

EDITORIAL

Flawed hero needs time to atone and pick himself up

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Until a week ago, Steve Smith was admired and respected, especially by young cricket fans, as one of the most successful sportsmen in the world. After his appointment, at a young age, to lead the Australian cricket team, Smith steered it through a difficult period, won back the Ashes and established himself as the best batsman in the world. His failure of judgment in Cape Town a week ago changed a great deal. The International Cricket Council deemed Smith's breach of rules worthy of a one-match suspension. Cricket Australia, which rightly seeks to reassert our national sporting priorities, has meted out heavier penalties

12-month suspensions from first-class cricket for Smith and for former vice-captain David Warner, and a nine-month suspension for Cameron Bancroft, the junior team member.

Warner, who was found guilty by Cricket Australia of planning the cheating episode, will speak publicly today. Smith and Bancroft did so on Thursday. Their remorse and shame were heartfelt; they know they have to atone. The coming months will be hard. As they retreat from the limelight, they must come to grips with their mistake and prepare to move on with their lives and their cricketing careers. Both are young men — Smith is 28, Bancroft 25. They have sullied their reputations. But they do not deserve a life sentence. Not a second has gone by in the past week, Bancroft said, “where I haven’t wished to turn back time and do the right thing during the lunch break. It’s something I’ll regret for the rest of my life.”

Smith may have permanently ruled himself out of consideration for the captaincy. But he remains, perhaps, the greatest batsman Australia has produced since Sir Donald Bradman. His handling of the crisis also shows his character is redeemable. Indeed, he is to be commended for the way he sat before the world fielding questions from the start of this drama. It was his leadership failure, he admitted on Thursday; he took full responsibility. He did not blame Warner or anyone else: “If any good can come of this, if there can be a lesson to others, then I hope I can be a force for change.”

Smith needs to win back the trust of his peers and cricket supporters here and around the world. That will take time, but he must be given the chance to do so. Tellingly, his most emotional moment at Thursday’s press conference occurred when he was asked about the impact of the incident on young cricket fans, who he loves to see playing the game he loves. “Any time you think about making a

questionable decision, think about those you are affecting.” Seeing the impact on his parents had hurt.

More tears flowed several hours later when coach Darren Lehmann announced his resignation. While not involved in the ball tampering, he has made the right decision as Australian cricket prepares for a new era: “It’ll let the game move forward.” Such is their talent and toughness that Australian cricket teams are used to winning, on merit, more often than they lose. That’s something to be proud of. But as the game regroups, possibly with a different coaching model, any signs of “win at any cost” must be discouraged. The young men whose careers are in tatters, as *The Times* noted, were “raised in a world in which sugary sweets are used to shine the cherry, of throwing the ball in on the bounce to rough it up, of using suncream and lip balm more liberally than medical need might permit”. They took the dark arts further, but ball tampering, sometimes illegally, sometimes dubiously, has gone on for years. This salutary lesson should see an end to it.

Smith’s fall from grace is a salient reminder of how leading sportspeople, like the rest of us, can come crashing down quickly if they make poor decisions and lose sight of fundamental truths. Smith, as he is the first to acknowledge, has let down Australians and he has let down himself. Yet his achievements with the bat remain extraordinary. And in the fallout from this crisis, he has shown the team spirit and humility that saw this newspaper name him as our Australian of the Year in January. From this point, the measure of the man will be whether he can get up, get on with life, and prove to himself and those who have supported him that he has the integrity and fortitude to show that his was a temporary error of judgment and that the better angels of his character will triumph. This will be his toughest innings. But, from what we have seen so far, it is not beyond him.