



GIDEON BROOKS

reports

SHANE WARNE evidently does not rate our airlines given a twitter outburst on Monday during his flight to the west coast of America that labelled British Airways as "the worst airline ever".

But spin legend Warne believes England's cricketers will fly to Australia this winter with their best chance of landing the Ashes Down Under since Mike Gatting's side won in 1986-87.

Speaking from Las Vegas where he is captaining the 888poker.com team at the World Series of Poker, which starts today, Warne admitted that, if pushed, he might put his chips on Australia.

But he is sufficiently impressed by England's progress in the past year to concede just one injury to a big player on either side would be enough to swing favouritism in his book.

"England played outstanding cricket to win this recent one-day series - they played very, very well indeed. At the moment they have won the latest ODI series, the World Twenty20 and the Ashes," said Warne. "There wouldn't be too many times [in history] when England have the edge in all formats of the game.

"But whether they can win in Australia, I don't know. What I would say is they are probably going to Australia with their best-ever chance. They have a side who can really challenge this time."

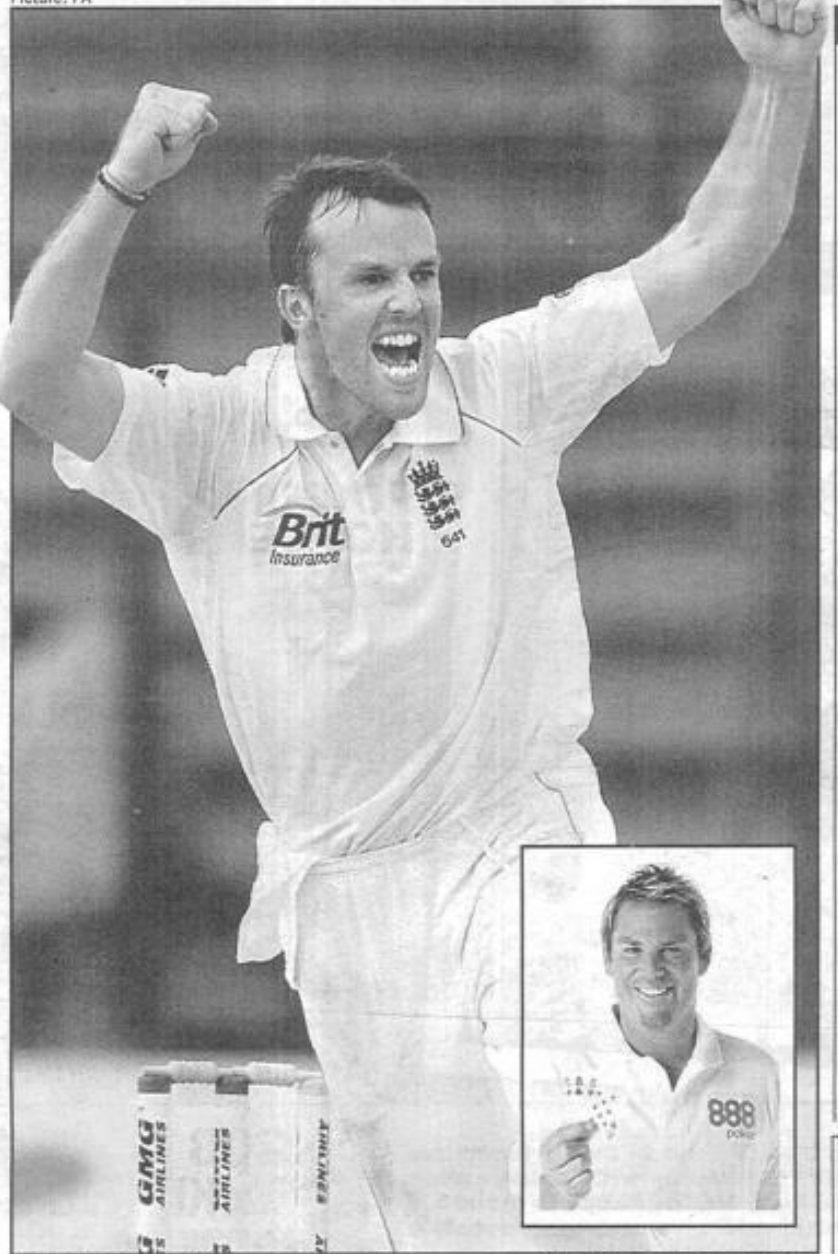
Winning in Australia is one of the toughest assignments in world cricket and the hosts have only proved generous twice in 20 years - losing to West Indies in 1992-93 and South Africa in 2008-09.

The last time England tried to take the Ashes Down Under, they came away with a very bloody one of their own. "That series [2006-07] was a whitewash but England will go there with a legitimate chance this time and will definitely want to do something about that," added Warne, who feels Graeme Swann, Stuart Broad and Steve Finn will be central to those chances.

"Swann has been the missing piece of the jigsaw. On day one he can do a job and on day five he can do a job. He is a real asset and I love the way he mixes his pace, how he's not afraid to be hit and that his instinct is to attack," said Warne.

"Most of all, I'm impressed how he is learning so much about how to take wickets in all conditions. He will be a real trump card in

Picture: PA



TRUMP CARDS: Warne, inset, says Swann could be the key Down Under

You edge it says Warne

Australia this summer and, if you are looking for someone to come out and change a game with a five-for, he is a tick for me.

"Jimmy Anderson needs the ball swinging and the ball doesn't swing as much in Australia, but Broad seems to be troubling the Aussies with his extra bounce and he'll enjoy the wickets over there.

"And from what I've seen of Finn, he appears to have that happy knack of just getting a wicket or working over batsmen. There is a lot to like about him and he could enjoy Australia too."

□ MUTTIAH MURALITHARAN, the world's leading wicket-taker of all time, will retire from Tests after this month's first Test against India.

Spinner Muralitharan, 38, is not likely to play in the one-day Tri-Series against India and New Zealand next month but may play one-day internationals in the build-up to next year's World Cup.

Muralitharan has taken 792 wickets in 132 Tests and 515 wickets in 337 one-dayers since making his Test debut against Australia in 1992.