

Sylvester Oliver

'TO THE MEMORY OF SYLVESTER OLIVER, PROFESSIONAL & FRIEND'

This simple message on the board which lists the names of Todmorden Cricket Club's professionals tells us that the relationship between Todmorden and 'Syl' Oliver was a special one.

Syl signed as Todmorden's professional in 1959, a young West Indian far from his home state of Trinidad. A natural and talented all-rounder, Syl had been twelfth man for the West Indies in 1958, the closest he came to playing in an international. The West Indies team was very strong at this time and it was tough to get selected.

Syl was instantly popular, the most exciting and entertaining cricketer seen in a Todmorden team. His fielding was electrifying, athletic in the outfield and brilliant close to the bat. He batted with style and aggression and bowled with pace and hostility. The final match of the 1959 season decided the league title. Unfortunately Todmorden lost to Colne who had also defeated them in the semi-final of the cup, but it had still been an excellent season.

In 1960, Syl's performances were marginally poorer than in 1959, Todmorden slipped from third to sixth in the league and he was not re-signed for 1961. Syl signed for Marsden in the Huddersfield League where he performed so well that Todmorden re-signed him in 1964.

On returning to the club he was clearly more mature and experienced. He had cut down his pace and learned to use English conditions to his advantage, swinging the ball in the air and gaining deviation off the pitch. His batting was more selective and consistent and Todmorden happily extended his stay as professional to five seasons, bringing his total to seven which remains the most by one professional at the club since the 1850s.

A shoulder injury sustained whilst away sub-proving in Huddersfield blighted Syl's season in 1965 and he was never able to throw powerfully afterwards. Syl recovered to take 114 wickets and a club record 26 catches in 1966 as the team finished third in the league and runners-up in the Worsley Cup. In his last two seasons at Todmorden he held together a weakening team. In Syl's seven seasons the team never finished lower than sixth out of the 14 clubs; in the first two seasons after he left Todmorden finished in the bottom three.

In total for Todmorden, Syl scored 3942 runs, including 31 fifties, and took 504 wickets, including 5 or more wickets in an innings on 46 occasions.

Syl was a league cricket professional for many years, including stints at Walsden in the Central Lancashire League, Egerton in the Bolton League, Almondbury in the Huddersfield League, Winnington Park in the Cheshire County League and Newton Heath in the Manchester Association. All these clubs have 'Syl stories' to tell. A favourite memory of many team mates is

Syl's careful planning but unclear communication when positioning his fielders ... 'Not on that piece of grass there; on that piece of grass there!'

Syl remained popular with everyone at Todmorden and returned as coach in the 1980s. He went on the clubs pre-season tour to Bristol in 1981 and was never happier than when invited back to play in a charity, benefit or friendly match. He played for the Lancashire over-fifties team, still a formidable cricketer. In a friendly match at Todmorden in 1990 he took a brilliant catch close to the bat and, whilst everyone was scanning the boundary trying to see where the ball had gone, Syl had it in his pocket!

In 1999, still enjoying excellent health, Syl went on holiday to his native Trinidad. He picked up a virus and died suddenly. A memorial service held in Todmorden was attended by representatives of all his league clubs. There was standing room only in St Mary's Church.

Playing for Todmorden changed Syl's life and Syl was good for Todmorden Cricket Club. Syl felt that Todmorden was his English home and that a part of him always remained here. The professionals' board is Todmorden's tribute to an adopted son.