



VERITY AND 'THE DON' RIVALS IN A GOLDEN AGE BY ALAN HILL

Hedley Verity's star was flickering uncertainly in the shallows of Central Lancashire League cricket when his revered opponent Don Bradman swaggered into the Test arena in the winter of 1928/29. He was then just a persevering apprentice, unacknowledged by Yorkshire and making his first tentative experiments with spin. Four years later, in a rush of personal accomplishments, Bradman and Verity had embarked upon an era of challenging rivalry that has passed into cricket folklore.

Jim Kilburn, the Yorkshire historian, later said that the honours between the two men were not so much divided as added together, bowling enhanced by the power in the batting and batting elevated by the skill and persistence of the bowling. The competitive stimulus of bowling against Bradman, whether he took his wicket or not, was to become the high point of Verity's career. Bill Bowes, a close friend and a superb bowling ally in Yorkshire's seven championship years in the 1930s, said: "Hedley and I talked about our duels with a marvellous batsman many times. I think the two of us got more pleasure, with all the stick he gave us and all the problems he set us, bowling to Don more than any other batsman."

Verity bowled more balls in Tests - 932 - to Bradman, who scored 401 runs against him, than any other bowler sent down to the Australian. He was one of the few bowlers not to be overawed by a cricketing genius. He dismissed Bradman ten times, eight times in 16 Test meetings and twice in each innings in two matches. No other English bowler can match this achievement.

In assessing Verity's supremacy as a bowler, it cannot be too strongly emphasised that he operated in an era dominated by batsmen. It was the ever-present guile and one of the most acute brains in the history of the game which accounted for his tally of 1,956 wickets, costing under 15 runs each, and including 144 for England in less than ten years. His name as a potential menace was linked, in the opinion of many astute judges, to one other only - that of Harold Larwood.

The memories of the left-arm spinning perfectionist glow as brightly as the steel of the Yorkshireman's character. Bradman once confessed that he never quite resolved the puzzles set by Verity. "With Hedley I was never sure. You see, there was no breaking point with him." Bradman was never a man to scatter compliments but he later presented another tribute. "Hedley's whole career exemplified all that was best about cricket. I deem it an honour to have been on the same stage with him in those golden days of the 1930s."

Verity twice dismissed his great rival to mastermind England's victory over Australia at Lords in June 1934. He captured 15 wickets to equal the record of his mentor, Wilfred Rhodes, at Melbourne 30 years earlier. Verity was irresistible after rain on the Monday when he took 14 wickets for 80 runs, six of them in the last hour of a momentous day. Les Ames, England's wicket-keeper in the match, remembered his palpitations as the ball flew from the top edge of Bradman's rashly offensive bat in the second innings.

“Everyone was petrified to go for it. Hammond could have caught it easily as could Sutcliffe or Verity, moving into position from the bowler’s end. The shout went up: ‘Yours Les’. I would have been quite happy if someone else had taken it. If we hadn’t taken the catch, there could have been trouble. But I did take it at silly point, very silly point.”

Douglas Jardine, Verity’s captain on the previous controversial ‘Bodyline’ tour of Australia, was at Lords to witness a masterly display. He later penned his tribute. “The crowd and the pavilion were treated to an exhibition of bowling which, whether judged by the standards of accuracy or general ability, may possibly have been equalled, but certainly has never been surpassed. For clear thinking and execution it may stand alone for all time.”

2005 marked the centenary of Verity’s birth which was commemorated by a ceremony at Headingley in May. He was born not far from the Test ground where he would, sensationally, twice take ten wickets in an innings for Yorkshire in successive seasons. Against Nottinghamshire in 1932, he took ten for 10 which is still a world record. It was, in Verity’s words, an “avalanche from heaven”. Verity bowled 113 balls without a run being scored off him on that thrilling day at Headingley. He conceded the 10 runs in four overs; the other four he bowled after lunch were all maidens. The analysis shows that 15 deliveries gave him seven wickets for three runs, including the hat-trick. The ten victims, all but one of whom had made a first-class century, went down for 23 runs in 65 minutes.

Like another great slow left-arm bowler, Kent’s Colin Blythe, who was killed in France during the First World War, Verity died fighting for his country on a night of murderous gunfire on a Sicilian plain in 1943. Both were aged 38. One admiring voice from a summer idyll in 1941 captures the reverence which Verity still commands among those who knew him. Jim Walsh was then a shy 16-year-old and an aspiring slow left-arm bowler in the garrison town of Omagh where Verity played his last game on a British field. Walsh recalled how a kindly man rallied to his aid. Verity was then serving with The Green Howards in Northern Ireland. “He typically and generously offered to coach me and eliminate my more obvious faults.” Walsh now resides in Cape Town and his memories of Verity were stirred again with the publication of my award-winning book. “Hedley lives on in your tribute; it should be a compulsory textbook for youngsters who aspire to excellence in sport.”