it was evidence of belief in Peter Siddle, whose backside, winnowed away by veganism, hardly dare show itself in polite company any more.

What is the origin of this form of words? It being part of Test cricket's charms, I spent some of the Oval Test down a backside-shaped rabbithole, and can report that it does seems distinctively Australian, with references concentrated in cricket.

We seem to owe it to Michael Clarke, who as early as 2005 described a bout of early-career soul-searching with his father in terms destined to become familiar: "He said very clearly, 'Mate, you can stay here, you can be upset, there's a shoulder here to cry on for as long as you want, or you can go the other way, get back into the nets, train your backside off and get back into the team.'"

As captain, and perhaps also as a player with a notoriously bad back, Clarke had no time for backsides - his own or anyone else's. Defeat in Cape Town in 2011? "You've got to spend time in the middle and ***work*** your backside off." Adversity in the UAE in 2014? "We've got to fight our backsides off tomorrow and see what happens."

Brad Haddin? "He's always been the type of guy to ***work*** his backside off and leave no stone unturned. Warner? "Hopefully he is training his backside off, like I am pretty sure he would be." Clarke is a strangely obscure figure in Australian cricket these days, but in every dangling backside can be detected his cricket legacy.

The expression is popular to the extent that even players viewed as reluctant trainers are defended in its terms. When Usman Khawaja was struggling in Sri Lanka three years ago, for example, Warner commended his team-mate's determined combination of backside and hand: "He's been training his backside off in the nets and he's been doing everything he can to put his hand up for selection." And this, Khawaja confirmed after his fine hundred last year in Dubai, was far from an isolated instance: "I've ***worked*** my backside off for the last ten years of first-class cricket, day in, day out."

No backside, of course, has been so systematically ***worked*** off, to the extent that it must these days lead virtually an independent life, than that of the world's No 1 Test batsman. Clarke foretold this even before Steve Smith played a Test: "If he gets his chance he'll grab it with both hands. If he doesn't, he'll keep ***working*** his backside off and keep waiting for his opportunity." As Mitchell Johnson confirmed before the last Ashes: "He has ***worked*** his butt off to make himself the world No 1."

Questions arise from this. After the Oval Test, Smith admitted to feeling exhausted. Might he benefit from a rapprochement with his butt? No man is a backsideless island. Fred Trueman took a famous pride in his mighty posterior: "A big spike needs a big hammer to drive it home." And on what, as they review these Ashes, will the Australians sit and ponder?

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