

Searching for young, black cricketers

The recent mini resurgence of West Indies cricket, brought about by the unexpected success of the regional team against England, has triggered renewed interest in the game in the UK amongst the older generation of West Indians.

However young, black, Afro Caribbean boys appear not to follow the team or the game and this is of some concern in the cricket loving diaspora. **Barbados TODAY** went in search of the reasons why the game appears to be dying in the hearts of young black Caribbean boys.

The Afro Caribbean Cricket Association, (ACCA) founded and led by former Guyana and Surrey County club wicketkeeper Lonsdale Skinner and his colleague Derek Gift-Simms, was formed in 2013 after they observed that young black boys were not seen in numbers in cricket circles for many years.

Let Skinner take up the story: "It worried me that there were very few, if any, homegrown black cricketers on the county circuit. Therefore, I decided that I would bring awareness to the community and its authorities by founding the ACCA to bring a structured programme in an effort to introduce the game to our young men."

Skinner was appalled to find that the England Cricket Board (ECB) did not have a public awareness of this gap and furthermore, there was no representation for the black community on any of their committees.

He continued, "The old clichés were used to explain this omission. Authorities and pundits alike put out the story that young Caribbean boys were not interested in the game. Indeed, it was felt by them that the boys did not even like the game and therefore were not prepared to be engaged in it."

Perhaps Skinner's view of the Board's passiveness can be supported by the fact that contrastingly, figures for young Asian cricketers playing the game in the UK were known whilst there were none in relation to black players and teams.

Skinner said he will not be deterred in his



efforts to right an imbalance in the system and it is his dream to see young black men again grace the playing fields on the English County circuit. In his endeavours, he is supported by former Worcestershire and West Indies opening batsman, Ron Headley, son of the legendary and great Jamaican and West Indies batsman George Headley. Headley also feels young Caribbean boys are excluded and pigeon-holed and he believes that the concept of the ACCA is a laudable one. He added that it should be supported by former first class black players who currently reside in England.

The Surrey man who emigrated to the UK in 1962 with his parents told me that in

following Headley's line, he has been able to get the promised assistance of Philip De Freitas (Leicestershire and England), Chris Lewis (Surrey and England) and Mark Alleyne (Gloucestershire and England) but he is anxious that many more former black players will join the crusade.

But, I asked, how do you reach the young men? He replied, "We need to generate the interest of the parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles. The legacies of Sir Garfield Sobers, Sir Vivian Richards, the late Malcolm Marshall and many others should not be allowed to drift away untapped like some rudderless boat. These former players should be profiled as reasons why

our young black men should want to play cricket. They are our heroes, they have helped to build small nations and I would hope there are young Caribbean boys out there who would want to emulate these fine cricketers."

Warming to his theme, Skinner pointed out that it is a near fallacy that Caribbean youths are playing football to the exclusion of other sports.

He said, "We see many black footballers on our television screens, but on close examination it can be seen that they are predominantly from the African continent and West Europe. Few have Caribbean roots."

I prodded further because the challenge he is undertaking, on the face of it, appears improbable to achieve given the current state of the communities in the UK. I suggested possible reasons such as (1) There is little or no cricket being played in the state schools where most black boys are educated. (2) Facilities to play privately are depleted almost to the point of being zero rated. (3) Most black cricket clubs founded in the sixties and seventies are now defunct.

Skinner did not see these as valid reasons for the absence of young Caribbean men and said, "Currently 30-35 per cent of people playing below the level of county cricket are from the Asian community. Surely, we can raise the level of Caribbean participants through a concerted effort by all cricket loving Caribbean people."

The Surrey Cricket Foundation, a Charity of the Surrey County Cricket Club, has been very supportive of the ACCA and provides coaching facilities for any young and promising black player. However, in the final analysis, this is a project that requires the backing of the black community. A cry has gone out for referrals to the ACCA of boys who show interest in playing cricket.

Finally, the president said, "The ACCA needs to achieve its aim to prevent cricket from dying in the black communities across the country. All support is welcome and people are invited to join us at our website www.africanaribbeancricket.com."

The Association has arranged a day for young aspirants to showcase their skills on July 28, 2019, at the South Hampstead Cricket Club, Willesden NW10. Surely, it's a date that should be kept in your diaries.

I can think of few worthier causes that deserve your support.

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