

Hapless England's Ashes dreams in tatters as Australia pounce



Australia's Pat Cummins celebrates taking the wicket of England's Haseeb Hameed

AFP | Melbourne

England crashed to 185 all out on day one of the third Test yesterday, leaving their Ashes dreams on the brink of ruin in the face of a relentless Australian attack.

After heavy defeats in Brisbane and Adelaide, the visitors must win in Melbourne to keep the five-Test series alive, with Australia only needing a draw to retain the urn as holders.

But those hopes took a near-fatal blow as Australia ripped through England's flimsy batting, with only captain Joe Root (50) and Jonny Bairstow (35) showing resistance.

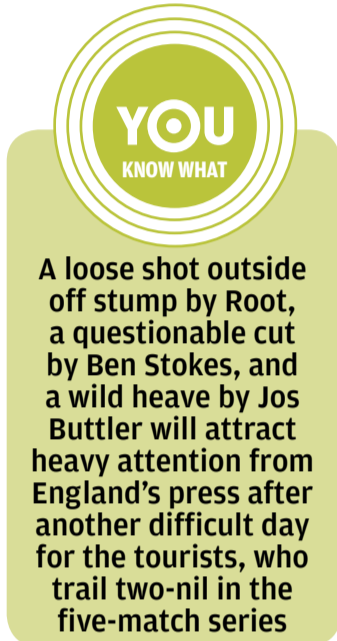
Australian skipper Pat Cummins, back after missing the second Adelaide Test because he was in Covid isolation, and spin king Nathan Lyon both took 3-36.

Australia then added to England's pain by negotiating 16 overs to be 61 for one at stumps, trailing by only 124 with Marcus Harris not-out 20 despite taking a nasty blow to the finger, and nightwatchman Lyon yet to score.

But on another bad day for England they did bag the big wicket of David Warner, who raced to 38 off 42 balls before sending a thick edge off Jimmy Anderson to Zak Crawley at gully.

"As a bowling group we know we are not going to give up any soft overs. You need to take 20 wickets to win the game and that's our motive," said Australia's Scott Boland, who made his debut and took the wicket of Mark Wood. "It's a great attack to be a part of."

After batting collapses and poor bowling in the first two Tests, Root read his players the riot act -- seemingly to lit-



tle effect. They have failed to score more than 297 in five innings so far.

"Obviously the toss didn't go our way, we'd also have loved to bowl in that first session," said Bairstow.

"Yes, we're still looking for that big score. We've got to get stronger and tougher with our dismissals, we know that."

"But we've seen that the pitch offered plenty (for the bowlers) today and hopefully we turn up in the morning and put pressure on to get some early inroads."

Openers Haseeb Hameed (0) and Crawley (12) fell cheaply to Cummins after he won the toss and put England in to bat, with their hopes resting once more on Root in front of 57,100 fans at the MCG -- less than expected due to Covid concerns.

He brought up his 53rd Test half-century in his 112th match, but once more failed to convert it into a maiden ton in Australia after a poor shot on 50 to Mitchell Starc.

Six of the best for Man City as Arsenal, Spurs cruise

Manchester City's Laporte and Sterling end Leicester comeback in 6-3 thriller



Manchester City's Raheem Sterling scores his side's fourth goal

● Bukayo Saka's double leads Arsenal's 5-0 Boxing Day breeze past Norwich

● Lucas Moura carves apart Crystal Palace as Tottenham toast a festive triumph

AFP | London

Manchester City opened up a six-point lead at the top of the Premier League with a first half demolition of Leicester in a thrilling 6-3 win as Arsenal and Tottenham were also comfortable winners yesterday.

Three of the scheduled nine Boxing Day matches were postponed due to coronavirus outbreaks as Britain battles record numbers of cases caused by the Omicron strain of the virus.

Earlier this week, Premier League clubs rejected the option of temporarily halting the season to allow a circuit breaker for infections.

And a stop to the season may be the only way to slow City's charge towards a fourth title in five seasons as Pep Guardiola's men have now won nine league games in a row.

Leicester were blown away by four goals inside 25 minutes.

Kevin De Bruyne blasted home to open the floodgates before Riyad Mahrez netted against his former club from the penalty spot.

Ilkay Gundogan rounded off a brilliant City team move to make it 3-0 before Raheem Sterling won and converted the champions' second penalty.

Leicester are one of the sides to have been decimated by Covid infections and injuries in recent weeks, but they produced a stirring second half fightback thanks to James Maddison.

The midfielder pulled a goal back before leading a break finished off by Ademola Lookman. Kelechi Iheanacho made it 4-3 when he bundled home from close range after Ederson could only turn Maddison's shot onto the bar.

But City quickly restored some order as Aymeric Laporte powered home from a corner and Sterling rounded off the scoring from close range.

Five-star Arsenal

Arsenal consolidated their position in fourth with a routine 5-0 win at rock bottom Norwich.

Goals from Bukayo Saka and Kieran Tierney put the result beyond much doubt before half-time.

Saka added a second before Alexandre Lacazette's penalty and substitute Emile Smith Rowe rounded off a fifth con-



Tottenham's Lucas Moura scores his side's second goal against Crystal Palace



secutive win for Mikel Arteta's men.

Spurs moved up to fifth, six points behind their north London rivals but with three games in hand, after easing past a depleted Crystal Palace.

Palace's request for the game to be postponed was dismissed by the Premier League despite a coronavirus outbreak that left them without manager Patrick Vieira.

The Eagles were still able to field a strong side that featured just one change from their previous outing.

However, a rejuvenated Spurs under Antonio Conte never looked back after scoring twice in two minutes just after the half hour.

Harry Kane swept home just his third Premier League goal of the season before Lucas Moura powered in a header.

Palace's task was made even tougher when Wilfried Zaha was stupidly sent-off for two bookable offences before half-

time. Son Heung-min added a third 16 minutes from time.

West Ham's bid for the top four is falling apart fast as they were beaten 3-2 at home by Southampton.

The Saints led three times through Mohamed Elyounoussi, James Ward-Prowse and Jan Bednarek and held out to move nine points clear of the bottom three.

Chelsea badly need to end a poor run of one win in four league games when they visit Aston Villa, who will be without manager Steven Gerrard due to a positive Covid test.

The Blues are now nine points off City and just three clear of Arsenal.

Villa's next match against Leeds, scheduled for December 28, was also called off yesterday taking the total number of Premier League games postponed over the past two weeks to 14.

No restrictions have yet been put in place for the size of crowds at matches in England, although supporters do have to provide proof of vaccination or a negative test taken in the previous 48 hours.

Sport in Wales will be forced back behind closed doors from, while in Scotland a restriction of 500 outdoor public events has seen Scottish Premiership clubs bring forward their winter break by a week after yesterday's fixtures.

'Discipline' the key as Rahul gives India ideal start against South Africa

AFP | Centurion

Discipline was the key as opening batsman KL Rahul led a strong Indian batting performance on the first day of the first Test against South Africa at SuperSport Park in Centurion yesterday.

Rahul made 122 not out as India reached 272 for three at the close after Indian captain Virat Kohli won the toss and decided to bat on a green-tinged pitch.

"When you come abroad to a place like South Africa it's very important to be very disciplined with your game plans," said Mayank Agarwal, who made 60 in an opening partnership of 117 with Rahul.

"KL played very well today and he was part of some important partnerships," said Agarwal. "He understands where his off stump

is and he is very disciplined."

Agarwal's words were echoed by South African fast bowler Lungi Ngidi, who took all three wickets for the hosts to finish the day with three for 45.

"They showed good discipline," said Ngidi. "They batted well. Rahul left the ball well up front and put away the bad balls."

Agarwal said India had benefited from what he described as "great preparation" in middle practice at Centurion on pitches near the match strip.

"South Africa have a good bowling attack and they bowled good areas but credit to us," said Agarwal. "We're very well placed."

Ngidi said the pitch had not offered much help to the fast bowlers despite a good covering of grass on the surface. "The



India's KL Rahul, left, plays a side shot as teammate Mayank Agarwal watches

wicket did less than we thought it would," he said. Ngidi ended the opening stand when South Africa successfully sought a review after an appeal for leg before wicket against Agarwal was turned down by

umpire Marais Erasmus.

The consensus of commentators was that the ball was probably going to miss down the leg side or go over the stumps but the ball tracking software showed it was hitting near the

top of leg stump. "I thought it was a good shout," said Ngidi. "That ball kept a bit low compared to other deliveries."

He said wicketkeeper Quinton de Kock had persuaded captain Dean Elgar to call for the review. Agarwal said he could not comment on the decision. Ngidi followed up by dismissing Cheteshwar Pujara first ball, caught at short leg.

It was only a temporary setback for the tourists, however

as Rahul shared a third wicket partnership of 82 with Kohli (35) before he and Ajinkya Rahane added an unbeaten 73 for the fourth wicket.

Rahul provided a masterpiece of concentration and shot selection, marred only by a difficult chance to long leg off Wiaan Mulder when he was on 60. He faced 248 balls and hit 17 fours and a six in making his seventh Test century.

Rahane, whose place in the team had been questioned after a run of poor form, struck the ball crisply in making an unbeaten 40 off 81 balls with eight fours.

Kohli said at the toss that India's win against South Africa in the third Test in Johannesburg on their previous tour in 2017/18 had given them the confidence of knowing they could win away from home.