

## What's wrong with West Indies Cricket

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By Stan Walker

Today most West Indians abroad are lamenting over the state of the sport in the islands. Although many suggestions have been put forth as to what may be the cause, the once formidable world champions have reached the stage where they may become the beating stick of all the Test playing countries in the world.

The thing that most find mystifying is the quick rate in which the West Indies cricket team who were at the top of the world has slipped in almost every facet of the game. And although they now have a large crop of youngsters, the standard of play exhibited in the recently concluded series against South African points to a future that is far from promising.

One of the latest person to join the outcry is Ron Headley, son of the legendary West Indies Batsman of the 1930s, George Headley. He claims that the English-style "stereo-type coaching" is stifling the "natural talent" of young West Indian batsmen.

Headley, a guest at the formal opening and dedication of the George Headley Park at Sabina Park, Kingston, Jamaica, held recently, said: "Let the players play with the natural flow that God gave them. That is obviously not happening now. I can see that the players have the ability but they are not expressing themselves because of the stereo-type coaching that my dad was always against."

While welcoming the idea of academics for young cricketers (a West Indian cricketing academy was recently established in Grenada), Headley warned that "you can have the most luscious place with all the facilities but if you are going to impart the game in a stereo-type fashion you are going to destroy natural talent."

Stating that these days he was often afraid to switch on the television to watch the West Indies play because of the team's poor performances, Headley said that the tried and proven West Indian style was to "defend when you have to, but to always look to dominate."

There is an urgent need to find three or four young players who will make centuries regularly. "The talent is there, I can see it but it's as if they are frightened to express themselves," he said.

While Headley's points may be well taken, for one whose cricket today is subject to the television screen, it is my opinion that we may have the talents but we lack not only the proper techniques but the will to win.

Gone are the days when even with a low score we have a crop of players who will put up a fight to the end many times carving out victories that can be only be described as miraculous wins. Until we can find a group that approaches the game in such a mode we will forever find our quest for victory a constant struggle.

Cricket as I know it, regardless of what anyone may think is a batsman game. While bowling is limited to a certain number of players, everyone in the team will be called upon at sometime to bat. Even the best of bowlers will tell you that it is the dream of everyone who plays the game to score a lot of runs, possibly a century.

Batting is the glamour side of the sport, the showpiece in which there is probably no more classic a stroke than the cover drive, none more exciting than a well-timed hook, the straight drive off a fast bowler or a delicate late cut.

From my television viewing I am not too sure if our present crop of batsmen are dreaming of scoring a century which was the tendency in the West Indies. They seem to have lost the art of batting. Our batsmen today spend too much time plodding and pushing and concentrating on scoring runs only on the on side.

In the good old days, no batsman, of quality, West Indian in particular, was prepared to push and prod except on really awkward pitches. It was their nature to score runs and if the skill of the bowlers was such that they could not do so in the usual manner, they would improvise. And they did so without the helmets and numerous padding that the norm of present day cricketers.

In those days batsmen played off either foot. If they could not score off the front-foot, they would do so off the back-foot. If they could not drive, they would hook. Today most batsmen or either front-foot or back-foot players. They spend most of the time pushing or prodding and that is why runs are so difficult to come by.

Back then, fans used to pack the cricket grounds around the West Indies, not so much to witness centuries or to cheer on a fiery fast bowler, but to revel in the strokeplay of batsmen like the late Frank Worrell, Everton Weekes, Clyde Walcott, Jeffery Stoltmeyer, Gary Sobers, Rohan Kanhai, Basil Butcher, Seymour Nurse, Alvin Kallicharran, Lawrence Rowe, Sir Vivian Richards, Richie Richardson, Jeffrey Dujon, and a number of others who although did not achieve stardom was a delight to watch at the wicket. These men were very creative and at the top of their class. Of the present crop Brian Lara and Carl Hooper have come the closest.

What has caused the change of attitude among our players is a question that needs to be answered. It could well be attributed to the change in our society. As far as discipline is concerned our society has changed. Indiscipline is the order of the day and this could well be the seat of the problems that we are having among our young men in the sport.

Unlike in the past, our youths seem to be very indifferent to training. Without the frequent long training in the nets that was obvious in the past, they will never develop the confidence that is needed to perform in a consistent manner.

Back then, consistently scoring 30 or 50 runs could not secure you a place in any national team. You did not only have to possess the ability to consistently score a lot of runs but the desire to stay at the wicket for a long time.

No one seems to enjoy playing the game for fun any more. And with just a once-in-a-lifetime performance, professionalism has made many of our youngsters overnight stars. This attitude has robbed the game of much of its excitement and thrills. Until we can find a crop of players with the discipline, dedication and willingness to duplicate our former stars, then it seems that West Indies cricket will remain in the doldrums for a long time to come.