

Approaching a century

South African Norman Gordon, 99, is set to become the oldest Test cricketer ever in March. He talks to Daniel Lightman about the Timeless Test, meeting Brian Lara and why anti-Semitism may have stopped him from playing more

CRICKETERS ARE used to reaching new landmarks. Yet there is a significant one that has yet to be arrived at: no one who has played a Test match has scored a century in age.

This summer, on August 6, Norman Gordon is due to become the first to reach three figures. More immediately, he will become the oldest international player ever on March 23, overtaking the New Zealander Eric Tindill, who died last August aged 99 years and 226 days.

Affectionately known as Mobil because of the way he slicked back his hair as if it was covered in oil, Gordon played five Tests for South Africa in the 1938-39 home series against England. A quick bowler, he was an effective swinger of the ball, delivering it from close to the stumps and consistently finding a good length. Now, 62 years after his retirement, Gordon remains energetic, engaged and interested in the world.

GORDON grew up in the hilly Johannesburg suburb of Kensington, where he attended Jeppe High School for Boys. The school has produced more than 10 Test cricketers for South Africa, and Gordon soon got the cricketing bug.

"From the age of 10 I was crazy about cricket," he says. "I saw my first Test at the Wanderers at that age – the Australian team included Gregory and McDonald, who were very difficult to face on matting wickets. At school the outstanding cricket coach was

a Latin master. At that time I was recognised as a much better batsman than bowler, but just after I left school I played for the Old Boys and took a few wickets and became the opening bowler or first change." At Jeppe he met his wife, Mercy, to whom he was married for more than 60 years until her death in 2001.

After a wicketless debut for Transvaal in the 1933-34 season, Gordon did not play for them again for four seasons. He puts this down to the change from matting to turf wickets in South Africa. "I had quite a difficult time moving from matting to turf," he says. "I had to adjust the height and trajectory to make the ball come up off the turf."

His hard work eventually paid off as he led the wickets table in the 1937-38 Currie Cup. The following season, after dismissing the England captain, Walter Hammond, in Transvaal's match against the tourists, Gordon forced his way into the South African team – with considerable success. Indeed, he ended up with more wickets – 20 – than any other bowler on

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docile pitches in a five-Test series most famous for the longest Test match ever, played at Durban.

Gordon's first Test victim was Hammond, whom he regards as being "by far" the best batsman he bowled against: "He was a tremendous offside player. If he



off-drove the ball and you tried to stop it, it would probably go right through you. I once asked him why he often left balls alone on the leg side, and he said it was because that's the easiest way of getting out. He was also a very useful bowler and a wonderful slip fielder – I can't ever remember him missing a catch. But he was very modest about his cricket. He and I were very good friends."

The admiration was mutual. In a series in which he scored 609 runs at 87, Hammond was dismissed three times by Gordon. Writing in 1946, Hammond stated that Gordon (whom he erroneously called Nigel) "showed himself a really reliable fast right-hander, always attacking and very difficult indeed to knock on to the defensive. But for the war we should have heard a great deal of him, and perhaps may do so yet."

Gordon also enjoyed success against the young Len Hutton. In the Newlands Test with his fifth ball Gordon produced a superb offcutter which took out Hutton's middle stump. In the

crowd was Sir Sydney Kentridge, the eminent QC, who more than 70 years later recalls the moment clearly: "During the 1938-39 series in South Africa Norman Gordon was the best South African bowler, the one most likely to take wickets. So there was always a buzz around the ground when he came on to bowl.

"On the first morning of the Newlands Test he shattered the stumps of the great Len Hutton, who had just made his famous 364 against Australia. This was a tremendous moment."

However, Gordon had less success in the famous Timeless Test at Durban, which lasted for 10 days. In 92.2 (eight-ball) overs he took just one wicket for 256 runs. Didn't he lose heart after bowling 738 balls – more than any other pace bowler in a Test match – for so little success? "Quite frankly I was bowled too much," he says. "I was noted for fantastic stamina and often bowled 10 or 15 eight-ball overs at a stretch. But I didn't lose heart – I was so crazy about cricket, I didn't get worried that I wasn't taking wickets."

Numerous cricketers thought Gordon's bowling would thrive in England. Gordon did not get the opportunity to find out. South Africa's 1940 tour of England was cancelled because of the War and he was not picked for the 1947 tour. Hutton, writing in 1984, declared that he had "little doubt that if the war had not intervened Norman Gordon would have made a big name for himself had he toured England".

So why wasn't he picked in



“Humbling experience”: Norman Gordon meets Brian Lara in Johannesburg last November

RICHARD KAPLAN

1947? His Currie Cup record in 1945-46 (12 wickets at 18.41) and 1946-47 (10 wickets at 23.30) was good. In his book *MCC in South Africa*, Brian Bassano incorrectly stated that Gordon had “retired when the next side

“I often bowled 10 or 15 eight-ball overs at a stretch”

visited the United Kingdom in 1947”. The South African cricket writer Louis Duffus, in *The Cricketer* Spring Annual of 1947, acknowledged that his omission surprised overseas students of South African cricket. But he did say that “at the age of 36 ... it was probably felt that he would not stand up to a strenuous tour”.

This explanation does not pass muster with Gordon, who states that he “would have been fit enough to do the tour and had no ailments whatsoever. I bowled spells of 10 or 15 overs. Nowadays after five overs they ask to be taken off.”

Another explanation, according to Gordon, may be

found elsewhere. MJ Susskind, who was second in the South African Test batting averages on the 1924 tour of England, “was Jewish but didn’t profess to be Jewish, didn’t admit to it”. Gordon, in contrast, was the first openly Jewish Test cricketer.

He was a source of considerable pride for the South African Jewish community, who “were very proud that a Jew was playing for their country”, but also came across anti-Semitism. When he ran up to bowl the first ball on his Test debut at the Wanderers, he heard a heckler in the crowd shout: “Here comes the Rabbi.”

“Fortunately I took five wickets in that innings,” says Gordon, “and that shut him up for the rest of the tour.”

More than 30 years after the 1947 tour Gordon feels being a Jew may have played a part in not being selected. “A friend of mine told me that he had heard from one of the tour selectors that [South Africa and Sussex batsman] Alan Melville had told them not to select me as there might be anti-Semitism and unpleasantness in England. He thought it expedient to let me out of the tour. I am sure that my friend wouldn’t have told me if it wasn’t true. There was quite a bit

of feeling about Jews even after the War in England.”

Whatever the real reasons for Gordon’s exclusion, Gordon isn’t bitter. He finished his playing career in 1949, with 126 first-class wickets from 29 matches. He went on to run a sports shop, Luggagecraft. One regular visitor was the future South African captain, Ali Bacher. “Once a year I used to buy my bat from him,” says Bacher. “He used to serve me, a very affable and dignified man.”

GORDON and his son Brian now live in the same flat in Hillbrow, Johannesburg, in which he has lived for more than 55 years.

Every day they both go to Houghton Golf Club, near Johannesburg – where, last November, there was an unexpected visitor: Brian Lara. Gordon says that he “was so pleased to meet him and I couldn’t believe how modest he was”.

Lara also recalls their meeting with pleasure. “I was very keen to meet him; we share the same two passions, cricket and golf,” says Lara. “I don’t know if he was told but with no hesitation the minute we met he voiced my name. That was a humbling experience. His appreciation for the game still reigns and his knowledge of the changes in the game since the last Test he played brought a smile to my face.” 📷

Daniel Lightman is a barrister and the author, with Zaki Cooper, of *Cricket Grounds from the Air*. He predicts an India v Australia World Cup final

Oldest Test cricketers

AGE	PLAYER	BIRTH & DEATH	TEAM	TESTS	SPAN
99y 226d	Eric Tindill	1910-2010	New Zealand	5	1937-47
99y 184d*	Norman Gordon	1911-	South Africa	5	1938-39
98y 324d	Francis MacKinnon	1848-1947	England	1	1879-79
96y 150d	Jack Kerr	1910-2007	New Zealand	7	1931-37
95y 252d	Wilfred Rhodes	1877-1973	England	58	1899-30
95y 229d	Bill Brown	1912-2008	Australia	22	1934-48
95y 151d	‘Dad’ Weir	1908-2003	New Zealand	11	1930-37
94y 198d	Syd Barnes	1873-1967	England	27	1901-14
94y 198d	Morappakam Gopalan	1909-2003	India	1	1934-34
94y 119d	Ron Hamence	1915-2010	Australia	3	1947-48

* Gordon’s age as of February 8, 2011