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Crack of the willow

By BILLY FREEMAN

TEST cricket captain Steve Waugh gets his bats from India, but his successor may be able to look closer to home if a new tree planting exercise is successful.

A firm called Australian Cricket Bat Willow has planted 17,000 willow trees in an orchard in regional Victoria, aiming to have Australia producing its own cricket bats within seven years.

ACBW wants to raise \$5 million from investors to plant thousands more trees.

The firm's chairman Dr John Lill, who is a former Melbourne Cricket Club secretary, said Australia has a rich history

in making cricket bats.

Australia grew willow trees and made bats from them until 1956, when the Slazenger bat company in England bought the Crockett bat business.

Crockett made bats for such cricket legends as Lindsay Hassett, Australian captain from 1949-1953.

"The English bought this successful operation, felled the trees, retreated to England and created a monopoly for the supply of English willow," Dr Lill said.

English bat makers had undertaken a "magnificent marketing campaign" since then to convince people that they made the best bats because they had the best willow.

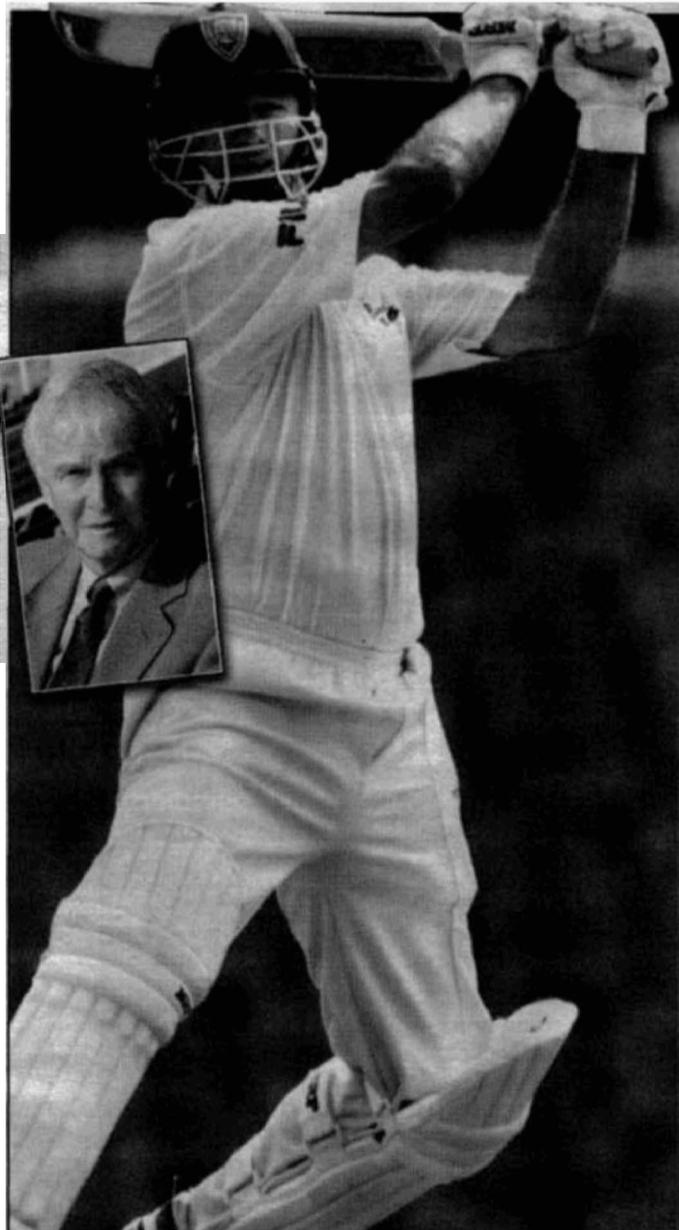
"In fact, the Australian growing cycle is warmer and longer than it is in England.

"History is also on our side — we know that high quality willow was successfully grown in this country for over 50 years.

"Australia is the best cricketing nation on earth . . . yet for 50 years we have been paying other countries to produce our cricket bats.

"We can and will attract the attention and support of our own Australian batsmen and players from South Africa, New Zealand and the West Indies."

ACBW says the trees planted in its orchard near Swan Hill are the best willow in the world for cricket bats.



Perfect pitch . . . John Lill [inset] has his eyes on Steve Waugh's successors