

England ring changes for must-win Test as Australia hand Boland a debut

England's Chris Woakes has been dropped for the Boxing Day Test with Mark Wood recalled

● **Australia's Scott Boland will make his debut in Melbourne**

AFP | Melbourne

Embattled England made four changes yesterday for the crunch Boxing Day Test in a bid to keep the Ashes alive, while Australia handed experienced seamer Scott Boland a surprise debut.

Joe Root's team must win at the Melbourne Cricket Ground in front of an expected 70,000 fans to stay in the hunt after heavy defeats in the first two Tests at Brisbane and Adelaide and with three still to play.

Those losses were characterised by batting collapses compounded by poor bowling and fielding with the visitors looking to stop the rot by shaking up the team.

Zak Crawley was recalled for



England's Chris Woakes (L) and Mark Wood attend a trial match in Brisbane

the first time since March to replace struggling opener Rory Burns, despite averaging just 28.34 from his 15 Tests.

Veteran Jonny Bairstow, meanwhile, will add to his 78 Tests when he takes over at number six from youngster Ollie Pope, who has failed to adapt to the Australian conditions.

England also mixed up the

bowling unit again with speedster Mark Wood returning after being rested for their 275-run defeat in Adelaide, which followed a nine wicket thrashing in Brisbane.

Off-spinner Jack Leach also gets another chance after being axed for the second Test despite the Adelaide pitch having plenty in it for the slow bowlers.

“It’s a massive game for us, but it’s a brilliant venue to play cricket at. Everyone is very excited to be here in what I’m sure will be a hostile environment. We know we need to bring our best cricket, we haven’t brought that so far and that’s disappointing”

ENGLAND'S JOS BUTTLER

Chris Woakes and Stuart Broad were overlooked in an attack that will be led by veteran quick Jimmy Anderson and Ollie Robinson.

“It’s a massive game for us, but it’s a brilliant venue to play cricket at. Everyone is very excited to be here in what I’m sure will be a hostile environment,” said wicketkeeper Jos Buttler,

who keeps the gloves despite Bairstow's return.

“We know we need to bring our best cricket, we haven’t brought that so far and that’s disappointing.”

“The reaction (after Adelaide) has been an honest one,” he added. “We have a really tight-knit group, some great mates in there, but we had some honest conversations as well.”

‘Someone fresh’

Australia are bolstered by the return of captain Pat Cummins, who missed the second Test after being a close contact of a Covid-19 case. He replaces Michael Neser.

But, as expected, fellow pace spearhead Josh Hazlewood will again miss out as he continues to recover from a side strain.

Jhye Richardson, who took five wickets in England's second innings at Adelaide, is still sore from his efforts with Boland replacing him to become the third Australian debutant this series

after Neser and Alex Carey.

In doing so, he also becomes the first Indigenous man to play Test cricket for Australia since Jason Gillespie.

“He was pretty sore,” Cummins told reporters of Richardson, adding that he also had a minor leg injury.

“We were umming and ahing -- he had a bowl yesterday but we thought seven days off (before the fourth Test in Sydney) will kind of give him enough rest.”

Boland will play on his home ground, where he has taken 91 wickets at 25.71 in 26 first-class games, often on unresponsive pitches.

Cummins said his record at the Melbourne Cricket Ground factored into their thinking.

“It was a huge part of it. His record speaks for itself here in domestic cricket,” he said.

“Home ground, having someone fresh like him who can perform straightaway were the big factors.”

Djokovic ‘won’t go’ to pre-Australian Open ATP Cup



Serbia's Novak Djokovic in action during a match (file photo)
Reuters | Sydney

World number one Novak Djokovic will not travel to Sydney for the men's season-opening ATP Cup next week, Serbian daily Blic reported yesterday.

Djokovic was named in Serbia's team for the ATP Cup, although the 34-year-old has yet to commit to the Australian Open following the organisers' mandate for COVID-19 vaccinations.

Djokovic has declined to disclose whether he is vaccinated, citing privacy.

Serbia are in Group A along with Norway, Chile and Spain at the ATP Cup, which is scheduled for Jan. 1-9 before the Australian Open begins on Jan. 17.

Australian Open chief Craig Tiley said on Wednesday that he is still uncertain whether Djokovic will be playing at the Melbourne Park major.

Tiley has said that all players and staff at the Australian Open would be vaccinated or have a medical exemption granted by an independent



World number one Djokovic could win a record 21st Grand Slam title at the Australian Open, which starts on January 17, but to enter Australia he and members of his entourage will have to be vaccinated and the 34-year-old has previously expressed his opposition to the vaccine

panel of experts.

Those requirements have prevented Djokovic from confirming whether he will bid for a men's record 21st Grand Slam title and a 10th Australian Open crown.

BRAVE CF congratulates IMMAF on achieving WADA signatory status

TDI | Manama

Brave Combat Federation, the premier Mixed Martial Arts promotion founded by His Highness Shaikh Khalid bin Hamad Al Khalifa in the Kingdom of Bahrain, congratulates the International Mixed Martial Arts Federation (IMMAF) for achieving the groundbreaking signatory status with the World Antidoping Agency (WADA).

BRAVE CF and the IMMAF have been working together fostering the development of the sport since day one, in a partnership that has included the biggest world championships in the history of amateur MMA and three consecutive BRAVE International Combat Weeks in the Kingdom of Bahrain.

“On behalf of BRAVE Combat Federation, the BRAVE Nation, and the entire Mixed Martial Arts community, I’d like to congratulate the IMMAF for this huge step for MMA as a sport. The future is bright for our sport and we’re excited to be part of this legacy”, said BRAVE



Mohammed Shahid with Shaikh Salman bin Mohammed Al Khalifa

CF President Mohammed Shahid.

“I’d like to congratulate and extend my greetings to Mr. Kerith Brown and Densign White, President and CEO of the IMMAF,” Mr. Shahid continued. “I would also like to congratulate His Highness Shaikh Khaled bin Hamad Al Khalifa, His Highness Shaikh Salman bin Mohammed Al Khalifa [Chairman of the

Bahrain Combat Sports Council], and Mohammed Ali Qambar [President of the Bahrain Mixed Martial Arts Federation] for their vision, support, and efforts which were fundamental for the development of this new era of the sport.”

The adherence of IMMAF and the signature of the WADA Code included an assessment by independent experts of

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BRAVE CF PRESIDENT MOHAMMED SHAHID

its level of good governance, a review of WADA's application, and the completion of an extensive Code Compliance Questionnaire to demonstrate the quality of the anti-doping program.

By doing so, the IMMAF, and the grassroots level of the sport of Mixed Martial Arts, are now joined by 600 other sports organizations in the “Clean Sport Community”, as it's known.

Canadian Raonic withdraws from Australian Open with heel injury

Reuters | Melbourne

Canadian Milos Raonic has pulled out of next month's Australian Open as the former world number three continues his recovery from a heel injury, the organisers said yesterday.

Raonic suffered a thigh injury in March and returned to the tour after a three-month gap. But his 2021 season was cut short due to another heel issue following his first-round loss at the Atlanta Open in July.

“Milos Raonic has withdrawn from the #AusOpen as he continues his recovery from an



Milos Raonic of Canada serves during a match (file photo)

Achilles injury,” the organisers of the Grand Slam said on Twitter.

Raonic, who turns 31 on Monday, reached a career-high world ranking of third in 2016 - the year he reached the finals at Wimbledon and made a run to the semi-finals at Melbourne Park.

The Canadian, who has currently slipped to 70th, is the latest to be ruled out of the Australian Open, with Roger Federer, Stan Wawrinka, Jennifer Brady, Karolina Pliskova, Karolina Muchova, Serena Williams and Bianca Andreescu also ruled out with injuries.