

# Stokes eager to lead England **recovery** after 'hardest period of captaincy'

Leadership group stays intact as Ben Stokes pledges to learn from recent team failures

- England lose Ashes 4-1
- ECB backs Stokes, McCullum, Key
- Midnight curfew enforced after Australia tour
- Home Tests against New Zealand start June
- Stokes is recovering from a groin injury

AFP | London

Ben Stokes reckons the past three months have been the "hardest period" of his time as England captain but is determined the current leadership group can oversee a revival in the Test team's fortunes.

Earlier on Monday, the chief executive of the England and Wales Cricket Board, Richard Gould, confirmed Stokes, managing director Rob Key and coach Brendon McCullum would all stay in their posts despite the team's 4-1 loss on their five-Test tour of Australia, which ended in January.

Key denied suggestions Stokes and McCullum had fallen out in Australia, despite the pair offering contrasting messages dur-



England's Ben Stokes signs autographs for fans after the fifth Ashes cricket Test

ing a desperately disappointing series loss.

Stokes, in an emotional Instagram post, said he was determined to learn from his mistakes following the lowest period of his near four-year spell as England captain, with Key and McCullum still the right men to be alongside him.

"Being England captain is the

greatest honour a player can be given and I do not take it for granted," Stokes wrote.

"It has its highs and it has its lows, it makes you want to smile, it makes you want to cry. It completely and utterly consumes you and feels like it's the only thing in your life at times.

"The last 3 months has with- out a doubt been the hardest

period of my captaincy journey, it's tested me in so many different ways and I'm sure every other captain has gone through this as well.

"Baz (McCullum), Rob and myself have the passion and desire to take this team forward, we are going to give you everything we have, we know we made mistakes along the way



The Ashes defeat marked England's eighth Test loss in their last nine matches across all formats

and we have learnt from those mistakes, you learn more from failure than success."

In addition to England's poor performances on the field, there were reports of excessive drinking by players on a break, raising concerns about the dressing-room culture.

Revelations followed that vice-captain Harry Brook had been involved in an altercation with a nightclub bouncer on the pre-Ashes visit to New Zealand. A midnight curfew has since been enforced, while the ECB are trying to recruit a new national selector after Luke Wright resigned for family reasons.

Stokes has not played since suffering a groin injury in the fifth Ashes Test in Sydney in January, but is set to feature for Durham in the County Championship ahead of this season's home Test programme.

England have three Tests



Baz (McCullum), Rob and myself have the passion and desire to take this team forward, we are going to give you everything we have, we know we made mistakes along the way and we have learnt from those mistakes, you learn more from failure than success

BEN STOKES

against McCullum's native New Zealand in June before a trio of matches against Pakistan in August and September.

Stokes added: "I have learnt a lot about myself but the most important thing that I want the fans to know is that..."

"I F\*\*\*\*\*G love cricket, I F\*\*\*\*\*G love this team, I F\*\*\*\*\*G love being England captain and I have got so much more to give to this role and I'm so happy that I get to do it with Baz and Rob.

"We all appreciate every single person who supports us. We do what we do for many reasons but one of those reasons is to bring our supporters and fans happiness and a sense of pride and we will aim to do those things as much as we can in the future.

"See you all in June for the start of the Test Match summer."

# Mbappe says injury is behind him, all systems go for World Cup

● Mbappe missed 54 days with knee sprain

● Longest injury absence of his career

● France play Brazil Thursday, Colombia Sunday

AFP | Madrid

French superstar Kylian Mbappe says the knee injury that kept him sidelined for almost two months is "behind him" and there had never been a concern he would miss this year's World Cup.

The 27-year-old Real Madrid striker admitted he had not been at his best mentally during the 54-day absence -- the longest of his career.

"There was a lot of frustration, anger and anxiety," the French captain said.

Mbappe, who along with the French squad flies to the United States yesterday for friendlies against Brazil on Thursday and then Colombia Sunday, came on as a substitute for a few minutes in last week's Champions League last-16 match at Manchester City.

He also played over 25 minutes for Real -- for whom he is



Real Madrid's Kylian Mbappe celebrates scoring (file photo)

top scorer this campaign with 38 goals in 34 appearances -- in the 3-2 derby win over Atletico on Sunday.

"It is behind me," he said of the injury.

"I put myself under a regime where I wanted to return gently but with a hunger to play.

"I hope I am going to be able to play during the international break and make a difference."

The France captain -- a World

Cup winner in 2018 and runner-up in 2022 -- said he had been annoyed by the rumour mill suggesting his injury was more serious than it actually was.

He had avoided undergoing surgery after scans he had in Paris at the beginning of March revealed he would not require an intervention.

"Lots of people gave their own diagnosis, I heard many false

things," said Mbappe, who was appearing at an event of an insurance company he invested in in Paris on Monday.

'Not at my best'

Mbappe said there had never been a doubt about the injury preventing him from playing at what will be his third World Cup finals in June.

"No, that was never a topic of discussion," he said.



It is behind me. I put myself under a regime where I wanted to return gently but with a hunger to play. I hope I am going to be able to play during the international break and make a difference

KYLIAN MBAPPE

"At worst I could have had a partial rupture (of the ligament) which would have ruled me out till April.

"There was never a debate about the World Cup or the climax to the season with Real Madrid."

In spite of the sprain and the resulting pain the former PSG star played part of January and February, admitting he and Real "had tried to manage it as best as possible".

"One has to look at the positive, today, I have no pain and we are still in the hunt for trophies, that is what is most important," he said.

"We will have time afterwards to assess how it was handled.

"I am not going to go into the details, I will say I was not at my best in handling this period, I was not the happiest of players but I am delighted that is behind me now.



Mbappe battled through pain in January-February before scans confirmed no surgery needed, silencing rumours while maintaining Real Madrid's trophy hunt

"All (the pain) is gone."

Mbappe said he was looking forward to pitting his wits against the Brazilians, who are managed by Carlo Ancelotti, who coached the Frenchman in his first season at Real.

"It might be a friendly but when you play Brazil, the greatest footballing nation with five World Cup wins, it is unbelievable to play against them," he said.

"It is a team who could win the World Cup, it is good to compare how we are at the moment with them.

"Even if we cannot take a lot of learnings out of this get together, we can nevertheless take some.

"One thing is for sure we are not going there for a holiday, we are going there as a step in our preparations for the World Cup."