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ENGLAND PRAYS FOR RAIN

Old Trafford's renowned wet wicket - where no test win has been scored for 40 years - opens the third test to fine weather. A record crowd suspects that only a dose of Manchester summer can stop Don Bradman and his team from winning the rubber and thus retain the ashes - held by them for 14 years. Cyril Washbrook - opening on his home ground - and new boy George Emmett (watched anxiously by their colleagues) - don't impart the same confidence formerly felt in Hobbs and Sutcliffe, whose century opening stands were accepted as matters of course. Oh - for a Hobbs to play again today.

In a position, always held successfully by Yorkshire idol Len Hutton, his replacement (Gloucester's George Emmett) seems out of his class. As opening wickets fall for schoolboy scores, the hearts of old timers like Eddie Paynter sink to their boots. Only the younger generation keep theirs in the right place. Bill Edrich, who can give a sparkling display, is no longer a batsman to be relied upon. Against the shrewd skippering by Don Bradman and the express deliveries of Ray Lindwall, they're all at sea - all, except Compton, the great. The game speeds up. Everyone is rivetted on Compton. Speed merchant Lindwall - although not as fast as Harold Larwood - can bump them too - and it's one of these that sends Denis staggering round the field - his forehead gashed by a "special" that bounced off his bat. Helped off the field, his retirement spreads gloom among the spectators. They (like every sports fan) know that while Denis Compton is batting, there is always a hope.

Left hander Crapp tries hard, but his score - however gallantly hit - is not good enough for an England player. The batsmen are letting us down again. Harold Dollery comes and goes - for one. No wonder old-timer Harry Makepiece grows more dejected. But Denis Compton - head high - his wound stitched - returns to show just how to handle these Australians. For his display, there is only one word "magnificent." Standing up to Lindwall, he hits him all round the wicket. Great that Compton always is, never has he been greater.

Helped by Godfrey Evans - who bats sprightly and is not afraid of what the bowlers send down, the total climbs steadily. If only the star batsman could follow this example. England's test team need more men with the spirit of Compton, Evans and Bedser, for it's high time that we took our cricket seriously.