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Sheffield Shield 2018: Dukes ball exposes lack of batting depth

Tasmania's Jake Doran bats against Victoria at Blundstone Arena.

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The Sheffield Shield final starts on Friday after a season in which the runs dried up as the Dukes ball laid bare the nation's dearth of batting depth.

Australia might have the world's best batsman in Steve Smith but it no longer has the world's best batsmen — the days of players such as Darren Lehmann, Stuart Law and Jamies Siddons and Cox making mountains of runs in the Shield are long gone.

Callum Ferguson's Shield-leading aggregate of 780 runs is the third-lowest season haul since the Shield final was introduced in 1982-83.

Leading statistician Ric Finlay reports that not since Rob Quiney's 724 in 2010-11 has there been a lower high mark. Just 10 of the Shield's top-20 runscorers this season averaged more than 40 and only four of those — Glenn Maxwell, Joe Burns, Cameron White and Cameron Bancroft — averaged more than 50. The swing-friendly Dukes ball used in the second half of the season has helped ratchet the averages down, but attributing the lack of runs to the Dukes is to ignore a deeper malaise. (Finlay also reports that the average per wicket with the Kookaburra this season was 30.56 — and was 30.59 with the Dukes.)

Test aspirants such as Marcus Stoinis (173 runs at 17.30), Nic Maddinson (307 at 23.61), Moises Henriques (374 at 24.93) and Jake Lehmann (536 at 28.21) all went backwards this season.

Hilton Cartwright (617 at 32.47) and Kurtis Patterson (672 at 37.33) trod water. There are greenshoots and they have sprouted in Tasmania.

Jake Doran, 21, has delivered on his rich promise to arrive as a Test player in waiting. In his third season after shifting from NSW, Doran has made 722 runs at 45.12 to give Tasmania's middle order steel and substance.

In allowing Doran time to grow — his average has only recently edged into the 30s — Tasmania has done the nation a service as he'll still be a young man if and when he wins a Test berth. Doran's rise reflects Tasmania's resurgence from laughing stock to Shield finalist.

The Tigers were rolled for 63 to plummet to a 301-run loss to WA in the first round. They arrested the slide before their pace attack hit back hard with the Dukes in the second half of the season. The redoubtable Jackson Bird overcame injury and the heartbreak of the Boxing Day drop-in to take 35 wickets at 20.22. Tom Rogers (35 at 17.31) emerged as one of the finds of the season. Like the Australian quicks he aspires to soon join, Rogers is more than handy with the bat too. His 296 runs at 24.66 often came when his side was in trouble. Sam Rainbird (35 at 27.91) and Andrew Fekete (21 at 26.52) round out a formidable Tasmania pace attack.

So the Tigers enter Friday's final at Allan Border Field brimming with confidence but the Bulls are too after a remarkable comeback to beat NSW in Wollongong. The hosts also have an impressive seam attack: Michael Naser (37 at 19.70) is backed by the emerging Brendan Doggett and Mark Steketee and seam-bowling allrounder Jack Wildermuth.

If the Bulls have an advantage, it might be that in Mitchell Swepson they have a class spinner. In a five-day final Swepson could be the difference. That Queensland and Tasmania are contesting the final is surely good for Australian cricket, ending Victoria's run of three straight titles and NSW's longer-term domination.