

Azeem Rafiq's racism allegations take Root into spotlight



Joe Root, left, trains with the English Ashes squad on the Gold Coast.

- Peter Lalor
Senior Sports Writer
- 18 November, 2021

No corner of English cricket remains unaffected by the racism scandal that emerged in the British parliament this week, with calls for captain Joe Root and his Test team to address the issue from the Gold Coast.

Former Yorkshire player Azeem Rafiq named senior players, administrators and senior figures in the game as part of a culture that nurtured or ignored racism.

Michael Vaughan, David Lloyd, Gary Ballance, Matthew Hoggard, Alex Hales and Tim Bresnan were all mentioned in the emotional evidence and Root did not escape unscathed as his squad prepares for the Ashes.

Hales, who plays for the Sydney Thunder in the Big Bash League, has defended himself against allegations his black Doberman was named Kevin. Rafiq said the name was used as code for players of colour at Yorkshire.

“I entirely respect and have huge sympathy for both the stance Azeem Rafiq has taken and what he has had to endure,” Hales said. “His evidence was harrowing.

“There is no place for racism or discrimination of any kind in cricket and I will gladly co-operate with any investigation the game’s authorities choose to hold. Neither I nor my representatives will be making any further comment on the matter.”

The Thunder said it would speak to Hales about the incident, but reported he had been a keen participant in the side's multicultural and anti-racist programs.

Hale's English county, Nottinghamshire, has launched an inquiry.



Gary Ballance playing for England in Perth in 2017.

Rafiq expressed disappointment after Root denied knowledge of racism at the county.

“To be clear, Root is a good man. He has never engaged in racist language. I found it hurtful because Root, he was not only Gary’s [Ballance] housemate but before he started playing for England, he was involved in a lot of them socialising nights out where I’d been called a Paki.”

“But again, it just shows – and he might not remember it – but it just shows how normal it was in that environment, in that institution, that even a good man like him doesn’t see it for what it is.

“It was strange, but like I said, it’s the environment of the institution that made it such a norm that people don’t remember it. It’s not going to affect Joe, but it’s something I remember every day.”

Ballance was accused of using racist terms toward the players of colour while captain at Yorkshire.

Paki was once used as an abbreviation of Pakistani in Australia, but in the UK it was a used for any person of colour and has long been recognised as racist.

Oliver Brown — a correspondent for the British newspaper The Telegraph — wrote a powerful piece questioning the Ashes squad’s relative silence, saying it “strains credulity to imagine that Joe Root, in particular, was not aware of the slurs that Ballance would deploy in the name of ‘banter’”.

“Members of England’s Ashes squad, quarantining 10,000 miles away on the Gold Coast, might delude themselves into thinking they are remote from Rafiq’s testimony at Westminster, but it threatens to be a mistake,” he wrote.

“Silence on racism, of all issues, risks looking an awful lot like complicity. Eight of the travelling party in Australia were part of the Test set-up at the same time as Gary Ballance. Yes, the very Ballance who would call Rafiq a “Paki”, allegedly asking ‘Does your dad own these?’ whenever they drove past a corner shop, while describing any person of colour as ‘Kevin’.”



Yorkshire cricketer Azeem Rafiq testifies before a parliamentary Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee in London this week.

Lloyd, now a commentator, was forced to apologise for comments he made about Asian cricketers and Rafiq earlier in the week.

Yorkshire had a terrible reputation for its racist fans over the years. Ian Botham told *The Australian* this week that Vic Richards had to be restrained on one occasion when he was abused by spectators who threw banana skins at the West Indies champion.

Botham described the fans at Headingley — home ground for Yorkshire — as “ignorant, biased, bigoted and a bunch of racial idiots” at the time.

Richards said recently that he was “very pleased and glad that it (racism) has come to light and more so than anything else, it is something that, in my opinion, has always been embedded in that particular cricket club”.

“It (Headingley) was just a nasty place for you to play and I took it upon myself and because of some of the nasty names we used to be called that we were playing a Benson & Hedges (English domestic one-day) match and I think it was a quarterfinal and normally when I nick a ball I would walk.

“I think we need something like 70-plus runs to win and when I met this team I think it was David Bairstow behind the stumps, but I knew I hit it but I just stood there. The umpire looked at me and never put his hand up and I said thank you.

“I decided I was going to bat on and just flared them to all parts of the ground. Got a hundred and knocked off the runs in whatever quick time.”