

## Sports

# Ashes gone, pride at stake for wounded England at MCG

## Bairstow call teammates to rally behind under-fire skipper

**MELBOURNE:** England have lost paceman Craig Overton and may make a further change as they try to restore some pride in tomorrow's fourth Melbourne Test after surrendering the Ashes to Australia. It's been a tour from hell for Joe Root's beleaguered team, succumbing to three heavy defeats which rendered the last two Tests in Melbourne and Sydney "dead rubbers."

Root has been in the eye of the storm over the tourists' underwhelming efforts, with former Australia captain Ricky Ponting deriding him as a "little boy" who has been a "bit soft" during the one-sided series. Several other under-performing senior players, notably Alastair Cook, Stuart Broad and Moeen Ali, have also been under the gun as some critics call for their axing.

Overton was ruled out on Sunday with a rib injury, with either Tom Curran or Mark Wood likely to replace him, while young leg-spinner Mason Crane is pushing for a Test debut.

England and Wales Cricket Board chief Tom Harrison typified the feelings inside the team when he said earlier in the week: "I don't think this is the moment for rash decisions." Wicketkeeper Jonny Bairstow has called on his teammates to rally behind their under-fire skipper. "We don't just owe him (Root), we owe ourselves as well," Bairstow said. "We've got to go out there and try and win both of these Test matches."

Talking is one thing, doing is another for England, who have had their moments in the series but have been

blown away by big losses — 10 wickets in Brisbane, 120 runs in Adelaide and an innings and 41 runs in Perth. Cook, who became the first Englishman to play 150 Tests during the series, has scored just 83 runs in six innings, while Root has two half-centuries but only a total of 176 runs at 29.33.

In comparison, Australia skipper Steve Smith is in cracking form and is coming off a Test-best 239 in the third Test. He is averaging 142 for the series. Smith's phenomenal form has him in rarefied company, occupying joint second position in the ICC's all-time rankings list along with England's Len Hutton and behind only the legendary Don Bradman.

Smith has a career average of 62.32 from 59 Tests, second only to Bradman's pinnacle 99.94. The Australian skipper is gunning for his fourth consecutive Melbourne Test century after hundreds against Pakistan, the West Indies and India in the last three Boxing Day showpieces.

### Australia have won half of the 56 Tests played at MCG

There will be some respite for England, with Australian pace spearhead Mitchell Starc ruled out on Sunday with a bruised heel and replaced by Jackson Bird. But Smith has vowed no let-up in short-pitched bowling against England's tailenders, despite claims the umpires should give the lower order more protection.

"We obviously had a plan from the start of the series that we were going to bowl a lot of short stuff to those



PERTH: File photo shows Australian players celebrate taking the Ashes series after winning the third Ashes cricket Test match between England and Australia in Perth on December 18, 2017.—AFP

guys, much like we did back in 2013," Smith said in the past week. Australia have won half of the 56 Tests played at the vast MCG, although England won there in 1998 and 2010.

Cricket Australia chief executive James Sunderland said the Boxing Day crowd was likely to surpass the 91,112 that made Ashes history in 2013-14 even though England had already lost the series.

#### Teams (probable):

Australia - David Warner, Cameron Bancroft, Usman

Khawaja, Steve Smith (capt), Shaun Marsh, Mitchell Marsh, Tim Paine, Pat Cummins, Josh Hazlewood, Nathan Lyon, Jackson Bird.

England - Alastair Cook, Mark Stoneman, James Vince, Joe Root (capt), Dawid Malan, Jonny Bairstow, Moeen Ali, Chris Woakes, Tom Curran/Mark Wood, Stuart Broad, James Anderson.

Umpires: Kumar Dharmasena (SRI) Sundaram Ravi (IND).

TV umpire: Joel Wilson (WIS). Match referee: Ranjan Madugalle (SRI).—Reuters

## Selection challenge for South Africa against Zimbabwe

**PORT ELIZABETH:** Selection is likely to be South Africa's biggest challenge ahead of their one-off day-night Test against Zimbabwe, starting at St George's Park tomorrow. Zimbabwe are unlikely to stretch the home side but South Africa, ranked second in Test cricket, will want to establish their best XI in this four-day Test ahead of a three-match series against India, starting in Cape Town on January 5.

With the return of AB de Villiers and Dale Steyn after long absences from Test cricket, and with all South Africa's front-line fast bowlers fit for the first time in more than a year, coach Ottis Gibson described the selection issue as "a good nightmare".

"India are the number one team in the world at the moment and we know we need to be at our best if we are going to compete with them and beat them, which is our ultimate goal," said Gibson.

Six or seven batsmen? Three or four fast bowlers? A spin bowler? An all-rounder? These are all questions that will be troubling Gibson and his fellow selectors.

The situation is complicated by South Africa's unique racial balancing act, with Cricket South Africa committed to having an average of six players of colour, including two black Africans, in their starting teams. Three black Africans - batsman Temba Bavuma, all-rounder Andile Phehlukwayo and fast bowler Kagiso Rabada - played in South Africa's most recent Test matches, two one-sided encounters against Bangladesh. But with batsman De Villiers and fast bowlers Steyn, Vernon Philander and Morne Morkel back in the mix, only Rabada of the three seems guaranteed to start in what should be another lop-sided contest. Assuming captain Faf du Plessis is passed fit after recovering from shoulder surgery, it will be difficult to fit Bavuma into the batting line-up, while Phehlukwayo's medium-pace is unlikely to be required when there are four world-class fast bowlers in the squad.

Zimbabwe had a disappointing warm-up when they were beaten by a largely unheralded Invitation team in Paarl, but they were able to gain some experience with a pink ball under floodlights.

It is the first day-night Test to be played in South Africa. When the hosts held their first practice under lights on Friday they found the ball helped the seam bowlers more at night than during the day, which has been a pattern in floodlit Tests elsewhere.

The floodlights at St George's Park were upgraded during the off-season. Only two Twenty20 matches have been played at the ground since then, with the team batting second winning on both occasions.

#### Squads:

South Africa: Faf du Plessis (capt), Dean Elgar, Aiden Markram, Hashim Amla, AB de Villiers, Temba Bavuma, Quinton de Kock (wkt), Theunis de Bruyn, Andile Phehlukwayo, Vernon Philander, Keshav Maharaj, Kagiso Rabada, Dale Steyn, Morne Morkel, Duanne Olivier.

Zimbabwe: Graeme Cremer (capt), Hamilton Masakadza, Solomon Mire, Craig Ervine, Brendan Taylor, Sikandar Raza, Chamu Chibhabha, Ryan Burl, Peter Moor, Regis Chakabva (wkt), Kyle Jarvis, Chris Mpofu, Tendai Chatara, Blessing Muzarabani, Tendai Chisoro.

Umpires: Richard Kettleborough (ENG), Paul Reiffel (AUS).

TV umpire: Michael Gough (ENG).

Match referee: Chris Broad (ENG).—AFP

## South Africa's de Villiers eyes successful test return

**PORT ELIZABETH:** South Africa talisman AB de Villiers has declared himself fit for the challenge of day-night test ahead of the one-off match against Zimbabwe at St George's Park tomorrow.

It will be the first test appearance in almost two years for the 33-year-old, who had taken time off from the longer version of game while continuing to dominate bowlers in limited overs. "I pride myself in the fact that I can adapt to certain conditions and formats," he told reporters as the Proteas prepare for the first ever-four day match, also the first test to be played under lights in South Africa.

"I have worked hard on my game over the last six months. I started in July facing red balls at the University of Pretoria, getting some technical stuff sorted out, I feel more ready than ever to take it on. "I faced a few pink balls here

last night on a spicy wicket, it was really tough. Then again it's a great challenge, it's the ultimate form of the game, it's the greatest challenge to come out on top when the ball is moving around a bit."

De Villiers did not see much difference between the formats. "It's a mindset, a little tweak here and there. You have to have more patience with the red ball but you still have to play cricket strokes, it's not like you are playing rugby, it is still cricket.

"As long as you respect the conditions, sum up what is going on in a match situation, you can make it work." He allayed fears about the stiff lower back that kept him out of the three-day warm-up match against Zimbabwe in Paarl and was looking forward to a fruitful outing.

"I want to contribute. I want to play knocks, have my say in the field with my experience and take some catches that can win games of cricket," he said. South Africa will host India to three tests in January before their four-test series against Australia in March and April.

"We would like to be number one in the world, we are not far away. We know if we win a few series in the next three months against tough opposition we can achieve that," de Villiers said.

"We will take it one step at a time, that will be nice to achieve, to be the number one team in the world and to maintain it for a few years." — Reuters

## Giles slams immature England

**LONDON:** Ashley Giles admits he would have considered sending home some of England's players for bad behaviour during their Ashes tour of Australia. England's poor performances on the pitch, which have seen them lose the series ahead of the start of the fourth Test on Boxing Day, have been compounded by incidents off it.

Ben Duckett, who is not part of the full Ashes squad but was in Australia to play for England Lions, was given a suspension and a fine by the England and Wales Cricket Board for throwing a drink over vice-captain James Anderson. England star Jonny Bairstow was involved in a bizarre headbutt incident with Australia's Cameron Bancroft during a night out in Perth. Ben

Stokes, an England all-rounder, is out of the international frame while waiting to discover whether he will be charged for an alleged late-night brawl before the Ashes tour in Bristol in September. Former spinner Giles, who played 54 Test matches for England and later worked as a national team selector, believes some of the current crop of players have lacked maturity.

"I think I would have been very tempted (to send some home)," Giles told BBC Radio 5 Live yesterday. "There comes a time when there's enough water gone under the bridge, a lot of it not very nice water, you have to make a stand and we're probably past that point."

"The whole thing sheds a bad light on England cricket but I think what we have to remember is these guys are extremely talented cricketers and they've got a great gift in what they do. "It doesn't make them extremely mature individuals. And there's work to do there. "If the maturity isn't there in the dressing room then they need quite strict guidelines and rules. "Over time, if you can't trust people to make correct decisions off the field, how can you trust them to make them on the field?" — AFP



AB de Villiers

## England's injured paceman Overton out of fourth Melbourne Test

**MELBOURNE:** England paceman Craig Overton is out of the fourth Ashes Test against Australia with a fractured rib, officials said yesterday.

The England and Wales Cricket Board confirmed he would not play in the Melbourne Test, starting on Boxing Day. Uncapped fast bowler Tom Curran will reportedly make his debut to replace him, although fellow speedster Mark Wood has trained with the team this week.

Overton, who made his Test debut in Adelaide this month, was diagnosed with a cracked rib during the third Test in Perth. He was struck when batting in Adelaide and exacerbated the injury when he tumbled while attempting to take a catch off his own bowling in Perth.

It is a blow for England, with Overton one of their best players on a troubled tour in which the Ashes urn was surrendered before Christmas. "It's obviously quite sore...and not the most ideal thing to get," Overton told reporters last week.

"It just seemed like battling through the pain was in my nature. I've always been taught to fight through things and that's what I've had to do." Curran, a right-arm from Surrey, was only added to England's Ashes squad when Steve Finn was ruled out at the start of the tour with a torn knee cartilage.

Born in South Africa, the 22-year-old played a one-day international and three T20s for England earlier this year. — AFP



Ashley Giles