

George "Mass" "Atlas" Alphonso Headley

By Nasser Khan



George Headley was the first great West Indian batsman who carried the burden of our batting on his shoulders ("Atlas") with little support for most of his career compared to all others to come. That is until Brian Lara who similarly had a relatively weak supporting cast. All the other greats between the Headley and Lara eras had strength and depth in their batting line up.

The late West Indies allrounder, Gerry Gomez, in a television feature unhesitatingly singled out Headley as the greatest batsman he had ever seen.

In CLR James' book, *Beyond a Boundary*, an entire chapter is devoted to George Headley and makes for the most interesting reading: "He had to a superlative degree the three cardinal qualities of the super batsman. He saw the ball early. He was quick on his feet. He was quick with the bat. The most important of all, in my view, is seeing the ball early"

Like most great cricketers in the region, the George Headley stand at Sabina Park, Jamaica is named in his honour and for his contribution to the sport of cricket he was awarded the MBE (England) and OJ (Jamaica) honours as well as being named Wisden's cricketer of the year 1934.

He was born in Panama on May 30 1909 where his Jamaican father had worked building the famous canal and was taken to Jamaica at age 10 after having spent time living in Cuba where he spoke Spanish and played baseball.

In Jamaica he took an immediate liking to cricket and evolved into a player of immense talent such that it was not uncommon for a pick up "field and bowl" game to be terminated since they could not get him out. His stint at the St. Catherine's club impressed everyone and there was soon widespread talk about this batting phenom.

In spite of his talents the plans were for him to go off to the USA to pursue a career in dentistry but had it not been for a visa delay at age 18 he might have been lost to the world of cricket for he was selected, at 19, to the Jamaican team to play against a visiting

English side against whom he thrashed 78 and 211 in consecutive games. Since it was not a full fledged English test team he was not selected on the West Indies team shortly thereafter in 1928.

However that performance really set the tone for Headley becoming one of the greatest batsmen the world has ever seen. Famous English scribe Sir Neville Cardus stated that Headley had good claims to be considered the best ever batsman on all wickets compared even to Bradman.

Medium built, compact, balanced and light on his feet, blessed with great eyesight and athletic ability (see quote from 'Beyond a Boundary' above), he always had more time to play the ball than less gifted batsmen and like other great ones was a superb back-foot player and seldom made a hurried shot. He especially favoured the cut shot and was extremely skilled in picking the gaps in the field making it a nightmare for opposing captains to set a field to contain him.

His test career spanned a phenomenal 24 years (first test in Jan 1930, last in Jan 1954), sadly interrupted by WW2 and the fact that not many tests were played during his era when there were long breaks in between tours compared to today's hectic non-stop schedule. One can only imagine what further heights might have been achieved had it not been for these interruptions (about 8 years altogether during his peak years).

His phenomenal test batting average of 60.83 from 22 matches (see stats table below) with 10 centuries, 5 fifties and a highest score of 270 not out, remains the highest by a West Indian. In his first class career he averaged 69.86 with 33 centuries, 44 fifties and a highest score of 344 not out. Note that both his highest scores were not out (Brian Lara similarly with his even more phenomenal 400 not out and 501 not out)...indeed "Mass" George (short for master, massa).



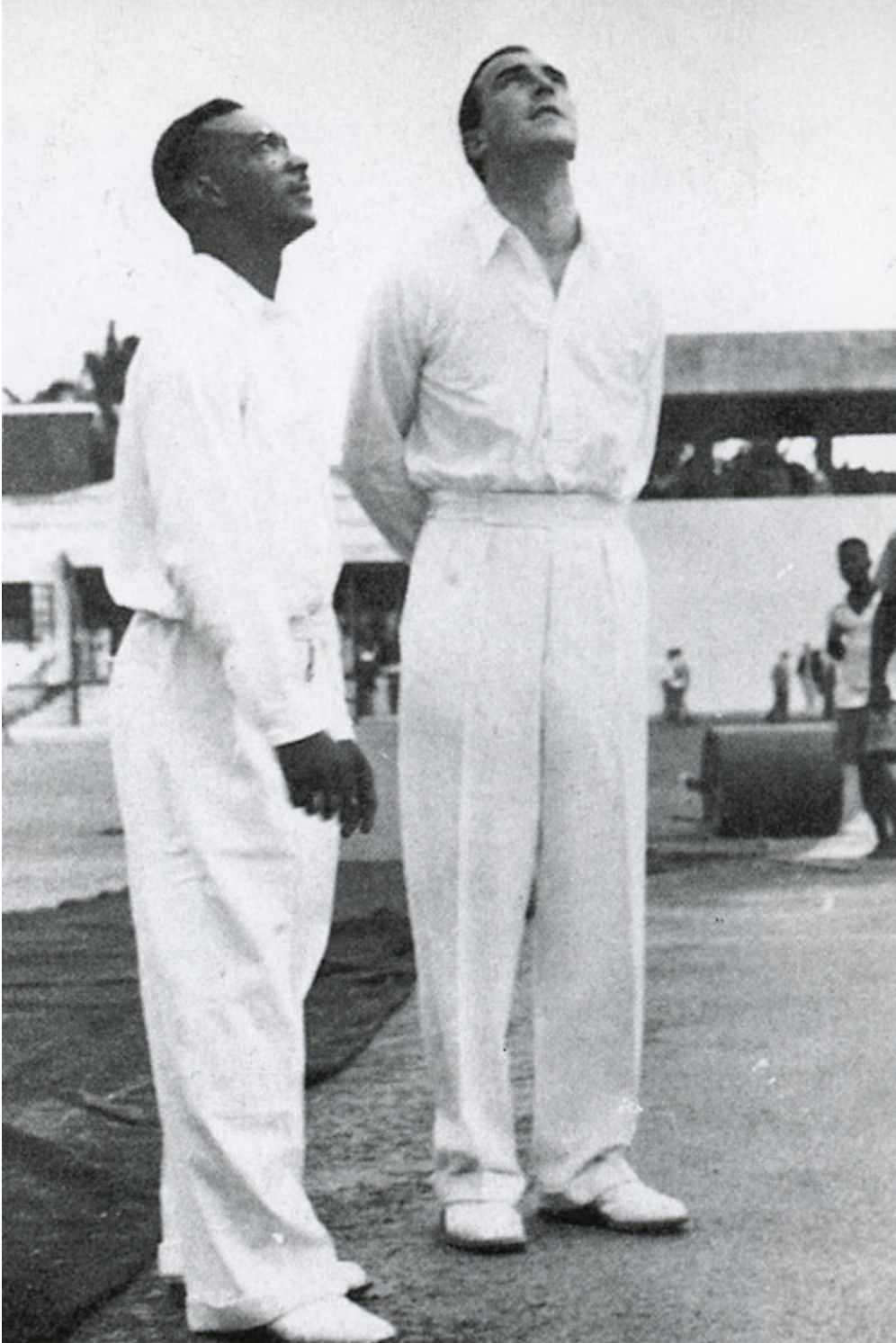
In his first test match, age 20, in 1930 he scored 176 in a drawn game against England at

Kensington Oval, Barbados. He exploded in the third test, becoming the first West Indian to score a century in each inning of a test match, in only his third test, 114 and 122 at Bourda, British Guiana. This was also the first ever Windies test victory since attaining test status in 1928, a game in which Trinidadians Learie Constantine took 9 wickets in the match and Clifford Roach scored 209 in the first innings. In the fourth match of the same series on his home ground, Sabina Park, he cracked 223 in the second innings (match drawn). He remains the first cricketer to amass four centuries in his first four tests and in only eight innings and is still the youngest, at 20, to score four in one test series. He was also the youngest test double centurion with his 223 (broken in 1976 by Javed Miandad).

He continued his amazing streak in 1931 with 102 not out (out of a total team score of 193... 'Atlas' indeed) versus Australia at Brisbane then followed it up with 105 at Sydney (WI won). In 1933 at Old Trafford versus England he thrashed 169 not out, later battling to 44 out of a team score of 102 at rain-affected at Kensington, Barbados (Jan 1935). Then it was 93 in the second test at the Queen's Park Oval (WI won, Constantine scoring 90 in the first innings and taking five wickets in the match), 53 in the third at Bourda then massacre-ing the Brits for 270 not out in a two-to-one victory at Sabina.

In June 1939 he became the first batsman to score centuries in both innings of a test match at Lord's. This was the second occasion he had scored separate centuries in a test (the first at Bourda in his first test series in 1930).

In 1948 he became the first 'black' man to captain the West Indies (not altogether a popular appointment according to him) and in his final appearance in 1954, the oldest West Indies test cricketer (44 years, 236 days) ever.



Ken Cranston, England's stand-in captain and George Headley toss before the first Test in British Guiana, West Indies vs. England, 1st Test, Bourda, January 21, 1948

Due to the breaks in his test playing years, even before WW2 he took up a series of professional contracts with sides in the English Lancashire leagues and during the war

years worked in a variety of jobs including a stint as an insurance agent and one with the Jamaica department of labour.

His son Ron Headley played in two tests matches for the West Indies in 1973 and his grandson Dean Headley played fifteen tests and thirteen one day internationals for England in the late 1990's, the only instance of three generations to play test cricket.

West Indians have delightfully combated the Australians reference to him as the 'Black Bradman' by referring to Bradman as the 'White Headley'.

George "Mass" "Atlas" Alphonso Headley, truly a West Indian great, died in November 1983 at the age of 74 at Meadowbridge in Kingston, Jamaica.

Batting and fielding averages													
	Mat	Inns	NO	Runs	HS	Ave	100	50	6s	Ct	St		
Tests	22	40	4	2190	270*	60.83	10	5	1	14	0		
First-class	103	164	22	9921	344*	69.86	33	44		76	0		
Bowling averages													
	Mat	Inns	Balls	Runs	Wkts	BBI	BBM	Ave	Econ	SR	4w	5w	10
Tests	22	14	398	230	0	-	-	-	3.46	-	0	0	0
First-class	103		3845	1842	51	5/33		36.11	2.87	75.3		1	0