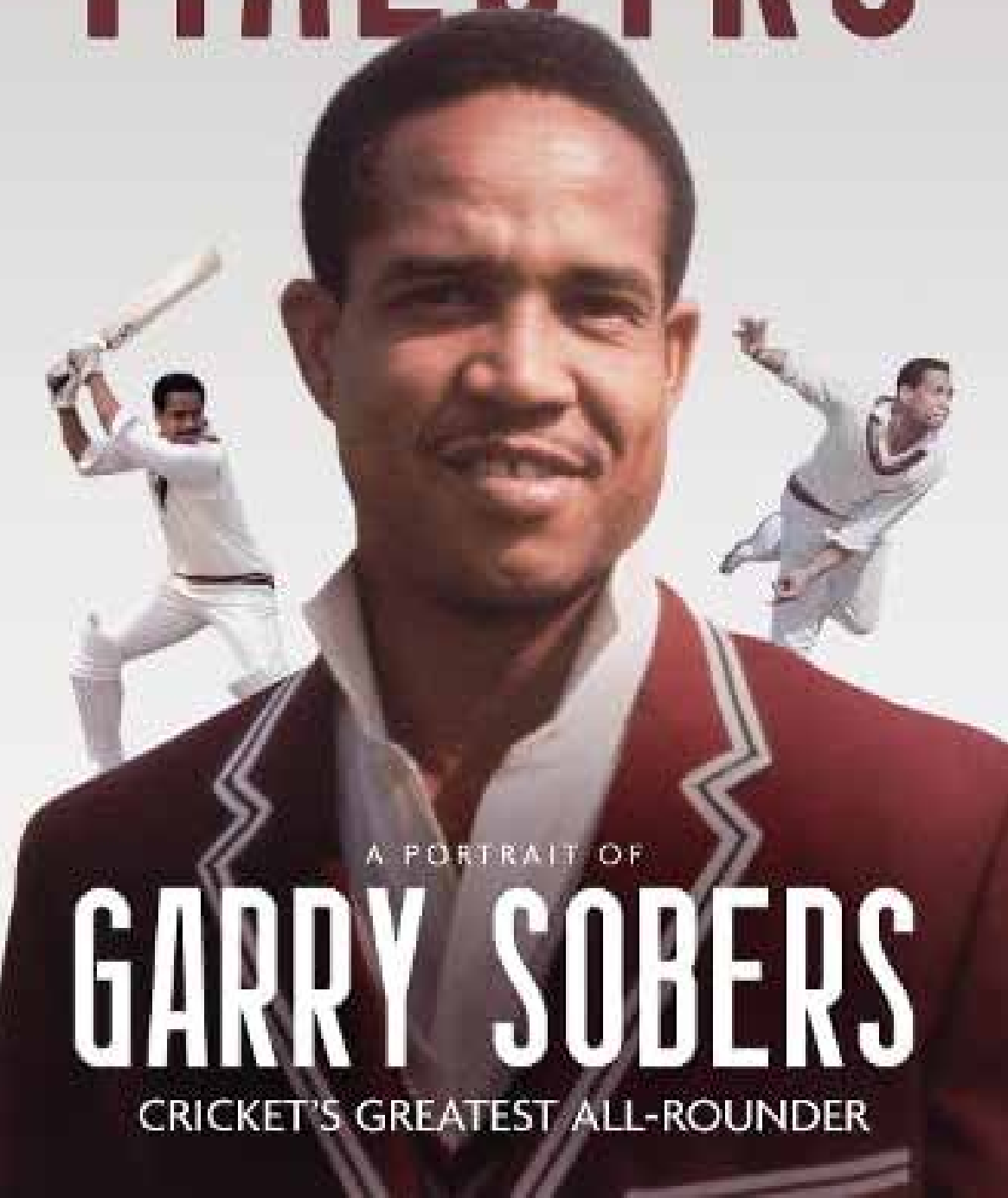
DAVID TOSSELL

MAESTRO



A PORTRAIT OF

GARRY SOBERS

CRICKET'S GREATEST ALL-ROUNDER

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CONTENTS

1

LIFE AFTER DEATH: BOY FROM THE BAY

'There are few successful adults who were not first successful children.'

American author Alexander Chase

THE SPOTLIGHTS pierced the dark Atlantic waters, shooting ominously from the silhouette of the submarine and finding their mark on the hull of SS *Lady Hawkins*. The ship's carpenter, William Burton, was the first to spot the German U-boat poised for its deadly strike. 'It was a big one,' he said. 'It came up about 100 yards off us and just lay there with two white lights on us.'[1]

An 8,000-ton steam turbine ocean liner, part of the Canadian merchant navy fleet in the Caribbean, *Lady Hawkins* was one of a group of ships built in the 1920s to carry mail, passengers and perishable cargo. It had set off from Montreal for Bermuda earlier in the month and was carrying 2,900 tons of cargo; vital provisions that Germany and its Second World War allies knew would be badly missed if they failed to reach their destination.

It was only five days since the Panamanian tanker *Norness* had been sunk by two torpedoes 60 miles off Long Island, marking the beginning of a campaign of similar attacks on passenger and cargo ships that would see German submarines sink 12 vessels in the Atlantic in little over two weeks, costing almost 350 lives.

Blacked out, but unescorted and possessing only one small gun, *Lady Hawkins* had been ordered by Captain Huntley Giffin to follow a zig-zagging course to make it more difficult to track and hit. It was 150 nautical miles off North Carolina's Cape Hatteras when, at around 2 a.m. local time on 19 January 1942, Burton made his sighting.

Most of the 212 passengers and 109 crew were in their cabins and quarters, among them General Servant Shamont Sobers, a 34-year-old father of six from Barbados. A handsome man, good at sport and leader of a YMCA scout troop, Shamont was known for his zest for life and for always being well dressed. Awaiting his return after this voyage were his wife, Thelma, and a brood of offspring whose four boys included a five-year-old known as Garry.

Barely a minute elapsed after Burton's discovery before Korvettenkapitän Robert-Richard Zapp, commander of IXC class submarine U-66, gave the order to fire. A stern-launched torpedo exploded into *Lady Hawkins*' number two hold. Bellboy Leo Riveira, another Barbadian, had been asleep alongside a colleague under a table in the first-class dining room, believing it was safer there than in his berth below. 'The ceiling of the dining room started to fall in, so we got up and out of there,' he recalled.

The ship began to keel over, throwing everyone on deck into the sea. Lights went out, leaving passengers and crew to begin a panic-stricken grope towards the upper deck, the stench of cordite burning their nostrils. Then a second torpedo ripped into hold number three, continuing its course of destruction into the engine room; also taking out two lifeboats. 'We got on to the promenade, but the ship was listing fast, and there was only one lifeboat ready for use,' Riveira continued. 'The chief officer said, "All right, boys, jump for it!" And we did.'[2]

Less than 30 minutes after the first strike, *Lady Hawkins* had sunk. Shamont Sobers perished with it.

It was nine days before the ship's fate was fully understood, when the 21 crew and 50 passengers picked up by New York liner SS *Coamo*[*] – having been adrift in a lifeboat for five days – arrived in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Only then could the families of the 245 victims be told what had happened to their loved ones.

'I remember a messenger coming to our house and my mother Thelma sobbing and crying. She told us that his boat had been torpedoed,' Garry recounted. Initial hopes that another two lifeboats might have made it to safety proved unfounded. 'After a few days and then the weeks passed, we came to realise that Dad would never be coming back.'[3]

The subsequent issue of *Canada-West Indies* magazine announced, 'Shocked by the ruthlessness of this deed, it is only natural that we should cry for vengeance on the cowardly Nazi

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* *Coamo* was sunk by a U-boat attack later in the year off the coast of Ireland, with the loss of all 186 on board.

rat who cold-bloodedly committed this murder. As surely then as night follows day, that submarine commander, here, or in the hereafter must answer … for his act.'

Such sentiment might have been shared by Thelma, but it offered no practical help for a mother whose husband had died while serving in a civilian, rather than military, role. It would not be until 2000, the year before Thelma's death, that the Canadian government announced details of a $50 million compensation package for 7,300 merchant seamen and widows.

* * *

The home where the Sobers family lived, and where Garry was born, was a small, shambling single-storey wooden construction on Walcott's Avenue, a tidy but unaffluent street in Bay Land. Part of the St Michael's parish in the south-west of Barbados, the two-square-mile area had been developed for plantation workers after the abolition of slavery in the region almost a century earlier and its chief claim to fame was rivalling nearby Oistins for the island's largest fish market.

'A depressed place for persons of his origins,' was how Barbadian lawyer and historian Guyson Meyers described it. 'Like most people around him, [Garry] would have been acquainted with poverty and little expectation. Living conditions then were not far removed from what existed a hundred years earlier. Prospects for a significant life were not good for a black boy born in the Bay Land during that period. We know of nothing which would have suggested that the young Garfield

Sobers would have had a life different from what was common for boys like him at that time.'[4]

It did not need any kind of formal policy of apartheid to make the majority black population aware of their status. By the end of the 1930s, not much more than three per cent of the population, most of them white, were eligible to vote, while the vast majority of white-collar jobs were closed off to the black community. Charlie Griffith, born in Barbados two years after Sobers and destined to become a West Indies team-mate, recalled that 'life was simple and uncomplicated'. But he added, 'Opportunities were few and horizons seemed very restricted. No one ever dared look beyond the next meal or the bare necessities of life.'[5]

Since the 1920s, Barbados's population had been expanding, economics having reversed the trend for workers to head to the United States and South America for greater opportunities. But wages were now failing to keep pace with the cost of living as the worldwide depression reached its shores. In 1937, the year after Garry's birth, 14 people on the island were killed and 47 injured in protests and rioting that was mirrored throughout the Caribbean. Such events were the spur for Grantley Adams, who had attended Oxford University, to found the Barbados Labour Party.

According to Mary Chamberlain in her historical study of Barbados:

> The Great Depression of the 1930s had hit the West Indies like a hurricane, devastating the already

> precarious national economies in its wake and with it the even more precarious household economies of its workers. Migration – the great safety valve of the region – had come to a standstill. Work was intermittent or non-existent, wages were low, malnutrition rife, housing deplorable. Apart from the privileged few, West Indians were poorly educated and in many cases illiterate. Child labour was common.[6]

In the third decade of a new century much has changed in Bay Land, now known as Bayville. Four-storey apartment blocks have been built in some of the bigger streets; two-bedroom, one-bathroom houses in the neighbourhood can fetch upwards of BD$300,000 (well over £100,000); and Garry's old school in Bay Street became a ministerial building.

But Walcott's Avenue retains enough of its character and construction to make it easy to imagine Garry and his brothers playing on the single-track road or in the narrow passages between brightly painted houses. As you complete a mile's walk north from the Garrison Savannah racetrack, the pink boards of a small general store and the green-painted house at opposite corners of the south end of the street offer a warm welcome to the tentative visitor.

Keith Sandiford, a schoolmate of Garry's, said of Bay Land, 'Its residents shared strong community bonds and a sense of belonging, neighbours were generally very kind and helpful, and crime was rare, probably in part because few of the inhabitants had anything worth stealing. With the exception of a small

number of larger houses with guard dogs, almost all houses were left unlocked.'[7]

Most of the houses have been replaced or modernised over the decades. Garry's status in the sport might not have afforded the luxury to which the modern Test and IPL stars are accustomed, but it did allow Thelma, determined to remain in the family home, to have it extended and updated in stone.

Born on 28 July, 1936, and given the full name Garfield St Aubrun Sobers, the new arrival was Shamont and Thelma's fifth child, after George, Greta, Elise and Gerald. Another son, Cecil, followed. There was even a seventh child, a boy, who died very young. The way the adult Garry would refer to this early brush with tragedy is instructive. Remarkably, he addresses it in his 1988 autobiography with the most jarring of throwaway lines. 'The seventh child died in infancy, the victim of an accident with a kerosene lamp.'[8] No elaboration, no suggestion of the horror it must have inflicted upon his family.

It is indicative of several things: Garry's young age when it happened, of course; the family's preference, hardly untypical of the time, to move forward with stoicism and not to speak of such things; and a lack of curiosity, or need for insight, that would continue to manifest itself throughout Sobers's life – whether analysing the brilliance of his cricket or exploring his background. In discussing the origins of his unusual name, he thought that both Garfield and St Aubrun might have been derived from distant relatives in the US, or 'there was a suggestion I was named after John Garfield, the American actor'. The latter was untrue, given that Garfield had not made

his movie debut at the time of Sobers's birth, nor had he yet adopted his professional surname. 'I do not bother looking into how names were handed down,' Sobers shrugged.[9] Similarly, he believed he was born at 3.30 in the morning, but 'I couldn't tell you. I never troubled to go into it that deeply.'[10]

Shamont's salary as a merchant seaman put his family nowhere near the island's lower-middle class bracket of teachers, policemen and civil servants, but it was higher than the average plantation or domestic worker, the jobs occupied by the majority of his peers. There was rarely spare cash for luxuries, but enough for the necessities. His children were properly clothed and always had full bellies. If they were poor, his family were happy because they knew no different. They were popular figures in the neighbourhood; the sight of the boys playing cricket in the street a familiar one.

Yet Garry's relationship with his father was one of ambivalence. When friend and former opponent Trevor Bailey wrote his 1976 book on Sobers – as much personal memoir as biography – he suggested that Shamont nurtured his sons' cricket and he painted a picture of domestic bliss. 'When home on leave he would spend hours playing with them,' Bailey wrote.[11]

It was true that Sobers senior was a keen sportsman, although football was closer to his heart than cricket, and he would play the latter with his boys alongside their house or on a patch of land behind known as Bay Pasture, then the home of Wanderers Cricket Club. But Garry was fearful enough of his father to describe his death as 'a blessing in disguise'. Garry recalled Shamont as a 'very strict man'. If he and his siblings

were playing in the neighbourhood when news arrived that his father's ship had docked, they would rush home and pretend they had been inside the whole time. 'He didn't like us going outside to play with the other children,' recalled Garry, who didn't understand the reasons at the time and, typically, 'never bothered inquiring as a I grew older'. He said, 'It wasn't the sort of thing to bring up and question my mother about after the tragedy.'[12]

Instead, he got on with enjoying childhood under the less rigid regime of his mother, who, despite early misgivings about letting her sons wander too far from home, was happy for them to be playing cricket outside because at least she knew what they were up to. She even tolerated some indoor games, played with marbles, when darkness brought close of play, although a shot that endangered furniture or ornaments meant instant dismissal. Other sports were staged indoors, even the high jump until one of their friends, Harcourt Lewis, broke a leg.

The trade-off for Thelma's tolerance was to accompany her to church every Sunday, sitting in the same pew at St Paul's Anglican Church and listening to the sermons of the Rev. Barlee, who they nicknamed 'Bup'. Attendance at Sunday school was also required – at least until they were old enough to plead that they had other things to do. According to Sandiford, Bay Land was 'greatly influenced' by its churches and schools, 'all of which placed great emphasis on the value of virtues such as cleanliness, godliness and perseverance'.[13]

Working as many hours as possible because the tiny pension she received for Shamont's death covered only a fraction of

the household outgoings, Thelma – known by friends and family as 'Sobey' – would be described by Garry as doing 'such a magnificent job that we all turned out to be happy and successful'.[14] There was certainly no time, or desire, in her life for another man. Besides, Garry believed her mistrust of how a second husband might treat her children was a deterrent to seeking out new love.

In a tight-knit community, there were always neighbours to lend assistance. Garry spent a lot of time in the home of Goulbourne Cumberbatch. Known as 'Dads' and a dedicated teacher of dominoes, he was the first of several men Sobers would come to acknowledge as father figures. Another, Melvyn Brewster, introduced him to first-class cricket by taking him to Kensington Oval during the MCC tour of 1947/48. 'None of us gave our mother any problems and maybe because of that there were always people outside the family to help her look after us,' Sobers remembered.[15] Misdemeanours rarely extended beyond picking fruit off the trees so that they had something to eat without interrupting games of cricket for meals.

The plentiful local produce and warm climate meant that food and clothes were rarely in short supply. The children left for school with a good breakfast inside them, a packed lunch in their bags and the promise of chicken or fish with rice in the evening. And when oldest brother George, a bright boy whose place at Combermere High School had been earned partly through scholarship and partly through his father's wages, left school at 15 to work as a meter reader for the Barbados Electric Company, the household coffers received a welcome boost.

George would eventually follow his father's path by becoming a seaman. Gerry, too, would spend a short time on ships before going to England to play league cricket. Such career decisions were taken over the protests of Thelma, who had seen the sea claim the life of her husband. The importance of the island's merchant seamen in the family's life was evident when, in late 2023, they gifted the Barbados Museum and Historical Society its collection of press clippings. Presumably compiled by Thelma, tucked among the various pages of Test match reports were newspaper stories of the National Union of Seamen's fight to preserve jobs and achieve better working conditions.

Garry, because of lack of funds and academic achievement, would follow Gerry to Bay Street Boys' School; there was no prospect of taking George's path into a higher level of learning. Cecil would also attend Bay Street, while sisters Greta and Elsie went to St Mathias Girls' School. Sport was always of more interest to Garry than studies, although Thelma did remark on his good head for figures. Perhaps that was enhanced by – or can even be attributed to – what became a lifelong passion for horse racing. With Garrison Savannah on his doorstep, and the wide-open course offering plenty of free roadside vantage points on three of its four borders, Garry was an enthusiastic and knowledgeable spectator. 'Even as a little boy I was attracted to the horses,' he said, although it would not be until he arrived in England that racing began to play a large role in his life.[16] He could never have imagined returning to the course in later life as a winning owner – and to be knighted by Queen Elizabeth II.

That he was able to, of course, was down to cricket. Garry reckoned he was three years old when he began playing; not unusual for an island that had the sport at its heart. As renowned Caribbean author Andrea Stuart, niece of West Indies cricket great Sir Clyde Walcott, explained:

> As my Barbadian father [Kenneth] said, every boy on the island played cricket. (Even those who, like my father, were better at tennis.) They played it in people's backyards, on blocked-off roads, and on the beach, where a tennis ball was used and the stumps set in wet sand. And many families, such as my father's, played it every weekend. Cricket's unique place in this complex society was such that if they weren't playing it, they were talking about it, discussing it alongside the latest political crisis or other local gossip. Indeed the game was as intrinsic to the fabric of the community as the sugar that had been so ubiquitously cultivated. So it is perhaps no surprise that a disproportionate number of the cricketers who have represented West Indies were born in Barbados. This small island, of only 166 square miles, must be the most prolific island breeding ground for cricketers in the world.[17]

Any old piece of wood could be fashioned into a bat – coconut tree branches and palings from neighbourhood fences were popular – while balls were often made from rags wrapped around a stone and soaked in tar. Gerry, one year older than

Garry, was a constant playmate, although their sisters might be roped in as additional fielders.

A lot of budding cricketers' early innings were played in a locally popular format where the batter kept one knee grounded behind the popping crease. It encouraged cutting and hooking, while the imperative to bowl underarm led Garry to learn to spin the ball as he delivered it. Tennis ball cricket, on the beach or on grass fields, was a version of the sport that remained widely played among those who had gone on to play a high level of club cricket, and even represented their island.

Often the games were free-for-alls, with as many as 20 or 30 fielders, where those who brought the bat and ball – frequently the Sobers boys – got first knock and batted for as long as they could avoid dismissal. Such was the brothers' dominance that they were often in fear of being given a beating by older boys frustrated at waiting for their turn.

The need to avoid a multitude of catchers saw Garry develop the ability to keep the ball on the ground, rolling his wrists and picking gaps in the field. When playing in the streets, hitting a house on the full meant dismissal, another imperative to perfect his ground strokes. On a broader scale, the prevalence of tennis-ball cricket throughout the Caribbean played a significant role in the development of a generation of batsmen who combined strong back-foot play with the ability to drive a bouncing ball on the up.

In his 1963 biography of Barbadian-born Frank Worrell, Ernest Eytle suggested, 'These forms of cricket sharpen the eye in a way no professional coaching can. What they lack in

orthodoxy is compensated for by a passion for hitting the ball hard, getting it away from the fielders … The subtleties of footwork are unknown, but the zest for hitting and catching the ball grows with each stroke.'[18]

Garry, as history knows, batted and bowled with his left hand. Like many southpaws, he endured attempts to convert him to right-handedness – a smack with a ruler was a popular tactic among teachers – but his mother never went further than encouraging him to use his right hand. He was allowed to stick with whatever felt natural. Besides, there was another manual element to contend with: the fact that he had been born with six fingers on each hand.

The way he described the manner in which he dealt with such an abnormality was typical of him: high on nonchalance and low in detail. 'The first extra finger fell off quite early when I was nine or ten,' he explained. 'I took the second off when I was 14 or 15 and playing serious cricket. The first of the spare fingers came off with the help of a piece of cat gut wrapped around the base and a sharp tug, something like the old fashioned way of removing a child's milk tooth. The other came off with the help of a sharp knife.'[19]

The fortitude it must have taken to perform and endure such self-surgery was never mentioned. Nor was any pain or embarrassment he endured from boys calling him a 'freak' in the meantime.

Perhaps his superiority on the field made him immune to childish cruelty. It was a dominance that Gerry and Garry carried into the formal setting of schools cricket, where they

turned Bay Street into a multiple championship-winning team. Gerry was captain, wicketkeeper and star batsman; Garry, despite looking unthreatening because of his small stature and short trousers, the most dangerous bowler. The reputation of the 'Chinese Brothers', as they became known because of their lighter complexions and elongated eyes, spread across the island. At one memorable match, against St Mathias Boys' School, cars lined up along Bayshore Beach's esplanade as spectators watched the boys in action.

When they played against St Giles, they came up against future West Indies opening bowler Wes Hall, who immediately joined the list of admirers. 'Garry was a bowler, a very small man at that time, a left-arm spinner. It was at that time that I really knew he was extraordinary.'[20] Hall added, 'Even in those early days cricketing cognoscenti recognised that Garry was a "superb, loping, natural athlete", who was destined for success … They were aware that he had such natural gifts that he would have succeeded in any game.'[21]

Garry admitted that he and Gerry spent too much time playing sports to be good scholars, but their talent and commitment was recognised and encouraged heartily by Everton Barrow, the boys' sports master, a cricketer at the Empire club.

Outside of school matches, further competition was provided by weekend matches on Bay Pasture – known locally as 'Brisbane' – against groups from rival neighbourhoods. A regular team-mate in these matches was Keith Barker, who went on to play league cricket in England, where he settled permanently. His son, also Keith, signed as a footballer for

Blackburn Rovers before embarking on a successful county career as an all-rounder for Warwickshire and Hampshire.

When Garry wasn't playing cricket, he was happily watching cricketers. He would observe the Wanderers players preparing for their Barbados Cricket Association matches and ended up operating the scoreboard, along with future Hampshire batsman Roy Marshall and brothers Gerry and Cecil. He took the chance to study men such as Worrell and Everton Weekes, who both visited with the Garrison Sports Club, and Walcott, who played for Empire. Of more interest to Garry than the ball speeding to the boundary was noting how the good batsmen moved their feet and picked up their bats; or where the bowlers would put the ball to induce false strokes. In the absence of formal coaching, Garry stored away these images and aimed to put them into practice when playing with his mates.

He would talk cricket, too, often with Wanderers groundsman Briggs Grandison, who arranged for him to bowl in the nets at Denis Atkinson, a West Indian Test player. 'Perhaps it was because I was so small, but I got the impression I was a favourite and there was plenty of encouragement all round,' he remembered.[22] Keen to prepare for facing left-arm Indian spinner Vinoo Mankad in an upcoming series, Atkinson knocked off early from his job as an insurance salesman to face the 12-year-old, placing a shilling* on top of the stumps and allowing the bowler to keep it if he knocked it off. Sobers would describe these sessions as 'the workshop where I first learned my trade'.[23]

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* The equivalent of 24 cents at a time when Garry would be given four cents per day for lunch.

Garry also had the chance to snag a few real cricket balls when they were too damaged to be of any use to the club. He had suffered a painful blow when he first faced a hard ball – delivered by an adult, Frank 'Pidge' Grant – in a match organised by the Wanderers groundsmen when he was around ten years old.

He had been momentarily forced to reassess his relationship with the sport. But his passion for cricket had returned quickly and now he sought out a local shoemaker to stitch the ragged old balls back together. The repair work created a raised seam that produced prodigious movement and would, Sobers reflected, help prepare him for the moving ball he would face in England.

It was suggested by some that more of Garry's time should be spent helping and supporting his mother, but he was aware enough of his unusual ability to realise that both he and his family might be better served if he dedicated himself to cricket. 'If I became good enough it was the only sport that would allow me to travel and see the world,' he said. 'I would read about cricket in the papers and when the West Indies went to India in 1948 and then to England in 1950 we used to listen in awe to the commentaries on the radio. To a young boy from a humble background this was something magical.'[24]

Which was not to say that other sports didn't capture Garry's attention and deliver different opportunities. Having begun playing for the Notre Dame football club as a left-winger he happily took over in goal, despite his small stature, when the regular goalkeeper was injured. Sobers would recall playing for

Barbados in a 4-1 victory over Guyana at the age of 16 before giving up the sport to concentrate on cricket.*

Captain of Notre Dame was Lionel Daniel, a cabinet-maker and joiner a couple of streets from the Sobers home. His workshop became a regular hangout for boys in the district. While lecturing them on the value and importance of money, he would also demonstrate various tools. Gerry and Garry, a frequent visitor between the ages of 11 and 14, quickly picked up the skills of the trade. So much so that, in 1952, Daniel would benefit from their work when he won first prize in the island's Industrial Exhibition with a mahogany wardrobe he had made and the Sobers boys and a friend had polished.

Basketball was another of Garry's favourite sports and he, Gerry and Keith Barker played for the Bay Street Boys' Club, known as the Lakers, winning the local knockout competition in 1951. Sobers, in one of his autobiographies, makes casual reference to representing Barbados at basketball, as well as turning down the opportunity to fill in for the island in a table tennis international in Trinidad because he had not played for two years. Meanwhile, the Sobers boys teamed up in road tennis and were among the best sprinters in the athletics events organised at Bay Pasture. Encouraged by Daniel, Garry regularly competed for sixpence in 100-yard races against a rival, 'Spottie' Clarke.

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* Details of Sobers's football career and prowess are in short supply. Articles over the years make unsubstantiated claims of him representing Barbados, although there is no mention of whether it was at age-group level or any further information. I found no documented confirmation, while efforts to get the Barbados Football Association to shed further light proved fruitless. There were stories in England in 1960 that Sobers had been invited for a trial by Everton, an opportunity he declined.

While Garry's cricket development was encouraged by those at Wanderers over several years, playing for them in the Barbados Cricket Association, with its roster of wealthy clubs and its Act of Parliament mandate to administrate the local game, was not a serious option. As club cricket on the island had developed over the previous half-century, a strict hierarchy of clubs had evolved. There were exclusively white clubs – although some would allow in wealthy blacks; clubs set up by and for the middle-class cricketers of colour; and, finally, those for which the black lower-classes could play.

Far from creating an environment of apartheid in the sport, the structure was tolerated, even by someone as politically active as the writer CLR James. 'These divisions were not only understood but accepted by players and populations alike,' he explained. 'All these clubs played every Saturday in club competitions and not infrequently a white member of the Legislative Council or president of the Chamber of Commerce would be playing amicably for his club against another, most of whose members were black porters, messengers or other members of the lowest social classes. Cricket was therefore a means of national consolidation. In a society very conscious of class and social differentiation, a heritage of slavery, it provided a common meeting ground of all classes.'[25]

Youngsters from poorer backgrounds tended to end up with the less-well-off clubs in the Barbados Cricket League, founded in 1937. But even young Garry's local Bay Land team in that competition, the Nationals, felt he was too small for a place.

Instead, he ended up playing for Kent, whose ground at Penny Hole was on the opposite south-east corner of the island. Kent's captain, a builder called Garnet Ashby, was a friend of Grandison and had therefore been told about Garry even before he saw him bowl when his team visited Bay Land to play a friendly. Asked to make up the numbers, and playing in shorts, Garry took three wickets, including that of Ashby, who promptly invited him to represent Kent.

First, though, Ashby had to ask Thelma's permission. 'You want to take Garry on the back of a motorcycle to the country to play cricket against big, able men, and on a Sunday?' was her not unreasonable response. 'I don't even know you.'[26] After additional lobbying by Barrow, Grandison and others, an agreement was reached where Garry would stay with Ashby on game weekends.

Leaving school at 14, Garry was given a job as a tally clerk by Goulbourne Cumberbatch, going on to the boats in the docks to make a note of the cargoes. Having made it plain that he had no interest in following his father into the navy, Garry continued to make his mark as a cricketer in 1951* when, as a 15-year-old, he took enough wickets for Kent to earn selection for the BCL's series of City versus Country matches. Named in the Country XI against brother Gerry, the *Barbados Advocate* informed its readers that he was 'a left-hand slow bowler who has been very impressive this season'.

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* The Barbados league seasons were staged from June to December, with most of the Caribbean's small number of first-class games played between January and April.

He was subsequently picked for the full BCL team to take on the revered BCA at Empire in December. Several West Indies players had used this fixture to move up the island's cricketing hierarchy from League to Association clubs, or even into the Barbados team itself. The match, spread over two weekends, straddled his appearance for the BCL against a Cable and Wireless XI at Boarded Hall, where he took advantage of a soft wicket to take 3 for 10 as the opposition were bowled out for 87.

As well as batting doggedly at number 11 against the BCA, participating in an important last-wicket partnership, Sobers recalled that he 'bowled pretty well, line and length with a little variation', causing considerable trouble for Wilfred Farmer, who played for the Police club and Barbados and was assistant commissioner of the Barbados force. 'Fee', as Farmer was known in sporting circles, had previously seen the youngster playing with a tennis ball and bowling in the nets. 'Talent such as that displayed by the young Sobers is so immediately impressive, so blatantly obvious to anyone with the merest grain of cricketing knowledge,' he remembered, highlighting his 'ability to consistently drive a tennis ball sizzlingly across the turf, to cut with absolute precision, and to execute a series of sophisticated, if traditional, shots'.[27]

Duly smitten, Farmer asked a local fan by the name of Tom Sealy the identity of the youngster. Farmer asked Sealy to invite him for a chat and wasted little time in enquiring whether he was interested in representing the Police. He even had a solution for his target's lack of years and height. 'We'll have to let you try out for the band.'[28]

Farmer had been as impressed by Sobers's demeanour as his performance. 'Here was a boy of promise,' he remembered. 'He was shy, yes, but there was none of the usual shrinking, simpering, tongue-tied, hand-wringing reticence about him. He answered questions and volunteered information frankly and firmly. He bore himself manfully – not by any means mannishly – and met your eyes squarely and directly, with no trace of suspicion or defiance.'[29]

So it was that Police turned up for their BCA Division 1 match against Empire in June 1952 with a recently recruited bugler in the Royal Barbados Police Force Band. Empire's Bank Hall ground was renowned for its pace and, therefore, as a production line for various West Indies quick bowlers, including Griffith. On this day they included 'Foffie' Williams, a former Test paceman who could still bowl at decent speed at the age of 38.

When Williams took the second new ball, Sobers was looking comfortable in his number eight spot and Police had taken their total beyond 200. In his first over, after being slashed for four, Williams offered the young batsman a gesture of slitting his throat before unleashing a bouncer that Sobers failed to pick up. The ball struck his jaw, forcing him to retire hurt with 7 runs on the board. As he sat beyond the boundary, his jaw became stiff and swollen. Police eventually lost the game by ten wickets, Sobers having bowled only three wicketless overs. His band leader, Captain Raison, upon hearing that Sobers would not be able to blow his bugle for a while, correctly reasoned that he had no interest in music and dismissed him from his ensemble.

Farmer had a backup plan. The police force had set up a boys' club based at Bay Street, not far from Sobers's home, and by becoming a member Sobers remained eligible to play for Police's first team as well as playing for the Police Boys' Club.

In the meantime, he was also playing in the BCL for Middlesex. It meant that those reading the *Barbados Advocate* became used to seeing his name pop up in reports of one team or another. He came back from his painful innings for Police by scoring 89 for Middlesex against Mental Hospital before following up a week later with a century as he captained the Police Boys' Club against Chamberlain. There was another all-round performance of note against Mental Hospital – 83 runs and 4 for 19 – and a first-innings hundred for Police on the first day of their BCA match against Lodge School. 'Honours of the day went to Sobers, who top scored with 102 runs in fine style,' said the *Advocate*, whose Sunday edition added, 'His hard hitting and stroke playing was of his best.' He also took nine wickets in the match.

There is even a story, told by Cecil, that Garry played match-winning roles on the same day for two different clubs, Police and Middlesex, in two different competitions, the BCA and BCL, on two different grounds, the YMPC Sports Club in Bridgetown and Bay Pasture. The tale – remarkable if true – has Garry scoring vital runs for Police against YMPC before cycling east to bowl out Belfield for 16. Then it was back on his bike to take some YMPC wickets. Both of his teams were victorious, with Police supposedly unaware of Garry's moonlighting for another team, which they would have prevented. If it all sounds

a little far-fetched, then it is testament to the uniqueness of Garry's talent that it can be considered remotely feasible.

The island's cricket spectators would take advantage of the large number of games played in close proximity by venturing from one to another depending on the fortunes of their favourite players. According to Worrell, 'All budding cricketers can catch the eye of the selectors and pressmen, who are themselves numbered among the itinerant spectators.'[30]

Playing for Police allowed a moment that Sobers would consider for his entire life as one of his finest on a cricket field. Lining up against Wanderers at Bay Pasture, in front of his neighbourhood crowd and after bagging a duck in the first innings, he struck an unbeaten 113 on a difficult, damp track in the second to save the match. 'All my friends from the Bay Land were there, seemingly happier even than I was,' he recalled, even though he was playing for the away team. 'I still value that century as highly as many of the others I've been fortunate to make.'[31]

Sandiford and Bertie Callender, writing in 1994, explained that it would not have been simply a question of Sobers being cheered by his mates. Even at that young age he was fostering feelings of local pride. 'Throughout Bay Land there has traditionally been a very strong sense of community. The village lauds its successful products with a considerable degree of intensity.' Success such as that of Sobers, they argued, was seized upon as 'convincing evidence that it is possible for poor youngsters in the district to rise far above their modest origins'.[32]

Sobers would continue to play occasional games for Police into his 40s 'because it was them and Captain Farmer who gave me my opportunity'.[33] And Farmer found that the adult, world-renowned version of Sobers that turned out for his club was not so different to the shy, polite teenager, unaffected by fame and adulation. 'He remains completely unspoiled by it all,' he said in 1973. 'His friends of yesteryear remain his friends today, even though the circle has been much widened by the new acquisitions of a much-travelled, affable and genial personality.'[34]

As well as offering Sobers the chance to meet up with old friends and team-mates, those return trips also provided dream-come-true moments for opponents. One of them was Maurice Foster,* who played for Pickwick in the island's first Knockout Cup final at Kensington Oval. 'I remember the individual shields all displayed on the table,' Foster explained. 'I had been playing about 15 years and with a top score of 49 it had dawned on me I was not likely ever to play for Barbados. But this shield, this trophy, was going to be mine … As I sat putting on my boots someone came up the stairs and I looked up in amazement as Garry Sobers entered. He was back in Barbados and would play for Police against us. I don't remember his bowling, but I do remember his batting as I spent most of the afternoon in the covers returning the ball from the boundary. Well, we lost and I never got my shield. But that day I believe the Lord said something very special to me. "Maurice," he said. "You'll never

* Not to be confused with the Jamaican batsman who played alongside Sobers for West Indies.

play cricket for Barbados and you're not even going to get that shield you want so much. But today I have given you something that is worth far more than these. Today you have played against the greatest cricketer in the world.'"[35]

Foster would go on to campaign for a statue of Sobers to be erected in Broad Street in Bridgetown, coming up against a since-overturned government edict not to commission statues of living Barbadians. The figures of Sobers and Wes Hall standing outside Kensington Oval bear handsome testament to that change of policy. Not that Barbadians, especially those from the Bay Land streets that nurtured Sobers, need physical manifestations of what he means to them.

According to Sandiford and Callender, 'Speaking to the inhabitants of Bay Land, one gets the distinct impression that they regard Sir Garfield Sobers as their own pride and joy. It is difficult to convey in words the great awe and affection with which they discuss their favourite son. In their eyes, Sir Garfield is still a Bay Land boy. Garry still sees himself as a product of Bay Street Boys' School, St Paul's Anglican Church and Walcott's Avenue. He is, that is to say, an extremely proud Bay Land boy.'[36]