

Injury worries hurt England's preparations

Pietersen and Prior are doubtful starters for first Test

By Stephen Brenkley

England's quest to retain the Ashes was severely disrupted yesterday by injuries to Kevin Pietersen and Matt Prior. The extent of the damage in both cases is yet to be determined but the tourists will be concerned that one or both will miss the opening Test in Brisbane which is 11 days away.

Pietersen is again suffering pain in his right knee which forced him to miss three Test matches earlier this year. Although Andy Flower, the England coach, is confident he will recover, Pietersen was due to fly to Melbourne today for a scan and cortisone injection instead of travelling to Sydney with the rest of the team after their week in Hobart.

Also worrying for the England camp is the tight calf which kept Prior out of the field in the final day of the tour match against Australia A yesterday. He felt discomfort while batting and although he played on, Joe Root assumed the wicketkeeping duties for the 31 overs that the home side batted in the rain ruined game.

Both players would be considerable losses for England at any time

171
Tests is the collective experience of Pietersen (99) and Prior (72)

11
days remain for the first Ashes Test

but they would be more keenly felt at the start at the Gabba where Australia have not lost for 24 years. England's batting has not been so assured lately that they can easily replace Pietersen.

Prior has played 57 successive Tests since 2009 and is part of the England furniture. While he had a lean summer with the bat by his standards he is integral to every-

thing the team do in the field and is vice-captain.

It is less than a year since Pietersen first complained of severe soreness in his knee in New Zealand. It was not thought to be serious then but eventually he flew home from that tour and was absent at the start of the English season. That experience at least heralds the possibility that the present optimism may be misplaced.

Flower said: "I don't think it's going to be a huge issue. He's had a couple of these injections before and they have been very successful and quietened the problem down. It's obviously an ongoing issue for him but we anticipate this one being successful and him playing a full part in the Ashes tour."

He must feel at present that everything that can go wrong is doing so. Alastair Cook, the team's captain, missed the first tour match because of a stiff back and the second match was wrecked by rain with two full days being lost.

The weather relented sufficiently for 66 overs to be possible on the final day of the match yesterday, which at least allowed Pietersen, Stuart Broad and Graeme Swann to have their first cricket of the winter. But Prior's absence immediately brought forth dark clouds of a different kind.

"His experience is very valuable to us," said Flower. "However if he is injured and unavailable Jonny Bairstow will step up."

"If that happens, he could be man of the match in Brisbane. None of us know exactly what is going to happen."

England batted on briefly yesterday, taking their score to 430 for seven with Root hitting an assured unbeaten fifty against some improved bowling. Jimmy Anderson took two wickets as Australia A finished on 118 for 3.

© The Independent



Trouble: Matt Prior hurt is calf during the game against Australia A yesterday.



Future tense: Kevin Pietersen's troubled knee has returned to haunt him.

Pictures: Getty Images

Roger Taverner

A Brit behind Aussie lines



That louché larrikin is on the loose again

Who's the most important Australian cricketer right now? The game-changer; the one with potentially the most influence over the destination of the upcoming Ashes.

Captain Michael Clarke, Shane Watson, or David Warner perhaps?

Nope, not them or any of the other lacklustre Aussies going into battle on November 21 in the first test in Brisbane.

The most important player for the Aussies right now is a former bald, fat, text maniac, who, at 44, is already playing a blinder with his own spin on verbal warfare.

Shane Warne, his hair transplant, makeover (looks a bit weird if you ask me) and his Tweetheart, the clingy former 'actress' Liz (call me Elizabeth, but nobody, apart from Shane, does) Hurley, may have retired from playing but he is still very much on the front-line of the pre-Ashes war of words.

Warne, one of the greatest bowlers ever, doesn't even have to leave the bar these days to get the English twitching in the crease. He delivers his home-spun theories on how bad the chinless Poms are via Twitter, while bigging up his 'under-rated' Aussie mates.

Well, he would do, wouldn't he. Especially after the first broadside was fired by the Poms' very own megamouth, Sir Ian Botham, who has predicted a five nil drubbing and four Ashes series wins in a row.

The first target of Warne's verbal spin was England's skipper Alastair Cook who is now squirming uncomfortably after the Aussie legend called him boring, negative, uninspired and a major weakness in the England team. Warne reckons that despite leading England to victory in the last Ashes and an impressive tour win in India, the Three Lions need someone with a bit more aggression, someone like Kevin Pietersen. Yeah, right!

Incredibly, Cook put himself at the mercy of Oz TV admitting Warne had a point. He said he was actually not the greatest tactician on the planet and wouldn't be human if he hadn't taken the criticism to heart. What?

For W G Grace's sake, Warne had got the talismanic English opener for a duck...



Spin doctor: Shane Warne.

After all these years the class of 2013 hasn't learned a thing about Warne. That is, like the old native Americans in the frontier wars, the whole aim is to take out the enemy's leader.

If you know Warne – and England should by now – this louché larrikin is 90% psychologist and 10% cricketer. He admits he talked out most of his 708 test victims, convincing them he was unplayable.

Well, so far, he's already out-playing the Poms with one hand on his smart phone and the other around the one-time English rose who appears to have gone over to the other side. It is fair to point out that Warne has also had a little pop at Aussie skipper Michael Clarke saying he needs to be less selfish. Seems nobody is safe as Warne keeps himself in the headlines. It's all warming up nicely.

All that twitters

If the cricket gets a bit dull we can always scroll through the latest Twitterings from Shane Warne and Liz Hurley. The re-united couple and their cheery public love affair continues to titillate an open-mouthed Australia which barely recognises the Warne of old. He looks different, behaves different and describes himself as 'Soppy Shane'. It's done wonders for their personal profiles though. As 1.7m followers testify.

Lehmann: Watson should be fit for Gabba

By Staff Reporter

Australian coach Darren Lehmann said yesterday he is confident Shane Watson will be fit to play in the Ashes series opener against England later this month.

The experienced all-rounder was cleared this week of a serious left hamstring injury he picked up during Australia's recent tour of India, raising concerns that he could miss the Test opener at Brisbane starting on November 21.

But Lehmann said Watson was

making good progress and was in line to play at the Gabba. "The reports from our medical team on Shane's recovery from injury are pleasing," Lehmann said in a Cricket Australia statement.

"He is making good progress and responding well to treatment. If that continues, we have confidence that he will be fit for the first Test."

Lehmann said Watson would miss New South Wales' Sheffield Shield game with Queensland this week. "We won't be taking any chances with his preparation. We

want him to continue his treatment, and if all goes to plan, join the Australian team in camp ahead of the first Test in Brisbane," he said.

Team physiotherapist Alex Kountouris said this week he was quietly confident Watson would be ready, describing the injury as "a low-grade muscle strain". "He will have intense treatment and rehabilitation and just how well he responds to this will determine how quickly he can resume full training and match preparation," he said.

Hamstring injuries have been

common for the former vice-captain – he missed the 2006-07 Ashes campaign with one – and there has always been a question over how to balance his workload as an all-rounder.

Watson has been on the road almost continuously since the birth of his son, Will, who is nearly eight months old.

He has played 72 days of competitive cricket since the India tour, batting and bowling in three formats for Australia and two tournaments for Rajasthan, his IPL team.



Recovering: Shane Watson.

Experienced Bowden returns as on-field umpire for Ashes

By Matt Somerford

Billy Bowden has been included in an expanded list of five umpires to officiate during this winter's Ashes series.

Following the controversy that surrounded the officiating during the last summer's Ashes, the International Cricket Council has named Bowden to stand in a Test for the first time since he was dropped from the Elite Panel in June.

Bowden will join the four umpires that officiated this sum-

mer – Kumar Dharmasena, Aleem Dar, Marais Erasmus and Tony Hill – after the list of appointments was revealed yesterday.

Hill will, however, be used solely as a television official.

Bowden, who has stood in 75 Tests, will make his return in the third match in Perth, before moving into the TV box in Melbourne.

"We felt that we needed to spread the appointments across five umpires for the five Test series, rather than just the four that were used in the UK," the ICC's general



Seasoned: Billy Bowden.

manager of cricket Geoff Allardice said in a statement. "Billy Bowden is the most experienced umpire on the international panel, and understands what is needed for the umpiring team to perform well in high-profile Test matches."

Allardice said that Hill's sole employment as a TV official – he will be used in three of the five Tests – was to help provide consistency in decision-making.

"Appointing Tony Hill as TV umpire in three of the five matches is recognition that the role is be-

coming increasingly important in a DRS series," Allardice said.

There is still doubt about what technology will be available for use in the DRS this winter.

It was initially announced that Hot Spot would be left off the DRS list after host broadcaster Channel Nine and Cricket Australia were unable to fund the technology.

There are reports that may yet change, ahead of the first Test in Brisbane on November 21, with the possibility of Real-Time Snickometer also being installed.