

STORY OF PROCTER JUST WON'T GET TIRESOME

Stephen Thorpe previews the latest autobiography of a man who has simply been there, done that

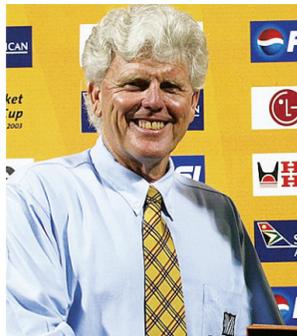
When the number of autobiographies you write nears your Test appearances, it's fair to surmise the author has enjoyed a remarkable life – on and off the field – and that's undeniably the case with former South African all-rounder Mike Procter, one of the greats, assuredly, on most counts in any era.

Legend is a word often over-used but here it's an understatement! After a shortened Test career and an enduring affair with Gloucestershire, a tumultuous period ensued in roles as national coach, head selector, director of cricket, TV commentator and, latterly, international match referee, which offered an equally compelling narrative in the afterglow of his playing days.

It was never straightforward amid pitfalls aplenty, and in the just released *Caught in the Middle*, his fourth tome after *Cricketer Buccaneer (1974)*, *Procter and Cricket (1981)*, *South Africa: Years of Isolation and Return (1994)*, he lays bare the issues when he lost all his assets, including two houses and a prized Roller, then sold insurance before a difficult recovery culminated in unprecedented controversy and a blackballing by the Indian authorities. A rare tale worth telling then, and richer by its diverse perspective.

Rising 71, he's still modest and engaging, a bit wary on the pins perhaps after countless knee ops, and working in hospitality over the current series whilst fundraising for his Ottawa Primary School Foundation back home. He's at Lord's this weekend – and, rest assured, Aggers will drag him into the TMS box for a reverential chat at some stage. He returns every summer to renew old acquaintances and in a quiet north Somerset pub this week, he gave TCP a few more thoughts on the book.

Procter was a schoolboy prodigy, a legspinner, wicketkeeper and batsman, pitching up at Bristol with Barry Richards to play county qualifying second eleven cricket on the recommendation of Jackie McGlew in 1965, then actually making a first class debut against the touring



Discovery: Barry Richards

South Africans that July – and top scoring with 69. Good quiz question there.

His first contract was worth £1,750 and the years that followed from 1968 as their overseas man entered Glorious Closter folklore. Sensational performances with bat and ball, a hugely respected skipper for five years, a Wisden Cricketer of the Year in 1970, sackfuls of Man of the Match awards and the county's unofficial renaming as "Proctershire" – which embarrasses him to this day (less so the routine misspelling of his own name, started by Wisden in 1965 and repeated this year by The Telegraph and Playfair, using 'o' as opposed to 'e').

In full flight in his pomp, he was an arresting spectacle, a runaway train of a bowler off a long approach then the high, whirling fast arm action, unorthodox and chest-on, apparently releasing it off the wrong foot. He didn't, of course, but it added to the aura.

The stock ball was a seriously rapid in-ducker, but he was also a highly capable offspinner when conditions allowed – and perfectly illustrated by career best figures of 9-71 on a turner in Bulawayo for Rhodesia against Transvaal.

A master at using the crease and



A master at using his crease and varying his angle, when he went round the wicket the late inner could be devastating

varying his angle, when he went round the wicket the late inner could be devastating as Hampshire, including his mate Richards and Gordon Greenidge, discovered in their B&H semi-final defeat at Southampton in 1977 when losing four wickets in five balls.

My own first sighting came in that unforgettable Gillette Cup semi-final at Old Trafford in 1971 – England's first true day-nighter, no floodlights required – when David Hughes flayed offspinner John Mortimore in the gloaming; it was at close quarters too, Procter barging me over trying to prevent a boundary when a few ill-advised youths were pushing the rope forward at the death.

He had been a pivotal figure in successive series victories over Australia in 1966-67 and 1969-70 with an astounding 41 wickets at 15 in seven matches and played in all five of the hastily-convened Rest of the World "Tests" against England in 1970. With South Africa cast as political pariahs over apartheid, the country lost an entire generation of fine sportsmen and "Procter" was merely one.

Typically, he was never rancorous, only sad, preferring to observe, "What's a Test career compared to the suffering of 40 million? Lots of people lost a great deal more over those years and if by missing out on a Test career we played a part in changing an unjust system then that's fine by me."

Various sages, not least himself, considered batting his stronger suit and his old sparring partner at Bristol, the sadly departed former journalist David Green, would often regale anyone who cared to listen, and even those that didn't, of "the power and the glory of Proccie through the offside".

He wasn't bad off the back foot either mind, strong on the cut and pull like so many reared on harder tracks, and a withering counter attack would regularly resurrect any top order collapse. Six successive Currie Cup hundreds bracketed him with the Don and CB Fry in the first class annals, a holy trinity that remains unmoved, if not unchallenged, to this day.

In 1977 he was summoned to an undercover meeting at the Savoy in London by Kerry Packer and Tony Greig, accompanied by Eddie Barlow, a momentous gathering which led to the launch of World Series Cricket and changed the global game's outlook forever.

The triangular series between

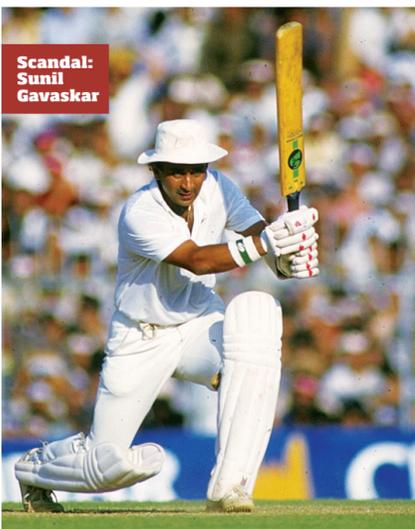


Important role: Match referee Mike Procter chats to England captain Michael Vaughan and, inset, the new book

PICTURE: Getty Images

Australia, West Indies and Rest of the World were all high octane contests "certainly the most demanding of my career, but leavened by a fantastic post-match camaraderie," he recalls. Knee problems exacted a heavy toll, though, and in 1981 he managed only seven championship matches before reluctantly calling time aged 34 on a wonderful county career. He laments not having an average higher than 36, "figures were never really my thing, and I'd often give my wicket away needlessly," he says now.

He played a few games in South Africa, still making runs and a final ton in 1983, but it was time for a new direction; a failed business venture with Martin Benkenstein, father of Dale, did not augur well before Orange Free State granted him a lifetime back into the game with a director of cricket role, later repeated at Natal then Northants on the recommendation of Allan Lamb. Nelson Mandela's release and the efforts of Steve Tshwete and Dr Ali Bacher ushered re-integration in 1991, an early World Cup baptism in Australia in 1992



Scandal: Sunil Gavaskar

then the historic one-off Test match against West Indies in Barbados. Procter was installed as coach and South Africa were riding high on the final morning, 79 to win, eight wickets in hand, but lost when Mr Ambrose went into overdrive. The result was immaterial but three years on, a sacking by telephone whilst in intensive care prompted him to accept a job in television commentary. "The most enjoyable time of my post-playing life, without a doubt," he affirms, prior to that ill-fated sojourn as an ICC match referee.

This was volatile from the start, through no fault of his own – on his first overseas assignment in May 2002, a bomb exploded outside his hotel in Karachi, forcing the abandonment of New Zealand's tour, then he became centre stage during major controversy in Tests at the Oval and Sydney, a period the book straplines as "Monkeygate, Politics and other Hairy Issues".

He refereed when umpire Darrell Hair abandoned the Pakistan Test at the Oval in 2006, the lowest point of his career, and notes that, "Darrell was outspoken, and could be heavy-handed when he

had a hunch". Two years later in Australia, things became far more serious after Indian offspinner Harbhajan Singh was reported for calling Andrew Symonds "a monkey"; Procter presided over the first hearing when effectively no defence was offered and handed down a three-match ban for racial abuse. Then all hell broke loose on a wider front. Sunil Gavaskar, never averse to a contentious aside, wrote that Procter would always favour the white man over the brown, a scandalous notion that the author shrugs off with, "I took that quite personally"; India threatened to return home. Then, at the appeal, Sachin Tendulkar suddenly announced that Harbhajan had uttered an abusive Hindi term, not racist. But why had he not mentioned it earlier?

Procter became the fall guy, persona non grata with the BCCI and shunned by ex-Indian players he considered friends; he's seen Gavaskar recently, shook hands even.

It was a damaging finale, and he admits the episode, "left a very bad after-taste". "I wasn't happy with the

brush I was tarred with and I've been paying a silent price ever since." As Mark Nicholas says in a punchy foreword, "During his time with various administrations, he has both been well supported and hung out to dry."

A brief stint as South Africa convener of selectors followed, but he's now fully focused on developing the school foundation he set up near Durban with coach Rodney Malamba – a venture originally conceived as a cricket project but which quickly escalated into something much greater, including sourcing food and sustenance for a majority orphaned by Aids.

Driven by Mandela's mantra of "Sport has the power to change the world, we owe our children, the most vulnerable citizens in society, a life free from violence and fear", he lays no blame either on Kyle Abbott and the rest for taking county contracts while the quota system remains, and reckons momentum probably favours England for the series ahead.

● *Caught in the Middle*, co-written with Lungani Zama, is available through Pitch Publishing.



Out to impress: Chris Gayle

Home town hero Gayle back in fold for West Indies

By Luke Baker

THE self-styled 'Universe Boss' is back after being included in the West Indies squad to take on India in a one-off T20 international at Sabina Park on Sunday.

Chris Gayle hasn't donned a West Indies jersey since the 2016 World T20 final against England in Eden Gardens, when he was out for four in his side's four-wicket victory.

The power-hitter is arguably the most box-office cricketer in the world and is unsurprisingly his country's highest scorer in the shortest format of the game – having accrued 1,519 runs at 35.32, with a strike rate of 145.49.

He replaces Lendl Simmons, who notched six, an unbeaten 17 and 15 in the recent T20 series against Afghanistan, in the 13-man squad, while Test and ODI captain Jason Holder is also once again rested.

Gayle will play a T20I on his home ground of Sabina Park for the first time and despite their various disputes with the 37-year-old over the years, Cricket West Indies chairman of selectors Courtney Browne is excited to have him back in the fold.

"We welcome Chris back to the T20 squad," said Browne. "He is the most

prolific batsman in this format and will add value to our team at the top of the order.

"He will get the chance to play on his home ground and against a top-quality Indian team.

"This squad has a good mix – experience within the batting and bowling. It is a well-balanced squad.

"This is an opportunity for the young players to showcase their talent and for the experienced players to perform and help nurture the young players."

The T20 follows a five-match ODI series between the sides, which India dominated early on before the West Indies came roaring back.

The fourth ODI last weekend saw the Windies record a surprise 11-run victory to keep the series alive, trailing 2-1 ahead of the fifth and final clash that was played overnight.

WI openers Evin Lewis and Kyle Hope both scored 35 as they set India an eminently gettable target of 189-9 from 50 overs, yet MS Dhoni's glacial 54 off 114 balls – the slowest half-century by an Indian in 16 years – set the tone as the visitors fell dismally short to set up last night's fascinating decider.

Pears show faith in Tom with new contract

By Joshua Peck

WORCESTERSHIRE have always supported Tom Fell, and now they've awarded the batsman with a two-year contract extension.

Fell, 23, suffered two bouts of cancer and received the all-clear halfway through last season, with his club standing by him.

His average has dropped this season to just 17 from a career average of 33.72, though the young star is confident he can star again.

Fell said: "Hopefully I'm just one score away and it should all fall into place again.

"It is a good time to be at the club.

"I think the future definitely looks good and it's nice to know I'm going to be a part of that future and hopefully keep taking the club forward."

Fell isn't the only one to sign a new deal at New Road, with 19-year-old paceman Josh Tongue agreeing a four-year contract with the club.