

Of a mortal immortal

Cricket

BY QUAZI ZULQUARNAIN ISLAM

And so it ends.

Fitting, though, that perhaps the greatest and most glorious of all cricketing careers will bid its final hoorah at the scene of its greatest achievement.

But then again, perfect timing is just what you would expect from Brian Charles Lara.

When the West Indies captain comes out to bat for one last time against England in the final match of the Super Eight phase of the World Cup tonight, the packed turnstiles will hope for a display of genius reminiscent of the poetic 153 not out that he eked out against Australia at the same Bridgetown, Barbados ground some eight years ago.

Widely and justifiably regarded as the greatest chasing innings Test cricket has known, Lara's hundred and fifty against all odds draws whispers of approval from even his most scathing detractors. As Wisden later put it, "he had guided his team to victory as though leading the infirm through the maze."

Which was exactly what he is capable of.

As far as cricket is concerned, for wholesome mastery there is Sachin Tendulkar, for wizardry there is Shane Warne, for technical virtuosity there is Rahul Dravid, to bat for your life there is Jacques Kallis.

Lara's story is amongst the most

So where does Brian Lara fit in all this? What the Trinidadian does is epitomise all of the above characteristics and more. He lifts the soul, brings light and song and to a further extent bliss and glory into the game.

His parting words sum that up to the dot. "I just want to be remembered as someone who came out there and tried to entertain," said Lara. "You have to remember that people pay to come through the turnstiles and watch you. It's important if they say that they have enjoyed watching Brian Lara play."

And entertained he has. From his divine 277 in Sydney to his world-record breaking 375 in Antigua, his three consecutive centuries under exceptional circumstances at home against Australia in 1999, his mastery over Muttiah Muralidaran in the slow pitches of Sri Lanka and the reclamation of his world record with a 400 against England in Antigua, Lara has regaled us to no ends.

Over a career spanning some 17 years, Lara has had many taxing relationships -- with the WICB, with the media, the selectors and even the players. He has walked out, impressed, flustered and tested the most immaculate of relationships.

However, one bond that remained unshakable was the one that Lara forged with his spellbound audience. You fell for him once and God help you -- you were hooked for life.

Lara's story is amongst the most

exotic in world cricket. Born into the small village of Santa Cruz his infant steps towards world domination were forged in the backyard of his house he shared with his parents and ten other siblings.

Within four years of his debut in 1990, Lara was the darling of the cricket world with the records for highest individual Test and first-class scores snugly fit in his back pocket.

Lara was a young man at the peak of his powers, a hero to many with a world already conquered. But as Irish-American novelist Francis Scott Fitzgerald once said, "show me a hero and I will write you a tragedy."

Lara's tragedy was yet to begin. For while his batting at that time was impeccable, his ability to deal with superstardom was fatally flawed.

Lara's fall for grace was spectacular.

His rise to the zenith of the cricketing world and the adulation of the public is well-documented, almost as well as his fall from that elevated pedestal. If he owned the world in 1994 he scraped the bottom of the barrel in the four years following that.

And when in 1996 he was branded mentally fragile and put off as a destructive influence, many critics wrote him off as a flawed genius, without country or country.

But it is his ability to rebound, the ability to shine in the face of adversity and in the most trying of circumstances.

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BRIAN LARA

PCB clears team of match-fixing

AFP, Islamabad

An inquiry into Pakistan's shock exit from the cricket World Cup has found no evidence that any players were involved in match-fixing, the head of the probe said Friday.

The Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) ordered the inquiry after the 1992 champions were dumped out of the competition, losing to minnows Ireland in the first round, sparking allegations that games could have been thrown.

"The inquiry has been completed and there is no evidence of match-fixing against any player," inquiry committee chief Ijaz Butt told AFP.

He said details of the committee's report would be submitted to PCB chief Nasim Ashraf next week.

The committee interviewed nearly 40 players, officials and retired PCB functionaries during its two-week hearing.

Butt also rejected a claim by former PCB chairman Shaharyar Khan, who said in March that parts of international cricket matches are fixed and the practice known as "spot-fixing" happens on a regular basis.

"There is no evidence of any targeted match-fixing and Shaharyar's statement was found to be incorrect," Butt said.

The fixing allegations intensified in the wake of the murder of Pakistan coach Bob Woolmer hours after the defeat to Ireland.

Pakistan lost their opening match to the West Indies by 54 runs before a humiliating three-wicket defeat at the hands of debutants Ireland sent them crashing out of the World Cup on March 17.

Butt also criticised Pakistan media manager Pervez Mir for accusing the team of focusing on their devotion to Islam, instead of concentrating on the game.

"It was a stupid statement from P.J. Mir," Butt told reporters after the hearing in Islamabad."

FACTFILE

AFP, Bridgetown

Brian Lara factfile after the West Indies captain confirmed his international retirement on Thursday:

Full name: Brian Charles Lara
Born: May 2, 1969, Cantaro, Santa Cruz, Trinidad

Age: 37
Major teams: West Indies, ICC World XI, Northern Transvaal, Trinidad, Tobago, Warwickshire

Batting style: Left-hand bat

TEST MATCH CAREER (debut v Pakistan, Lahore, Dec 6-11, 1990)

Matches: 131

Innings: 232

Notouts: 6

Runs: 11,953

Highest score: 400 not out

Average: 52.88

100s: 34

50s: 48

Fours: 1,559

Sixes: 88

Catches: 164

ONE-DAY CAREER (debut v Pakistan, Karachi, Nov 9, 1990)

Matches: 298

Innings: 288

Notout: 32

Runs: 10,387

Highest score: 169

Average: 40.57

100s: 19

50s: 63

Fours: 1,032

Sixes: 133

Catches: 120

Lara divides opinion

Cricket

AFP, Bridgetown

Former greats on Friday paid glowing tributes to retiring batting genius Brian Lara, saying he leaves behind a great legacy.

But the praise was tinged with regret over his failures as captain of a declining team.

The record-setting left-hander announced he would retire from international cricket after his team's last World Cup match against England here on Saturday, bringing to an end a 17-year stay on the frontline which has had its fair share of ups and downs.

"I am bidding farewell to international cricket," said Lara on Thursday, ending speculation he was about to be replaced as captain for next month's tour of England, a trip for which he may not even have been selected as a player.

Former bowling great Wes Hall was surprised over Lara's sudden decision despite the 37-year-old having already announced he would retire from one-day cricket after the World Cup but would continue to play Tests.

"I am lost for words, it's unex-

pected," said Hall.

"He was a great servant to West Indies cricket. His legacy is fantastic, a great batsman, 400 in a Test, 501 in first-class cricket, I mean it's a big legacy," added Hall, also an ex-president of the West Indies Cricket Board.

Trinidadian Lara holds the world records for Test and first-class scores.

He smashed an unbeaten 400 against England in the Antigua Test in 2004 and an unbeaten 501 for Warwickshire against Durham in the English county championship in 1994.

He is the highest scorer in Tests with 11,953 runs in 131 matches with 34 centuries and the fifth-highest in one-dayers with 10,387 in 298 games.

Hall's new-ball partner Charlie Griffith agreed Lara was a genius.

"He leaves behind a strong legacy and a lot of players will have to work really hard to fill his shoes," said Griffith.

Former opener and a teammate of Lara, Philo Wallace said Lara's retirement was a great loss.

Ramnaresh Sarwan, tipped to take over as new West Indies captain, praised Lara's mental strength.

"Lara is a very strong man. He has come under a lot of scrutiny but his mental strength stands out," said Sarwan, who has been Lara's

deputy since 2003.

But despite acclaiming his stature, some of his most vociferous critics accused Lara of prolonging his career.

"Lara stayed on for longer than he should have, and now it's time to thank him and look forward," said former fast bowler Michael Holding.

"He had a great career, but of course, a lot of times his captaincy was questioned."

Holding's teammate Joel Garner agreed Lara's leadership left a lot to be desired.

Lara's only meaningful piece of silverware as national skipper came with the 2004 ICC Champions Trophy.

It is his decision (to retire) and I can't say it's wrong. A captain can only be judged by his success record and that's not good in his case. Now we have to take drastic steps to carry West Indies cricket forward," said Garner.

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Wes Hall's new-ball partner Charlie

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Wes Hall's new-ball partner Charlie

Akram to train Pak pacers

AFP, Lahore

Pakistani bowling legend and former captain Wasim Akram is to help train fast bowlers for the national team, the Pakistan Cricket Board said Friday.

Wasim, Pakistan's leading wicket-taker who retired in 2003, will supervise a special two-week camp in the eastern city of Lahore from mid-May, board spokesman Ahsan Malik told AFP.

Wasim's decision comes after new Pakistan captain Shoaib Malik said he wanted to emulate him and it will boost Pakistan's efforts to recover after their dismal World Cup.

"Peter has been identified for some time as a leading candidate as a future England head coach," said ECB chief executive David Collier.

The 44-year-old coached Sussex to their first County Championship title in 2003 and took charge of the National Academy in 2005.

He has coached England A and worked with most of the current England team but has neither played nor managed a team at the highest level.

It was thought his main rivals for

Moores to replace Fletcher

Cricket

BBCONLINE, undated

England have named Peter Moores as the permanent successor to departing head coach Duncan Fletcher.

Moores, currently the National Cricket Academy director, will start on May 1.

The appointment comes less than a day after Fletcher decided to step down after eight years in the role following England's exit from the World Cup.

"Peter has been identified for some time as a leading candidate as a future England head coach," said ECB chief executive David Collier.

The chairman contacted Wasim today and invited him over to help Pakistan cricket and we are very happy that he has volunteered to help," he said.

"Wasim has offered all-out support to the Pakistan team to

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the job were Sri Lanka's Tom Moody, Bangladesh's Dav Whatmore and New Zealand's John Bracewell -- who all have experience at the top level.

But Moores said: "It is an honour

to have been appointed as head coach and to succeed Duncan, who has been an outstanding coach of the England team.

"The challenge of this new role excites me and I look forward to meeting up with the players on their

return to the United Kingdom and to leading England to success in both Test and one-day cricket."

Collier added: "The ECB has developed a contingency and succession plan for all key management positions and this is part of that."

"Peter is highly respected as an innovative and inspiring coach and is an ideal person to accept this appointment."

"In addition to the preparation of the Test team for the npower Test series versus the West Indies in four weeks' time, Peter will also commence the important work of preparing a new strategy for one-day cricket."

The appointment was wholeheartedly backed by former England and Middlesex bowler Angus Fraser, who said: "We used to watch Sussex prepare enviously because Peter was in charge."

"They have become the dominant force in county cricket. A lot of that is down to structures Peter put in place. He is a very good man to do the job."

That view was endorsed by

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