

England's test team in turmoil amid cricket's changing times

By STEVE DOUGLAS
AP Sports Writer

THE sell-out crowds that packed Lord's for the first three days of England vs. Pakistan offered no hint of the decline of test cricket in the sport's birthplace.

The team's performance in the middle provided plenty of evidence, however.

England's humiliating nine-wicket loss — wrapped up 90 minutes into Day 4 — to one of the most inexperienced Pakistan teams of recent times further exposed the frailties of a side that seems to have forgotten the basics of test cricket and how apply itself to the longer form of the game.

Yet is it any surprise?

When former test captain Andrew Strauss was appointed in 2015 as the chief overseer of English cricket, he made it clear “the area that most needs attention in English cricket right now is our white-ball cricket.”

Trevor Bayliss, a coach with a superb record in the limited-overs game, was hired to lead the national team.

Test cricket would not be ignored, Strauss was at pains to point out in an effort to appease the traditionalists, but it could not be seen “as being the only thing we're interested in.”

It was, though, a pointer to the thoughts of those leading English cricket.

Fast forward three years and to Colin Graves, chairman of the England and Wales Cricket Board, who this month gave his reasons why he was setting up a 100-ball competition — a version 20 balls shorter than the Twenty20 game that has



ENGLAND'S DON BESS, left, and England's Jos Butler walk from the pitch at the end of play on the third day of play of the first test cricket match between England and Pakistan at Lord's cricket ground in London on Saturday.
(AP Photo/Alastair Grant)

revolutionised cricket over the past decade.

“The younger generation, whether you like it or not, are just not attracted to cricket,” Graves told the BBC. “They want more excitement, they want it shorter and simpler to understand.”

Worrying words for supporters of test cricket in England.

These are worrying times, too.

England is without a win in its last eight test matches, losing the last six of them. A failure to beat Pakistan in

the second and final test at Leeds starting Friday would make it three straight series losses. It is 13 away tests without a win. And under Bayliss, England has lost 20 of its 41 tests, having started its era under the Australian with a home Ashes series win and a series win in South Africa.

And where are the English in the ICC's one-day rankings? No. 1.

Bayliss was a breath of fresh air when he came in, encouraging aggressive and attacking play from his test batsmen. It has meant the

art of patience, discipline and grinding out innings has gradually disappeared, only really practiced now by opener Alastair Cook.

In the domestic county season, white-ball competitions are given the bigger platform and PR, pushing the longer-form county championship to the margins. After the Pakistan loss, Bayliss even questioned whether the current framework of the county championship was helping.

“Is playing on wickets where you're not going to bat for too long, before you

get one that does a heap, is that necessarily good in the long term for learning how to concentrate for long periods?” Bayliss asked.

Bayliss said he was “at a loss” to explain England's current test problems, saying his recent advice to show care and patience — instead of aggression — if conditions dictated wasn't getting through.

“In a way, you almost throw your hands up sometimes,” he said.

The Australian has said he is stepping down as England coach after next year's

home Ashes series, though the Daily Mail is reporting he could lose his job if England is defeated in Leeds.

Bayliss is under pressure. New captain Joe Root has lost eight of 15 tests and his decision-making is being scrutinised.

There's a new selector in Ed Smith.

English test cricket is in flux at a time when the powers-at-be seem to be focusing on the shorter forms of the game.

The series is there for the taking for Pakistan at Headingley.

SMITH: NFL ANTHEM POLICY PAINTS KAEPERNICK AS 'VILLAIN'

By STEVE REED
AP Sports Writer

CHARLOTTE, N.C. (AP) — Panthers wide receiver Torrey Smith believes the NFL “dropped the ball” with its new policy that forbids players from sitting or taking a knee on the field during the national anthem.

Smith is upset because he feels like the ruling has created a “false narrative” surrounding the message former NFL teammate Colin Kaepernick was originally trying to convey while taking a knee prior to NFL games.

He said it also paints players as anti-American.

“Guys aren't against the military,” Smith said. “Kap originally started that against police brutality. It was never against the military, but that narrative changed.”

Smith, acquired in an offseason trade with the Eagles, denounced the league's ruling following Carolina's practice on Tuesday — its first since it was announced last week at the NFL owners meeting.

He said the restrictions imposed by the league on players go against the beliefs that protesters like Kaepernick have stood up for the past couple years.

“When you see reactive policy ... I always think that's a problem,” Smith said. “Especially when the message has been changed. ... It makes it seem like Kaepernick or Eric Reid and the guys who started it, what they did was in vain — like they were villains. And that is not the case.”

Smith reacted quickly to the league's change in policy on social media last week.

He tweeted: “Appropriate respect for flag and anthem” implies that guys were being disrespectful towards it. Which is an opinion. Most people who believe that ignore the responses from the players



CAROLINA Panthers' Torrey Smith (11) catches a pass during practice at the team's facility yesterday.
(AP Photo/Chuck Burton)

and more importantly why men chose to protest.”

Smith was teammates with Kaepernick in San Francisco in 2015 and 2016 and got to know him well.

The league made the decision to fine teams whose players don't stand during the national without consulting with the NFL Players Association. There have been protests in different cities since the ruling came down with claims the league is interfering with the right to free speech.

Smith believes the NFL made a mistake bringing the issue — one he felt like was dying off — back to the forefront.

He said the league's policy to fine teams for players protesting likely will only serve to “stir things up” between players and owners this coming season.

“You're being told to be quiet, when it could have been done together to

figure out what we can do to move forward and what would be best for the players,” Smith said.

Smith has long been outspoken on public matters because he feels the platform of being a professional athlete should be used for the betterment of society.

“It's going to be a long-term process, and we're just trying to do our part,” he said.

“That's essentially what the protests started with and we have to continue with. It's not so much about the protests but the work going forward.”

Smith said he was disappointed, but not surprised by the league ruling.

“At the end of the day, the league is about money, it's a business,” Smith said. “To try to silence those guys when they're trying to do the right thing for our country, I don't know what to say about it.”



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