



LET THE GAMES BEGIN

South Africa and Sri Lanka will visit for this summer's Vodafone Test matches against Australia, and recent history suggests some intense action

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It's that time of year again. 'Tis the season to find any excuse to get out of the office and spend a long, lazy day in the sun. It's the time for amateur selection committees to convene around every barbecue in the land. The moment for dusting off the Baggy Green, white kit and red Kookaburra. Test match cricket is back.

This summer promises to be a special one, as Australia host South Africa and then Sri Lanka in back-to-back three-match Vodafone Test series. It's a final home dress rehearsal before the Ashes in 2013, but it's too early for Australia to think about England just yet. They've got the world's top Test side and some wily subcontinental opposition to worry about first.

Australia have had a quiet Test schedule following their memorable 4-0 demolition of India last summer. Their only assignment since then came against the West Indies in the Caribbean, where they overcame a resilient home side 2-0. Michael Clarke's inspired first-innings declaration when 46 runs behind in the rain-affected Barbados opener set up a memorable win for his team, who went on to take another hard-fought victory in the third Test at Roseau.

Although all that happened several months ago back in April, there's no denying that Australia's most recent results make for enjoyable reading, with six wins and a draw in seven matches over their past two series. Most of the players will also have had decent spells in the middle during the early Bupa Sheffield Shield matches, and so will be raring to go for the Test summer.

Which brings us to the three Vodafone Tests against South Africa. Any mention of that particular opposition means only one



Senior batsman Mike Hussey was in the runs last summer, making 150 not out in Sydney



Smith (left) and Clarke shared the silverware last time their sides met

Any mention of South Africa means only one thing to Australia: revenge

thing to this Aussie side: revenge. The last time Graeme Smith's men toured Australia, in 2008-09, they left with the series victory they'd never been able to achieve during the Warne and McGrath era. And they did it in some style, first chasing 414 to win in Perth and then wrapping up the Boxing Day Test to make the third clash a dead rubber. Australia took a consolation win in a thrilling finish to that game at the SCG, but it was still a 2-1 home loss that they won't have forgotten.

Australia got a measure of revenge almost immediately after that series, albeit away from home. The return contest in early 2009 saw Ricky Ponting's side strike back, with Mitchell Johnson wreaking havoc on the South African top order and newcomer Phil Hughes among the batsmen to frustrate the home bowlers.



Sri Lanka scored a landmark away win when they beat South Africa last December



Australia have had it good in their last two Test series, against India at home (left) and more recently away in the West Indies (above)

Wins in Johannesburg and Durban wrapped up the series win for Australia before South Africa coasted to a consolation victory of their own in the third Test at Newlands.

When you added it all up after a hard-fought summer of home and away cricket, the score between the two sides stood deadlocked at 3-3. The rematch came one year ago in November 2011, again in South Africa, but this time with only two Tests scheduled.

The Aussies looked all set to go 1-0 up in Cape Town after new skipper Clarke scored a masterly hundred and Australia then rolled the home side for 96 in their first innings for

a lead of almost 200. But Clarke's men were then skittled for a scarcely believable 47 as rookie bowler Vernon Philander blazed to five wickets. Australia then had to watch Graeme Smith and Hashim Amla rattle off the runs to take victory in a remarkable Test match.

Resilient as ever, the smarting Australians fought back hard and won another thrilling

game in Johannesburg to square the series. This was largely thanks to the efforts of young paceman Pat Cummins, one of several promising quicks to work their magic for Australia in the past couple of seasons.

And so it is that Australia and South Africa head into this series at 4-4 for their last eight Tests, some of which are already the stuff of legend. The rivalry between them is almost as fierce as that between Australia and England, and that's expected to show in some white-hot battles at the Gabba, the Adelaide Oval and the WACA in the early part of the summer.

Australia have everything on their side in Brisbane, a venue that is a fortress for the home side and where South Africa haven't played since 1963, nor ever won a Test. They haven't won in Adelaide since the Sixties, but will have good memories of Perth after that famous win last time they were here.

There's extra incentive for the Aussies now

The score is now 4-4 for the last eight Tests between Australia and South Africa

that South Africa have claimed the top position on the ICC Test rankings following their series win in England in the middle of 2012. Defeating South Africa will re-establish Clarke's side as Test cricket's official champions, and they'll build up a lead if they can follow success up with victory over the Sri Lankans in the contest for the Warne-Muralitharan Trophy.

The islanders will have the honour of playing in the Vodafone Boxing Day Test for only the second time, after which they will play in their first Vodafone New Year Test at the SCG. They will be thinking wins would make a great souvenir of their time in Melbourne and Sydney. First, though, they must focus on Hobart, a venue where they've played twice – including the venue's first Test match back in 1989 – but unfortunately also lost twice.

Sri Lanka's threat is likely to come primarily from their top-order batsmen and spinners. On paper, they can match Australia in both these departments, thanks to batsmen Tillakaratne Dilshan, Thilan Samaraweera, Mahela Jayawardene and Kumar Sangakkara, and spinners Rangana Herath.

Their record away from home, even before the retirement of history's top wicket-taker Muttiah Muralitharan, has not been as good as they'd like. But last summer they overcame a big psychological barrier by winning a Test away in South Africa, so they'll now have some confidence that they can claim their first Test win on Australian soil too.

In fact, Sri Lanka have only ever beaten

The wicket of South African big fish Jacques Kallis is one every Australian bowler will want to take



Ben Hilfenhaus has become a potent weapon for Australia

Sri Lanka have only ever beaten Australia once in a Test, in Kandy in 1999

Australia once in a Test, and that was in Kandy in 1999, where bowlers Muralitharan, Chaminda Vaas and Nuwan Zoysa led the home side to a six-wicket win over Steve Waugh's troops. With the other two games drawn, it also meant Sri Lanka's only series win over the Aussies.

It's a surprising statistic in some ways, because these two sides have enjoyed some very competitive battles over the years. Australia's series wins haven't exactly been a string of whitewashes, with the most recent clash in 2011 a perfect case in point. Aussie bowlers Nathan Lyon and Ryan Harris (helped by a first-innings 95 from Mike Hussey) led their side to a 125-run win in the opening Test,

but hosts Sri Lanka held the Australians to draws in the next two games.

That said, Australia did indeed whitewash the Lankans in their last visit to this country in 2007-08, where they won both games in Brisbane and Hobart. So they will start as favourites, but can expect Sri Lanka to have learned from their past experiences just as South Africa did from their many years of struggle in this part of the world.

Like the home side, Sri Lanka come into their series match-fit for Test cricket, having hosted New Zealand for two Tests at the end of November. Their 2012 form ahead of New Zealand's visit was reasonable, as

they were unbeaten in their two series, both at home. First they drew 1-1 with England (then the world number one side), then they beat Pakistan 1-0 over three matches.

One thing's certain already: this summer's winning coaches will be South African. Mickey Arthur (Australia), Gary Kirsten (South Africa) and Graham Ford (Sri Lanka) all hail from SA, but Arthur is perhaps in the best position of all. Having masterminded the Proteas' 2008-09 series win here, he knows much about how they operate – and how to beat them!

All that remains is for the umpires to call 'play' and the action to begin. Get ready – it's gonna be special. ●