'Sci-fi' England-Windies opener a new frontier for Test cricket

AFP | London

't will be Test cricket but ampton starting on Wednesday. tions at Old Trafford.

With the coronavirus pandemic having brought the world game to a halt in March, there paign might also fall victim to COVID-19.

But, with the West Indies ed health checks. agreeing to go ahead despite Britain's virus death toll of over every turn, and on the floor there 44,000 being the highest in Eu- are arrows, lines and footprints rope, the series is set to mark to show the way to go," Wood cricket's return from lockdown told the BBC. instead.

rus measures mean next week's with players at individual desks match will look like few others "looking at the back of the perin 143 years of Test-match history.

be staying at on-site hotels at spectators. Southampton's Ageas Bowl and Old Trafford in Manchester -the venue for the second and third Tests -- in a series origi-

nally scheduled for elsewhere in England in June.

England have already settled not as we've known it when in at the Ageas Bowl, where they England face the West In- played a three-day intra-squad dies in the opening match of a match this week as the West "bio-secure" series at South- Indies continued their prepara-

'Back at school'

Mark Wood, the England fast were fears this three-Test cam- bowler, said the environment, "feels a bit like a sci-fi movie", with players subjected to repeat-

"There is hand sanitiser at

He added meal times were However, a number of anti-vi- "like being back at school", son in front".

But perhaps the most visible For a start, both sides will change will be the lack of any

> For while sparse crowds are 'home' games in the United Arab affair.



England cricket players during a training session (file photo)

not unknown in Test cricket -- Emirates -- this series will be a

That does help officials to particularly when Pakistan play completely behind closed doors honour lucrative broadcast contracts and so eliminate a 'night-

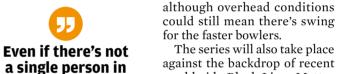
mare scenario' of no cricket at all this season that, according to its own estimates, could cost the England and Wales Cricket Board £252 million (\$309 million).

Meanwhile, Cricket West Indies president Ricky Skerritt insisted a \$3 million loan from the ECB was a "helping hand" at a time of economic crisis rather than a condition of touring England.

Quite how the lack of atmosphere, as well as being cooped up on the ground at night, will affect the players is uncertain, with West Indies captain Jason taining the standards associated Holder admitting he would miss England's loudest fans.

"I enjoy playing in front of the person in the crowd it's still Barmy Army, to not hear them what we all dreamt of doing," sing, to not hear them chant will he said. take some getting used to," he said.

England batsman Ollie Pope, going to be really up for it."



the crowd it's still

what we all dreamt

of doing. When

that Test match

starts up, crowd or

no crowd, you are

going to be really

up for it

OLLIE POPE

with cricket's pinnacle format.

"Even if there's not a single

up, crowd or no crowd, you are

The series will also take place against the backdrop of recent worldwide Black Lives Matter protests, with both teams set to have a BLM logo on their shirts. But amid all the changes,

which includes provision for virus substitutes if required, there will be a return to cricket's past.

Travel restrictions mean there are set to be two on-field home umpires in a Test for the first time since 2002 when the International Cricket Council made neutral match officials mandatory in the five-day game.

Yet concerns about the alterations are outweighed by a sense of relief that the series is still going ahead.

England captain Joe Root -- before it was confirmed he would miss the first Test to at-"When that Test match starts tend the birth of his second child -- summed up the mood by saying: "I think the whole crickethowever, was adamant the teams Players will be barred from ing world will be grateful to see



England fast bowler Mark Wood during a match (file photo)

Mane gets Liverpool back on track against wasteful Aston Villa

AFPt | London

Sadio Mane and Curtis Jones Struck in the final 20 minutes to ensure Liverpool marked their first match at Anfield since being crowned Premier League champions with a 2-0 win over struggling Aston Villa

After a 4-0 humbling at the hands of Manchester City in midweek, Jurgen Klopp's men again failed to hit the heights that made them runaway leaders before a three-month hiatus due to the coronavirus pandemic.

But Mane's sweet strike off the underside of the bar and Jones's deflected effort kept up a run of 24 consecutive league wins at Anfield for the Reds and left Villa still languishing in the bottom three.



Sadio Mane of Liverpool crosses the ball under pressure from Ezri Konsa of Aston Villa

Christmas presents" in the final English top-flight history. Klopp has insisted he will month of the campaign as Livernot dish out appearances "like pool eye a record points tally in alterations from an embarrass- dan Henderson and Georginio to break Villa down.

ing night at the Etihad on Thurs-

Wijnaldum dropped out, but all three were needed in the second half after a disappointing first hour.

In front of an empty Anfield, Liverpool struggled to summon Ghazi. their best with the big prize already won and just re-writing the record books to play for.

Villa, by contrast, are still desperate for points in their battle to beat the drop and Dean made a difference when Naby Smith's men were left to rue not taking their chances on the counter-attack early in the second half as their winless streak stretched to 10 games.

Pepe Reina was recalled in the Villa goal on his return to Anfield where he spent nine years as a Liverpool player.

However, the Spaniard barely had a save of note to make before The German made just three day as Roberto Firmino, Jor- half-time as Liverpool struggled

Indeed, it was Alisson Becker who was the busier goalkeeper as the Brazilian was forced to parry shots from Douglas Luiz, Jack Grealish and Anwar El

Klopp was forced into introducing Henderson, Wijnaldum and Firmino to try and summon a response from his side in the final half hour.

The triple substitution quickly Keita picked out Mane to sweep home his 20th goal of the season. Reina was finally forced into a fine save as he dived to his left to deny Firmino his first goal at Anfield this season.

Another substitute made the game safe a minute from time as 19-year-old Jones saw his effort deflect past the helpless Reina before Alisson produced another stunning save at the other end to deny Grealish a consolation.