when comparisons are made about which is the greatest Test cricket side of all time, the shortlist invariably comes down to Warwick Armstrong's 1931 Australians, Don Bradman's 1948 Australians and Clive Lloyd's 1980s West Indies. Among the crucial characteristics of this trio is the inclusion of one super batsman — and for Clive Lloyd that player was Vivian Richards.

Isaac Vivian Alexander Richards made his Test debut in 1974-75 and has remained a permanent fixture in the West Indies eleven since. In those fourteen years he has amassed more than 7,500 Test runs at an average of over 50. Richards is in the most exalted of company.

Perhaps Richards' most astonishing feat was his Test century hit from 56 balls against England on his home ground of St. John's, Antigua, in April 1986. It is hard to imagine that any player will ever score a quicker Test hundred. Not surprisingly, Vivian Richards has been deified in Antigua.

Antigua is an island in the Leewards with a population of around 70,000. It was not until the 1970s, when Richards and Andy Roberts emerged, that an Antiguan represented the West Indies at cricket. Roberts proved to be a great fast bowler, but it was Richards' success that galvanised the small island population. Lester Bird, at the time Deputy Prime Minister of Antigua, commented:

The common cause, that single purpose, became Viv Richards' success on the international cricket stage ... he personified what we perceived ourselves to be: young, dynamic and talented but yet unrecognised in the world.

In his wake other young Test stars from Antigua, such as Richie Richardson and Curtley Ambrose, have followed.

Peter Roebuck, who played with Richards for Somerset during the English summer, remarked that Richards "is not a man to compromise nor a man who easily suppresses rage at insults". Richards' biographer, Trevor McDonald, has added that he combines "humility and seriousness with a burning pride". In 1976 Tony Greig, the white South African-born captain of England, taunted the West Indian tourists with the comment that "We will make the West Indies grovel". Richards responded with 232 in the First Test, 291 in the Fifth, and a series aggregate of 829 at an average of 118.42. Wisden considered the performance "phenomenal".

As Roebuck also wrote, Richards has a "towering hatred of dishonesty, disloyalty and racial slurs". No doubt Greig had cause to regret his ill-considered remark.

Vivian Richards has been guarded about his own political opinions, although his friendship and admiration for the late Maurice Bishop of Grenada is on the public record. However, it is on the South African issue that Richards has maintained strong opinions. In 1982 when a group of English professionals toured South Africa he stated:

If I went to South Africa my people would think of me as nothing. I'd be told I'd sold my birthright. I'd be haunted and hassled by my own people — and by my own mind. Man, I'd be a goner.

Richards refuses to talk to the agents of white South African cricket who imagine they can buy any international cricketer. As Richards says, it would be "immoral" to go to South Africa; he will not accept "blood money".

Professional cricketers, like many of their administrators, have wanted to bury their heads in the sand and separate sport and politics. This makes them easy prey for South African "blood money". In fact the recent debates within the international cricket communities have been devoid of any principled and moral stand on apartheid.

To his credit, Vivian Richards is one of the handful of professional cricketers who have openly stated their moral and political objections to the South African regime. Sadly it is only a handful: of the 300 English professionals, there might be six who would be prepared to make similar statements.

Vivian Richards is a player motivated by great challenges. One of his aims on the recent tour of Australia was to become the first West Indian to achieve the milestone of a century of centuries — this he attained in Sydney in the match against New South Wales.

The captaincy of the West Indies side was another important goal and since that appointment Richards has been keen to inflict series defeats on England and Australia. Now those milestones have also been achieved.

It is hard to imagine what remains for Vivian Richards in Test cricket. He is the captain of the best side in the world; perhaps he intends to make his eleven as formidable as the sides in which he played under Clive Lloyd.

Michael Manley, the recently elected socialist Prime Minister of Jamaica, in his History of West Indies Cricket, argued that Clive Lloyd honed the ever-present talents of Caribbean cricketers into an all-conquering force through a new and determined professionalism. Vivian Richards inherited that side from Lloyd, but now has a pivotal part to play as captain in a new period for West Indian cricket.

It is not likely that we will have the pleasure of seeing "the great man" bat again in Test cricket in Australia. Sadly, the age of Vivian Richards is drawing to a close.

Ric Sissons