

C L O S E U P

O N

Viv Richards

Peter Wilson

Almost before the cheers die away, the crowd realises the enormity of the task ahead. Down the steps from the pavilion walks the incoming batsman. He enters the arena like a gladiator preparing for his next battle. On both wrists are his colours - sweatbands in the gold, red and green of the Rastas. In his right hand is a powerful weapon, the blade, as yet still to be wielded. His left arm is swung to ease out the tension and to exorcise any complacency. Chewing gum, he swaggers, almost arrogantly, to the war zone. We are then, if all the careful grooming has gone to plan, witnesses to one of the most glorious spectacles to be viewed on the sporting stage anywhere in the world: Isaac Vivian Alexander Richards in full flight.

For 10 years now that has been the sight which has demoralised opposing cricketers from Antigua to Auckland. The joy of seeing the early wicket of Greenidge or Haynes fall has been simultaneously tempered by the impending arrival of Richards. For 10 years he has disappointed no one - although he has frustrated many bowlers and broken many hearts.

It will probably come as little consolation to the England players currently facing the might of West Indian cricket in the Caribbean, but Viv Richards had a rather inauspicious beginning to his international career. In his first Test match, against India in Bangalore during the 1974/5 series, he scored just four and three in his two innings. Things didn't appear to be going any better in the next Test. Richards had struggled on to 12 before the Indian fielders made a very vocal appeal for a catch behind. The

umpire rejected the claims of his fellow contrymen and Richards was given a second chance; he didn't squander it, scoring 192 in what was to be a match-winning performance.

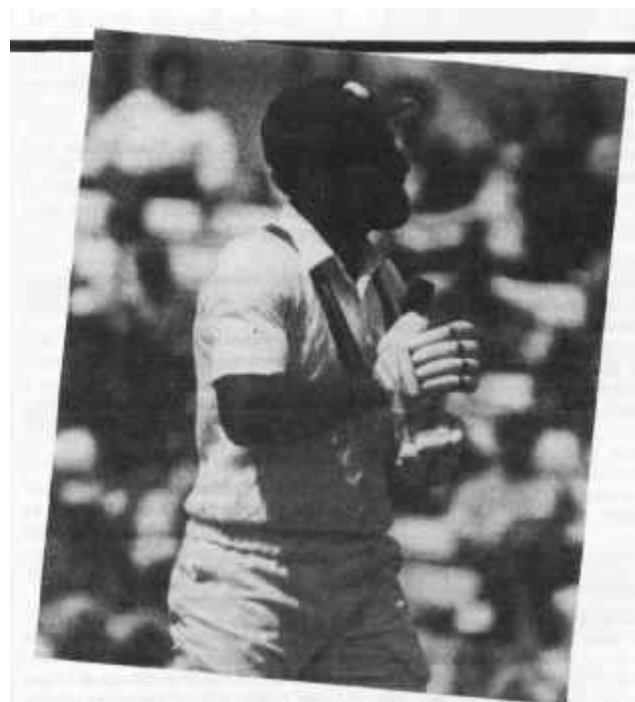
Today, of course, Richards is the captain of the West Indies Test side, as well as being justifiably considered as the greatest and most exciting batsman in the world. But he is not just a cricketer who delights with his betting, his lightning agility in the field and who tantalises with his off-breaks - he has become an ambassador for his sport and his country.

Born in Antigua 34 years ago, Richards, like many West Indian boys, played his cricket on the beaches and in the streets. But it was in the more enclosed surroundings of the Antigua Grammar School that he found the discipline to develop his game.

Richards had a reasonably comfortable childhood. His father, a good club cricketer who represented Antigua for many years, was a prison warden, his mother took responsibility for instilling religion and education into the Richards' children. At 18 he left school and became a club cricketer for Rising Sun. Off the field he worked as a barman and an apprentice mechanic, but both jobs were viewed as ways to earn money rather than for their career opportunities.

Richards' lack of academic success was a major disappointment to his parents. They wanted to send him to college in New York, but for the young Richards there was only one way he wanted to earn a living.

Richards' first trip to England was a six-week stay at the



renowned Alf Gover coaching school in Wandsworth. But it was a couple of hundred miles away in the West Country that Richards was destined to live, play cricket and carve out his own little niche in local folklore.

He was bought to Bath in 1974 with a hope that he would impress the powers that be at Somerset County Cricket Club. This he did with a merciless assault on local club bowlers, and despite the cold weather and the loneliness of being away from his family and friends, particularly his girlfriend and soon-to-be-wife Miriam. Richards became part of the jigsaw which, when completed, was to make Somerset the most exciting first-class cricket team in England.

The people of Antigua look on Richards with great pride - even the Queen during a recent visit to the island realised that her popularity in the Caribbean would not be harmed by a reference to the great man in a speech. And his refusal to go to South Africa won him back the favour of the West Indian cricket board, which had been harmed when in 1979 Richards went to Australia to join Kerry Packer's cricket circus.

He tends to be philosophical rather than political in his attitude to colleagues who take 'blood money' offered by the

apartheid state. 'It's their decision, it's their work, how can I criticise them?' he told me just before Christmas on his way back from the West Indies tour of Pakistan.

But the man who turned down £250,000 to play cricket in South Africa is just as clear on where he stands himself: 'I am worried about Viv Richards going to South Africa, not anybody else. I would not go to that country because of the way they treat the people of my colour.'

It is believed that Richards may turn to politics once his career comes to an end. He is concerned about Caribbean politics and was greatly influenced by the late Grenadian leader Maurice Bishop. He was impressed by the advances the small island had made under Bishop and was 'angered' by the subsequent US invasion of Grenada following 'my friend's' assassination.

That, though, is for the future. Richards is now plotting the downfall of England and will in April begin his twelfth season with Somerset. His less immediate aim is to captain the West Indies to their third World Cup success in India and Pakistan next year. It's clear that Viv Richards intends to give those who live outside the West Indies and Somerset more heartbreaking pleasure for a few years to come.