

SPORTS

Bird confirmed to play for Australia as Starc replacement

Curran to debut for England in Melbourne Ashes Test

MELBOURNE, Dec 25, (AFP): Young paceman Tom Curran will make his Test debut in England's only change for the fourth Ashes Test against Australia starting in Melbourne on Tuesday.



Curran

The Surrey 22-year-old fast bowler replaces injured Craig Overton, who succumbed to a rib injury when the tourists relinquished the Ashes to the Australians in last week's third Perth Test.

Curran has played three Twenty20s and a one-day international and was not originally chosen in England's Ashes touring squad.

But he got his chance when Steve Finn left the tour early with knee cartilage problems and now has a Test opportunity following Overton's injury setback.

Captain Joe Root said he was backing Curran to make the most of his opportunity in the showpiece Boxing Day Test before huge crowds.

"Tom offers a lot and is a real competitor," Root told reporters when announcing the team on Monday.

"He has that real sort of work ethic and the way he goes about things is very similar to Craig (Overton) actually."

"The way he gets involved in the contest and you know he is going to get involved in absolutely everything. He's also very skilful and hopefully he can have a really good week here."

Curran won the Test nod ahead of Mark Wood and Jake Ball.

Wood is nearing full fitness after touring with the England Lions, while Ball struggled in his only Test appearance on tour in Brisbane.

"It wasn't an easy decision," Root said.

"We certainly had a little while think-

Coach Lehmann to step down in 2019

MELBOURNE, Dec 25, (AFP): Australia cricket coach Darren Lehmann will not seek to renew his contract when his current deal expires at the end of 2019, he said in an interview aired Monday.

Lehmann outlined his plans to Fox Sports, declaring the English summer season in 18 months will be his last hurrah.

Australia will seek to defend their World Cup title in the first half of the 2019 English season before playing an Ashes Test series.

"That will be it," Lehmann said when asked whether he will seek a new contract beyond 2019.

"It will be a case of too much time, too much travel."

Lehmann has been at the helm since the 2013 Ashes when he replaced sacked coach Mickey Arthur following a disastrous tour of India.

In Lehmann's time as coach, Australia have won two Ashes series at home and lost two in England, while also winning the 2015 World Cup.

"For me, I've really enjoyed the role and loving it," he said. "We'll just get to that point and work out what we do from there." Former Test opener Justin Langer, who has an outstanding record at Western Australia and the Perth Scorchers, will be among the favourites to succeed Lehmann as national coach.

ing about it on this surface and these conditions. For the balance of this team I think Tom is the best option."

Meanwhile, skipper Steve Smith has confirmed paceman Jackson Bird will replace Mitchell Starc in Australia's team for the fourth Ashes Test against England starting in Melbourne on Tuesday.

Smith also admitted he still had pain in his right hand after being struck in the



Australia's batsman David Warner bats in the nets at the MCG in Melbourne on Dec 25. (AFP)

nets on Sunday but would play in the Melbourne Cricket Ground showpiece.

Australia have already reclaimed the Ashes after taking an unassailable three-nil lead in the five-Test series and are chasing a 5-0 whitewash over the beleaguered tourists.

Starc, Australia's leading wicket-taker in the series with 19, withdrew from

the team on Sunday with a bruised heel and will be replaced by Bird.

Smith said Bird, the leading Sheffield Shield wicket-taker with 25 at 16.56 in four games for Tasmania this season, deserves his chance.

"He's worked very hard. He hasn't played since this game last year and he's been on a few tours," Smith told report-

ers on Monday.

"He's bowled exceptionally well in the first couple of Shield games that he played (this season)."

"He bowls well out here (at the MCG). He deserves a crack and hopefully he goes really well."

Bird has been on seven overseas Test tours and has played in only two of them,

most recently being overlooked during series in India and Bangladesh.

"It's tough at the time but he's taken every bit of advice and every bit of criticism," Smith said of Bird.

"He's been fantastic around the group the whole time. Never complained, never whinged, just got on with the job and that shows great character."

Saracens down Leicester to end miserable losing streak

European champions climb to second behind Exeter

LONDON, Dec 25, (AFP): Saracens finally ended their miserable losing streak as the European champions got back on track with a 29-17 win against Leicester in the English Premiership on Sunday.

After suffering seven consecutive defeats, Saracens produced a commanding display at Welford Road to climb to second in the table behind leaders Exeter.

"It was a confident display from us as we were good with or without the ball and our penalty count was very low," said Saracens director of rugby Mark McCall.

"We did leave a couple of tries out there but we were in control and I didn't think the red card affected the

RUGBY

result in any way."

Jamie George crossed over for Saracens and England fly-half Owen Farrell kicked five penalties and a conversion.

Jonny May's red card for two deliberate knock-ons was instrumental in Leicester's fifth consecutive defeat.

Saracens also finished the game with 14 men after Mako Vunipola was sin-binned following a series of scrum penalties.

But they held on for their first win since beating London Irish in late October.

Mathew Tait crossed over for Leicester, with George Ford converting and also kicking a penalty.

Lakers 'rookie' Ball sprains left shoulder

LOS ANGELES, Dec 25, (AFP): Los Angeles Lakers rookie Lonzo Ball is out of the lineup after suffering a sprained left shoulder in Saturday's NBA game against the Portland Trail Blazers.

Ball will not play in the Lakers' Christmas Day matchup against Minnesota and is expected to be re-evaluated by team doctors in one week, the club announced on Sunday.

Ball returned to the court on Saturday after initially suffering the injury when he collided with Portland's Jusuf Nurkic near the end of the first half, and played a total of 28 minutes.

Ball, the second pick overall in the 2017 NBA draft, is averaging 10 points and 6.9 assists through the first 31 games of his NBA career.



A file photo taken on Dec 9, 2014 shows Australian supermaxi yacht Wild Oats leading during the Big Boat Challenge on Sydney Harbour. (AFP)

Wild Oats XI skipper likes Sydney to Hobart forecast

SYDNEY, Dec 25, (AP): Wild Oats XI skipper Mark Richards was extremely pleased after the weather briefing for the Sydney to Hobart race that he's won eight times.

"You couldn't ask for a nicer, more comfortable forecast, really," Richards said.

The 630-nautical mile race begins from Sydney Harbor on Tuesday, when 102 yachts, including 27 international entries, will make their way down the New South Wales state south coast and across often treacherous Bass Strait on their way to the island state of Tasmania.

"We're not looking at gale force winds on this race at all," Jane Golding of the New South Wales Bureau of Meteorology said. "But the warning to be looking out for most of this race is a strong wind warning, 25 knots to 33 knots; that's the range." The fleet in the 73rd edition of the race will be pushed along by 15 to 25 knot north-to-north easterlies for most of Wednesday.

The four super maxis entered — LDV Comanche, Wild Oats XI, Black Jack and InfoTrack — have all won line honors in the past.

Wild Oats XI achieved the treble (line honors, overall and race record) in 2012, in addition to its other seven line honors wins. Black Jack, formerly named Alfa Romeo, took 2009 line honors; LDV Comanche won in 2015 and InfoTrack (racing as Perpetual Loyal) won it last year, setting the race record of 1 day, 13 hours, 31 minutes and 20 seconds.

New LDV Comanche owner and skipper Jim Cooney was also pleased with the forecast.

"As (my navigator) Stan Honey says, if we had this forecast every year there would be a thousand boats on the line," Cooney said.

That's not always been the case: Of-

SAILING

ten rough seas and ferocious winds hit the fleet.

Six sailors died in 1998 when fierce storms and winds sank five boats, and 55 sailors were taken off their yachts, most of them in daring winch rescues by helicopter. Only 44 of the 115 starting yachts completed the race that year.

Richards said his boat was ready to race after some electronic instruments were destroyed last week when the yacht was struck by lightning.

"The boat is 100 percent," said Richards, who thanked the Black Jack camp for letting them borrow some of their spare instruments.

Sapporo Dome crowd erupted

Ohtani bids 'farewell' to Japan fans ahead of Angels adventure

SAPPORO, Japan, Dec 25, (AP): Los Angeles Angels-bound Shohei Ohtani bid farewell to fans of his former Japanese club on Monday as he sets off to join his new team.

The star pitcher and hitter wore an Angels jersey to his public news conference. He opened with an introduction in English, saying: "Long time, no see. I'm Shohei Ohtani. Welcome to my press conference. Please enjoy." The Sapporo Dome crowd erupted in laughter and applause.

For five seasons, Ohtani called Sapporo home, playing for the

BASEBALL

Nippon Ham Fighters. He intends to be a starting pitcher and everyday hitter with the Angels.

Ohtani, the reigning Pacific League MVP, threw one final ceremonial pitch from the Sapporo Dome mound.

He spurned other major league offers to join two-time MVP Mike Trout and slugger Albert Pujols. The Angels are coming off their second consecutive losing season and haven't won a playoff game since 2009.

Ohtani was 3-2 with a 3.20 ERA while slowed by thigh and ankle injuries. But those numbers don't indicate the potential for a pitcher whose fastball has topped 100 mph.

Scouts are more divided on Ohtani's ability to consistently hit big-league pitching. He hit .332 in 65 games with eight homers and 31 RBIs last season, occasionally

unleashing the tape-measure blasts that captivated prospective teams.

In 2016, Ohtani hit .322 with 22 home runs and 67 RBIs in 104 games. He also was 10-4 with a 1.86 ERA.

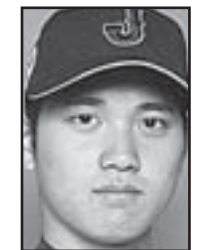
Ohtani will attempt to chart a rare career path, the majors' first regular two-way player in decades. He has drawn numerous, if unfair, comparisons to Babe Ruth, who excelled as a hitter and a pitcher early in his Hall of Fame career.

The Angels plan to use Ohtani as a hitter and a pitcher, and the 23-year-old player said Monday he is confident he can succeed in both in a more challenging environment.

Since joining the Angels this month, it was revealed that Ohtani injured the elbow of his pitching arm at the end of his past season. A leaked medical report sent to all MLB clubs showed a Grade 1 sprain of the ulnar collateral ligament and he received a platelet-rich-plasma injection in October.

But the injury is not considered serious and Japanese media reports last week showed Ohtani taking batting practice and throwing long toss.

The Angels have said they are not concerned and they expect Ohtani to be ready for spring training.



Ohtani

'Still feeling some discomfort'

Du Plessis doubtful for Zimbabwe Test

PORT ELIZABETH, South Africa, Dec 25, (AFP): Captain Faf du Plessis is a doubt to start South Africa's one-off day-night Test against Zimbabwe, starting at St George's Park on Tuesday.

Du Plessis has not played since suffering a back injury during a One-Day International against Bangladesh in October.

He said he was still feeling some discomfort and would only play if he felt he was fully fit and that his progress had been slowed by a virus he picked up a week ago.

"The professionals say that if there is still pain in the disc it's a little bit dangerous so that's why we're seeing how it works today," the 33-year-old said.

"Last week I would have said my chances were 80-20, right now it is about 60-40."

Du Plessis acknowledged that the match against Zimbabwe was a stepping stone towards a "big summer" which includes three Tests against India and four against Australia.

He hinted strongly that he was setting his sights on being fully fit for the first Test against India, starting in Cape Town on Jan 5. "I'd rather feel good and play no cricket rather than play and not feel good," he said.

Du Plessis admitted that a selection dilemma would be eased if he didn't play. "It gives someone else an opportunity to play, which was quite a headache

in the first place."

Fast bowler Dale Steyn, who is making a comeback after more than a year out of action with a broken shoulder, is another doubt, with Du Plessis saying he would not be rushed back into action.

"With Dale, in terms of the amount of overs he's bowled leading up to the first Test I think it's important to assess how ready he is to bowl at full intensity," said Du Plessis.

"We want him to be 100 percent. If he



A file photo of South Africa's cricketer Faf du Plessis. (AFP)

we feel he isn't quite there, there's still time to get him ready between now and the first Test against India."

Du Plessis said that a stand-in captain would have to be chosen if he didn't play.

He didn't offer an opinion but the choice probably rests between AB de Villiers, who captained the side when he last played Test cricket in January 2016, and opening batsman Dean Elgar, who was captain in the first Test in England earlier this year when Du Plessis had returned home for the birth of his first child.

Du Plessis said South Africa's first home day-night Test, and the first in the modern era to be played over four days, put a premium on tactics.

"There's more room for thinking out of the box and seeing if you can out-smart the opposition."

He added the use of a pink ball under lights would give heavy underdogs Zimbabwe reason for hope.

"The great thing for Zimbabwe is that they have some senior players back. With the pink ball they will probably see themselves offering more of a challenge because the pink ball does a little bit more. "The game is still played 70 percent in the day. The ball does something when it's new but then it goes a bit softer, then at night it does a bit more. But there will still be good batting conditions for a lot of the time."