Who is the Greatest of Them All?

REHMAN SOBHAN tries to resolve the oldest argument in cricket

SITTING in the lounge of the Fulbari resort in Pokhara, Nepal, overlooked by the magnificent Annapurna mountain range, we watched Sachin Tendulkar, on a widescreen TV put the South African attack to the sword, en route to his record breaking unbeaten double century.

Our watching was unfortunately episodic, as we were in Pokhara to attend a board meeting of the South Asia Centre for Policy Studies, and our chairman, rather unhistorically, demanded a more regular attendance from us at the meeting. We, however, saw enough of Tendulkar, in full cry, to inspire me to revisit the age-old question amongst cricket lovers: Who is the greatest batsman of them all?

The Bradman Legend

To the cricket aficionado this may seem a rather redundant question. Sir Donald Bradman, the Don, was without question the greatest batsman of all time. He scored a record 29 centuries in test cricket in 52 matches and retired at the end of the fifth test at the Oval in the summer of 1948 with a test average of 99.94.

He had needed just four runs, when he went into bat in his last test at the Oval, to attain the magical average of 100. But as luck would have it, Eric Hollies, a rather mediocre leg spinner, who played for Warwickshire, bowled him for a duck. The Don could have redressed this joke on history in the second innings but the all-conquering Australians won the match against England by an innings, bringing to an end their historic tour of England with an unbeaten record.

Many have rated the 1948 Australia test team, led by the Don, as the greatest Australian team of all time. Other batting greats such as Sid Barnes and Arthur Morris, the opening pair, Lindsay Hasset and the brilliant left hander Neil Harvey who at 18 was making his debut in test cricket, backed up the Don at the crease.

This formidable batting line up was followed by the dashing and handsome Keith Miller, perhaps one of the greatest all rounders of all time, who could score a century as fast as he could bowl in partnership with one of the all time great fast bowlers, Ray Lindwall. I rate Miller who was also a brilliant slip fieldsman, as a superior version of Ian Botham, who was perhaps the leading all rounder of his generation.

In his time, when Bradman was invested with the accolade of the greatest batsman of all time, the distinction was challenged by the old timers, who spoke with reverence of W.G. Grace, who practiced his trade as a doctor and batsman in Gloucestershire in the late 19th century. Later this title was passed on to the Australian opening batsman, Victor Trumper, who was Neville Cardus' favourite. The mantle then fell on Jack Hobbs, the elegant opening batsman who was the mainstay of England's batting line up in the 1920s.

But at the end of the day, in the pre-World War II era, no one could remotely approach Bradman's capacity for accumulating runs against all types of bowlers, on all sorts of pitches, with such consistency and speed. Bradman, was not as handsome in his stroke play as Victor Trumper, Ranjitsinghji, or Hobbs. But Bradman could score fast and is the only batsmen to score 300 runs in a single day of test cricket.

I have never had the privilege of watching Bradman bat, except in rather poor quality black and white videos of his career, where you can get a glimpse of his economical, yet efficient batting style. The first time we could hear if not see Bradman in action, was during England's tour of Australia in the winter of 1946-47. The English team, led by Walter Hammond, who was Bradman's closest rival in the 1930s to the title of leading batsmen, had a strong batting side, with Len Hutton, his opening partner Cyril Washbrook, Dennis Compton, and Bill Edrich.

But their bowling line up was weak, with Alec Bedser, a medium fast seam bowler, as the only quality bowler. The English attack was slaugh-