

# Gayle Force Winds Of Change



West Indies have been papering over Caribbean cracks for the last two decades, but the personal clashes of Chris Gayle and Dwayne Bravo with the West Indies Board are obscuring the external threat.

BY: NICK SADLEIR

Ever since the inaugural IPL in 2008, T20 cricket and its monster pay packets have hung over the head of the international game like the sword of Damocles. Fortunately the prioritisation of country over club by players and administrators in the Test playing nations has prevented most teams from losing their best personnel to the abyss that is the proliferation of relatively meaningless but cash-flush T20 leagues the world over. However, there is one sad exception.

The West Indies Cricket Board (WICB) may have a near impossible task in managing its motley pool of players from 15 rather spread out countries, but it has seldom excelled itself in its relations with its cricketers. With money and loyalty at the centre of most disputes it is no surprise that some of its stars have chosen immense wealth and international stardom over being paid a pittance (or nothing at all) to turn out for a side that has forgotten how to win.

The West Indies may have been easily the world's best for much of the 70's and 80's but a general shift across the region towards American popular culture and sports has resulted in greater interest in rap music and basketball than in the colonial game of cricket. In addition, most of the team's stars have either skipped or been omitted from West Indian squads doing international battle as a direct result of conflicts of interest between country and club.

Despite its enormous talent pool the West Indies continue to underperform and have won only two Test series over the past seven years; one at home to England in 2009 and the other recently in Bangladesh. Despondent fans will have scant optimism about their team's performance in the upcoming tour of England, although a competitive display against Australia, who are visiting the Caribbean after a dominant summer Down Under, will have raised some expectations.

The grim prospect of a second-string side being thrashed by the Aussies forced the board to try and make amends with alienated players. A host of non-contracted senior players took part in a two-week training camp that preceded the Australia series.

Two of the world's favourite T20 guns-for-hire, Dwayne Bravo and Kieron Pollard, along with the experienced Denesh Ramdin and Tino Best, returned to the fold to inspire some hope in a failing setup, but there remained one glaring omission from the pack. The WICB have excluded their ace turned joker; Chris Gayle. Apparently he refused to apologise to the Board for comments that he made about the Board and the coach, Ottis Gibson in a radio interview.

It was understood that Gayle needed only to retract and he'd be back in the mix. Similarly, the WI only needed to say the word and he'd play. At least that's the public face, said with the confidence that

it was never going to happen and Gayle was always going to the IPL. He has talked about coming to England for the one-day series. Cynics point out that he does not want to miss out on the T20 World Cup in Sri Lanka in September.

And it does seem that some progress has been made. The Caribbean Media Corporation (CMC) has reported that the WICB have put their differences aside. "The WICB and Mr Gayle agree that the

way is now clear for his active return to West Indies cricket, subject to all necessary fitness considerations," claims the CMC. But a pending court case between the West Indies Players Association - to which Gayle is a party - and the WICB, seriously contradicts that.

The Board hoped Gayle would drop the lawsuit concerning No-Objection Certificates filed by the WIPA against it, though Gayle, in a statement recently,

Left:

Gayle and Bravo. Mercenaries or Freelancers? (Getty)

Below:

Gayle lights up the Royal Challengers Bangalore as far away the West Indies go down to Australia. (AFP/Getty)



said he could not “possibly contemplate withdrawing unilaterally from proceedings”, especially when such a move would affect all West Indies players.

“Mutual intransigence” is what Tony Cozier calls it. Gayle is arrogant, but why wouldn't he be – the man is peerless when it comes to pelting leather over rope and he has plenty of reason to believe he was mistreated by his bosses at the WICB.

Hopefully something will give but in the meantime the dasher has been lining his pockets with gold by playing in every T20 tournament on the planet. His swing remains as true as ever. He hit 22 sixes in six games at the Stanbic Bank T20 in Zimbabwe, 22 sixes in seven games at the Big Bash in Australia (including a record ten in one innings) and 26 sixes in five games at the Bangladesh Premier League. If he hadn't been injured he would no doubt have pelted more maximums - instead of sitting on the bench – at South Africa's domestic MiWay T20 tournament.

In between these astonishing feats of freelancing he flew home to Jamaica to make a couple of appearances for his home island. When Gayle turned out for Jamaica in a four-day match it was his first first-class appearance outside of Test cricket for

over four years. As Gideon Haigh points out, it is this kind of thing that makes it no surprise that the WICB cannot find a sponsor for its domestic first-class competition.

Cozier says that off-field distractions and player-board tension continue to hamper the side's development, but he notes that; “such setbacks are somewhat moderated by the homecoming of Dwayne Bravo from his T20 exploits across the globe. An ebullient all-rounder who has clearly re-found his groove (he opted out of the team last June stating he wasn't happy with his game and needed time to 'rest, refocus and reflect') his enthusiasm has been infectious ever since he came into international cricket in 2004.

Now, if he could sort out all the off-field nonsense as well, he would instantly take over as Board president and team captain. But no one has yet found the formula for cricketing peace for 20 years and counting.”

Let us hope that Bravo can begin to do some of that, but though he played in the drawn one-day series against Australia, he has gone to the IPL – unlike his younger brother, Darren, who was the only West Indies player not to take up his IPL contract - and when SPIN caught up with the all-rounder a couple of months ago he seemed

Below:

Julian Hunte, president off the WICB, at the ICC Executive Board meeting in Dubai in October 2011.

Right:

Bravo goes aerial at the 2011 World Cup

Bottom Right:

Sunil Narine, West Indies new mystery spinner - sometimes. (All Getty)



distracted by his fledgling music career. Bravo has recorded a music video with Jamaican Dance Hall star, Beanie Man, and the record has been selling well. With a bit of luck, bling-bearing Bravo's antics could foster a 'cool' popular culture in the Caribbean that has cricket close to its heart.

He believes he can: "I'm a big music fan and Beanie Man has been my favourite music artist for a long time. I have always looked up to him - in the same way that I always looked up to Lara. So I really wanted to meet him and straight away we became good friends. I love music and dancing and I asked him if we could do something together. It was very easy - I flew to Jamaica and within two hours the song was made.

Beanie Man is big in America, Europe and even Africa. He has got me more into music and I have got him more into cricket. This is the kind of thing cricket needs.

The Caribbean culture has become more American and less colonial and everyone wants to be like the big US stars. Cricket is still the main sport but the facilities aren't there and youngsters struggle to make it internationally. This needs to be addressed and let's hope that by combining cricket and cool music we can do this and change things.

In the video we have kids (and some sexy girls - anything to do with girls and I'll be there) so hopefully that kind of thing can help Dance Hall music and our collaboration to encourage kids to play cricket.

Music is something I can do after my career as a cricketer. I love it and if I can get the right people around me then it can be great. But my real focus is on cricket - music should just be a hobby while I'm still playing."

Well, West Indian cricket has become unpredictable - let's hope for a turn up for the books again now.

But even if everyone kisses and makes up this is no longer a problem of personality, it is structural. The IPL has unbalanced the game and franchise owners are no longer waiting for players to make their mark for their country, as shown by the \$700,000 that Kolkata Knight Riders paid for the uncapped 23-year-old Trinidad 'mystery' off-spinner, Sunil Narine.

Narine was subsequently called up by the West Indies and confounded many Australia batsmen in the one-day series, but was he seriously expected to turn

down a contract that will financially secure his future on the hope of a West Indies Test call-up? Should he have? There has been talk of the ICC compelling players to play for their country, but would that be right? Small national boards cannot compete with the pull of the IPL, so it either needs to be built into the international schedule, or it will breed only more discontent.



"Was Sunil Narine seriously expected to turn down \$700,000 from the IPL? Should he have?"

