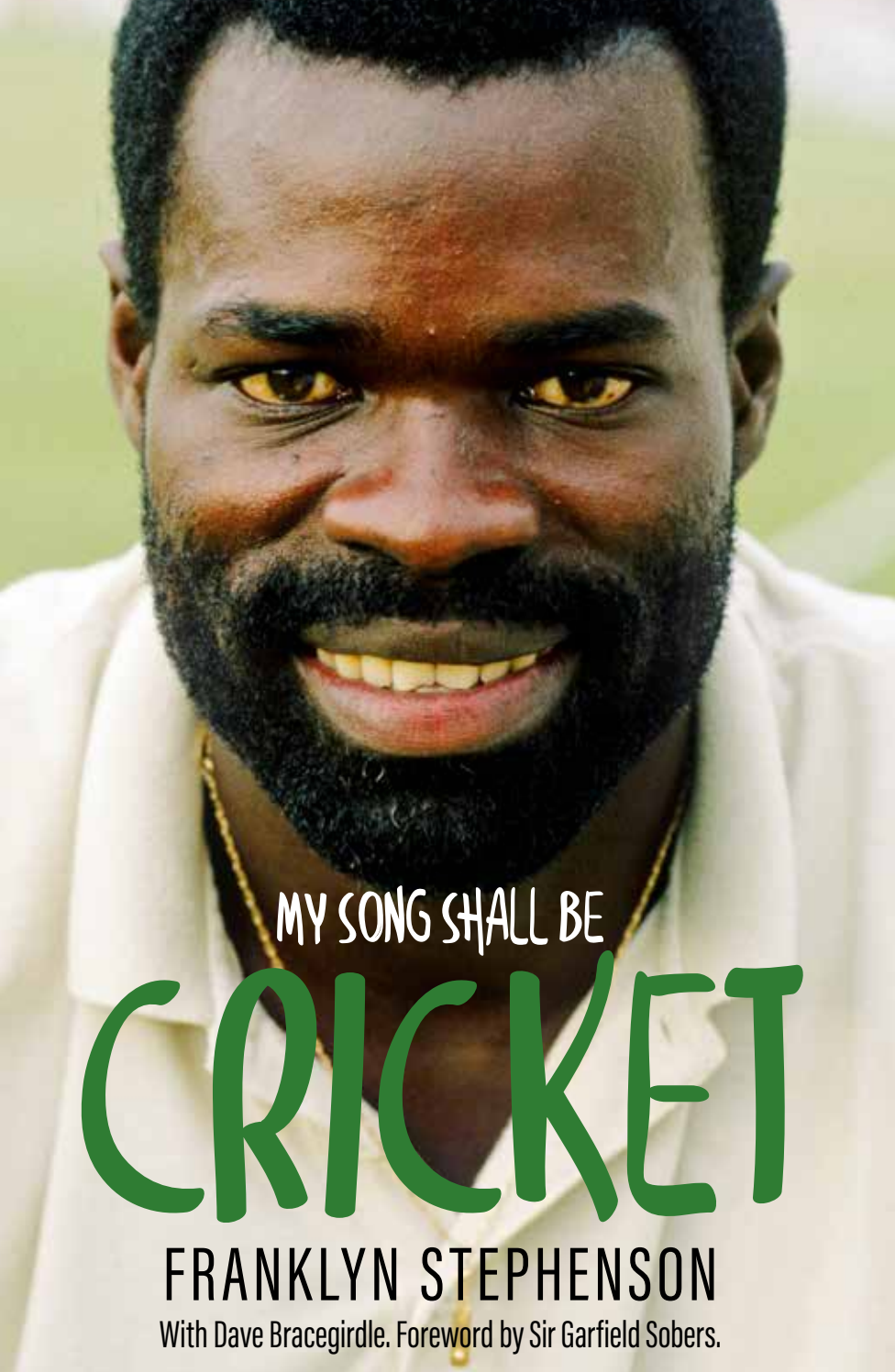

MY SONG SHALL BE CRICKET

FRANKLYN STEPHENSON

With Dave Bracegirdle. Foreword by Sir Garfield Sobers.

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pitch

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CHAPTER ONE

Village Life

I WAS born on 8 April 1959 to Violet Stevenson and Leonard Young in Hall's Village, a small community situated in the parish of St James in Barbados.

My dad already had two boys, named Leon and Theodore Ward, before he met my mom and she already had Charles, popularly known as 'Bronson', before she met my father.

Soon they had their first born together, a girl who was christened Angella Patricia. Apparently, my dad wanted to call her Pauline but wasn't allowed to. He carried on calling her that anyway and over time the name stuck – she's always been my sister Pauline.

I really don't know of any significance in me being named Franklyn Dacosta. No parallels have ever been drawn and frankly I never cared to ask.

My dad's full name was Leonard Bruce Young and my earliest memories of growing up in the village – the Youngs are a significant part of its history – are as a Stephenson. Back then it was natural that if the parents weren't married the children took the mother's surname.

That was a good ploy: men who wanted their children to have their surname had to man up to the responsibility and marry their lady. Today that has changed, however, and every young man fathering a child out of wedlock is insisting that the child has his surname.

You might note a difference in the spelling of my mother's surname and mine. That happened years later when I went to get my birth and baptism certificates in order to apply for my passport. My birth certificate stated Stephenson with a 'ph' but my baptism certificate had it with a 'v'. I understood that the birth certificate carried more weight and using the 'ph' spelling saved me any hassle. Mom just passed it off by saying that some of her documents were that way as well and that there was no bother in her mind.

I don't actually remember my parents living together but from as early as five or six years old it was decided that I should be the one to live with my father. By this time my mom had another two children, Jonathan Ezekiel and Margaret Cerlene.

Dad lived on his own in a small, two-roomed, single-gable building which was owned by 'old Ma King', who was actually first cousin to my great-grandmother, 'Feenie' Forde. It was situated in the back – or, as you would say in Bajan parlance, 'behind de pailin of Chessie and Lolita King'.

Research shows that the Fordes (nee Kings) are direct descendants of Jacqueline King, who is logged as the first freed slave in Barbados.

The Kings had four daughters and two sons and then there was also Ismay, an older girl, who was pretty much like a nanny. Their house was where I would spend my quiet time (and there was a lot of that) when Dad was out

to work and at night when he was at church or at Edna Lynch's gambling house.

He never told me, but I understand from the grapevine, that it was off to the church for two out of three evenings and 'the Den' for the other.

I spent so many of my evenings at church and also went there every Sunday morning. You may be surprised to hear that I always paid attention and returned home having thoroughly memorised the special text for the week.

Then, it was often a trip through the village and a couple of the nearby communities, pushing a wheelbarrow and selling lettuce, beetroot and cucumber from my father's garden, delicious specialities that would help towards making those Sunday meals taste extra good.

Dad's time in the church wasn't limited to being in the general audience, as he was a beautiful singer and a good all-round musician, playing the guitar (rhythm and bass), concertina (squeeze box), mouth organ and cymbal.

I would often have to give him a hand with some piece of equipment as he sang tenor, played rhythm guitar and recorded on one reel, then added bass vocals and guitar. I clearly recognised where his multi-skilling came from, as he was always busy with innovative things that challenged him.

More research is needed to discern the history of Hall's Village because, to this day, the Young descendants still own and reside on three significant plots of land in different parts of the village.

I recall my father telling me that his dad died when he was about eight or nine years old and, as was the custom then, his mom remarried soon after. He said that his stepfather sold some land and was busy trying to sell some more at the time of his mom's death. Soon after

he liquidated the family assets, leaving three sizeable, separate lots.

Of the three family lots, one was split between my dad and his youngest brother, Joseph. One is home to the elder brother Lyle and his family and one is shared by the families of dad's sisters Leetie and Thelma. Clearly there is a lot of history embedded in this little village called Hall's.

From my earliest memories, my life revolved around cricket. The village was quite sparsely populated and the majority of land was planted with sugar cane, cassava, yam and various other crops and kitchen-garden produce.

There were cows and sheep everywhere. My dad had his hand in every pie and my part was to help look after the smaller animals and water the kitchen garden in the afternoon.

As well as keeping cows, sheep and some pigs, which would usually be a full-time occupation for some people, my dad worked for the plantations, both in crop time cutting cane, and in the hard times harvesting hay and other crops.

There were no other boys of the same age as me in the village and only one girl, Shirley Hall, who was also in my class at St John the Baptist School.

That was something major for me because, from as early as seven or eight years old, and wanting to play cricket, I had to play with the big boys and the men because it was the only game in the village.

There, you weren't being coached – or even tolerated – you either participated or you didn't – and it was by far the number-one social event for young men.

I loved it and it became clear that my batting was becoming a bit of a frustration for the bowlers. Normally quite accurate, they seemed to become wayward whenever

I was at the crease. Or were they? It soon became apparent that it was a plan. I could defend my stumps and wasn't afraid of the fast stuff and so the ultimate test was the 'beamer'.

Remember, this was village cricket, played almost anywhere but especially out in the field with tennis balls. This was a good thing, too, because on a couple of occasions they were delivered with unerring accuracy by the same bowler, Vere 'Mandrekar' Scantlebury.

My left eyeball was no match for that tennis ball, delivered with venomous spite. It was obviously OK for this youngster to field and help retrieve the balls but it was different when I was batting. No respect or quarter was given when it was my turn at the crease. I had to earn it.

On each occasion it took about 20 minutes of rubbing and compressing the eye before I could get enough vision back to be able to continue my knock at the departure of the next batsman at the crease.

At that young age I learned to produce my best when it was necessary. It was always important to me not just to get to play but always to prove my worth.

My dad knew nothing of my day's exploits other than that I was too lazy or busy to water the garden, and on many occasions I had to find the energy to work on my sprinting and hurdling to keep out of his way on his return home in the evening.

There was this lovely lady, Mrs Jordan, from the church in Redman's Village, and my dad had allowed her to put her moveable wooden house on his portion of the lot. As I understand, he did this without any remuneration or contract.

I would make sure to pass by her house in my desperate effort to avoid my dad for a while, and would hope that on

my return his anger had died down. She was very pleasant and had a calming nature. I could always depend on her to speak on my behalf.

I really enjoyed my young days in Hall's Village: all that freedom rimmed with a little responsibility.

The west coast of Barbados during the 1960s and 70s was the ideal place and time for a young boy with a love of sport to grow up in.

My dad was a well-loved man in our community and he was talented and generous. He would leave home between 4.30 and 5 every morning and when I got up my breakfast was on the table. There would be a big cup of porridge, egg bread or a sardine and a biscuit.

He made sure that there was always something there for me to snack on until he could get home and do dinner before heading off to church.

Sometimes at night I would wrap my hands around his biceps. With all his physical work he naturally kept his muscles well-toned. Before encountering bodybuilders in later life, my dad's were the biggest and hardest biceps I'd seen.

Prior Park is a plantation immediately east of Hall's Village and legend has it that one day the grass cutting machine broke down and my dad proved to be a more than adequate substitute for it.

Nothing was ever mentioned about his exploits as a cricketer, but my dad would remind me that he was a backstopper (wicketkeeper) and that he didn't need pads.

School was an absolute trip every morning; the mode of transportation was L2 – our legs! We would set off at about 8.30am and walk down through Haynesville or Thorpe's to avoid the gully that separates Haynesville

from Holders Hill. Anytime the rain fell the gully became treacherous.

Then there were times when we found our own threat: that 6in cast iron pipe that crosses the ravine, suspended by those five 16in columns, was always too much to resist.

The highest area was 16ft above ground, surrounded by shrubs and rubbish. The challenges came; we had the talented, the brave, the foolhardy and the cowards. We also had a couple of incidents when our feet slipped off the pipe in different directions.

On one traumatic day – and I'm so glad I didn't witness it – Owen 'Sideburns' King jumped off the pipe and landed on an upended broken drinks bottle. Ouch.

Mostly we just exited at the other side into Greenham Lane, where the first house we came to was 'York the Butcher's'.

Every so often, standing right there in front of the house speaking to Mrs York (Dorothy), would be Edna Stevenson Corbin, whose only child with Robert Forde was my mother, Violet Stevenson.

I would hear:

'Franklyn, my grandson, come and give your grandmother a hug. Wha ya in comb ya hair, send dah comb for me … *waah*.'

The only thing I feared more than headmaster Jones's belt, as he stood at the front door looking for the latecomers to come past Holmes's shop, was that comb.

There were no Jheri curls or straighteners in those days and trips to the barber were in themselves special occasions. Oh, it felt as though she was scraping my brain. One quick explanation was that before Rasta locks our hair was naturally knotty.

In my writing, you will see a lot of synonyms and nicknames. So often I see people referred to as 'affectionately known as', but affection wasn't the first thought behind a community name. You had to hear your given name from your parents and the school teachers.

My first nickname was Black Magic, then later I became Cookie Monster and Gruff.

Among our group we also had Hockan, Chinie, Bummacock, Phantom, Square Nose, Itchy, Snow Bear, Snow Sheep, Bay Cat, Sprain Cat, Sea Cat, Primer, Rabbit Balls, Copper Cat, Bumma and Largie Big Bakes.

Lots of older people had nicknames, too, and when the young men felt insolent enough to use them they would be met with a verbal volley by the women and chased, sometimes even with stones, by the men. I enjoyed being something of a free spirit and basically had the whole village to myself. Any mischief I'd get into, my dad would know about it, sometimes even before he got home.

We could have founded the *News of the World*, *The Telegraph* and *The Times* with all the ingenious ways we had of spreading news through the village, as there was always the grapevine. Nevertheless, we were always taught never to disrespect our elders.

We had to make our own cricket ball and innovation saw us use one that could be repaired continuously. The 'rubber strand ball' was a small rock wrapped tightly with old cloth to about 2.5–3in in diameter, strapped with bicycle inner tubes sectioned at a width of a centimetre or so. Sometimes the strands were stretched so tightly that they glistened, almost like a new Dukes (or maybe I was just imagining that!).

We had neither pads nor gloves and used a bat fashioned out of a soft light wood called deal board. Sometimes you

shaped to play that in-swing bouncer, only to realise that there was a strand flying off as the ball continued to rise and pass outside the off stump.

The ball very often was continuing to rise as it passed you outside the off stump. Some of the strands that came off were good to go on again, but some broke and had to be replaced. There were usually old bicycle inner tubes around but the supply wasn't endless.

There came a day when we could not find one anywhere and the only tube to be found was a brand new red one that Dad had at home in a box at the back of a shelf.

It seemed to have been around forever and so it wasn't hard to convince myself to take the chance on him not missing it in a hurry. As fate would have it, he needed it the very next day. My hurdling was improving but I was outclassed in that small arena!

One afternoon, I was surprised to see a lady from the church come into the village. I could see from out in the field that when she reached the houses she turned right and went to ours. She passed back later, and when I got home I found that she had washed, cleaned and tidied the whole place. When my dad came home I told him that Esmie had come and he just smiled. From that smile I knew that he would have to find a bigger place.

It wasn't long before I was proved correct and we moved to a house 50 yards south-west of the King's front door and abutting Dad's lot. It was rented from Arleta Johnson, who had a daughter named Alison.

I was told in not so many words that it was not going to work out with me living there with my dad and his new wife and daughter Agatha. Things were still the same with him and me but he left early in the mornings and came home late, so it was time for me to relocate.

By this time my mom was living in Durant's Village, about 150 yards west of St John the Baptist School. This was after years of hopping, scotching, renting and boarding with a regular sojourn to and from her mom's house, as they could never see eye-to-eye.

My grandmother was a devout Christian. At last my mom had a place of her own and felt settled, as her dad helped her to put up a two-bedroomed house with a nice backyard and an outside toilet.

Things were different in Durant's which is popularly known as 'The Cross Road'. I still had a lot of freedom but at night, instead of my dad and I, it was five other siblings and me in the bed.

Mom never married and there was never an adult male presence around for very long, although one or two stayed for a little while. But the babies kept coming. I vaguely remember Floyd being sick and having to be taken to the doctor often. He died as an infant. Then there was Jonathan Ezekial, then Margaret Cerlene, Henry, Elvis, Randolph and Sonia.

Durant's Village turned out to be the perfect place for my cricket to develop. Two of my classmates, Robert Sandiford (an uncle) and Charles Connell, lived a couple of houses away in different directions and it didn't take us long to establish the culture in the community.

We played cricket on afternoons after school, and twice on Saturdays and twice on Sundays. For about a year and a half it was just the three of us. Our ball was a rubber strand ball and the stump was a 50-gallon oil drum or at times a wheelbarrow.

There were times when a batsman would lower his left shoulder to let a bouncer go by only to hear it crash into the barrow handle.

The size of the stumps was important to the number of players we had and batsmen had to be able to cover the line and play those good length balls. I became quite adept at getting the ball to touch down and leave the batsman, aiming at the outside edge of the drum. Just when I sensed them feeling that they had me covered, I would fire in a yorker aimed at the other edge of the drum. Robert, or Bob, who later adopted the Nyabinghi name 'Jah Glory', bowled leg-breaks and googlies at good pace. He wasn't easy to pick. When you didn't read him it was time to devise strategies to get you back to the crease: you had two mountains to climb.

Charlie bowled off-spin and had a beautiful arm-ball. He also generated some decent pace for a change-up.

Plans for my schooling, such as they were, fell into disarray when I was told that I had failed the 11 plus exam. It was quite a shock and also a bit of an eye opener for me as I'd never really failed anything before. I would normally finish in the first three in class tests.

The exam was held in two stages and you had a second chance if you failed. If you passed on the first paper, then you had two chances on the second. I passed the first stage, which meant travelling to The Good Shepherd School for the second stage. The results came out and I was told that I had failed the second stage. When my second chance to take it came around I felt prepared. I finished my paper, and with my classmates still head down and busy I took the time to go over the majority of the questions until time was called. I was confident that I had done well.

In a little while the results came out and again I was told that I had failed. *Well!* I guess it could be likened to being all padded up and ready to walk in to bat against Holding, Croft, Roberts and Kapil Dev in a Test match,

only to be told that you don't qualify and that you have to go and play in the leagues.

From our house we could actually hear the school bell in the morning ringing the call to assemble for prayers. The time not spent on bus rides, waiting and terminal changes was used in a most positive way. There were no floodlit playing fields or hard courts but sunset didn't mean that our cricketing day was over; it was when the shadow batting, bragging and complimenting session started.

Describing a shot came with an action replay and the sound of bat middling ball was a clicking noise from the mouth. How it was done and what could have happened was also expressed in describing the bowling action, but without the run-up. Our cricket was growing and so were we.

The cricket we watched was limited to the few games our school played and to weekends during the season, when the village league was being played.

At the age of 12 it was time to tour, to export our cricket, so we went up on to the school playing field in Holders Hill to join the mainstream of lads from surrounding districts.

Cricket was alive. There were three games going on in that relatively small arena. The big game, the main event, involved the likes of Desmond Haynes, Jedson Blackman, Keith, Lionel, Jeffrey and Colin Sandiford, Albert Padmore, Davidson Marshall, Bowen the taxi man who never seemed to work on evenings, and the legendary 'Salts'.

The other game – still with boys older than us – had the likes of Kenneth 'I Black' Blackman, his brother Abdul and 'Hopperd' Griffith and was pretty much a

'for the love of it' type game, played on the western side of the pitch.

The boys of our age were busy on a small area below the playing field that backed on to the gully by Mrs Boyce's beautifully quaint but very old house. This was the first real 'pavilion' in the area and we would soon spend many lunch hours sitting on her patio enjoying her sugar cakes, sweet bread and refreshments. If any sense of heritage preservation had prevailed, that colonial-style house, made of limestone and mortar walls and wood, would have been kept as a monument and an entrance to a museum. It showed its age but had no real signs of decay.

We joined in the cricket games, playing hand after hand (first and second) in which you would say, 'I fine you', which meant that the next time around you would bat before the other person. Bob was the first of us to get to bat.

He relished being on this stage and it showed, but our enjoyment was short-lived as a decision was soon taken to oust us from the game. We were too good for them, we were told.

I'm not quite sure whether the boys on the western side of the pitch were genuinely worried about our abilities but we were not allowed to join their game. We turned away and stepped on to the bigger stage, or was it into the pit? This was the arena where you didn't have to ask, and where you knew that no quarter was given.

We fielded. It was always going to be difficult to get one of the five or six tennis balls that were being used. The attack had everything: the pace of Davidson 'Mother Cat' Marshall, Jedson Blackman, Edwin 'Chim' Leacock and Leroy 'Foggy' Marshall.

The spin department was manned by Jeffrey 'Jack Smart' Sandiford and Wallace Thompson, who

represented the Barbados Cricket League (BCL) on their tour of England in 1972, plus Albert Padmore, who went on to represent the West Indies.

The prize was getting a turn at the crease. We later saw first- hand that this honour was on some occasions limited to only two or three of the 25 or 30 people that were there for the afternoon. Desmond Haynes, Jedson or Salts. Salts was a legend in his own right, and, indeed, the most difficult one to dislodge.

Even when you knew you had him caught by the keeper, he would point to some part of his anatomy other than his hands. The argument would rage and the only response would be his right forefinger tapping the left forearm. The discipline of the area was that the bowling resumed and, inevitably, the bowlers developed. Bob was the first of us to get a knock. I think we always made way for him as he was an opener. It was quite normal for 'Baby' (as he was known then because he was very chubby) to throw a tantrum when he was out but instead of this reaction being subdued in the arena it was more pronounced.

On being caught in the gully region he knocked the stumps over, cried and sat down at the crease. He was coaxed and ushered away and the wickets were repaired. He did have four bigger brothers playing, Keith, Lionel, Jeffrey and Colin. It was my turn next.

Twelve years old and I had arrived. I felt good and the fact that for once I was bigger than the wickets provided me with a bit of a boost. That feeling of arrival was short-lived, for I heard the call, 'He look good … ghe he de ting.'

I was concerned but not overly worried and expected a bouncer. 'De ting' was not a bouncer, nor was it a yorker. It was the dreaded beamer and the two bowlers

charged with delivering the aforementioned were Chimp and JB.

Ordinarily two bustling medium-pacers in the hard-ball game, they were serious contenders for the pace awards off 15 yards in the wind-ball game. I am told that they fashioned it especially for Salts. There was no umpire and he would ensure that both feet were firmly planted in front of the wickets when the quick bowler delivered. The beamer was used as the tool to back him up and get him to provide that little window of exposure to his stumps. That was where they started me. That was my baptism, my test.

They did get me on a couple of occasions, but as before when my vision returned so did I to the crease.

Cricket had found a home. At this time there were over 140 teams registered and playing under the auspices of the BCL on Saturdays. In addition there was the Barbados Cricket Association, with the established first division including the likes of Wanderers, Carlton, Pickwick, Spartan, Empire, Young Men's Progressive Club, an intermediate and second division and the schools. I cannot imagine any other country in the world achieving this feat: a game for every square mile.

My destiny was to stay at St John the Baptist School and I was selected as captain, but the one game that was supposedly organised for us never came off. Organised cricket was reserved for the secondary schools and so our elementary school never played a competitive match. Nevertheless, over the next couple of years we would prepare the pitch and practise three or four days a week. There was always intensity in those sessions and for a while the rules were that you had to be dismissed in order for the next person to bat.

This meant starting at the top of the order and soon the complaints started. I remember Hartley Alleyne in tears and bowling in one pad. He was padded for quite a while and he was anxious for a knock. We had the use of the field at this time of the evening as the older guys were running with their new fad, basketball.

As the cries wailed one evening, down came Mother Cat and Neil Phillips, who later represented Barbados as a speedster.

They came at the behest of the boys wanting a knock. I was batting and thought that the balls that were in play were fine but the new ball we had in reserve was handed to them to share.

Mother Cat ran in (I was tempted to say charged but he had such a lovely flowing rhythm). The first ball he bowled climbed towards my hip area. I started to rise and get on top and on the inside of the delivery but in the end it was sheer reflex action that got me to turn my wrist, as the ball seemed to gather pace off the pitch.

It came out of the middle of the bat and cannoned into Edna Prescod's wooden gate door. This sent the crowd on the basketball court into a jeering stupor. That did not please the Cat, although his outward demeanour suggested an endearing smile and a giggle. I knew I had to move faster as that might have been his loosener. His next delivery was hit down on that good length 'on or about' the off stump. I was in a good position, shaping my bat to come in nice and straight, but the ball didn't comply. It nipped back sharply and cannoned into my left pad. Luckily it missed my shin bone as it sank into the pad and my leg as well. Any fears we had about the ability of school pads to shield us from bowling of decent pace were immediately realised.

We soon reverted to batting time; remember, there were no helmets in those days.

Charlie Griffith was the coach who came to our school once a week. We were all excited on our walk up to the playing field with all the kit and this legendary West Indies fast bowler in tow. On our arrival we were shown where to leave the kit and were told to run. We did laps, stretches and sprints. The session finished and the kit remained undisturbed. The next week was the same. The third and fourth weeks were strengthening exercises and fielding drills. After that we got a chance to show what we could do on the pitch, skills we had been diligently preparing.

With the batsmen, coach Griffith was a stickler for the universal cricket calls of yes, no and wait. To us he was a very big strong man with quite a deep voice and an abrupt attitude. The shout that you got for 'come' felt enough to reverberate you back into your crease, but the one that seemed to send a shudder down his spine was 'stay'. The audio that bellowed from his vocal cords often sent shivers down our spine.

I have always considered that I started out as a batsman but I enjoyed both disciplines. On discovering bowling talent, coaches (especially ex-bowlers) find that they have so much more to work with and so bowling has a habit of taking over. Coach Griffith always wanted me to get my left arm up and around more at the top of my bowling action and my right arm to follow it.

He was committed to his job, and, with all the first and second that we would normally play (social cricket where each individual would bat until dismissed), his sessions brought fielding and discipline into focus. We were always respectful.