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Unity through Sport
The Case of the West Indies
Cricket Team

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“The impeccable manners of the Long Room at Lord’s do not reduce the desire to win which unites Londoners, Yorkshire men and Lancastrians. No one doubts they are Englishmen willing their side to victory. This is not even an occasion for comment since they pay taxes to the same government. On the other hand, over there in the bleachers, the people come from separate sovereign territories. Perhaps only when the cricket team is playing do they become West Indians and totally identified with the team and so with each other.”

Michael Manley A History of West Indies Cricket

Despite the recognition that the lands of the Americas were not the Indies Columbus and the other 15th century explorers were searching for, the name ‘West Indies’ continues to be used to refer to English-speaking states in the Caribbean region. The West Indian states include all the Caribbean countries that were once colonies of England. Most of these states are islands; Guyana and Belize are the only two countries situated on the South American mainland. All of them share a history of British plantation society. It is easy to assume that because of their similar experience as sugar plantation colonies there would be many similarities and shared institutions among the West Indian states, but it is just the opposite. Despite the evidence that the West Indian states can achieve far more politically, socially and economically if they assemble as a single unit, almost every regional West Indian organization has failed. Beginning with the short lived West Indian federation, the English-speaking Caribbean states have an abysmal record of failed regional organizations. Today, only a few institutions are shared by all the English Caribbean states. The institutions I speak of are the University of the West Indies, the Caribbean Development Bank, CARICOM (the region’s trade organization), and the West Indies Cricket team. Out of these institutions, I argue that the West Indies cricket team is the only organization that truly unites all West Indian people into a single body. The West Indies cricket team is the only international cricket team that represents a group of sovereign states instead of just one. West Indies cricket fans are infamous in the cricket world for being an

incredibly passionate group, and watching and playing cricket is the only time that the Anglo-Caribbean states identify with each other in a shared social experience. It is “the glue that binds the Caribbean together” (Empire of Cricket, 2009). Throughout its history, West Indian cricket inspired inter-island co-operation, as the Caribbean states had to combine their limited economic and political resources in order to be able to compete on an international level. If not for West Indies cricket, organizations like CARICOM and the Association of Caribbean States would have been much slower to organize, because before West Indian cricket there was little to no shared cultural identity among the Caribbean States. Cricket established a unique sense of ‘togetherness’ and that has since led to an increase in tolerance and goodwill within and between Caribbean states. It has also led to more goodwill with other cricket playing nations, namely Australia, England, Pakistan and India. In this essay I will analyze the growth of West Indies Cricket and its connection to the politics and social consciousness in English Caribbean States. I intend to demonstrate that West Indian cricket is more than just a game. It is one of the single most important contributors to Anglo-Caribbean unity, and has also played a significant role in encouraging tolerance in the British Commonwealth.

History of the Caribbean Desegregation

Although the Anglo-Caribbean states are often grouped into one category, there are many factors that differentiate them. Writing in the 1950s, David Lowenthal stated “heterogeneity, not uniformity, is the hallmark of the West Indies” (Lowenthal, 1958). Geographically, the landscape of each state is different. Jamaica for example has low lying areas and mountainous areas, while Barbados is almost totally flat. Much of the land in Barbados has been formed from limestone, while volcanic activity is responsible for forming St Lucia (Lowenthal, 1958). Some islands have many rivers, some have black sand beaches, and others white sand beaches, and so

on. In each island, geography has influenced the agriculture and infrastructure. For example while Barbados' flat land was suitable for planting sugar cane and expanding residential and commercial buildings, Dominica's mountainous landscape only allowed for small-scale banana farming and limited housing (Brereton, 2004). It is important to note these geographical differences because they affected the pace of development in each island. Islands like Trinidad, Jamaica, and Barbados developed far more quickly than the other islands because of their abundance in petroleum, bauxite and sugar respectively (Manley, 1995). They attracted more investment and attention from the colonial mother and so their social structure was more heavily influenced by British social culture. Barbados in particular has a reputation for adhering closely to English lifestyle traditions (Lowenthal, 1958). So among the colonies there were varying degrees of British cultural and social traditions. Geography then, helped to determine the social norms in each island.

The Anglo-Caribbean states are also ethnically diverse. The population in all of the states is predominantly black, as many of the inhabitants are the descendants of African slaves. In Guyana and Trinidad, however, a significant number of the population descends from East Indian indentured labourers who were brought in to work on the plantations after slavery ended (Brereton, 2004). There are also descendants of Chinese indentured workers, and Lebanese and Syrian traders in many of the smaller island states. Of course, there were a small number of whites in every state, descended from the planter class and ruling colonial governors. Finally in St Vincent and Dominica, there are descendants of the aboriginal Kalinago (also known as Carib) people who occupied the region before the arrival of the Europeans. All of these groups practise cultural traditions from their ancestors, and for many years there was limited ethnic integration. Furthermore the colonial governors openly encouraged a social class system based

on segregation by race. The racist class structure encouraged animosity between groups. In Guyana, Jamaica and Trinidad especially, ethnic clashes often led to violence.

Even in the class structure, each island is different. Although the white representatives in each island remained at the top of the social class, the status of the other racial groups was different in each colony. In Barbados for example, blacks were treated far worse than their counterparts in Dominica. In Trinidad, East Indians were usually relegated to a low occupational status with many of them being small shop owners, while in Guyana prejudice against East Indians was much stronger. Jamaican-Chinese descendants were almost totally excluded from the middle class, and they in turn scorned the black agricultural peasants who occupied the lowest social class (Brereton, 2004).

Clearly Anglo-Caribbean social desegregation was a direct product of British colonialism. British plantation society was enforced through social institutions and it was not until the 1930s that the status quo was seriously challenged by trade unions and universal adult suffrage groups. Nevertheless each class was deeply entrenched in their respective social practices. On a typical Sunday afternoon, for example, each group had a different tradition; tea, tennis, and cricket for upper class whites, bridge for the mixed middle classes, family and community gatherings for the blacks and east Indians. Most times, each group practised their tradition separately and without interference from the other. However there were a few instances where different racial and class groups would intersect. Cricket was one of these.

The Rise of West Indian Cricket

According to Hilary Beckles, Professor of Cricket Studies at the University of the West Indies, cricket in the Caribbean began as the white man's sport. Black slaves were not allowed to play. However the slave masters would often use their slaves to retrieve stray balls, or balls

hit into the bushes and cane fields (Empire of Cricket, 2009). This practice continued after slavery, and the white upper class often had their black or East Indian servants bowl to them or act as fielders. In this way blacks and East Indians were able to observe and learn the game for themselves. Although they were never actually allowed to bat with white upperclassmen, they could bat while play among themselves. The game spread throughout the colonies, helped along by the fact that playing the game was one way to emulate the white upper classes. West Indian middle and lower classes often tried to adopt traditions of the upper class in order to be more British (Manley, 1995). It was a commonly held view that British traditions were superior to everything else, so those who had the resources tried their best to adopt British styles and traditions in an attempt to be more British.

However, the cricket that developed in the middle and lower classes lacked what many upper class whites noted as a ‘finesse’ that came with learning the game correctly (Manley, 1995). This was hardly surprising, as the lower classes never had any professional training or formal instruction. They did not even play on correctly measured pitches. They played in street corners, in dirt roads, and anywhere else where land was available. Often the terrain and surroundings influenced their style of play and they had to develop new techniques. For example children playing in the streets of Jamaica had to avoid hitting the ball into the windows of the surrounding ghettos. They therefore developed a low hitting style that kept the ball towards the ground (Empire of Cricket, 2009). Upper class onlookers were not above sneering at what they perceived as a “crude” approach to cricket, but it was this “crude” approach that would eventually produce some of the most trendsetting cricketers in the world (Manley, 1995).

From the late 1800s to the early 1900s, the game of cricket spread in every West Indian colony. Cricket clubs were formed by upper class whites and the mixed middle class. Although

whites excluded the lower classes from joining the clubs, they were not above recognizing talent in certain players. Therefore when an international cricket team was formed comprising of members from the different West Indian colonies, the team was primarily white with one or two blacks (Manley, 1995). In 1928 the West Indies team was accorded test status, that is, they qualified to play cricket test matches with England and Australia. In those early days only the most talented blacks were allowed to play on the team, and they brought with them an aggressive yet stylish approach. These first blacks made an indelible impression.

The first of these memorable players was Learie Constantine, a black Trinidadian from the lower-middle class. His father had also been a cricket player and both men had learned to play the sport on unkempt grounds, using makeshift or poor quality bats, balls and wickets. They therefore became accustomed to playing according to instinct, as opposed to textbook calculation. Michael Manley notes that Constantine's style of batting with instinct, exuberance and energy was a dramatic departure from the calculated grace of the English batting style, but just as effective. The all-white team welcomed Constantine, whose unusual style confounded opposing team bowlers (Manley, 1995). George Headley was similarly welcomed, because of his excellence at batting. At the mere age of twenty, Headley scored over a hundred runs (a century in cricket terms) in a test match, making him the youngest player at the time to score a century. And he was a black Jamaican, from the working class.

Upon his return to the West Indies Headley was regarded as a hero among the lower classes and blacks. He was living proof of the promise of black success and as news of his feat spread around the colonies, more black lower class players were emboldened. Learie Constantine and George Headley were key factors in the early wins of the West Indies cricket team. They had entered the white man's realm and proved themselves more than worthy. The white upper

classes who controlled the selection of the cricket players recognized that there was a latent talent, and slowly began to move towards cultivating it. They could tolerate black players, so long as those players would help the team win. Cricket therefore led to an increase in relations between whites and blacks, as the formerly all-white cricket clubs began to admit more and more blacks. But more importantly, the black and coloured masses connected with the black players in a way they never could with the other white players on the team. In cricket, they had discovered an area where their skin colour would not determine how far they could proceed, and all black and coloured West Indians from Jamaica to Guyana, relished this. Constantine and Headley were not just heroes for Trinidad and Jamaica; they were heroes for all West Indians of all social classes. These heroes emerged at a time when the idea of a black excellence was taking root in the Caribbean.

In the 1920s and 1930s the Caribbean was undergoing a period of social change. The depression had taken its toll on the colonies and there was widespread poverty. Furthermore, the lower classes were becoming increasingly frustrated with their limited social rights. Michael Manley writes “in 1928 the black masses of the Caribbean had no vote in a political system largely transplanted from Britain” (Manley, 1995). Trade unions began to form and the middle classes and black scholars began to put pressure on the British governors. The colonies were moving towards independence, slowly but surely. The early independence advocates recognized that independence would come quicker if all of the colonies were united in their efforts, but yet they lacked a clear “sense of direction of means to unity” (Manley, 1995). The colonies after all had very little economic exchange with each other and were acutely aware of their social and cultural differences. Nevertheless the region’s leaders were “responding to the logic of the argument that so many small territories would do better in combination than they could hope to

do separately” (Manley, 1995). The British government also warmed to the idea of dealing with “one West Indian government rather than eleven or twelve” (Manley, 1995). And so the West Indian colonies began to prepare for a West Indian federation.

Black and Coloured Caribbean political leaders and intellectuals were becoming increasingly prominent in the 1930, 40s and 50s. These men and women were an integral part of the founding stages of the federation, and many of them were cricket supporters. Interestingly enough, the leaders found themselves singularly united in their efforts to include more black players in the West Indies cricket team (Manley, 1995). On the other hand, they could not agree on the location of a capital for the West Indies Federation (Lowenthal, 1958).

The West Indies Federation was doomed to failure, mostly because the colonies found they often disagreed on social and political issues. Jamaica and Trinidad were particularly anti-Federation because they felt that in comparison with the other colonies, their economies were far more developed. They feared that the smaller colonies would be an added weight to their economic troubles.

Inter-island prejudices did not help. In each colony were stereo-typical thoughts about other colonies. For example Bajans (Barbadians) considered most Jamaicans aggressive and uncouth, Trinidadians considered Bajans to be stoic and British copycats, and Jamaica, Trinidad and Barbados all thought of the smaller islanders as ignorant and far less educated than themselves (Lowenthal, 1958). Generally West Indians were intolerant of one another, and the Federation brought all of this to the forefront.

But while the Federation crumbled, the West Indian cricket team continued to play on. As previously mentioned, West Indian political leaders and scholars were at least in agreement as far as cricket was concerned; they worked as a single body in order to ensure the appointment

of Frank Worrell the first black captain of the West Indies cricket team (Manley, 1995). One of the first people to express public support for Worrell as captain was Gerry Alexander the former captain of the team. Worrell's appointment was a sign that in the West Indian cricket world, a player could rise in prominence because of skill and merit, as opposed to race and class. It was also a sign of a growing camaraderie between white and black sportsmen. The appointment of the first black captain was a significant turning point in the cricket world because it demonstrated a more tolerant cricket selection board. As captain, Worrell assembled a diverse team with blacks, whites and east Indians that eventually went on to win a series of matches. This in turn led to more support for the sport, as the black masses could clearly see that cricket was slowly breaking away from the system of racially entrenched privilege that had denied them social and economic mobility for so long. For West Indians, the cricket team became synonymous with West Indian pride, nationalism and integrity.

In the fifties the team enjoyed many successes including a tie with the formidable Australian cricket team. The West Indies cricket team became a source of pride for many West Indians, especially as more and more black and East Indian players joined the team. Cricket was becoming an area in which coloured people excelled, and all West Indians could agree on this. It was one of the few ways they could stand on par with whites. At least on the cricket pitch everyone was equal, and West Indians perceived their cricket team's victories as a challenge to the Empire. As technology made it easier to communicate between the colonies, it was not uncommon for different islanders to have exciting conversations about their favourite players and test matches. The West Indies cricket board was very careful to select players based on skill, and so most of the Caribbean states were represented. The 'Windies', as the cricket team

became known, represented all of the Caribbean countries, and this inspired a Caribbean fellowship.

In the 1960s and 1970s most of the colonies gained their independence. It was an era of nationalism and black pride (Manley, 1995). The players on the West Indies team were woefully underpaid, but played on. The support from their West Indian supporters was invaluable at this point. Many West Indians had migrated to England after World War II, and were able to attend games in England. In the 1970s and 1980s, the West Indian cricket supporters were easily distinguishable with their drums, conch shells and whistles, and the term ‘calypso cricket’ was used to describe the team and their players alike. In their section on the stands were representatives from ten countries; Jamaica, Antigua & Barbuda, St Kitts and Nevis, Dominica, St Lucia, St Vincent & the Grenadines, Grenada, Barbados, Trinidad & Tobago Guyana and Belize. The flags of each sovereign Caribbean nation were flown in the bleachers, but the chant of the crowd seldom exalted any one Caribbean nation.

The players themselves encouraged unity despite coming from the different islands. Captain Clive Lloyd deliberately requested that no two players from the same country should room together (Empire of Cricket, 2009). His successor, Vivian Richards, continued this tradition. The result was a camaraderie that was projected unto and shared by their supporters. Even the cricket board shared this insistence on fellowship; they deliberately organized cricket matches in the different islands every time matches were to be played on home soil. Antigua, Grenada, Trinidad and Jamaica all became cricket sites, and during match season airlines and boat ferries gave discounted prices to West Indians in order to travel to the island where the match would be held. In almost every aspect, West Indies cricket had become the unifier of the West Indian people.

The Impact of West Indian Cricket

It is hardly surprising that cricket was able to inspire unity in the West Indies. Sport has long played an important role in both ancient and modern societies, and is one of the first areas where racial equality takes effect. The old question of whether it is the chicken or the egg that comes first is relevant to sport as well; does sport inspire tolerance or does tolerance lead to racial and ethnic equality in sport? In the case of the West Indies I argue that cricket goes both ways; it inspired tolerance and its continued development is due to an increase in tolerance among West Indian people. Special Advisor to the United Nations Secretary-General on Sport for Development and Peace notes that sport “can make a difference where other means have failed” (LEMKE, 2009). This is because sport brings “hope where there is only despair” (LEMKE, 2009). Cricket in the West Indies developed during a time of heightened social and racial tension. The sport itself was an export of the empire and when first brought to the Caribbean was another means of distinguishing the white upper class from the black and brown lower classes. Cricket was exported to the colonies and it was said to embody all the aspects of the classic learned white Englishman and could only be mastered by an Englishman (Manning, 1981). Yet the sport was co-opted and redefined until eventually becoming one of the most important tools in the decolonisation and black pride movements. For when West Indians (and Britain’s other colonial subjects) proved they could surpass the Englishmen at cricket, did that not prove they could be equals with their colonial masters? During the decolonisation period, cricket and politics were intertwined. It was the “hope” of many West Indians during the “despair” of colonialism.

CLR James, a Trinidadian intellectual, published *Beyond a Boundary*, a memoir on cricket. In the book, James argued that cricket was more than just a game, and what happened

on the cricket pitch affected life beyond it. He was of course referring to the social and political changes occurring in the empire and argued that cricket was an important contributor to the decolonisation movement and racial equality movement. He wrote that cricket players “played representative roles which were charged with social significance”, so important was cricket to British colonial life (Beyond a Boundary, 1965). The sport contributed to the breakdown of the West Indies class system, and challenged racism in a non-violent way. Cricket mirrored the West Indians emerging as a proud, capable people. It was especially important in the lives of West Indians who had migrated to England in the 1950s and 1960s (Empire of Cricket, 2009). In England, they experienced intense racial discrimination, especially heightened because they were a visible minority. Every-time the West Indies Cricket team played in England, the West Indian migrants living there were encouraged and inspired. Cricket imbued them with a sense of self-worth and West Indian pride. The dominance of the West Indies cricket team during the 1980s also contributed to Englishmen acknowledging West Indians as powerful, and worthy sportsmen. Although there were many in English society that resented the West Indies cricket team, especially because the ‘Windies’ defeated the English team for over ten straight years, many other sections of the English public who loved and celebrated cricket expressed support and admiration for the ‘Windies’ (Manley, 1995). Several West Indian players received honours and awards from the English government. Garfield Sobers and Viv Richards were both knighted by the Queen for their contributions to the development of cricket. Many West Indian players were recruited to play for clubs in England and this helped to further dispel racial prejudice in England.

Concluding Remarks

Clearly, sport has always carried a capacity to inspire nationalism and pride, especially in the 20th century (Sheed, 1995). This is exactly the case with cricket in the West Indies. No other sport established such a great following in the West Indies, mostly because of the importance of cricket during the colonial and decolonisation period. The West Indies cricket team worked alongside local politicians and scholars to encourage the decolonisation movement and to break down the social and class prejudices that had existed in the Caribbean for over one hundred years. I argue that cricket has done more for promoting West Indian unity and goodwill than any other product of the Caribbean. Unlike reggae music, Carnival shows and competitions which are specific to individual Caribbean countries, cricket is the one thing that incorporates all the West Indian sovereign states. This is especially important to some of the smaller, lesser known Caribbean islands like Dominica, St Vincent and St Lucia who lack the resources to participate in other international sports.

Furthermore the personal struggles of West Indian cricketers have become part of Caribbean history, as these men challenged the status quo, broke down barriers of race and class, as they opted to play not for money, but pride and self-worth. The West Indian cricket team succeeded where other regional organizations had failed, because the players were able to take a British game and reorganize it with a West Indian flair. This is far more difficult to do with other inherited British institutions, like the Westminster government or school system. It is far easier for men to unify in their joy of a sport, than in a political federation or trade organization, precisely because the latter encourage national competition and individualism. West Indian style of play entertained and delighted English, Australian, and South African crowds, and won the (begrudging) respect of men who once regarded blacks as uncivilized and subhuman. I

believe that it shows the capacity of man to unite through sport, and to rise above prejudice and racism. For countries that lack any other means to be on an equal footing with more developed countries, sport is one of the ways they can win glory. And for the West Indies, “only when the cricket team is playing do they become West Indians and totally identified with the team and so with each other” (Manley, 1995).

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