

Ashley wants England cricket kit deal as he targets Yorkshire rescue

The high street billionaire Mike Ashley wants to attach his Slazenger brand to England's cricket teams as part of a multimillion pound bid to repair the finances of Yorkshire County Cricket Club (YCCC).

Sky News has learnt that Mr Ashley has pitched to the England and Wales Cricket Board a proposal that would see Slazenger replacing Castore as the kit supplier to England's national teams.

Multiple sources said that the Frasers Group tycoon was pursuing efforts to expand the Slazenger brand in cricket, and had indicated to the ECB that the Yorkshire deal would need to be agreed in tandem.

Mr Ashley has been linked with a financial rescue of Yorkshire for months, most frequently with a deal to buy its historic Headingley ground for £23m under a sale-and-leaseback arrangement.

However, that transaction has begun to look increasingly unlikely as other suitors for the club have emerged.

A number of the competing offers would involve injecting capital into YCCC while leaving the ownership of Headingley untouched.

The ECB is said to have pointed out to Mr Ashley that it has a long-term kit supply deal with Castore, the sportswear brand, in place.

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The Castore partnership commenced in April last year and is said to have several years left to run.

One cricket insider said that Mr Ashley had approached Castore recently to gauge its appetite for buying it out of the ECB,

although this could not be independently verified.

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Among the rivals proposing to provide new funding for the club is Colin Graves, its former chairman.

Mr Graves is understood to be being advised on his interest by Oakwell Advisory, a specialist sports advisory firm.

A number of Indian Premier League franchise-owners and an unnamed US bidder have also been linked with the club.

Yorkshire's finances have been severely damaged by the racism scandal involving former player Azeem Rafiq.

In July, the club was docked 48 points from this year's County Championship standings and fined £400,000 by the Cricket Discipline Commission, with three-quarters of the sum suspended for two years.

The ECB had recommended a £500,000 fine, with £350,000 suspended for three years.

Mr Rafiq had alleged that English cricket was "institutionally racist", prompting sponsors and other commercial partners to cut ties with the club.

A refinancing of the club's debts – a large chunk of which is to Mr Graves's family trust – is now not expected to be finalised until at least next month.

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YCCC has drafted in new leadership since it was engulfed by the racism row, with former professional footballer Stephen Vaughan being named chief executive just over a year ago.

Harry Chathli was named chairman of the club in October.

FRP Advisory is working with YCCC on its refinancing while Kroll is understood to be working with Mr Ashley on his interest in the club.

A spokesman for Mr Ashley did not respond to several requests for comment submitted over more than 24 hours, while Frasers Group declined to comment on his behalf.

The ECB and YCCC also declined to comment.