

The King of Spin

ILLUSTRATION BY
OWEN BELL

@PINGPONGHURLEY: Keeper says u have a funny accent. You'll have to watch what u say as I'll copy it. I like naughty words. Do u know any?
@WARNE888: well I do know a few naughty words I will whisper to you - if anyone comments on those naughty words - blame naughty keeper!

FOR SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGISTS AND ornithologists alike, it's worth noting that a pet parrot named PingPongHurley first tweeted her way into our collective consciousness in February, after her "keeper" – actor, model, bikini designer and organic farmer Elizabeth Hurley – opened up a Twitter account for her.

PingPong's elevation to celebrity status came two months after it was revealed that Warne and Hurley were having an affair. A modern-day fairy tale – or high farce, depending on your point of view – was now being played out in the most public of fashions.

"About to go on worlds fastest roller coaster," Warne trumpeted in a tweet from Abu Dhabi last December, on his way back from London, where he'd presumably patted both PingPong and her keeper. "Ooooooh, I love scary rides – remember to scream if you want to go faster!" @ElizabethHurley trilled back from the Mother Country.

"I screamed so loud when ride took off I'm surprised you din [sic] not hear me back in the uk!!! Really need to man up hahahaha," Warne replied. He was right. We hadn't heard him, not this time, but that was all about to change with the unveiling of yet another episode in the continuing soap opera that is Shane Warne's life.

No sooner had we learnt that "horny Warnie", as English cricket fans are wont to call him, and Hurley were entwined than we were discovering – surprise, surprise – that Warnie had also been sending steamy text messages, 100 in all, to a married Australian woman while courting Hurley and still cohabiting with his wife, Simone, and their three children.

He'd told the 44-year-old Melbourne mother

of two and fashion-store owner Adele Angeleri that she made him "horny" and caused him to have "filthy, naughty dreams".

What a disaster for most mortals. Here was Shane Warne's new flame, planning to visit him on home turf, but now advising her Twitter followers that she had no interest in being part of a "Jerry Springer-esque saga".

Warne was crestfallen. Trying to commentate for Channel Nine on the Third Ashes Test in Perth in mid-December, he tweeted to his nearly half a million followers: "Not really a wink of sleep. Tossed and turned all night, feeling extremely grumpy." But Warnie is nothing if not resilient. A few days later, the spin king turned philosopher king waded into the Twittersphere again: "The journey of life is about riding the ups/downs. We are all childish, immature at times. It's about how you bounce back when things are tough."

And bounce back he did. By mid-February, all was well again in Shirley or Wurley Land (take your pick), with Hurley gracing our shores and Warne asking his Twitter followers to advise him: "Where is the sexiest place to take Elizabeth for lunch? Suggestions please? Chapel St? Crown? And no – not for spaghetti on toast."

A few days later, calamity threatened once more when London's *Sunday Mirror* announced that Warne had bedded porn star Chloe Conrad in the same \$2500-a-night royal suite to which he'd taken Hurley at London's Bentley Hotel. He had also been bombarding the "hot blonde" with text messages while trying to win Hurley's heart.

This was all too much for the London *Observer's* Carole Cadwalladr, who wrote that it was a measure of Warne's considerable sophistication as a lover that his answer to "the sexiest place" for lunch question had been his golf club. "This is not love, or romance, or even sex," she chided. "It's just PR. Shane and Liz are to romance what Valentine's Day is to love: shallow, vain, insincere and about as subtle as a platter of lamb chops in a butcher's window, or its sartorial equivalent, one of Hurley's frocks."

That was before Shane Warne went down on bended knee last month to propose to his Juliet, then tweeted confirmation of it to the world:

@WARNE888: I didn't propose in front of 200 people ... It was done privately and was very romantic - if I say so myself. Ps left knee is sore!!!

LONG BEFORE TWITTER ENTERED THE ZEITGEIST to become the new form of instant, international communication, we all knew the Shane Warne story, or some of its bare parts. It has been replayed endlessly for nearly two decades now – in newspapers (back page and front page), women's magazines, television profiles, radio commentaries, books (biography and autobiography – 10 at last count), lyric form, satire, musical ...

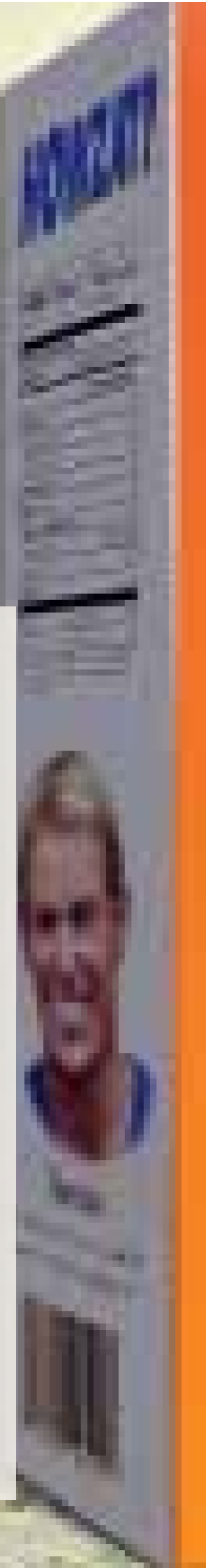
It is the story of the wild boy of cricket spinning his magic, bamboozling his opponents, sending his "hot, horny and hard" text messages, standing in his underwear, lurching between triumph and tragedy, fame and foolery, like a character out of one of his favourite films, *Dumb and Dumber*. Even Madame Tussaud's was to capitalise on his adventures with a waxwork of him in cricket gear, as opposed to his undergarments.

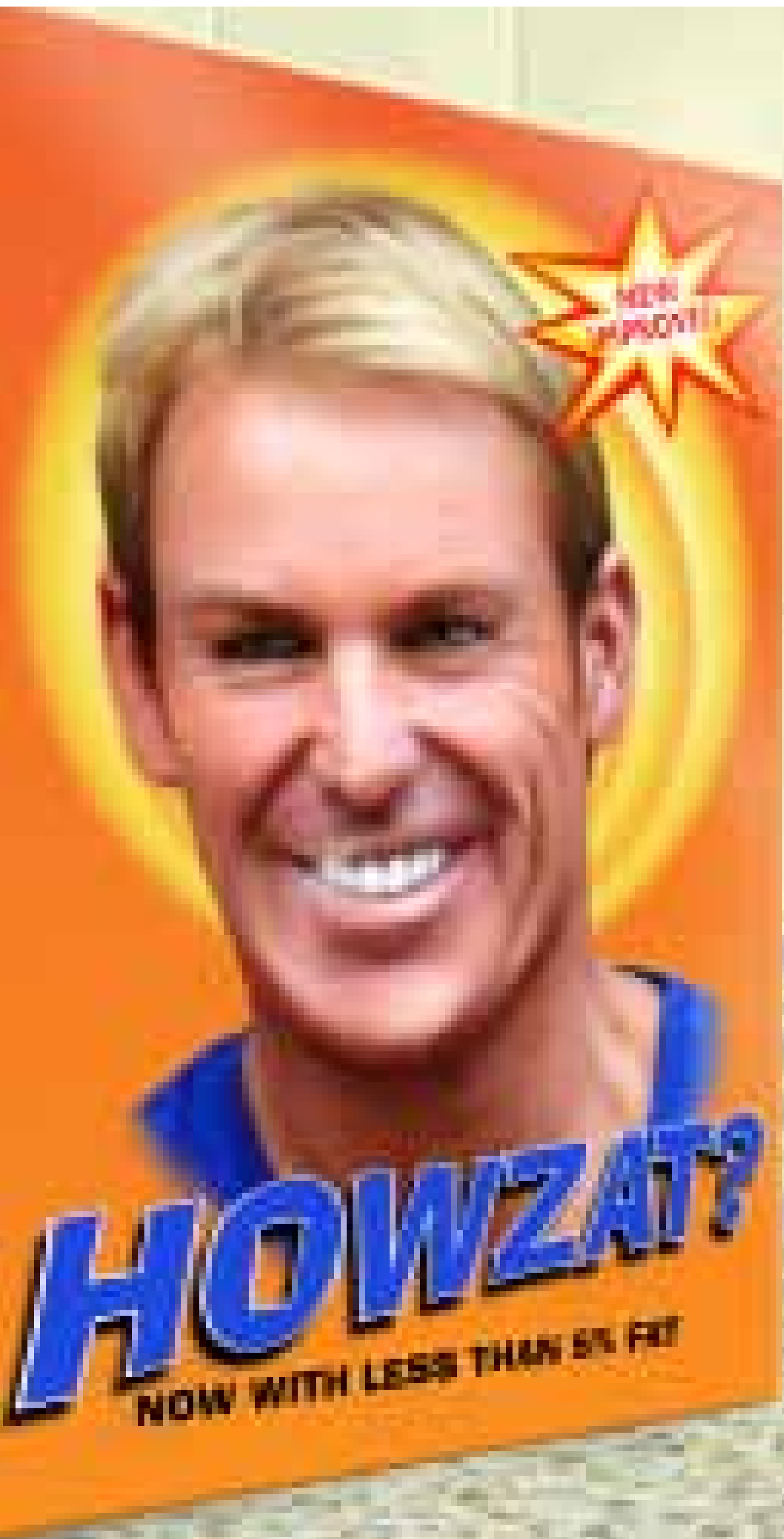
No other cricketer in the modern age, certainly no Australian sportsman, has ever garnered such attention. For years, we marvelled at his brilliance: six kinds of leg spin, plus a repertoire of other unplayable balls – flippers, sliders, zooters, wrong 'uns – that had batsmen the world over mesmerised and terrified in equal measure.

He was the prodigy, the genius, the untameable larrikin spirit from Melbourne's Ferntree Gully who redefined the mysteries of spin bowling and, in doing so, won countless matches for his country, sometimes almost single-handedly.

"Man, you should see this sucker from Victoria," his former captain Steve Waugh told a teammate early on in Warne's career. "He's tubby, he's got a mullet, he smokes a shitload of cigarettes and he likes a drink, but, f..., he can spin a ball."

We delighted at this God-given brilliance, not to mention the wizardry he could conjure on a





He's cheated on his wife and his mistresses, given in to beer and cigarettes, and had an extreme makeover, yet Shane Warne's popularity only climbs upward. DAVID LESER on a celebrity phenomenon.

diet of cheese sangers, baked beans, beer and cigarettes. (True, as a leg spinner, he didn't have to run very far, but his scorn for healthy living was almost a source of national pride, despite warnings from nutritionists that he might have been at risk of brain damage, heart disease, even scurvy.)

Apart from his freakish talent, we loved his self-belief, his boyish, almost preternatural, charm and his self-deprecating humour. But then we were also horribly let down by his more egregious lapses: accepting money from an Indian bookmaker in 1994; testing positive to a prohibited drug in 2003; regularly sledging opponents; smoking while being paid \$200,000 by a pharmaceutical company to promote Nicorette, then verbally abusing two 15-year-old Kiwi schoolboys after they had the temerity to snap an incriminating photograph of Warne puffing away.

All that was nothing, however, compared to the sex scandals that became a feature of his married life: his relentless hitting on – and texting of – any (preferably blonde) female who happened to take his fancy. The roll-call of porn stars, strippers, nurses, housewives, students was endless, as were the lewd, breathless text messages sent to them while simultaneously declaring undying fealty to the long-suffering Simone and their children.

"Oh Donna where are you?" London's tabloid *Mirror* newspaper quoted him as imploring 22-year-old English nurse Donna Wright, while in the act of self-pleasuring. "I'm picturing the wine all over us. Both our mouths together, our tongues together..."

And what was so extraordinary was that not only did he survive these tawdry and public misdemeanours, he positively flourished in the face of them, both on and off the field. *He'd been lonely. It hadn't meant anything. The women were to blame. The media, with all its invasive prurience, had been responsible. His wife and children were his life. He was just a kid growing up under an intolerable public spotlight.*

And then he'd go out again and repeat offend, while winning another Test match for his country.

CONSIDER CHUCK FLEETWOOD-Smith, the “wayward genius” of Australian spin bowling in the 1930s. He, too, had been a drinker and womaniser of Olympian proportions, but, unlike Warne, he ended up homeless and penniless; in the words of cricket writer Mark Ray, “a wino on the banks of the Yarra”. Consider, too, the numerous extramarital trysts that were to cost Tiger Woods his billion-dollar clean-cut image.

By comparison, Warne was able to shake off his transgressions with stunning equanimity, at the same time cashing in on his popularity, especially in India where he is treated like a demigod, perhaps now more than ever.

British publicist Max Clifford likens him to a James Bond figure, especially when he is behind the wheel of his \$3-million Bugatti Veyron or Lamborghini Gallardo Superleggera. “Every lad dreams of living Shane Warne’s life,” Clifford has said. “He’s entertaining, he’s a loveable rogue, he oozes charisma and that brings a certain magnetism – people want to be around him. If you could bottle what Shane’s got, it would be gold.”

Try bottling chutzpah. Caught as a serial SMS/text offender, Warne signed a sponsorship deal with Messages on Hold, a Perth-based telephone messaging company that had him advising prospective customers: “Trust me with this recommendation – I know a thing or two about spin.”

Warne’s hair started to fall out, so what better strategy than to sign a lucrative promotional deal with Advanced Hair Studio. Warne is photographed in a pair of *Playboy* underpants with two buxom blondes, so he launches his own Spinners menswear range, including underpants.

Sydney Morning Herald columnist Peter FitzSimons recalls being on the same *Footy Show* panel as Warne and being struck by the cricket star’s brazenness. “When we were all getting dressed and putting our suits on, there was Shane Warne with his big red undies and ... right at the groin, there were big, black *Playboy* motifs. I can imagine a 14-year-old boy wanting to do that, but a 37-year-old man?”

For years, FitzSimons had been prone to giving Warne a shellacking in print. Why? Because – cricket genius though Warne was – FitzSimons regarded him as a “f...wit”. Warne’s tweetings have only stirred the writer’s ire further. “The sheer banality of those tweets takes my breath away,” FitzSimons says. “He is a publicity whore to beat them all – and I say that as a publicity whore.”

“I look at Hurley; none of us had heard anything of her for the last five years. She was an actress fading fast and, suddenly, she’s world famous again, at least in Britain and Australia. They’re the prince and princess of the celebratocracy.”

Sarah Wilson, former editor of *Cosmopolitan* magazine and a well-known blogger and tweeter, believes the tweetings are just a natural outlet for Warne’s ego, one that has been stoked and fired by years of adulation. “It’s also a desire to connect, to say, ‘Hey, look at me,’” she says. “It’s quite child-like, and we forgive him because it is so childlike. We might roll our eyes but the reason we forgive him is because of this raw desire people have to connect. Shane just does it more brazenly.”

Ann Peacock, PR general manager at Crown and a Shane Warne Foundation board member, sees his twittering fetish in even more benign terms. “Good on him for having the courage to profess his love for someone publicly,” she says. “So many people hide it, whereas he’s proud of it. He has publicly admitted his mistakes and we’re forgiving



“Every lad dreams of living Shane Warne’s life ... People want to be around him. If you could bottle what Shane’s got, it would be gold.”

of people who admit their mistakes. It’s not his greatness that has taken over now, it is his complete genuineness. He is a loving father and decent human being who does a lot for others, particularly the disadvantaged and underprivileged.”

Clifford believes Warne’s propensity to tweet is a way of beating journalists at their own game. “By tweeting, you’re taking power from the journalist. The biggest bugbear to [celebrities] are stories which are damaging and possibly false. But this way, you eliminate that.”

And it has proved to be so in the wake of Warne’s much-heralded physical makeover, a transformation that has had newspapers around the world in something of a collective lather. London’s *Guardian* protested that “Shane has been slimmed, buffed, tweaked, styled and waxed into a marginally hairier clone of Ming the Merciless. With even pointier eyebrows.”

The *Daily Mail* described his new look as “spooky as a waxwork”, directing its dismay at Hurley, the “predatory praying mantis” who had transformed her previous partners Hugh Grant and husband Arun Nayer into self-pitying parodies of their former selves, and was now doing the same to an Australian sporting legend.

No wonder the Wurleys decided to employ the modern miracle of online social networking, by simultaneously mocking their detractors and promoting labels with which they were both associated: in the case of Hurley, cosmetics giant Estée Lauder; in the case of Warne, Alfred Dunhill designer menswear, his own Spinners brand and the Shane Warne Foundation, which has raised much money for underprivileged children.

“The trouble is, people I’ve never met think they know all about me,” Warne once told writer Gideon Haigh. So by tweeting his growing legion of followers, he bypasses the press and communicates with people on his own terms. (Warne and Hurley declined to be interviewed for this story.)

Come in, spinner: (from top) Warne during his playing days, 2006; the new-look, slimmed-down version with Elizabeth Hurley in London in June.

@WARNE888: FTR – no facelift or work on face... Fitter (9kg’s lighter) / healthier / estee lauder moisturizers (amazing) & feeling very happy!!
@WARNE888 It was a Dunhill tux I wore last night for those of you who asked – yes had my spinners underwear and socks on!!!!

Over their nine-month public flirtation, Hurley has been able to spruik her bikinis and organic snacks, while Warne has touted the benefits of his online poker company, thereby ensuring his estimated fortune of \$20 million only keeps growing.

IN THE GLOBALISED 21ST CENTURY, EVERYONE can now “plug in and play” to borrow a phrase from US journalist Thomas Friedman’s best-selling book *The World Is Flat*. In this new flattened world, Friedman wrote, “it is now possible for more people than ever to collaborate and compete in real time with more other people on more different kinds of work from more different corners of the planet and on a more equal footing than at any previous time in the history of the world”.

“We are entering a strange era where hedonism is the ruling ideology,” Slavoj Žižek, the Slovenian philosopher and critical theorist told the audience on the ABC’s *Q&A* show recently.

Hedonism maybe. Or a combination of hedonism, narcissism and spin. In writing his biography of Warne, *Spun Out*, Paul Barry invited his readers to close their eyes and imagine they were standing in Warne’s shoes. “You’re the best in the world at the one thing that matters to you. You’re cheered by the crowd ... feted by teammates. You’re mobbed by women wherever you go. Is it any wonder you think the world revolves around you?”

Psychologists have a term for it: “entitlement”. It is the feeling, Barry wrote, that “you deserve it, you’ve earned it, it’s your due, your reward. In its extreme form this syndrome is a mental illness called narcissistic personality disorder. Warne appears to be suffering a milder version.”

For Adam Ferrier, consumer psychologist and founding partner of Naked Communications, that’s hardly surprising. “Shane Warne would have been living at the centre of the universe for a long time,” he tells *GOOD WEEKEND*. “To not be at the centre of the universe would be a hard thing for him to reconcile. There would be a natural tendency for him to try and maintain that position, obviously subconsciously, for as long as possible. I think tweeting is a function of that.”

“They’re not tweeting their every romantic move,” publicist Max Markson says of the pair. “What they’re putting out there is what they want to put out there. At least they’re having fun.” And what better way to have fun now than to be back together again in Australia, soaking up the adulation, reuniting with friends and family, and launching Warne’s new Club 23 at Crown during next week’s Spring Racing Carnival in Melbourne.

No doubt their every move will be tracked. Paparazzi will swarm. Autograph hunters will queue. Women will pine for what might have been. The Twittersphere will froth and bubble.

Just spare a thought for poor PingPongHurley back in the UK, missing her master and keeper terribly, and apparently still struggling with her vocabulary, although she’s learnt how to imitate her keeper’s ring tone.

@WARNE888: Hope little ping behaving and being sweet – has she stopped pecking?

@ELIZABETHHURLEY: PingPong shouted ‘Num Num’ at me when I walked in. That’s her word for sunflower seed. She got 3 and a beak stroking. **GW**