

Players' mental health becoming major issue in cricket

November 14 2019, by John Pye



In this July 11, 2019, file photo, Australia's Glenn Maxwell reacts as he leaves the field after being dismissed by England's Jofra Archer during the Cricket World Cup semi-final match between England and Australia at Edgbaston in Birmingham, England. A serious health concern is emerging in Australian cricket. The first test of the home summer starts in Brisbane next week and Australia has three players out of the selection frame because of mental health reasons. (AP Photo/Aijaz Rahi, IFle)

A serious health concern is emerging in Australian cricket. The first test of the home summer starts in Brisbane next week and Australia has three players out of the selection frame because of mental health reasons.

Veteran allrounder Glenn Maxwell and ex-test batsman Nic Maddinson made themselves unavailable for the series against Pakistan before 21-year-old Will Pucovski informed selectors that he didn't want to be considered for national duties.

Pucovski was playing in an Australia A tour game against Pakistan in Perth when he made the call, and the decision was announced Thursday, hours before Australia's chairman of selectors, Trevor Hohns, was due to announce the test squad.

The mental health issue isn't isolated or, seemingly, new in [cricket](#). Senior England batsmen have left tours going back more than a decade because of [mental health issues](#).

And India captain Virat Kohli spoke openly this week about his own struggles. Kohli is one of the world's premier batsmen and respected leaders, and is involved in a home series against Bangladesh.

"I've gone through a phase in my career where I felt like it was the end of the world," he told a news conference in India. "In England 2014, I didn't know what to do, what to say to anyone, and how to speak and how to communicate. And to be honest, I couldn't have said 'I'm not feeling great mentally and I need to get away from the game.' Because you never know how that's taken."

That kind of statement is being taken seriously by the sport's administrators now.

Cricket Australia national teams manager Ben Oliver commended

Pucovski "for having the courage to discuss his situation."

"Will's decision not to nominate for test selection was the right one in the circumstances," Oliver said. "By Will bravely taking this position, he will undoubtedly inspire others facing similar challenges to speak up and take positive steps toward improving their mental well-being.

"The most important thing now is for Will to be given the time, space and expert support that he needs to return to full health as soon as possible."

The 31-year-old Maxwell, who has played seven tests, 110 one-day internationals and 61 Twenty20 internationals, has been in and out of the Australian team throughout his career. He withdrew from selection during a series against Sri Lanka last month.

Maddinson, who was rushed into the Australian team against South Africa in 2016, has played three tests but didn't appear comfortable at the highest level of the game. He ruled himself out of national selection not long after Maxwell's announcement last month.

Pucovski played the first of his 18 first-class games in 2017. He has a high-score of 243 and a first-class average of almost 41. He was set for a test debut in January but withdrew, citing mental health issues. He was back in calculations for this southern summer before making the same call.

Cricket Australia's sports medicine manager, Alex Kountouris, said player welfare was paramount.



India's captain Virat Kohli gestures to a teammate after batting in the nets during a training session ahead of their first cricket test match against Bangladesh in Indore, India, Wednesday, Nov. 13, 2019. (AP Photo/Aijaz Rahi)

"There is much society still needs to learn in relation to mental health, but we know enough to say with great certainty that silence is not the answer," Kountouris said. "Will has demonstrated great strength in being open about his situation. While no one wants to see a fine young man like Will confronting mental well-being issues, we are heartened by the fact he is surrounded by excellent people who will support him."

Kohli described the example set by Maxwell as "remarkable."

"He set the right example for cricketers all over the world—that if you're

not in the best frame of mind, you try and try and try, but as human beings you reach a tipping point and you need time away from the game," Kolhi said. "These things should be respected and not taken in a negative way.

"This is happening on a human level, it's got nothing to do with what you do on the field. It's not having the capacity anymore to deal with (everything), which I think can happen to any person in any walk of life."

Ex-England captain Marcus Trescothick quit a tour of India in 2006, initially cited a viral problem, but later said it was related to mental health.

"I didn't have a clue what was happening. I wasn't aware of depression but whatever was going on, I didn't want to have to say anything about it on TV," Trescothick told Men's Health magazine in 2016. "I was terrified.

"There was a lot of naivety and ignorance. People would say 'What do you have to be depressed about? You play cricket for England. You travel the world. You get paid well.' To try and experience the dark place when you've never experienced it is very tough."

England opener Jonathan Trott left an Ashes series in Australia after one test in 2013, saying later he'd struggled in the previous series and didn't know how to cope.

So-called mental toughness has long been a part of cricket, where sledging—often nasty banter between players—was a fundamental part of the game. That has been changing over the last decade. Cricket Australia has had a full-time sports psychologist working with national teams and player development squads.

Robert Craddock, a long-time cricket analyst and television host in Australia, said cricket was facing a mental [health](#) crisis. He said while it may not be a contact sport "its mental challenges, with so much waiting time, are much tougher than they look."

"Even though cricket is only starting to go public with its mental issues, it has always been a supremely demanding mental game," Craddock wrote in a column for News Corp. "The victory of the current crisis is that at least players are talking.

"If the current issues have taught us anything it is that success and failure can sometimes have little to do with it, and that the causes of the anguish are many and varied."

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