

West Indians started cricket in Hartford



By STAN WALKER

At one time having two of the best fields in the northeast region, if not throughout the U.S., the city of Hartford has remained one of the mainstays of the game of cricket which began in this country more than 200 years ago. During the early days, however, the game was not played in these parts. However, with the arrival of a group of enterprising West Indians, it did not take long for the game to rear its head.

Standing, from left: Vincent Elliott, Luther Wright, Leslie Murray, Sidney Elliott, Freddie Elliott, Vincent

Crockett and Ashley Bean. Kneeling: Ivan Redwood, Reginald Leslie (Captain), Desmond Blake, Noel Elliott (Vice Captain) and Ashley Williams

The first West Indians to make it to the Greater Hartford area did not come as sports ambassadors. They came to work on the various farms and fields that were flourishing in those times. Although very ambitious and hard-working, the men brought not only their sweat and toil in the fields but also their love of a game which was very popular in their homeland.

It was in the 1940s when the first group of men arrived. Boredom set in when they found themselves with nothing to do with their spare time. Not familiar with the local sports, some of the men began playing the game of cricket on make-shift plots in the camps where they resided. At first, gears were hard to come by but they improvised by making their own bats and balls and engaged in a popular version of the game known in the islands as “catchy shooby.”

Shortly after word got out that they had started to play the game on the farms, with the help of one of the managers they were able to secure some gears and as a result began to play matches between the various farms. Most of the matches were played at the Bradley Field camp.

In 1947, two pioneers of the game in Hartford, Jamaicans Reginald Leslie and Noel Elliott deciding that it was time to get the game started in Hartford, began recruiting players from the camps in the Greater Hartford area. They donated many hours and funds to get the game off on the right track, but because they had very little gears, no real playing fields and very few spectators, they found this somewhat difficult.

With the help of Lloyd Walford, a Jamaican living in Massachusetts, they were invited to play in Boston, which at the time had three active teams. In Boston, the men were hosted “in fine style,” given gears to play in and some to take back to Hartford to help with their game.

Shortly afterwards, a league started in Massachusetts and through Leslie’s drive the Hartford team was able to take part in the competition. With regular recruiting and increased interest, the team became so good that they beat all the teams in Massachusetts. They then went in search of new foes, their next opponent being the Canadians. This followed with them taking on a strong New York team led by another cricket stalwart of the region, James Gabriel.. This match was played at Colts Park.

The game and the team continued to progress in the area with the highlight was during the 1951 season when the team hosted a team from the British warship HMS Sniper, that had arrived at the New London base.

Around this same time, the West Indian Social Club started its own team, at the time the only one in the Hartford. Subsequently as the game developed and more West Indians started to arrive in the area, it became inevitable that more teams would be formed. This did not only materialize, but with the securing of the Keney Park field (Ridgefield Street), the local teams began to compete in a New York league. A

Connecticut Cricket League was eventually started and today it has as many as 10 teams participating.

Leslie, who throughout the years held various posts including captain, manager and promoter of the original team is regarded by many as the person mainly responsible for getting the game started in Hartford. Elliott, revered as one of the best cricketers to come to Hartford, also held similar positions with the team before retiring from the game.

As it stands today, Hartford has six active teams and three very good fields. Although many may be of the opinion that the game is dying, cricket can be said to be still alive and well in the Hartford area.