

Why we'll miss the rubber man

By LAWRENCE BOOTH

SHANE Warne led the tributes last night to cricket's 'whirly, twirly rubber man' Muttiah Muralitharan after the record-breaking Sri Lanka off-spinner announced he would play his final Test later this month.

Murali, who needs eight Indian wickets to become the first man to reach 800 in Tests, will continue playing one-day cricket and will be available for the 2011 World Cup on the subcontinent.

But the Galle Test starting on July 18 will be his 133rd and last, bringing to an end a colourful and controversial 18-year career in which his action was repeatedly queried as he vied with Warne for the title of cricket's greatest tweaker.

Even so, Warne, who finished his own Test career in 2007 with 708 wickets, insisted: 'Murali's been wonderful for the game. Those doubts are always something he's had to deal with, but people will have their own opinion on who was the greater player out of the two of us.'

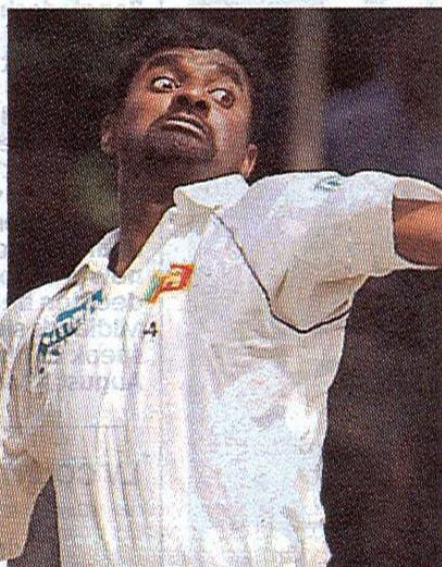
Murali was no-balled by Australian umpires in three different Tests and one-dayers in the 1990s, and was briefly banned from bowling his doosra in 2004 after it was reported by match referee Chris Broad.

Warne said: 'A couple of times he didn't come to Australia because he was worried what the crowds were going to say. But the fact that he's done everything with a smile on his face is why he's such a likeable character. He'll be missed.'

Despite his praise, the great Australian leg-spinner, currently in Las Vegas captaining the 888poker.com team at the World Series, also hinted at a long-standing grievance when he played down the statistical impact of Muralitharan's record.

The Sri Lankan claimed 176 of his 792 Test scalps against Bangladesh and Zimbabwe — two minnows who provided Warne with only 17 wickets.

'It's not so much how many wickets you take, it's how many



Action man: never mind the doubts, Murali was a great rival, says Warne PA

games you've won, the way you got your wickets, what style,' said Warne. 'That's how people make their minds up and judge.'

However, Warne was less ambiguous in his praise for another off-spinner when he called Graeme Swann 'the most improved player in international cricket'.

Warne added: 'He mixes his pace, he's not afraid to be hit and he's learning all the time in different conditions. There are times to defend and times to attack, but if in doubt attack — and that's what I like about Graeme Swann. I think



MURALITHARAN BY NUMBERS

- 792** ^{Test} wickets
- 22** Times he has taken 10 wickets in a Test
- 132** Test matches played for Sri Lanka
- 11** Man of the series awards in Test cricket
- 1992** THE year in which he made his Sri Lanka debut (v Australia) aged 20
- 1,256** THE number of Test runs he has scored

he is going to be a real trump card in Australia.'

It is an Ashes series Warne believes presents England with a great chance of winning Down Under, with Andrew Strauss's team in a position to put the 5-0 drubbing of 2006-07 behind them.

'They'll want to do something about that result,' said Warne. 'And I think they've got a side that can really challenge Australia out there for the first time since 1986.'

'Stuart Broad seems to be troubling the Aussies and I think he will enjoy bowling in Australia with extra bounce and pace you get in wickets.'

'And Steven Finn has a happy knack of getting a wicket and when he is working over a batsman he seems to have a good plan.'

When Warne, once a serial Pom-baiter, begins to talk up England's chances, you know times have really changed.

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