

# Walsh the unlikely record holder

BY HOWARD CAMPBELL  
Staff writer

**A**S Courtney Walsh trundled in to bowl what turned out to be the last rites of South Africa's win in the first Test in Johannesburg yesterday, one television commentator remarked: "You can bet Walsh won't be volunteering himself for the next provincial match."

Three days earlier, the 36-year-old Walsh moved past present West Indies coach Malcolm Marshall's longstanding record of 376 wickets when he picked up the first two batsmen in the Springboks' first innings. At the end of the match, his tally stood at 382 Test wickets, just one away from joining Englishman, Ian Botham, in third place on the list of most wickets taken in Tests.

Walsh can point to his record-breaking performance in the West Indies' historic first Test on South African soil as some form of solace for his strength-sapping performance in a losing effort. It seemed a justifiable blueprint of his two-decade-long career as a professional cricketer.

In an era of tearaway quicks and stare-down speed merchants, Walsh, like the magnificent New Zealander, Richard Hadlee, is a throwback to the days when guile, and not bully-boy tactics, was the hallmark of the great fastbowler.

In a chat one month before leaving for South Africa, Walsh spoke of his latest impending milestone with typical humility: "First and foremost I want the team to have a successful tour," he said. "But, yeah, getting the record would be nice."

When Stuart Williams brilliantly snared Jaques Kallis' snick in the slips to give Walsh Test wicket number 377, the lanky Jamaican became the West Indies' most prolific and — in some quarters, most unlikely — wicket-taker.

Unlikely, because Walsh, especially in the initial stages of his Test career, was never the match-winner he has become in recent years. Unlike other regional quicks like Anthony Merrick and George Ferris who came to the fore in the wake of fastbowling terrors like Holding, Roberts, Garner, Croft and Marshall, stepping on the gas has never been priority for Walsh.

Indeed, the fiery passion associated with the fast men was missing early on. An incident in a Jamaica/Barbados Shell Shield game in 1983 when he wept after one of his deliveries struck a batsman in the face

suggested he didn't have the guts to go all the way.

Walsh's seamer's style also saw him being overlooked by the West Indies selectors for the fourth spot in the fastbowling quartet for Winston Davis and Patrick Patterson in the mid eighties. But like Hadlee and Imran Khan it has been good old know-how that has seen Walsh's bowling improve with age.

That type of resolve has seen Walsh to his best performances as a Test bowler past the age of 30, a time when most contemporary fastbowlers are considered to be past their prime.

Superb performances in away series against India and New Zealand in 1994/95 and a fantastic burst in the memorable Adelaide Test of the 1993/94 series against Australia, not only saw Walsh turn the corner as a match-winner but as a leader as well.

Interestingly, Walsh surpassed Marshall's mark at the tailend of a year that started out far from promising. He was replaced as West Indies captain by Brian Lara for the tour by England in the wake of an embarrassing 0-3 wipe-out by Pakistan in the winter, the biggest loss suffered by the Windies since the 1-5 thrashing from Ian Chappell's Australians back in 1975.

"I wasn't pleased with the way it was handled at the time," said Walsh of the West Indies Cricket Board's decision to replace him. "But looking back, I can say I'm pretty pleased with the end result."

The West Indies, and longtime Walsh fans, would have been pleased as well. Walsh finished with 22 wickets against England, including a match-winning four for 80 in the final Test in Antigua.

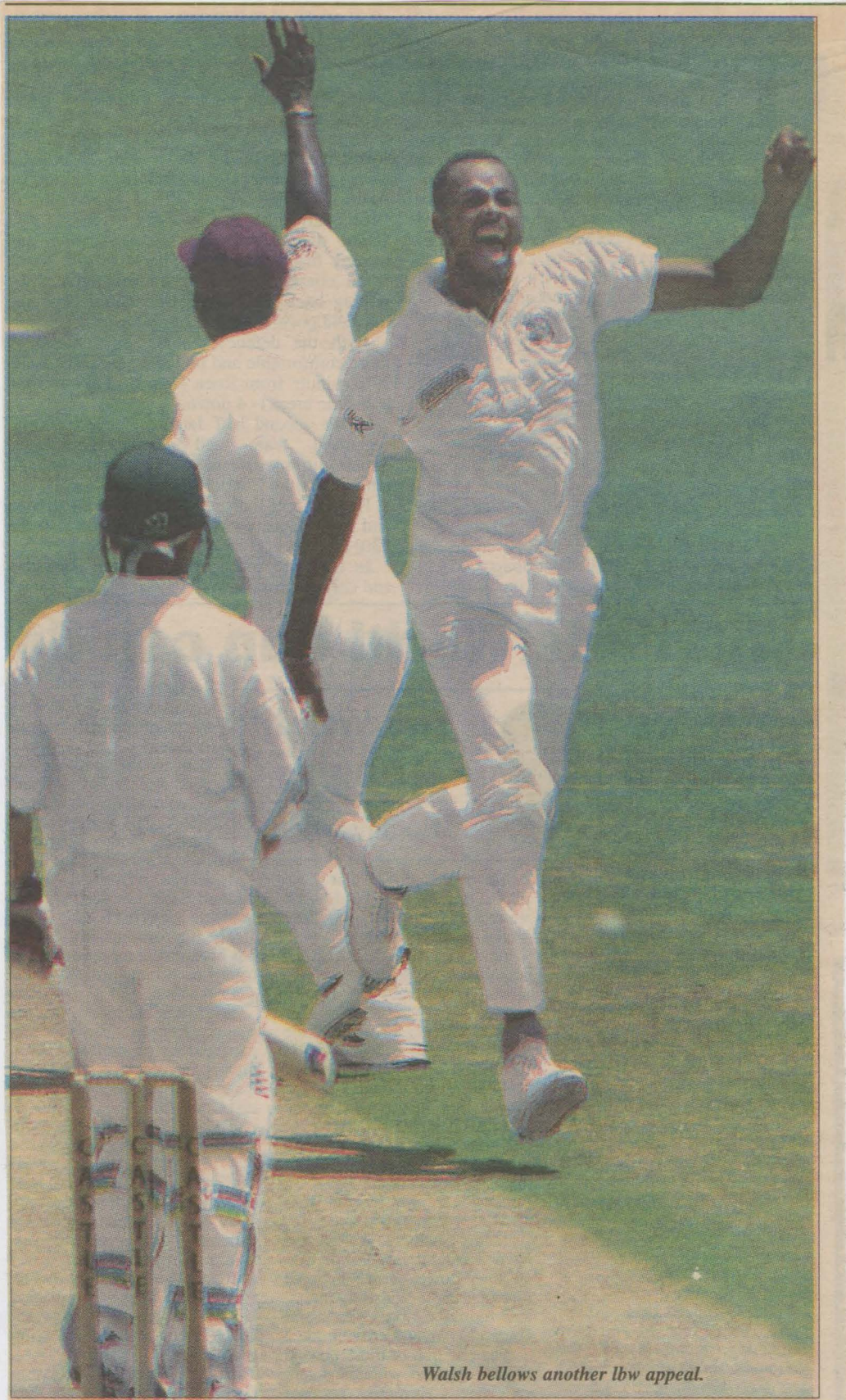
Walsh's 36-year-old legs were still fresh enough for him to snap up 106 wickets for Gloucester in the English County Championships, a haul that helped the county to a respectable fourth place.

But there comes a time when even Courtney Walsh's — nicknamed Duracell at Gloucester — batteries will start fading. Like Hadlee and Kapil Dev of India who bowed out against arch-rivals England and the West Indies respectively, Walsh would not mind having one last go at the Aussies who play four Tests here in 1999.

Not prepared to take his place for granted, even in times when his selection seems secure, Walsh chose the safety-first route: "Let's wait and see," he said.

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*Courtney Walsh*



*Walsh bellows another lbw appeal.*

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