

The man for **THE JOB**

He's 24 years old, with just eight Test matches to his name – and he's been entrusted as the new leader of the West Indies Cricket Team. RICHARD ASHER learns more about Jason Holder and discovers why he's received the backing of some of the game's greatest ever players...

You could certainly forgive Jason Holder for being dazed and disoriented when this season's Boxing Day Test match comes around. It's been one heck of a 365 days for him, after all. Yet the man who will most likely lead the

Windsies at the Melbourne Cricket Ground will be calm as Christmas morning in a house without kids. You can put your last dollar on it.

On Boxing Day a year ago, only cricket tragics had heard of the tall Barbadian in the longest format. He was in Port Elizabeth, playing in just his second Test match. To the outside world, at least, this 23-year-old was just another newish, youngish face in a West Indian five-day team constantly looking to unearth lasting quality.

But to a few influential people in West Indies cricket, Holder was a different kettle of fish. He'd been catching eyes at St Michael's school in Barbados from an early age. That's why, a few days before Christmas 2014, the powers-that-be had seen fit to hand him the captaincy of the One Day International side.

Still, the announcement sparked rumbles from the Caribbean that Holder could probably feel all the way across the Atlantic. With the ICC Cricket World Cup 2015 just a few weeks away, the reaction was vociferous. This man had next to no experience and was the youngest to ever captain a West Indies side. Had the selectors taken complete leave of their senses?

KEY HOLDER

Veteran cricket journalist Tony Cozier was one of the doubters. "A lot of people, including myself, were a little fearful whether he could handle it, especially in the circumstances at the time," Cozier says. "That included Chris Gayle and Kieron Pollard being very vocal about the deposition of Dwayne Bravo as one-day captain."

Clive Lloyd, who chairs the selection committee, remembers the fuss all too well. "When he was made captain of the ODI side there was a big hue and cry," says the former captain, who knows a thing or two about the qualities needed to lead a winning West Indies team. "People said he's too young, and he hasn't got enough experience."

After getting through that Test series in South Africa, Holder set about proving the critics entirely wrong. And he did it in his own quiet way. First he had to lead the troops in a bilateral series against the Proteas, and then came a rather large challenge: the ICC Cricket World Cup 2015. Though neither assignment was a success for the team, Holder conducted himself admirably in taking the West Indies to the Quarter Finals, managing to turn more than a few heads in the process.

After that it was time to fall back into ranks and really make his mark on the Test side. He ticked that box in no time at all, making a match-saving hundred of the highest order against England. He followed that up with a belligerent clobbering of the Australian attack in Jamaica. ▶





JASON HOLDER'S TEST FIGURES

BATTING

Mat	Inns	NO	Runs	HS	Ave	BF	SR	100	50	4s	6s
8	14	3	380	103*	34.54	589	64.51	1	2	46	5

BOWLING

Mat	Inns	Balls	Runs	Wkts	BBI	BBM	Ave	Econ	SR	4w	5w
8	14	1241	566	16	3-15	5-49	35.37	2.73	77.5	0	0

* Figures do not include the October 2015 Test series with Sri Lanka

Then, in September, came the next addition to Holder's ever-growing resume. He was awarded captaincy of the Test side ahead of the tour to Sri Lanka. Doubtters were much harder to find. Throughout the 10 months since Christmas, the humble Holder had simply let his cricket and his leadership do the talking. Suspicion was growing that the Windies selectors had played a masterstroke by choosing to back him.

"After the World Cup a lot of people realised it was a wonderful move to make him captain," says Lloyd, who is one of those who had Holder on his radar for many years.

"I first saw him at around 16 years of age," remembers Lloyd. "I had a chat with him when he came to the High Performance Centre. I didn't know the young man from Adam, but I soon realised that he had all the qualities needed for West Indies cricket to get a lift. He's intelligent, he's articulate, he answers questions quite well and he's a likeable young man."

That's exactly what emerged as Holder led the limited-overs team in early 2015. Cozier explains how this helped Holder nail down the captaincy job.

His first two series were away against South Africa, one of the best teams in

the world, and then the World Cup. A very difficult initiation for him as a new captain! He had to deal with AB de Villiers scoring the fastest ODI hundred in Johannesburg, and then a similar thing again in the World Cup.

But in between all that, the West Indies didn't do as badly as had been expected, reaching the Quarter Finals. Holder himself gained a lot of kudos for the way he handled the situation. He could have been absolutely devastated, but he wasn't.

"He handled himself and the team really well in difficult times. He always kept his calm and never shirked his responsibility. He got hammered for 34 in one over by de Villiers in Sydney, but he just came back, kept going."

BEYOND THE NUMBERS

What might be noticeable by this time is that we've said very little about Holder's actual cricketing performances. Even when you talk to the experts, his runs and wickets seem to come as an afterthought. It's as though his character and his leadership are the reason he's in the side. ▶

"He always kept his calm and never shirked his responsibility. In one over he got hammered for 34 by de Villiers, but he just came back, kept going"



Ian Bishop thinks a few minor technical bowling adjustments will help Holder become one of the world's best all-rounders



"Intelligent, articulate and likeable" – Clive Lloyd has nothing but the highest praise for Holder

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LAST WE SAW HIM...

It's less than a year since we saw Jason Holder in Australia. Barely into his captaincy career, the ICC Cricket World Cup 2015 brought him here last February.

From a team point of view, Holder did a great job to get his side to the Quarter Finals after an early loss to Ireland. Their wins over Pakistan, Zimbabwe and the UAE were enough to get them there, despite a further loss to India and a record-breaking horror day against South Africa in Sydney.

Holder himself conceded 104 runs in that game, mostly thanks to AB de Villiers, yet still came out with his leadership reputation enhanced.

It's understandable, because another raw, talented cricketer isn't necessarily what West Indies cricket needs most right now. Holder appears to fulfil the gaping vacancy for a whole-hearted player who leads by example, shows limitless grit and fight, demonstrates intelligent reading of match situations and gives 100 per cent from the moment he laces up his boots.

You don't see much of this on paper, at least in the Test format. He has played just 10 or so matches. At the time of writing, he had just that one lonely hundred to his name. He tends to bat in what might euphemistically be termed the lower middle order. He bowls economically at first-change, but that flood of wickets is yet to come.

Look beyond the numbers, though, and you start to see why Holder has generated respect that transcends statistics. Another former West Indian Test player, Ian Bishop, explains.

"His three Test scores over 50 have all been scored in demanding game situations," says the retired paceman. "That speaks volumes to me because it promises that as he matures the West Indies will have a player who thrives in tough situations. That's a heck of a lot more important to a team than someone scoring easy runs and taking cheap wickets."

The toughest situation of them all was that unbeaten hundred he scored against England back in April. The visitors thought they'd be able to wrap up the first Test easily enough on day five in Antigua, no drama. But nobody told Holder he had to give up hope.

Instead he showed patience, application and discipline. He demonstrated solid defence, eating up 216 deliveries, but also a calculated willingness to attack the bowling. All this while the ever-present spectre of running out of partners loomed. ▶





LANDS OF THE GIANTS

Jason Holder is big – really big – but he’s not the first West Indian player to tower over his opposition. Let’s see how he stacks up against the Caribbean giants of yesteryear...

1. Joel Garner – 6’8” (203cm)
2. Curtly Ambrose – 6’7” (201cm)
3. Sulieman Benn – 6’7” (201cm)
4. Jason Holder – 6’7” (201cm)
5. Courtney Walsh – 6’6” (198cm)



Garner and (below, from left) Ambrose, Benn and Walsh



“Jason’s Test hundred against England was his most impressive innings so far for me,” says Bishop. “It came as a match-saving knock, which says a lot about his ability to absorb pressure and speaks of a tough character for such a young man.”

In its own way, it was one of the most significant knocks seen by a Caribbean Test batsman for many years. Holder put a high price on his wicket, and the English couldn’t stump up the money. Ultimately, his effort meant the West Indies earned a draw in a series they were expected to lose.

This kind of batting, especially from a number eight, was as inspiring to his team-mates as it was heart-warming to the cricket world. You could almost sense him dragging his batting partners that day, most significantly the experienced Test captain he has ended up replacing, Denesh Ramdin.

“That knock showed how intelligent he is and also his maturity,” says Lloyd. “He’s got his head screwed on properly and he thinks about other people. He

was a batsman first, but with his height and so on he’s come through pretty well as a bowler. He can catch anywhere, and field anywhere too.”

FIGHTING SPIRIT

In June, it was Australia who got a taste of Holder the Test fighter. Think back to the Jamaica Test, when Holder brought life to a flagging West Indian first innings with an 82 that even included hitting Mitchell Johnson for six. It was enough to get the touring Australian fans, feeling short-changed by a fickle schedule and a lack of fight from the opposition, cheering for Holder. Maybe they saw something of the mighty Windies players of years gone by in the tall Bajan.

But it’s not all about ‘fight’ and ‘character’. There’s certainly enough cricket ability for Holder to blossom into the kind of genuine all-rounder that is such a perk for any cricket team.

“He looks likely to be a real quality number six or seven if he continues to



Holder is the kind of player who leads by example out on the field

develop and keeps fit,” says Bishop. “This batting excellence should not mask the fact that he will be an all-rounder of some quality. He’s already a good fielder, and with a few technical adjustments his bowling can be of a higher standard.”

“Holder is a useful third bowler in the attack,” adds Cozier. “At six foot seven, he has height on his side, and he can do a job for the West Indies as a bowler.”

It’s not hard to see why Holder is being looked to as the model West Indian player for the future. He leads by example and sets high standards in all three departments – a team player who shows the value of clear thinking and hard work.

“It’s really a joy to know that we have a man of that calibre around,” says Lloyd. “I hope that we can find a few more like him. I think he’s just a terrific young man and I’ll be disappointed if he doesn’t inspire the same qualities in more young players. There are a couple more coming through. If they can just gel together we can have a pretty good side.”

If there’s any man who is likely to gel them, it’s Holder. Certainly playing the way he did in the Antigua Test is the kind of thing that doesn’t go unnoticed in dressing rooms.

But even though Holder has long been known and earmarked for the part he’s

playing now, it’s always a gamble to pick somebody so youthful, so unproven, to lead an international team. They can swim, or they can sink with the sharks. Perhaps the West Indian selection panel had Graeme Smith’s story in mind when they made their choice. Smith began leading South Africa at a similar age. And he turned out pretty well, didn’t he?

West Indians will be praying that Holder can galvanise his team to the same lofty heights Smith did. He has come to symbolise the hope of a Caribbean revival. And if anyone can carry that unfair burden, Holder can.

PUBLICITY SHY

Holder never forgets his roots, and remains active at his Wanderers club in Barbados. Nor does he seek plaudits. Tony Cozier, also heavily involved at Wanderers, recalls a striking illustration of this when Holder was recently asked to present club kit to all three teams. “The Chairman said there’d be a press photographer, and Jason said, ‘No, I don’t want any publicity, this is for the club.’ That’s the way he is,” says Cozier. “He is a very respectful and disciplined young man. He respects the game and he’s very grateful to the people who’ve helped him.”