

LOCATING OUR CRICKET HERITAGE

AN APPRECIATION OF THE GREATS, BY FAZEER MOHAMMED

Lara's greatest regret, despite the mountains of runs and assortment of records, is that he was never part of an all-conquering West Indies team

First things first. While this is an appreciation of the contribution outstanding cricketers from Trinidad and Tobago have made at national, regional and international level in the 50 years since the twin-island nation's Independence, it would be negligent not to acknowledge the significant role played by a number of pioneering personalities on the field of play before 1962, from the fast bowling tandem of Woods and Cumberbatch at the turn of the century and the flamboyant daring of the legendary Sir Learie Constantine (who, in addition to his achievements on the field was the first Black man to become a member of Britain's House of Lords), to the elegance of Jeffrey Stollmeyer and all-round virtues of Gerry Gomez, to the emergence of the match-winning mystery spinner Sonny Ramadhin from the sugarcane heartland of rural Trinidad.

Indeed, it is a curious coincidence that the

golden anniversary of political independence from Britain occurs at the time when another spin wizard from this country, Sunil Narine, has enjoyed a meteoric rise in stature due to his exploits with first, his homeland, then for the West Indies and, in keeping with the flourishing interest in the lucrative and popular T20 format, as the "Player of the Tournament" in his debut season in leading the Kolkata Knight Riders to their first triumph in the 2012 season of the Indian Premier League.

Such prowess in spin bowling should really be no surprise for it can be argued that, before the emergence of batting superstar Brian Lara as the nation's one and – so far – only global cricketing icon, and the rise of Tony Gray and then more significantly Ian Bishop as world-class fast bowlers from the mid-'80s to the end of the '90s, Trinidad and Tobago has long carried the mantle as the home of practitioners of guile, evidenced by the likes of Willie Rodriguez in the '60s to the quartet of Raphick Jumadeen, Rangy Nanan and Inshan and Imtiaz Ali in the '70s.

Others have followed in their footsteps since, and while they have all played key roles in Trinidad and Tobago's regional successes over the years, none has managed to make a major impact on the international scene in the manner Narine suggests that he may in the coming years.

Yet whatever he achieves, it is unlikely that the young man from Arima will scale the heights conquered by Lara, whose nearly 20 years at senior national and international level from 1988 to 2007 left a legacy of monumental record-breaking feats of batsmanship, accomplished with a style that made a lasting impression on those who saw the left-hander at his very best and guarantees him a lofty stature as one of the greatest batsmen of all time.

Lara's greatest regret, despite the mountains of runs and assortment of records, is that he was never part of an all-conquering West Indies team, his emergence coinciding with the seemingly

Photograph courtesy of Paria Archive



The legendary Sir Learie Constantine

irreversible decline in the fortunes of the regional side that is now approaching two decades.

Fortunately, the same fate did not befall Gray and Bishop. While the former's all-too-brief international career can be put down to the curiosities of the selection process, only the recurrence of a serious back injury that interrupted his progress at the very height of his fearsome powers deprived Bishop of the opportunity of being ranked among the all-time greats in a glorious vanguard of Caribbean pacemen.

Trinidad and Tobago's contribution to West Indies and world cricket over the past 50 years has also included personalities who, while not being considered giants among their contemporaries, were vital elements to successful national and regional sides.

Foremost in this category would be Larry Gomes, "Mr Dependable" of the batting line-up in the virtually invincible West Indies team of

the '80s, while Deryck Murray's quiet efficiency as wicketkeeper and useful lower-order batsman straddled two dominant eras: the '60s of Sir Frank Worrell, Sir Garfield Sobers and so many other luminaries, and the '70s as a member of two World Cup-winning teams when the fearsome quartet of fast bowlers presented a unique challenge for wicketkeepers.

Then there are those whose talent suggested they should have achieved a lot more despite prolonged participation at the highest level. Names like Gus Logie, Phil Simmons and Daren Ganga come immediately to mind, although Ganga has at least had the consolation of being at the helm of the national side in its emergence over the past eight years from a prolonged drought at regional level.

Just as it would be disrespectful not to have acknowledged the outstanding performers prior to 1962 who paved the way for the post-Independence successors, it is also necessary to pay tribute to the ground-breakers of 1970, the national team under the astute, no-nonsense leadership of Joey Carew that claimed successive Shell Shield crowns and included players of the calibre of Charlie Davis, a batsman who, despite averaging over 50 in Test cricket, retired from the international game because the pittance being earned by players at the time was not enough to sustain his family. That era of austerity is far removed from the riches now enjoyed by Narine and several of his compatriots who now command places in the West Indies squad and attract lucrative contracts from the T20 tournaments sprouting up all over the world.

In the midst of such financial abundance though, they would do well to note that, apart from their own obvious talents, they are also the beneficiaries of the exploits of earlier sons of the soil of Trinidad and Tobago who made us all proud to identify with them as they took on the very best in the world over the past 50 years. ■

The 1970s era of austerity is far removed from the riches now enjoyed by the likes of Sunil Narine and several of his compatriots as a result of the T20 tournaments sprouting up all over the world



Brian Lara: T&T's global cricketing icon