

The Slogger from Vega Three (by Robert Bee)

It was that time of the year again. When Joe Pullham downed his shears and pumped up his line marker, it could only mean one thing. War! A war that would only be settled after the breaking of countless stumps on that humble oval nine miles from Gundegai.

Snake Fang Paddock. Landed on by kamikaze crop dusters, grazed upon by Pollyanna Merino's, wheeled by drunken midnight revheads, the Paddock couldn't boast any two square metres at the same level.

But in neutral territory, it was perfect for 'The Match'. A match so charged with local passions, ancient jealousies, swollen egos, naked hubris that the local rag recalled its top gun reporter to cover the event.

This Saturday was the annual clash of the Rams versus the Scarecrows.

"We'll murder 'em, Angus", Hugo 'Victor' Bingham chortled, not an easy nor pretty feat while simultaneously chugging a schooner of the local best. "My out-swing is downright deadly, and my in-swing, it's..."

"Swinging in?" Constable Frank 'Sledger' Poole shook his head ruefully. "How am I supposed to catch your cannon balls if they keep changing direction? It's hard enough catching crooks without catching your crooked balls."

"Victor, Sledger," Angus broke in. As captain of the Gundegai-Tunblong-Brungle-Adalong Scarecrows, he despaired of the motley group who comprised his cricket team. Coaxing ears of wheat from his uncooperative fields seemed easier than getting sense out of his players. "We will win, but..." he pointed a dramatic finger at Victor's froth covered mouth "...not because of your downright deadly out-swing."

Sledger rolled his eyes. "C'mon Angus, this isn't one of your local productions. Give."

"We have two secret weapons," Angus held up two crop weary fingers. "One...Miss Fingal, the mobile librarian and traditional scorer of these matches is keen to play Maria in our upcoming show, opposite my Captain von Trappe. I don't have a casting couch..."

"Pity," Victor mumbled. "I'd volunteer to audition her."

"...but I might have a casting score book."

"More than one way to bowl a maiden over, eh Angus" Sledger winked. "And two..?"

"Two. It happens that Bob Tussock's fiancé caught him in flagrant infidelity behind Lockett's barn last night, so she broke it off."

Victor choked mid-chug. "You mean she..?"

"Yeah. Threw it in his face and ran home to mummy...in Newcastle. Bob's chased after her with the ring to try and patch it up. So, the Rams will be missing their gun spinner."

"Down to ten men." Victor burped. "Huh, where will they get a replacement by tomorrow?"

"Right," Angus said. "My shout?"

It was so hot, the mad dogs had abandoned their tucker boxes for the shade under the trucks. Tarpaulins and crazily coloured beach umbrellas formed a ragged semi-circle around Snake Fang Paddock. All agreed Joe Pullham had performed a miracle with the pitch, despite Bull Fillet, the Ram's umpire complaining he'd lost his pen knife down a crack.

The outfield was mowed as close as the lava outcrops would allow. The petrified ghost gum at long mid-off (from the highway end) was declared dead ball territory after two chain saws met their waterloo trying to down it.

The two umpires waited at the pitch for the toss. "I see you undercut me on the loin chops again, Dave," Bull mumbled from under his sombrero sized hat.

"All's fair in cricket and butchering, Bull," Dave 'Gristle' Crafter laughed.

"Yeah? Well if your finger's as heavy as your thumb, we're set to see some pretty crook rulings today. Got a coin?" Bull asked. "Watch the cracks."

Lars Anikari, expatriate Vegan and captain of the Bookham-Jugiong-Muttama-Wambidgee-Coolac Rams won the toss. "You can bat, Broadway. Break an arm!"

"It's 'break a leg'" Angus McBurnie shook hands with a laugh. "Good luck with ten men."

Lars chuckled to himself. He enjoyed being back on Earth. Vega Three was very pleasant and one got used to its one-and-a-half Earth gravity after a while. His fellow Vegans, all colonists from an adventurous Finland, many from Lapland looking for a warmer climate and new challenges that don't involve hunting yaks, had opened up the Vegan frontier, made the planet their own. But many still called Earth home. They named their Vegan landmasses after their old Finnish geography and secretly pined for the old country. Like Lars, who lived in New Lapland. He'd come back for a one year sabbatical, visited Australia – and stayed. Now Jugiong was his home. And he loved his cricket, a sport his Vegan-Finnish friends could not grasp.

The cricket match was to be a fifty overs, one day affair, minus the lurid pajamas. A winner was essential. There would be no whoosy draws for this match.

Cheers, jeers and ribald rural encouragement followed Ernie 'Number One' Spragg and Bernie Wolff as they swaggered to the pitch, pads flapping and bats tucked like riding crops under their arms. Ernie was actually number two on the batting list. His nickname came from the clipper comb size he regularly used on his customers, despite protestations for 'just a trim'.

The Rams spread around the paddock, half of them just inside the beer can boundary for the inevitable slogs. No inside-the-circle malarkey for this match.

Angus's smirk quickly disappeared as he counted heads. 'Fumbles' Baxter at the wicket, Billy 'Snot' Greenfields warming up to bowl...ten...eleven?

"Hey, Victor," he grabbed the fast bowler's burly arm. "Who's that at long on?"

"Where's...?" Victor lowered his beer.

"Over there, dummy!" Angus pointed.

"Dunno, it looks like two of them from here."

Angus strode quickly over to Betty, sitting under a purple and orange umbrella, the score book spread across her ample lap. "Betty, who's the Rams' eleventh man?"

Betty looked up. "Hi Angus. Listen...doe, a deer, a female..."

"Not now, Betty, Who..."

"Mattie-Dahlgren Tuujuu."

"Steady on."

"That's his name. He's Lars's second cousin, visiting from Vega Three. His space ship got in last week. He answers to Matt. I think he's cute."

Angus's mind ticked over fast. "Betty, do they play cricket on Vega Three?"

"No way. Their only sports are gruekking – hunting those two headed multi-fanged things – fishing, caving and...you know." She smiled coyly.

Angus's smirk returned. "So, Matt wouldn't know a cricket ball from gruekk dung?"

The Scarecrows scored 263 runs, more thanks to the outfield's unpredictable bounce than the team's batting prowess. 'Fumbles' Baxter lived up to his name, dropping three easy catches and gaining a black eye from a vicious full toss from 'Snot' Greenfield, which many believed was aimed at Fumbles' eye and not the wicket.

Cover drives and hook shots had scooted over the lava shelves like cannon shot. On the occasions Matt fielded the ball, his returns were so hard, no one dared catch them, so the overthrows stacked up like rabbit skins on a barbed wire fence.

When 'Acres' Swinson and Stew Pott strode out to open for the Rams, Angus McBurnie was brimming with confidence. So much so that he sidled up to Betty Fingal and informed her he was giving the part of Maria to Ailsa Morgan, the new infants teacher at Gundagai.

But cow pats and lava flats were no respecters of cricket teams. By the forty eighth over, despite a steady loss of wickets, the game was now a nail biter. Damn! Angus regretted defusing his first secret weapon. But he still had the second weapon. Matt!

Victor charged in like a mad bull. His gangly frame stretched to bursting point, limbs akimbo, then he loosed the red ball towards Fumbles cowering at the wicket.

A collective 'oohh' escaped the spectators, followed by silence as Fumbles was carried from the field in a wheelbarrow. "Bloody crop duster," he was heard to mumble. "Landing during a game. Get his number some-one."

Eight balls left. Rams needed sixteen runs to win. And their last batsman was coming on the field.

Angus called his team into a huddle. "Check him out. Big as Uluru, but doesn't know cricket from a cockroach. Keep him on strike, bowl at the stumps, and the trophy's ours." The huddle broke up. "And let's give our Vegan visitor a good Aussie welcome."

Matt reached the wicket, the bat like a paddle pop in his hands. His pad tops didn't reach his knees, and he sported keeper gloves. Lars showed him how to take strike, reached up to slap him encouragingly between the shoulder blades, then retreated to the bowler's end.

"Fatty...Fatty Finn...Fatty..." Sledger started a low chant. Soon it was picked up by slips. The sound carried to the spectators and the Scarecrow supporters began a rowdy chorus of 'Give my Regards to Lapland'.

Victor Bingham steamed in again. The ball ripped into the pitch midway, reared up high enough to scone a normal batsman– and struck Matt squarely where it hurts.

The sickening thud was heard all around Snake Fang Paddock. Grown men wept.

"Howzat?" cried Victor.

Bull Fillet snorted. "Y'got to be kidding. Any higher and you'd bring rain."

Victor smirked at Lars. "Dot ball. Talk about a laplander."

Victor's last ball was a yorker. It ripped past Matt's pathetic little bat and smashed into his pad. 'Howzat?' he screamed, supported by the entire Scarecrow team.

Bull studied Matt for a full three seconds. "No."

Sledger fell backwards in shock, landing on a juicy cow pat he'd been carefully avoiding all innings.

Angus roared from first slip, "Bull dust! It was plum."

Bull held his ground. "The batsman is so...broad... I cannot see any part of the wicket. So, he gets the benefit of the doubt."

"C'mon Scarecrows," Angus called. "Sixteen runs in six balls. They don't have a chance." He took the ball and eyed Lars at the wicket. Let's see what my fiendish flipper and woe-be-yours wrong'n will do.

Lars cracked the first delivery through mid-off for four. "How do you like that do-re-me, Captain?" Betty Fingal yelled over the cheering crowd.

Angus sent down his flipper, but Lars picked it with a mighty on drive. Barnie Wolff gave chase, but slipped on a pat just as he reached the ball. Ball, Barnie and pat slid over the rope for four.

The wrong'n caught Lars's inside edge, perilously missing the leg stump. Lars scrambled for one, while Matt took some leisurely strides to reach the other end.

"Don't bother with the lbw, Gristle," Angus whispered. "It's time for some catching practice." Angus stepped up and aimed a full toss at Matt's chest.

The Laplander expanded his massive pectorals and the ball struck it like a fly against a battleship.

"Ooh!" swooned the ladies on both sides.

The second last ball was an even higher lob. Matt followed the flight carefully, then like a Socceroo, headed it straight back into Angus's hands.

The Scarecrow supporters erupted into cheers and horn blowing. One ball, and seven runs needed. The game was won.

Lars called Matt to the pitch's centre. "Remember. Over the rope is six. That's only a draw."

Matt's massive face split into a grin wider than the Arctic Circle. "You just remember what I told you, cousin, and be thankful for Earth's lighter gravity." He lumbered back to his crease, then waved his bat like a ping pong paddle. "Bowl up, Fungus."

The crows on the ghost gum ceased their cawing as Angus contemptuously flipped another soft lob towards Matt. Matt drew his shoulder and bat back, back...then he unleashed his arm like a coiled spring and smashed the ball straight up like a rocket off as launching pad.

The crack of the bat on ball scattered the crows. The Scarecrows stood stunned like...scarecrows.

Lars remembered his instructions. He ran like hell down the pitch as Matt strode past him, seeming to float as he ran.

Two runs. Three. Lars scampered like a rabbit. Matt's long strides matched him, run for run as the ball gathered ice.

"Incoming," cried Sledger, his gloves outstretched, the plummeting red dot growing larger. "Mine...bloody hell, yours," he squealed and dived aside.

Four runs.

The ball slammed into a lava patch at square leg. It sailed back into the air, leaving the Scarecrows gaping.

Five runs.

The cruelly uneven bounce landed the ball on Barnie Wolff at long fine leg. His nickname changed from that moment.

Lars and Matt touched for six as the ball bounced off 'Lucky's' head into Victor's hand. Victor cocked his arm, aimed, then threw.

The battered ball streaked at the middle stump while Lars launched himself for the winning run, bat outstretched. Unfortunately for Lars, he was well outside his crease.

Unfortunately for Victor, he'd chosen the wrong time to throw an in-swinger. Sledger was right. It was crooked.

'THE MAGNIFICENT SEVEN' the headline screamed from the front page. "Look at this," Angus fumed. "'Rams take shine off Scarecrows with Matt Finnish. Vegan and ve did'. Ha Ha! Damn it, Lars, how could he hit it so high?"

Lars watched his off-world cousin smooching with Betty in the bar's corner booth. He felt suddenly generous towards his vanquished opponent. "New Lapland's 2007 Hammer Throw Champion," he said.

"Huh? But Betty said..."

"Betty lied." Lars admired the trophy in his hands.

"Lied? Why?"

"Betty Fingal, Angus" Lars smiled. "Think about it."

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