

Well bowled 'Cuddy'

BY R W MATHIAS

IN becoming West Indies highest wicket-taker in Test matches, the veteran fast bowling campaigner, Courtney Walsh, has been rewarded for his relentless drive for perfection, when through commitment, he bowled his heart out for the West Indies usually performing the role of "workhorse". This time around the workload is again expected to be heavy.

Most fast bowlers possess a volatile temperament, which sometimes gets them into trouble. Walsh is not in that category. He is a highly popular player both on and off the field and one cannot help admiring the level-headed manner in which he has taken adversity as well as adulation. "Cuddy" as he is familiarly called, is at his best when the team needs him most and remains a great example of professionalism and determination to the younger players.

Now nearly a month past his 36th birthday, Walsh entered the opening Test between South Africa and West Indies on November 26, needing a mere two wickets to overtake Malcolm Marshall's highest ever West Indies Test tally of 376 wickets from 81 matches. With the West Indies occupying the crease on the opening day, Walsh did not take long to rewrite the record books when South Africa batted on the second day. He had opener, Adam Bacher, snapped up by Test debutante wicket-keeper, Ridley Jacobs, to equal the record. He then made it his own with the first delivery of his tenth over, when Jacques Kallis was brilliantly caught at second slip by Stuart Williams before adding two more victims to his collection, Darryl Cullinan and Shaun Pollock. No one can deny that he thoroughly deserved the honour, while ending with impressive figures of four for 66. Then in second innings with three increasing the total to 382 wickets in his 103rd Test.

Walsh is now fourth in line of highest Test wicket-takers ever, behind Kapil Dev (India) 434 from 131 tests, Richard Hadlee (New Zealand) 431 from 86 and Ian Botham (England) 383 from 102. As regards the West Indies, Walsh seems like holding the record for a long time. His nearest rivals are veterans Curtly Ambrose with 346 from 81 and Ian Bishop 161 from 43. Lets hope that Walsh's legs continue to carry the strain, and his appetite for the game continues, so that this popular cricketer can move on to become only the third bowler to reach the 400 wicket mark and then further progress to one of cricket's mightiest summits, that of claiming the highest amount of wickets at the Test level.

While Walsh just keeps rolling along, like "old man river", he is not only the oldest fast bowler in Test cricket at present, but also the longest serving at the highest level.

The road has never been easy for Walsh. Although a member of West Indies touring party to England in 1984, he never made his Test debut. Another pace bowler, Winston Davis, on County assignment in England was drafted into the team for the fourth Test when both Malcolm Marshall and Milton Small were declared unfit. Selected on tour of Australia for the 1984-85 five Test series, Walsh made his debut in the opening Test at Perth, while West Indies rejoiced

in fast bowling riches. He did not bowl in Australia's first innings, when they were bundled out for a paltry 76 by Marshall, Garner and Holding. In the second innings, Walsh claimed two for 43, when West Indies won by an innings and 112 runs.

During the 1988-89 five Test series "Down Under", Walsh in the opening Test at Brisbane ended Australia's innings when he claimed Tony Dodemaide's wicket with his first delivery of a new over. Then in the second innings took the wickets of Mike Valetta and Graham Wood with the first and second deliveries of his opening over. He became the third West Indies bowler after Wes Hall and Lance Gibbs to achieve a hat-trick and the first in Test history to complete the feat over two innings.

For the fourth Test at Sydney, the determined and at times luckless Walsh became the 12th West Indies bowler to claim 100 test wickets. He reached the landmark in his 29th Test when wicket-keeper, Jeff Dujon, accepted the catch to dismiss centurion David Boon.

Walsh's omission from the West Indies team for the fourth Test against England at Kensington Oval in 1990 must have been a frustrating experience. Taking his place was the 32-year old Barbadian pacer, Ezra Moseley, who in 1983 had defied West Indies Cricket Board's ban by journeying to the forbidden land of South Africa.

However, Walsh was back in the fold for the fifth Test at the Antigua Recreation Ground, which the West Indies won by an innings and 32 runs and with it the series by a 2-1 margin.

When Pakistan came to the Caribbean in 1993, Walsh was again in the limelight when he trapped Basit Ali leg before wicket in Pakistan's second innings of the second Test at Kensington Oval to claim his 200th test wicket after nearly 10 years and 58 Tests.

After taking over the captaincy from Richie Richardson and without the services of speed partner Ambrose and established opener, Desmond Haynes, for the West Indies three match tour of India in 1994 did a marvellous job. By winning the third Test, West Indies levelled the series one-all and maintained their 15-year-old unbeaten Test series record.

Going to New Zealand early in 1995, West Indies won the two Test rubber one-nil. At the end of the second Test, West Indies triumphed by an innings and 322 runs. Walsh covered himself in glory with career best innings figures of seven for 37 and for the match 13 wickets for 55 runs which for the West Indies stands second to Michael Holding's 14 for 149 against England at the Oval in 1976.

When the sixth and final Test between the West Indies and England got underway at the Oval in that country, in the summer of 1995, Walsh needed just one more

wicket for his 300th. England won the toss and elected to bat but Walsh had a long wait until tea on the second day, before claiming that important wicket. The victim was lower order batsman, Mike Watkinson. Batting at number eight he edged a catch to wicket-keeper, Courtney Browne. Walsh then became the tenth bowler and third West Indian after Lance Gibbs and Malcolm Marshall to achieve 300 Test wickets.

When England toured the Caribbean earlier this year, Walsh became only the fifth West Indian to turn out in 100 Test matches. He is the only fast bowler to join the illustrious group of batsmen - Vivian Richards (121), Desmond Haynes (116), Clive Lloyd (110) and Gordon Greenidge (108). There has been no more faithful servant to West Indies cricket than Walsh. He missed a solitary Test, through injury, which forced him out of the Kensington Oval match against India last year.

Appointed Ambassador at large for his native, Jamaica, Walsh is also recognised as a great ambassador for the West Indies, and CARICOM should now see it fit to award him the Order of the Caribbean Community. Sir Garfield Sobers is the only sportsman to receive the prestigious award.

B/W - Walsh Courtney
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Walsh in action during the first Test against South Africa.

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