First Citizens Sports Foundation

HALL OF FAME



Wilton St. Hill

Cricket

Inducted in 1984

At a period in history when sport was strongly divided along racial and social class lines, along came a batsman who provided a sense of pride for the lower-middle class and persons of color in Trinidad and Tobago. He became one of the first black batsman to achieve a successful career, an important steppingstone for the game, both regionally and globally.

The stroke-play that emanated from his 6-foot, very slim build, would see him score runs on both sides of the wicket, cutting to the offside or using his favored leg glance, despite the risk of getting out if he missed the shot. His game was wrist-based, whereupon he could use the speed of a fast bowler's delivery to simply guide the ball to the boundary. There was little footwork because, as his fellow batsman Sir Learie Constantine noted, it was all about timing.

Born in Port of Spain, cricket formed part of the family household, with St. Hill and his two brothers, Edwin and Cyl, joining the club that best represented the lower-class players, Shannon. His appetite for runs meant that he soon established a fearsome reputation in the domestic leagues, one that suggested that a rival club, Maple, which only took players of a lighter skin tone in the early 1900s, were interested in Wilton playing for them. His staunch response was, “Yes, but they would not want my brothers”, both of whom were darker than he was.

At 19 years of age, St. Hill made his debut in the Inter-Colonial Tournament against British Guiana, ironically batting at number nine in the order, where he scored four runs, and not bowling. Moving one place higher for the next game against Barbados, he scored 59 not out in a losing effort as the Barbadians continued their dominance of regional cricket.

By his next first class match in 1913, he was batting at a much more preferable number three, taking guard against a touring Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC) attack which he dispatched with his own offensive style to score 76 runs in the three matches.

The First World War (1914-1918) meant that first-class cricket was suspended until 1920. St. Hill resumed with his attacking style in the Inter-Colonial match versus Barbados, taking the position of opener and scoring 96 runs. Once again, it was in a losing effort.

In 1921, on home soil against British Guiana, he made his maiden first-class century, 104 runs as Trinidad and Tobago won the game. The final was against the old enemy, Barbados, but emphasizing the era the match was declared a draw after rain delays took the game to the point where

Barbados had to take the boat scheduled to take them home (matches could last ten days or more).

St. Hill tried to moderate his attack-minded approach to make the West Indies team that would tour England in 1923. It was believed that, like Constantine, he saw the tour as an opportunity to become a professional and play in the English leagues. His scores in the trial matches were far from his actual potential, and the subsequent non-selection for the Windies caused furor among the Trinidad and Tobago fans.

It marked a return to the hard-hitting batting approach with the 1924 season, where Trinidad and Tobago again faced Barbados in the Inter-Colonial final. St. Hill failed to make double figures in each innings and Barbados took the spoils once again.

Fortunes turned around – for Trinidad and Tobago and St. Hill – in 1925. In the regional final, batting at number three, he scored 100 in the first innings against British Guiana and Trinidad and Tobago won by two wickets. St. Hill was finally part of a championship winning national team.

When the MCC again toured the Caribbean, St. Hill, playing for Trinidad and Tobago, scored 105. That innings prompted the English to describe St. Hill as the best batsman in the West Indies.

It was a mantle bolstered by his performances in the trial matches for the 1928 tour of England, with West Indies now being granted Test status. He scored 144, the highest innings of his career, and sealed selection with further scores of 45, 44 and 71. *The Times* in the UK previewed the tour, describing St. Hill as 'one of the best batsmen on the side, from whom much is expected'.

Unfamiliar conditions and a swinging ball meant that St. Hill's attacking style got him into trouble early on and he would lose his wicket going for the big shots. He played in two of the three Tests, making 4, 9 and 3, before a much better 38 in the second Test. There was disappointment all round.

He would play one more Test, in 1930 at Queen's Park Oval against MCC, where he adapted his game to batting more cautiously and scored 30 batting at number three and 33 opening the innings.

He played league cricket in Trinidad until 1931, while still working in a department store later on in his life, a job that he had taken in 1919 – the year of his first-class debut.

For some fans he remained an enigma, including CLR James who was so enthralled by what he saw in St. Hill's batting, that he dedicated an entire chapter to Wilton in his celebrated work, *Beyond A Boundary.*

Wilton St. Hill, once dubbed the best batsman in the West Indies, was inducted into the Trinidad and Tobago Sports Hall of Fame in 1984.

Matches: Test 3; First Class 43

Batting: Test 117 runs, Average 19.50: First Class 1,928 runs, Average 27.15, Hundreds 5, Fifties 7

Bowling: First Class Wickets 5, Average 41.79