

Batting holds key as cricket returns

AFP, London

Batting could well determine which side emerges on top when international cricket resumes after months of coronavirus-enforced lockdown with the first Test between England and the West Indies at Southampton starting on Wednesday.

Both sides have proven pace attacks, with West Indies captain Jason Holder among a bowling unit set to include the likes of Shannon Gabriel, Kemar Roach and Alzarri Joseph as the tourists look to retain the Wisden Trophy they won in the Caribbean last year.

England too have plenty of pace bowling options, with veteran new-ball duo James Anderson and Stuart Broad among a group of fast bowlers that also includes the Barbados-born Jofra Archer and Mark Wood.

They, like the West Indies, will be captained by a seam-bowling all-rounder of their own in new skipper Ben Stokes, shouldering the burden of England leadership for the first time in the absence of regular captain Joe Root, who is missing the match to attend the



FIXTURES
8-12 JULY: First Test at the Ageas Bowl, Southampton.
16-20 JULY: Second Test at Old Trafford, Manchester
24-28 JULY: Third Test at Old Trafford, Manchester.

birth of his second child.

England have no spare batsman in their squad, with Dom Bess the lone spinner, and that meaning the make-up of their pace attack appears to be the outstanding issue.

Injuries have prevented England pairing the express Archer and Wood together since the former's Test debut last year.

But if they are both in the final XI, it could mean Broad missing a

first home Test in eight years.

With matches coming thick and fast -- the series will be over before the end of the month -- England may decide to hold Wood back for the second and third Tests.

The pitch at Lancashire's headquarters traditionally has more bounce than the one at Southampton -- a consideration that is even more important given the temporary ban on bowlers using saliva in order to combat the

spread of COVID-19.

Root's absence weakens England's batting, even if he managed a mere four runs when the side were bowled out for 77 in the first Test at Barbados last year, with Roach taking five for 17.

Nevertheless, the pressure will be on the top order, for all England won a series in South Africa this year, with Joe Denly set to play despite averaging a modest 30 from 14 Tests.

"As a top-order batter Joe would obviously love to convert those starts into hundreds...but also it is fully understood that he has contributed to good team batting performances," said England national selector Ed Smith.

West Indies' also face questions over whether their batsmen can give their bowlers enough to play with.

A likely top-five of Kraigg Brathwaite, John Campbell, Shamarh Brooks, Shai Hope and Roston Chase subsided to 49 for five in their final intra-squad warm-up innings at Old Trafford.

"I would have loved to see the batsmen spend a little bit more time in the middle," said West Indies assistant coach Roddy Estwick.



The one thing that will be missing in the Test between England and the West Indies is a packed crowd as unlike the times in the past, the gallery of the Ageas Bowl will be empty and instead of the usual crowd noise, the players will need to be used to the sound of the ball hitting the willow reverberating around empty the stadium.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

A return both empty and fulfilling

BISHWAJIT ROY



The great Eduardo Galeano, in his masterpiece 'Football in Sun and Shadow', wrote that "playing without their fans (club fans) is like dancing without music". According to the Uruguayan, players know it is 'player number twelve' who stirs up the winds of fervour. Galeano wrote about the beautiful game, but his words ring true for sport across the board.

Alas! When this book was published twenty-five years back, 'New Normal' was not yet a watchword; otherwise Galeano may playfully have added something about accepting a match without fans.

Under the circumstances following the Covid-19 pandemic, fans have already welcomed the return of football behind closed-doors. And cricket fans' wait will end today when England and West Indies lock horns in the first Test. There will be no entry for fans, but 'live cricket' after such a long break will definitely be a breath of fresh air for cricket crazy fans all over the world.

"What a relief. How long can you only reminisce? You feel bored when you live life looking back at the past. Just think, for the past few months we seemed to become so old. We were only talking about our pasts. Who actually lives life only depending on their past memories (laughs)?" former Bangladesh captain Habibul Bashar said.

Regardless of the fact that cricket is going to return thousands of miles away, it will provide fresh entertainment for cricket lovers in Bangladesh. "The return of cricket will just inject some fresh air. Now we can talk about some 'live cricket'," added Bashar.

For Bangladesh ODI captain Tamim Iqbal, the England-West Indies series means a lot, especially in bringing

HIGHLIGHTS

The three-Test series has been named 'Raise the Bat' by the ECB to pay tribute to key workers.

All three Tests will be played inside a biosecure bubble, following the newly set COVID-19 guidelines provided by the ICC.

West Indies arrived in the UK on June 9 and went under a 14-day quarantine before playing a couple of intra-squad practice matches. England played a three-day intra-squad warm-up match from July 1 at the Ageas Bowl, the venue for the first Test.

The two teams will be sporting a 'Black Lives Matter' logo on their jerseys.

Cricket resumes after a 117-day hiatus due to the coronavirus pandemic. The last international fixture was played between Australia and New Zealand on 13 March. Four Test series (10 Tests), 12 ODI series (35 ODIs) and 9 T20I series (31 T20Is) were cancelled or postponed in that time.

confidence back to cricketers.

"It's a very positive sign that cricket is going to return on the field. The successful conclusion of the series will help players all over the world overcome the fear factor which has been created due to the coronavirus. The important part is how one can control everything. We are waiting to see how everything is managed during the series. If everything ends well, it will provide confidence to players all over the world," Tamim said.

Tamim was excited that everyone can now talk about live cricket instead of constantly strolling down memory lane, but he will only be fulfilled when he can step onto the field.

"No doubt, it's refreshing as cricket is returning to the field. But as a player, the fulfilment only comes when I can play," added the left-handed opener.

In the end, when the England and West Indies players walk out on to the lush Ageas Bowl pitch today, it will originally be back to a 'life of cricket'.

'Do it your way, Stokesy'

REUTERS

Stand-in England captain Ben Stokes says regular skipper Joe Root has given him a simple piece of advice ahead of Wednesday's first Test with West Indies -- do it your way.

With Root missing for the birth of his second child, Stokes will get to pit himself against West Indies counterpart Jason Holder.

"The best message I've received was when I got my photos done yesterday, with the blazer. Rooty just left a message on the hanger which said, 'Do it your way'," said Stokes.

But the all-rounder says he knows he will be able to turn to Root for advice at any stage during the match.

"I know he'll be at home watching and his phone will always be available if I need him," he added.

Stokes' first big decision as captain will be to name his team along with coach Chris Silverwood.

"It's not very often that we've been in a situation where we've got six or seven bowlers to choose from. It's a real head-scratcher as somebody who's got to choose the side but as a bigger picture it's a great place to be in as a team.

"I feel as if we're in a position now as a test team like we were with the one-day team in 2015 and building for that World Cup. I feel as if we're building towards the Ashes in Australia and also India," he added.

Test of the new normal

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI



The eyes of the cricketing world will be focused on Southampton today when England take on the West Indies at the Ageas Bowl in what will be the first international cricket series since the outbreak of coronavirus pandemic more than three months ago. The Test match, the first of three during the Windies' tour of England, will go a long way to showing other nations how to host an international series even amidst the pandemic. With football already leading the way in terms of getting sport back on the field, it is cricket's turn to follow suit and set the tone.

Whether it is James Anderson or Kemar Roach who comes in to bowl with the new ball, they will all be acutely aware of the ways of the 'new normal', given that it is very much the absence of normal that dictates circumstances.

For instance, none of the bowlers will get to hand over their caps, towels, sunglasses or sweaters to the umpire like they used to. The ICC guidelines called for 'adopting a process that will assist the bowler in managing his/her items. Umpires may also be encouraged to use gloves when handling the ball'.

Social distancing will have to work on the field of play too and even though cricket is a non-contact sport, there will not be those team huddles while awaiting an umpire's decision or high fives, fist-bump or approaching your key bowler who has just got a prized scalp and hugging it out.

Then there is the hotly-debated saliva ban that is giving faster bowlers sleepless nights. Will the ball swing for them after a few overs go by? Conditions in England are conducive to seam bowling but will sweat be enough to clean up the ball? Such



England and West Indies players can take note from Aaron Finch (R) and Kane Williamson's mistake of shaking hands -- realised only moments after -- during the last international game before the coronavirus halt. Cricket returns today in England under very strict hygiene measures. PHOTO: TWITTER

questions will be on the minds of the faster bowlers in both camps and, until they play a real match, it is difficult to know exactly how to make this 'new normal' work.

Both teams and staff have been in a bio-secure 'bubble' for the past few weeks and West Indies coach Phil Simmons found out the hard way how stringent the restrictions facing them are. Simmons had attended his father-in-law's funeral before completing a week-long self-isolation at a hotel room. Yet, there were calls for him to be sacked, with one Windies director saying it was 'inconsiderate and reckless'.

England pacer Mark Wood had said that all of it felt like being inside a sci-fi movie. Essentially, the players

had been cut off from the rest of the world. There will be aggressive coronavirus testing along with colour-coded testing sites demarcated for various groups.

"It's a mental game. While on tour, you would want to switch off from cricket for some time. You may want to go for a coffee or to a mall. It's not possible now. It's a bit of a challenge and it's harder for the players. It is tough. But we have to get used to it as coronavirus is going to stay for some time now," Roach was quoted as saying by the Hindustan Times. For England, they have to do without the famous Barmy Army. Roach felt the absence too. "Some music will be good, maybe get somebody who can sing!"



Sevilla winger Lucas Ocampos scored the decisive goal before donning goalkeeping gloves after an injury to their goalkeeper during a crucial La Liga match against Eibar on Monday. The makeshift goalkeeper then pulled off a last-gasp save to lead Sevilla to a 1-0 victory. PHOTO: SEVILLA FC

Mourinho happy with 'beautiful' bust-up

REUTERS, London



Tottenham's 1-0 Premier League win over Everton on Monday will best be remembered for a halftime bust-up between Hugo Lloris and teammate Son Heung-min that manager Jose Mourinho described as 'beautiful'.

With only one win in nine matches ahead of the game and their desire questioned by Mourinho after last week's 3-1 defeat at Sheffield United, emotions were raw.

Spurs were leading thanks to an own goal but Lloris saw red as the players walked off the pitch for halftime, ranting at Son for not tracking back when Richarlison had a chance. They had to be separated by teammates, although it was all smiles later.

Mourinho said he had encouraged his players to be more critical with each other.

"It's beautiful," Mourinho, whose side moved up to eighth, said. "It's probably a consequence of our meetings. If you want to blame someone for that it's me. I was critical of my boys -- they were not critical enough with themselves. I asked them to be more demanding of each other. Son is



an amazing kid, everybody likes Son but the captain told him you have to do more and give more to the team."

Expanding on the mentality he expects, Mourinho said: "A team of good boys and nice boys the only thing they want to win at the end of the season is the fair play cup and I've never been interested in winning that," he said. "I don't like a team that doesn't have a critical sense. What happened shouldn't have happened there, it should happen inside the dressing room. But I can promise you my winning teams had big fights."

WORLD ARCHERY INITIATIVE

Ruman to get Covid-19 grant

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh's top archer Ruman Sana was named in a list of 35 archers who will receive grants from World Archery and the Foundation for Global Sports Development's COVID-19 fund.

Each athlete will receive between 1500 and 7500 of the \$190,000 fund, according to the official website of World Archery.

Bangladesh Archery Federation general secretary Kazi Razibuddin Ahmed Chapal hinted that Sana might receive \$5000. He also informed that Sana is going to receive Tk 1.79 lakh from the IOC as scholarship for Tokyo Olympics.