

Jamaican ambassador Anthony Johnson presents Cricket Hall of Fame's president Shirley Matthews with statuette of former West Indian great George Headley.

George Headley first black world class performer.



By STAN WALKER

The Cricket Hall of Fame was the proud recipient of a prized piece of art work, a statuette of the late great West Indian batsman George Alphanso Headley on Thursday, October 1. Making the presentation was Jamaican Ambassador Anthony Johnson, who explained that the statuette which is being sold to raise funds for Headley's club, Lucas CC, which is in need of dire repairs, was commissioned to mark the 100th birthday of Headley, the first West Indian sporting hero.

Before making the presentation Johnson, an ardent fan of the game, gave the gathering a brief history of the development of the game in the Caribbean and the formation of Lucas CC. He particularly expressed the significance of Headley's accomplishments, which he said played a major role in breaking down the color barrier that existed in sports during the 30s and the 40s.

"We had Marcus Garvey," he said, "but they had put him in jail. The world heavyweight boxing champion Jack Johnson had been discredited and exiled, during that time. Headley thus became the first black man to be acknowledged as a world-class performer," he said.

"For the first decade of West Indies participation in Test Cricket, Headley's performances were always at a high point. He was called Atlas since he bore the reputation and pride of the region on his shoulders. He was not only carrying the cricket team on his shoulders, but the esteem and potential of African-Jamaica," he said.

"The fact that Headley was mastering the English and Australian bowlers was a new experience for West Indians," Johnson continued. "He was the superstar of the age. He created a feeling of pride in every West Indian especially among the black masses, which prompted former Jamaican Prime Minister Michael Manley, to say in his book that 'Headley became excellence personified in a white world and a white sport'. He showed the world that a black man could perform just as good as any white man," Johnson said.

"Lucas CC was formed out of necessity," Johnson said. "Opportunities for the working class were few and for the minority who were successful, there was no social acceptance in the 'gentlemen's clubs' of the day."

David Ellington, a guard at the Customs Department in Kingston, was determined to bring the finer points of the game to the underprivileged of the city and in 1889 started a team from among the better players at Kingston Race Course, a sort of breeding ground for players.

“In 1895, the skipper of a visiting English team, Slade Lucas ‘took great interest in Ellington’s efforts and, overnight, Ellington’s experiment was hailed across Jamaica,” Johnson said. About 1896, Ellington changed the name of his team to Lucas CC in honor of the visitor. The club became known as the working man’s club, but in private it was known as the black man’s club.”

“It gained significance when the legendary owner of a well-known drug store in the city, R. E. Nelson, a leading black businessman of the day, made lands available to the club to play their games at no cost. The club later bought the land and named it Nelson Oval in honor of their benefactor. It has since become a top cricket club on the island which has produced a number of cricketers who has played for Jamaica and the West Indies