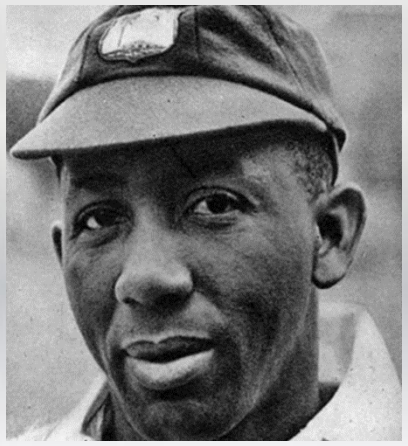
First Citizens Sports Foundation

HALL OF FAME



Learie Constantine

Cricket

Inducted in 1984

On and off the field of play, Sir Learie Constantine became a legend in all relevant spheres of life, from cricket to politics, from diplomacy to race relations.

It was inevitable that he would become a cricketer. His father, Leburn, represented Trinidad and Tobago in first class cricket, as did his uncle, Victor Pascall. Together with his two brothers, a young Learie perfected his game under the watchful eye of the two national players at their Maraval home.

He later summed up those sessions: “The joy, the tension, the exhilaration and the happiness those Sundays brought into our lives, served as a cushion, I am sure, for the sterner life which was ahead for all of us.”

By secondary school, his attacking batting style – the forerunner for that unique brand of West Indian cricket – fast medium pace bowling and especially his electric fielding, together with his family pedigree, ensured that he was soon catching the eye of national selectors.

But Lebrun stepped in to prevent him playing competitive cricket until 1920. His thinking was two-fold: he wanted Learie to establish a professional career in his chosen field, law, while he also sought to limit the exposure to experienced opposition that could take advantage of an inexperienced young all-rounder.

Thus, Learie became a clerk for a firm of solicitors, recognizing that just as in cricket, lighter-skinned persons were favored and given greater opportunities to succeed. This discrimination proved a motivating factor for the team that he joined upon his competitive return, Shannon Cricket Club. Standout performances, especially with the ball, in that 1920 comeback season, ensured his selection for the Trinidad and Tobago team for the Inter Colonial Tournament.

Reflecting the practices of the era, the newspaper advertised the wrong start time for the first match, so Constantine arrived late for his proposed debut verses British Guiana. His first appearance would happen in the next game against Barbados, where he made duck in the first innings and took two wickets.

By 1922 he was a fixture in the Trinidad and Tobago team but mainly due to his exciting fielding in the covers; he was losing his wicket early going for the big shots, while he was not taking wickets with great regularity. Nevertheless, when the West Indies team was chosen to tour England

the following year, Constantine's selection was a surprise, given that there were other candidates with better averages.

Given the chance, he did not disappoint, and the natural talent shone through on the English pitches. Taking 37 wickets at an average of 21.86 and scoring his first first-class 50, Constantine's performances were an instrumental part of a tour that ensured that the West Indies would be granted Test status. *Wisden*, the cricket bible, noted that there was clearly much more to come from Constantine the player, while exposure to England had planted the seed as to what overall lifestyle Learie wanted for Constantine the man.

Through the mid-1920s, performances for Trinidad and Tobago, like 8 wickets for 38 runs versus Barbados, and scoring 167 for Shannon, reminded the world of his prowess. But, he still lacked consistency. After a quiet 1926, he decided to get fitter, bowl faster and bat more sensibly. He was astute enough to develop his catching to become a slip fielder, to be able to conserve his energy for long spells of fast bowling. His plan was for both the short term – the 1928 official Test tour to England – and long term, to play professional cricket for an English club. He knew that given the racial boundaries in Trinidad, he stood little chance of elevating himself through the legal fraternity.

A fitter Constantine easily made the West Indies team, leaving his Norma and daughter behind. Motivated by the desire to escape the constraints placed upon him because of the color of his skin, he warmed up with 130 in 90 minutes versus Essex, an unheard-of scoring rate for the time. The stellar performances continued, piquing the interests of several teams. By the first match against England, appropriately, it was Constantine that

took the Windies' first ever wicket in Test cricket. He did not light up the Test series, but by the end of the tour he had taken 107 wickets at an average of 22.95. Returning to the Caribbean, his 133 in the final against Barbados helped Trinidad and Tobago win the Inter-Colonial Tournament.

1928 had been a standout year, securing him a professional contract with Nelson in Lancashire for 1929. He returned to the Caribbean to face England in a Test series where the vastly experienced visitors were expected to dominate. George Headley, Clifford Roach and Constantine had other ideas, and after centuries from the former two players, Headley stepped up with an array of pace and the occasional slower ball to take 4 for 35 and 5 for 87 to give the Windies their first ever victory in Test cricket.

In 1935 he accomplished another 'first' when West Indies' captain George C. Grant was injured during the third and deciding Test in Jamaica in another series against England. Constantine took leadership of the team on the field. He ably led the team to a mammoth victory of an innings and 161 runs; the first man of color to lead the team, in its greatest achievement – a Test series win – at the time.

He was now one of the best paid sportsmen in England, which Nelson recouped as thousands entered through the turnstiles on a weekly basis to see this brand of unrestricted cricket. By the end of his professional career for Nelson in 1939, he had taken over 70 wickets each season with an average that never rose above 11.30. In his time there, they won the league seven times.

After initial trepidation, the locals adopted him as one of their own, referring to him as 'our Connie', but he remained aware of the existing race problem and began a lifelong endeavor to directly tackle the issue.

His popularity enabled him to pursue a career in journalism, reporting on the BBC to the Caribbean during World War II, while his financial standing enabled him to pursue his legal career, qualifying as a solicitor in 1954, the same year that he wrote an explosive book about race relations, *The Color Bar*. He returned to Trinidad, joined the People's National Movement, and became part of the movement towards independence from Britain.

During his role as Trinidad and Tobago's High Commissioner to the United Kingdom, he was knighted in 1962. Later, in 1969, he was awarded a life peerage, becoming the first black man to sit in the House of Lords. It was a life of many 'firsts', and for his extraordinary achievements Sir Learie Constantine MBE was inducted into the Sports Hall of Fame in 1984.

Bowling: 58 Test Wickets; 439 First Class Wickets

Batting: 19.24; Test average 24.05; First Class average