

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

AFP | London

It will be Test cricket but not as we've known it when England face the West Indies in the opening match of a "bio-secure" series at Southampton starting on Wednesday.

With the coronavirus pandemic having brought the world game to a halt in March, there were fears this three-Test campaign might also fall victim to COVID-19.

But, with the West Indies agreeing to go ahead despite Britain's virus death toll of over 44,000 being the highest in Europe, the series is set to mark cricket's return from lockdown instead.

However, a number of anti-virus measures mean next week's match will look like few others in 143 years of Test-match history.

For a start, both sides will be staying at on-site hotels at 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 in at the Ageas Bowl, where they played a three-day intra-squad match this week as the West Indies continued their preparations at Old Trafford.

'Back at school'

Mark Wood, the England fast bowler, said the environment, "feels a bit like a sci-fi movie", with players subjected to repeated health checks.

"There is hand sanitiser at every turn, and on the floor there are arrows, lines and footprints to show the way to go," Wood told the BBC.

He added meal times were "like being back at school", with players at individual desks "looking at the back of the person in front".

But perhaps the most visible change will be the lack of any spectators.

For while sparse crowds are not unknown in Test cricket -- particularly when Pakistan play 'home' games in the United Arab



England cricket players during a training session (file photo)

Emirates -- this series will be a completely behind closed doors affair.

That does help officials to honour lucrative broadcast contracts and so eliminate a 'nightmare 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 Holder admitting he would miss England's loudest fans.

"I enjoy playing in front of the Barmy Army, to not hear them sing, to not hear them chant will take some getting used to," he said.

England batsman Ollie Pope, however, was adamant the teams would have no trouble in main-

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OLLIE POPE

taining the standards associated with cricket's pinnacle format.

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Players will be barred from using saliva to shine the ball,

although overhead conditions could still mean there's swing for the faster bowlers.

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 attend the birth of his second child -- summed up the mood by saying: "I think the whole cricketing world will be grateful to see some cricket again."



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

Mane gets Liverpool back on track against wasteful Aston Villa

AFP | 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.

Klopp has insisted he will not dish out appearances "like



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

Christmas presents" in the final month of the campaign as Liverpool eye a record points tally in

English top-flight history.

The German made just three alterations from an embarrass-

ing night at the Etihad on Thursday as Roberto Firmino, Jordan Henderson and Georginio

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 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 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 half-time as Liverpool struggled to break Villa down.

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 Ghazi.

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 made a difference when Naby 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.