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England face searching Ashes questions after India series thriller

After 2-2 thriller with India, England face selection and fitness dilemmas ahead of Ashes tour

- Stokes' fitness crucial for Ashes
- Fast-bowling injuries a concern
- Spin options remain uncertain
- Crawley's form under scrutiny
- Ashes series starts in November

AFP | London

England suffered an agonising six-run loss to India at the Oval on Monday as one of the most dramatic Test series of recent times ended in a 2-2 draw.

Their next major red-ball assignment is a five-match Ashes series away to arch-rivals Australia -- where England have gone 15 Tests without a win -- starting in November.

Here we look at some of the key issues that emerged from England's rollercoaster contest with India and what they mean for their quest to regain the Ashes 'Down Under'.

Stokes central to England's hopes

What England gain from having Ben Stokes in their side was never more evident than when their inspirational captain missed the fifth Test with a shoulder injury -- a fresh worry following his history of hamstring trouble.

The 34-year-old all-rounder was the most threatening mem-



England's Josh Tongue (2R) celebrates taking a wicket

ber of England's attack against India, taking 17 wickets at 25 in 140 overs -- the most he has bowled in a series.

Stokes also looked back to his best with the bat, scoring 141 in England's mammoth total of 669 in the drawn fourth Test at Old Trafford. By contrast specialist opener Zak Crawley failed to reach three figures in nine innings.

And at the Oval, the sight of vice-captain Ollie Pope running off to the dressing room to receive what appeared to be tactical guidance from Stokes did not say much for England's depth of leadership.

England limited-overs captain Harry Brook, also a mainstay of the Test team and a lively skipper in the Stokes mould, could

yet prove a better fit as vice-captain against Australia.

Fast-bowling plan under threat

England have long believed a battery of genuinely fast bowlers is essential if they are to win an Ashes series in Australia for the first time since 2010/11.

But fitness issues could blight their best-laid plans.

Jofra Archer made an encouraging return to Test cricket against India but played just two matches as England looked to manage the express paceman's workload.

Mark Wood, another bowler with genuine pace, has not played Test cricket for nearly 12 months and had knee surgery earlier this year.

The inconsistent Josh

Tongue's return of 19 wickets at under 30 in the India series could well see him selected for Ashes duty, with Gus Atkinson's five-wicket haul on his return to Test duty at the Oval doing his cause no harm.

Spin dilemma

England, and Stokes in particular, have shown huge faith in Shoaib Bashir, a 21-year-old off-spinner unable to hold down a regular place in a county side but who has now taken 68 wickets in 19 Tests at 39.

In the India series, Bashir's 10 wickets came at an expensive average of 54.1, before a finger injury ruled him out of the last two Tests.

But Hampshire stalwart

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Despite taking 17 wickets against India, Stokes bowled a career-high 140 overs in the series--raising concerns over his workload ahead of the gruelling Ashes tour

Liam Dawson failed to seize his chance in the drawn fourth Test, with Stokes appearing to tell the left-armer where he should be bowling on the Old Trafford pitch.

Leicestershire's 20-year-old leg-spinner Rehan Ahmed, already England's youngest Test cricketer, is another option.

England, however, didn't bother with a specialist spinner at the Oval, deploying Joe Root and Jacob Bethell -- clean bowled following a reckless charge down the pitch during a second-innings collapse -- for a mere 11 overs combined.

But former Australia captain Ricky Ponting believes England should stick with Bashir for the Ashes because of his similarity to outstanding Australia off-spinner Nathan Lyon.

"Australia will have probably three or four left-handers in their line-up which will aid the right-arm off-spinner as well," Ponting told Sky Sports. "And it's the over-spin that you need in Australia."

India's Siraj 'woke up believing' ahead of Test heroics

AFP | London

Mohammed Siraj said he never lost faith in his own ability to deliver a sensational victory for India in the fifth and deciding Test at the Oval on Monday.

England, set 374 to win, lost a nail-biting encounter by just six runs, with Siraj returning innings figures of 5-104 as India ended a rollercoaster campaign level at 2-2.

The hosts resumed on Monday's final day on 339-6, needing just 35 more runs for a win that would have given them a 3-1 series success.

But they had no answer to the enduring skill of fast bowler Siraj, who featured in all five games.

He undid England on Monday with a brilliant burst of 3-9 in 25 balls, ending the match in style when he knocked over Gus Atkinson's off-stump.

"From the first day until the fifth game, fifth day, we have fought an unbelievable fight," said Siraj, who bowled a marathon 185.3 overs during the series.

"God must have written something good for me, that's why I won this match and took the last wicket.

"When I woke up today, I



Akash Deep, Mohammed Siraj and Prasidh Krishna celebrate the win

thought I could do it. I downloaded a picture from Google saying 'believe'."

The 31-year-old was named player of the match after an overall return of 9-190.

Siraj redeemed himself in spectacular fashion after stepping over the boundary rope on Sunday in the act of catching Harry Brook, thereby conceding a six.

Brook (111) and Joe Root (105) took the game by the scruff of

the neck with a fourth-wicket stand of 195, putting England on course for victory.

"I thought the Brook drop was a game-changing moment," said Siraj the leading bowler on either side in the series with 23 wickets at 32.43.

"If it had been taken, we might not have come out today."

India captain Shubman Gill, alongside Siraj at a post-match press conference, jokingly added: "If he had taken the catch,

the game would have been too easy for us."

England were in command at 301-3 and on course to break the record run chase in the fourth innings of an Oval Test of 263-9 that has stood since 1902.

England collapse

But India fought back superbly, taking England's last seven wickets for just 66 runs.

"What we did this morning kind of summarised what this

From the first day until the fifth game, fifth day, we have fought an unbelievable fight. God must have written something good for me, that's why I won this match and took the last wicket. When I woke up today, I thought I could do it. I downloaded a picture from Google saying 'believe'

MOHAMMED SIRAJ

team is all about," said Gill.

"The way Brook and Root were going, not many teams in the world would have given themselves a chance, but this team believes that whenever we have some kind of an opening, we can get through."

Gill's first series as India captain was a personal triumph as he scored a mammoth 754 runs, including four centuries.

"Each hundred that I scored had a very different significance," said the 25-year-old. "The one in Leeds was my first match (as captain), I was under a bit of pressure.