



GREAT CRICKETERS OF THE WEST INDIES BY GERRY GOMEZ

"The invitation of the Editor of The Journal of the Cricket Society to write about some of my contemporaries allows me some of the happiest recollections of my cricketing life. In the first instance, there is reflection on the experience of having started my career in West Indies Cricket in the late 1930s, when the early stirrings of its unbridled attractiveness were becoming more evident. Thereafter, the metamorphosis by more purposeful and skilful application produced a new breed of West Indian cricketer in the post 1939-1945 war period. There is a genuine warmth of feeling and justifiable pride in the realization that over a period of sixteen years, I bridged the gap between the pre-war greats - Constantine, Hedley, Roach, Martindale and the post-war greats - Weekes, Worrell, Walcott and Sobers."

It has been a wonderful experience enriched by association with some of the finest West Indian cricketers, who in many instances, left their mark, not only in our islands, but in many parts of the cricket world. Some of them reached the greatest heights and there were others who, while not achieving the status of superstar, did make a worthwhile contribution to the development of West Indies cricket in its rise to the pinnacle of present day success and who were delightful fellow travellers.

Roach - Fine Player, Fine Man

In 1937, as a lad of 17, I was awe stricken to find myself a member of the Trinidad team against British Guyana which included 5 Test players of whom Clifford Roach took pride of place. He had already scored the first Test hundred, and the first double century by a West Indian, and was easily the most exciting opening batsman of the day. He was a fine athlete, an outstanding soccer player, brilliant cover fieldsman, and everything about his cricket was aggressive and scintillating, particularly, his batting. He could bat nowhere else but, as an opener. Against the fastest, fiercest and most accurate bowlers, he always threw down the gauntlet. Clifford was reared on the coconut-fibre matting wickets of Trinidad, on which he developed mastery and skill of his most productive strokes, the cut and the hook which he used to good effect on the likes of Voce, Larwood, Haigh, Tate, Hammond and Clarke, plus our own Griffith, Francis and Martindale. He took over from George Challenor the mantle of our leading batsman, until the great George Headley appeared on the scene and a healthy rivalry developed between these two accomplished batsmen. In several dazzling 2nd wicket partnerships there was entertaining evidence of trying to outdo each other. This feeling eventually came to the surface during the 1933 West Indies and Surrey fixture, when, on returning to the dressing room, after scoring a hundred before lunch, he flung his bat down saying - "Now, let him try to better that one!" He was a lawyer by profession, a man of intelligence and good sense of humour, which made him a good team man. I remember too well his encouragement and advice on my first appearance for Trinidad. As I sat with my pads on, he sat beside me to quell the butterflies. Later in the match, with accustomed humour, he provided solace on my return to the pavilion, after my second doubtful l.b.w., decision handed down by the same umpire, who had happened to be the local Postmaster General. With a comforting arm around me, Clifford said - "Tough luck Gerry, he has certainly left his stamp on you."

In later life, he lost both legs - a misfortune which he bore with fortitude, dignity and resolve. As we lived in the same district of Diego Martin, quite often I would come upon Clifford propelling by hand, his wheel chair, under the noon day sun. In spite of my urgings, he never accepted my invitations to fold his chair and ride with me, and remained, at all times, independent and dignified. Clifford Roach was the epitome of West Indian panache and batting aggression, and his clones Conrad Hunte, Gordon Greenidge and Roy Fredericks, bear testimony of his legacy.

A Personal Contribution

Clifford was not cast in the classical mould of some opening batsmen of his era like Hobbs, Challenor or Walters. His method was piratical for his mission was to plunder fast bowling before the spinners arrived to expose his fallibility against a type of bowling not much in vogue in the Caribbean in those days; He relished his role and dealt harshly with opening bowlers who, even in their first over wavered in length and line. In Trinidad Club cricket the Maple v. Shannon drew huge crowds to view the spectacle of a Constantine - Roach clash which was always thrilling and entertaining. By his deeds he was admired and lauded and his pleasant and dignified manner bred a mutuality of respect between Clifford and anyone privileged to have known him. It was a pleasure to have known him and to have played cricket with him. No greater honour was bestowed on me than when his family invited me to do the eulogy at his funeral service.

Headley - The Giant

1939 brought me even further joy by my inclusion in the West Indies Team to England, and becoming a team-mate of the two greats - Headley and Constantine. The last time I had seen them in action was the Test Match v England in Trinidad in 1935, when, at age fifteen, I had sneaked into the pavilion, to get their autographs and those of Hammond, Leyland, Ames, Wyatt, little imagining that I would be playing with and against these greats four years later. Early in the tour I began to appreciate the cricketing genius of George Headley and, like Jeff Stollmeyer, became receptive to the stream of knowledge which he gave forth in a slightly embarrassed manner. It was as if he was trying to say that: "you should not accept what I am saying, because George Headley says so." He was very modest, even introverted, but supremely confident to deal with any situation on a cricket field, particularly, the art of batting. Like Bradman, he never received coaching of any sort and shared the same insatiable appetite for runs. Alas, he never had the batting support enjoyed by Bradman and Hammond, yet by initiative, skill and exquisite stroke play, contrived to achieve prodigious feats against some of the greatest bowlers of all time.

A hundred in his first Test, centuries in each innings of a Test twice. His Test batting average of 60 runs per innings remains the highest so far in West Indian cricket history. He was the first West Indian batsman to exhibit the blend of skill and ruthlessness, of which West Indies batting was so devoid before the war. He bore the brunt nobly, and whenever one of our batsmen was out carelessly, he would mutter, without rancour, but with a twinge of disappointment and admonishment - "Him don't like to bat."

The image I have of George is that he never played and missed. Of later batsmen, Len Hutton is the only one who left a similar impression. Like most great players, he had in his method, one characteristic, that of shuffling across his wicket just prior to the bowler's delivery stride. This earned him the reputation of being predominantly an on-side player but charts of his innings often proved otherwise.

If the ball was pitched well up on the line of the middle stump, this position allowed full swing of a perpendicular bat and with superb timing usually resulted in a boundary either side of mid-on. As charts of his innings will show, he was equally strong on the off side, and, indeed, all round the wicket. His cutting and hooking were executed with power, precision and control. His hooking, particularly, was a model for present day batsmen, because he hooked down causing short legs to fear for their safety. Vivid memories of George in the 1939 tour of England are his hundreds in each innings of the Lord's Test

and 65 in the 3rd Test at The Oval. This latter innings was brought to an end when George, looking impregnable, was run out by Victor Stollmeyer. We had visions that day of Len Hutton's Test record being broken and such was the enormity of the calamity that C.B. Fry, writing in one of the evening papers, dubbed Victor Stollmeyer - "The Giant Killer" - a description he used whenever Victor's name cropped up, during the course of the match. I was the incoming batsman and as I approached the crestfallen Victor, he muttered - "I now have to bat for 3 people - George and myself". He went some way in doing so by making 96, but George on that day, looked like getting 396.

Domination

Later against Yorkshire at Harrogate he played a cameo of an innings of rare skill, giving a perfect example of how to play on a sticky wicket.

He was up against the finest exponent in the use of such conditions - Hedley Verity and scored 62 in less than even time. He virtually plundered the bowling and was particularly severe on Verity for whom Brian Sellars eventually stationed a deep point and a backward point to staunch the flow of runs in that region. George's answer to the quickly turning and lifting delivery was a cracking square cut played whenever the ball was pitched shorter only than half volley length. Even in these conditions he hardly played and missed; it was not a matter of defending three stumps: it was skilful attack and the wrenching away of the initiative from a great bowler in conditions made to order. Like the other great players of that time Headley's career suffered from the lapse of cricket activity. It was not until 1948 that I played again with him, this time, under his captaincy against Gubby Allen's team. This appointment was a fitting tribute to George's skill, knowledge of every facet of the game, and his incisive cricket brain. Regrettably, rain brought an end to that game which seemed all but won, depriving him of the signal honour of a win in his first Test as captain. Due to injury he took no further part in the series, but was witness to the emergence of the three W's, particularly Everton Weekes who was George's replacement in the last Test at Sabina Park, and obliged with the first of his 5 consecutive Test hundreds, During the war the absence of Test cricket reduced the self-discipline which characterized his approach to the game, with the result that his heavy scoring habit was reduced in matches against Trinidad, Barbados and Guyana to normal, if not insignificant levels. To some observers it was surprising after playing just one Test against England, in early 1948, that he was selected to tour India in November of that year. In India after the First Test in which he scored 3, he hardly played. This distressed me as I harboured the uncharitable thought that this great man at whose shrine I worshipped, was reluctant to put his great reputation on the line in the face of the burgeoning skills of the young and insatiable Weekes and Walcott. My unhappiness and concern for George became more acute as he often became the butt of jokes about being a tourist etc. He remains to me the best batsman that West Indies cricket has produced, notwithstanding the superlative skills and achievements of Weekes, Sobers, Richards, Walcott, Worrell, Greenidge, Kanhai, etc. etc. I remain forever in his debt for the thoughtfulness and consideration which he extended to us, the young ones of the 1939 tour. During a day's play he would take the trouble to sit with us and expose to our minds many of cricket's skills and intricacies, which unfolded as play went on. It is tragic that so little of this relationship takes place in present day cricket, for it is this chemistry which allows knowledge and experience to permeate into the consciousness of aspiring youngsters willing to absorb knowledge. Even as an onlooker in India in 1948, his shrewd advice was a powerful impetus to that team on its way to further laurels.

Constantine - The Gifted All-Rounder

At a time when the glare of media publicity was confined to daily newspapers with a modicum of action pictures, and television was still in its experimental stage, it was quite remarkable to find that in every part of England, wherever we travelled in 1939, Learie Constantine was immediately recognised. He will always remain the embodiment of West Indies Cricket, its life and its soul. Learie Constantine put West Indies Cricket on the map. By the time we had become team mates in 1939, Learie had already toured England in 1923, 1928 (doing the double of 1000 runs and 100 wickets) and 1933, plus a tour to Australia 1930/31. I must have been about age 10 when I used to hear my father talk about the Constantines, their relative Victor Pascall, the St. Hill brothers and the exciting cricket played on the cocoa plantations of Trinidad. These matches were gala events attended by spectators from nearby towns

and villages. There was always a band of musicians in attendance, a lot of liquid refreshment (rum) and a lot of betting. There was keen rivalry among the estates, and each estate owner or overseer would contract a leading player at a suitable fee and there was always a fair sum of money riding on the result. My uncle owned a cocoa estate at Moruga in the deep south of the island and organised such a match in which my father took part. Lebrun Constantine was on the visiting team and brought young Learie along to complete the team. Learie proceeded to turn the match upside down by a fantastic all-round performance, which left my uncle out of pocket, and my father awe stricken by the superb hitting, lightning fast bowling and brilliant fielding of Learie, who was still in his teens.

Johun's Moment of Glory

I first met and played cricket with Learie Constantine in January 1937 during the Intercolonial Tournament in Trinidad. I had been included in the original 13 players selected but failed to get into the final team and I was elated to find myself however, on a team including several Test players journeying to Cedros, in south Trinidad, to play a South Trinidad Team, which included another famous Trinidadian Joe Small. I was more elated when I found that I would be a passenger in the car, driven by Learie Constantine, for the 80-mile journey. This fixture was arranged by Mr Rohmer Johnstone, the owner of the largest coconut estate, and a great lover of cricket. Our team comprised several Intercolonial players, chief of which were Clifford Roach, and Ben Sealey who were great friends of Learie, having played together for Trinidad in the 1920s and 1930s. In front of a very large crowd the home team batted first, and with our opening bowlers feeling the effects of the long journey got off to a good start; but, Ben Sealey picked up a few wickets and this let in the local hero, a young East Indian player named Johun. He was a player of some ability but what was remarkable was that as a youngster he had lost one eye in an accident, yet was able to perform outstanding feats in local cricket. He got settled in, and by this time the crowd was becoming impatient to see Learie in action. Learie was in the process at that time of honing his new bowling method, slipping in the odd leg-break or googly among his faster deliveries. By way of loosening up he bowled about three overs of his quicker stuff while Johun had most of the strike and handled Learie's quickies with some confidence, much to the delight of his supporters. At this point, Learie produced one of his slower tweakers to which Johun advanced down the wicket and hit him for six over long on into the coconut trees. The crowd went wild. Learie glared at him while Clifford and Ben made no attempt to hide their mirth and proceeded to rag Learie about being hit for six by a one-eyed batsman. Worse was to follow when Learie, now bristling over the ribbing that he was getting from Clifford and Ben, resorted to a bouncer which Johun promptly hooked into the coconuts for another prodigious six. Pandemonium broke loose and Clifford and Ben, weak with laughter, hung on to each other. The day ended with some big hitting by Learie and not unexpectedly two of his biggest hits were off Johun's bowling. There was the distinct impression that our local hero was being chastised for his indiscretion by taking such liberties with the greatest name in West Indies cricket. This amusing scenario opened my eyes to the fact that even the great have feet of clay and respond instinctively in such situations. I also appreciated that only his contemporaries like Clifford and Ben could take such liberties with the great man who really fell for the bait of the leg-pulling and got really steamed up.

Is it Catching?

We next became team-mates in the 1939 tour of England in which we had Learie's services for the entire tour unlike the 1933 tour when he was available only for the Tests. Now aged 37, he proceeded to get 103 wickets using his slower method of leg breaks and googlies, interspersed with quicker deliveries which sometimes reached top pace. This provided an element of surprise not only to batsmen but to slip fielders who lulled into a sense of false security would be faced suddenly with an 80 m.p.h. snick off the edge. To miss a catch from Learie's bowling was unpardonable, because in his book all catches were catchable. I attracted his wrath during the Yorkshire match at Harrogate when I dropped Arthur Mitchell at deep square leg off a lofted sweep. I lost the ball in the setting sun and as it hit me in the chest I was less unsettled by the Yorkshire crowd chorus of, "Get a Bag!" than the thought of facing up to Learie's ire.

Fortunately, by that stage of the tour, he, himself, had grassed a few chances and now seemed to view such aberrations in a more kindly light. At 37 his reflexes had begun to wane and in between taking fantastic catches he spilled a few, much to the amusement of Manny Martindale who took every opportunity to pull his leg and draw from him involved and technical explanations of how such an unlikely event could have taken place. His bowling, like that of the great Bill O'Reilly was now thoughtful aggression - no longer tearaway pace, affrighting life and limb. His subtle variations of flight and spin with an occasional faster ball was a constant source of worry to batsmen of the highest class of which there were a fair number in the 1939 English season. In spite of the varied nature of his bowling, his control of length was quite remarkable for he gave away less than 3 runs per over while taking 103 wickets at an average of 17.7 with a striking rate of a wicket every 6 overs. His batting was exploratory as ever and in Yorkshire would be branded as definitely uncommercial. His great moment on the tour was an electrifying innings of 79 out of 109 added by the last four wickets in the 3rd Test at The Oval. Anyone coming into the ground in the middle of this innings would have thought that the spinners were on. The field was spread out thus: 1 slip, with third man, extra cover, long off, long on, square leg and long leg all on the boundary, cover and mid wicket. The bowlers were, Maurice Nicolls and Reg Perks. A stroke which lingers in my memory was a back drive off Reg Perks for six over the bowler's head. This was after he had grabbed 5 wickets in England's first innings. At all times he was superlatively fit, lithe and supple with movements which suggested that he was made of rubber. When bowling he was all action and very often would follow a flighted delivery up the wicket expecting to pick up a return catch from a defensive prod. This caused Neville Cardus to write with justifiable exaggeration: "I swear I once saw him keep wicket to his own bowling". In my recollection, he never left a field of play (a trait, peculiar also to the great Gary Sobers in later years). His self discipline was a model for all athletes - teetotaler (except for the occasional glass of wine) non-smoker and as a product of good family background his life style encompassed clean living, appreciation of his fellow man and pride in his ancestry. The honours bestowed on him in later life were the result of his intelligence and his honest and forthright attitude in dealing with every facet of his varied life. Without a doubt, Learie possessed a shrewd sense of history, and advanced the cause of the black man by pushing open doors, already ajar, by his superlative cricket prowess and the public image he had created as an intelligent, proud, progressive thinking and cultured West Indian. England rewarded him with a knighthood and a Life Peerage and he served his country as a Cabinet Minister and High Commissioner in London where he continued his crusade for equality for coloured colonial migrants in the United Kingdom. Such was his popularity and the esteem in which Learie was held that the average U.K. citizen remained unaware of the identity of the American or Russian Ambassador but certainly knowing who was the High Commissioner for Trinidad & Tobago. In spite of this exalted position he became the victim of the paranoia of his friend, confidant and Prime Minister - Dr Eric Williams, who, obviously feeling threatened by Learie's growing stature, dispensed with his services. It was a piece of shrewd cricket judgement when in 1923 H.B.G. Austin, (later to become Sir Harold Austin) was emphatic that the West Indies team to tour England that year could not travel without Learie Constantine. That decision by a leading member of the Barbadian plantocracy gave to Cricket one of its dynamic forces and a man who played an important part in redressing the social imbalances of those colonial days.

Michael Manley in his History of West Indies Cricket has identified the exploits of Learie Constantine and George Headley, the folk heroes of the late 1920s and 1930's, as being on parallel course with the resistance of leaders, Marcus Garvey and Arthur Cipriani, to an oppressive colonial legacy. It follows that by the example of these role models and that of their talented successors, cricket became the root of West Indian culture. To the sociologist, West Indian cricket is recognised as an expression of hard won freedom by a collective West Indian personality, restrained for so long by colonialism and its inhibiting influences, but bursting forth as it had done with unfettered zeal, enthusiasm, skill and pride. At age 19 I became unwittingly a part of this historical process, savouring the sheer delight of playing cricket and gradually appreciating the benefits of its influence.