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Dukes ball helps swing bowlers prosper but spinners are toiling

Mitchell Swepson is Australia's leading spinner in the Sheffield Shield, but only comes in at 12th on the wicket-taking list. Picture: AAP

ANDREW FAULKNER THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM March 17, 2018

A new wave of swing bowlers is prospering with the Dukes but the nation's spinners are less than enamoured of the English ball.

Spinners have been on the outer as the swing and seam men make the Dukes talk in the final rounds of the Sheffield Shield.

Some Shield sides have fielded four frontline seamers, and no specialist spinners, since the switch to Dukes balls after the mid-season break.

The Tigers have decided a pace attack of Jackson Bird, Andrew Fekete, Sam Rainbird and Tom Rogers are the men to bowl them to their first Shield since 2012-13.

Tasmania's 14-man squad for the mini-final against Victoria featured seven seamers and no spinners.

The Redbacks have also fielded an all-seam attack — Daniel Worrall, Nick Winter, Joe Mennie and Kane Richardson — against WA in Adelaide.

Adam Zampa is carrying the drinks and there's no room for Lloyd Pope, the 18-year-old leggie who spun England out of the recent under-19 World Cup.

The Redbacks are out of the running for the Shield, so a dead rubber seemed an ideal time to blood Pope, who took a six-wicket bag for his club last the weekend.

But the SA XII had already been picked before Pope's weekend haul and the Redbacks probably would have played four quicks no matter what.

Since the Shield resumed, just one in six wickets have fallen to spin (before the final round).

So on the face of it at least, the switch to the Dukes has exacerbated the nation's dearth of Test-class spinners.

The Shield's top 10 wicket-takers this summer include precisely no spinners.

With 27 wickets at 35.07 leading into the final round, Queensland legspinner Mitchell Swepson is 12th on the list.

Fawad Ahmed (26 wickets at 38.50) is 13th and Steve O'Keefe (18 at 27.33) is 20th.

There are caveats. Adam Zampa (17 wickets at 46.41) and Ashton Agar (nine at 45.77) have been absent on T20 duties and Nathan Lyon has been busy reclaiming the Ashes and taking more Test wickets than anyone in 2017.

O'Keefe has missed games with injury, as has Jon Holland (12 at 28.33), who's now in South Africa with the Test squad.

But the Dukes ball certainly hasn't helped spinners already besieged by bigger bats, shorter boundaries, conservative captains and doped up drop-in wickets.

The MCG has hosted exclusively draws this summer so it was refreshing when the Vics rolled out a spin-friendly strip last week to celebrate the return of Junction Oval as a venue.

Fawad and O'Keefe dominated in a match where 19 of the 40 wickets fell to the slow men.

But that match was a statistical outlier as swing lords it over spin.

Using modified Dukes balls — they are similar but not exactly the same as the Dukes used in England — in the second half of the Shield season is all about retaining the Ashes in 2019.

After four consecutive series losses in England, the Australians are desperate for an away win.

With its proud seam and longer-lasting shine, the Dukes is the fast-bowler's friend.

"I'm a massive fan of the Dukes," Bulls quick Brendan Doggett told *The Australian*.

"There's always something happening with the Dukes.

"Especially with the wickets getting flatter. It stays harder and it can swing for 80 overs if you work on it."

Doggett is among the new breed of quicks filling gaps in the ranks left by the touring Test side and the recovering injured.

Swing bowlers, especially, love the slightly smaller and harder Dukes.

Redbacks' left-armer Winter's Shield debut has coincided with the switch to the English ball.

Winter has taken 30 wickets at 19.33 to announce his candidacy for the 2019 Ashes.

Since the mid-season break, Rogers has reaped 18 wickets at 18.33.

Worrall has one of the best outswingers in the land and to prove it he's taken 23 wickets at 23.56 with the Dukes this season, including 5-72 against WA in Adelaide on Wednesday.

The other stated aim of the Dukes experiment is to give batsmen practice against the moving ball to hopefully avert repeats of the 60 all out at Trent Bridge.

Winning an away Ashes is a worthy pursuit, but goodness knows how Steve Smith's side will ever catch world No 1 India without quality spinners to support Lyon (who, incidentally is a confirmed Kookaburra man).

And goodness knows how Australian batsmen will master Indian spin if they barely face spin of any kind at home.

