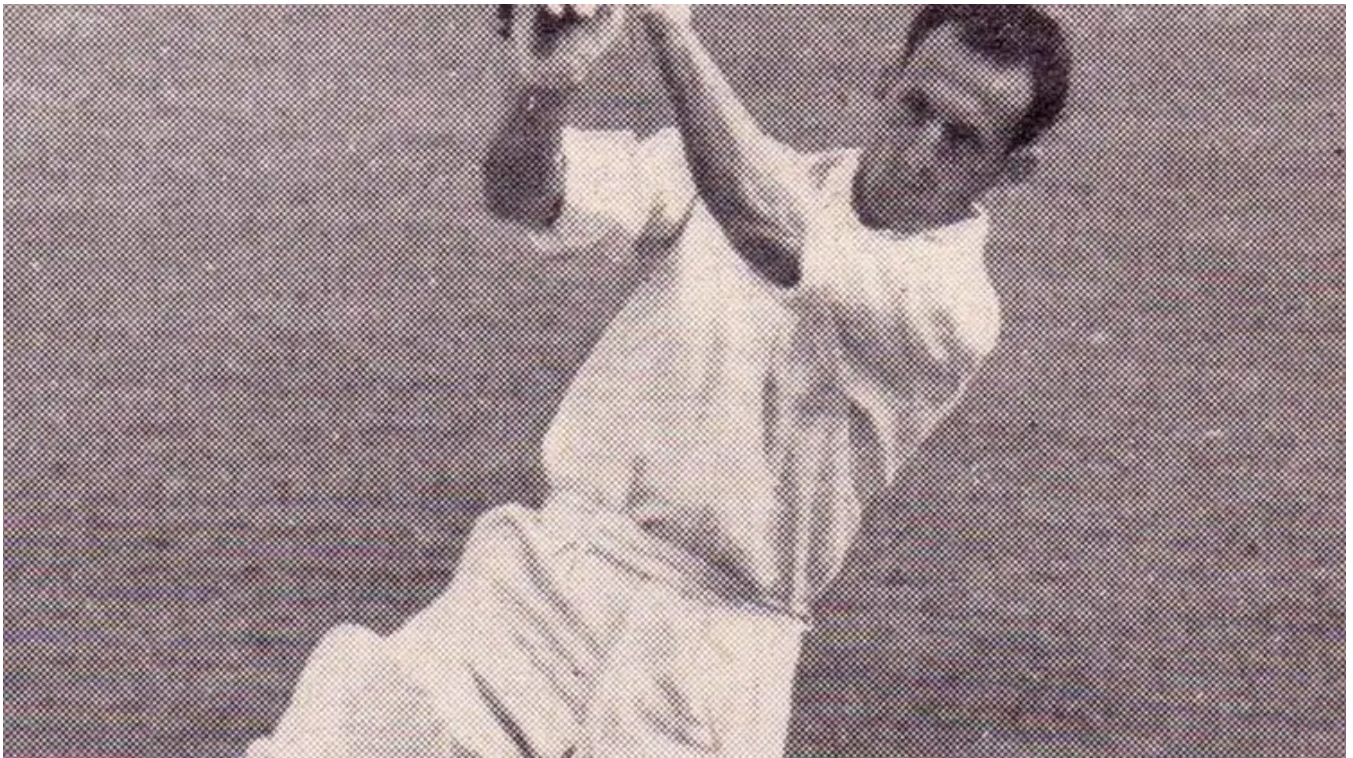


News

The truth about super Sid

Sid O'Linn, who died last month, was a top-flight footballer and cricketer. But few knew that he was also the son of a kosher butcher

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By [Daniel Lightman](#), Daniel Lightman 4 min read



In the 1950s and 1960s, Sid O'Linn was famous in a way that sportsman today rarely are.

He was a top-flight footballer who played for South Africa and, for ten seasons, Charlton Athletic.

He also liked a spot of cricket. After keeping wicket for Kent, he earned the admiration of the cricket world for his courageous batting for the Springboks against England's renowned pace bowlers Fred Trueman and Brian Statham.

But his Irish-sounding name concealed a hidden fact: Mr O'Linn, who died last month in Johannesburg at the age of 89, was born Sydney Olinsky, the son of a kosher butcher.

Mr O'Linn showed great sporting promise from an early age. At 16, he was made an offer by Liverpool, which he reluctantly turned down as his parents thought he was too young to take the boat on his own to England.

He first played cricket for Western Province in March 1946, when he was only 18. But soccer was his first love, and when he was picked for South Africa, cricket took a back seat.

In 1947, Mr O'Linn toured Australia and New Zealand with the South African football team, winning an international cap against Australia. This led to him being recruited by the English First Division club Charlton Athletic, for which he made 194 appearances, scoring 33 goals. Initially playing at inside right, in time he moved into the midfield. His colleague at Charlton, Derek Ufton, recalls he "had a terrifically powerful shot in him".

When the football season was over, he played cricket for Kent, where he was reserve wicketkeeper to the great Godfrey Evans. In 1952, as *Wisden* recorded, Mr O'Linn "justified hopes that he would lend solidity to the batting and, for all his limitations in style and technique, he was the first to reach 1,000 runs for the county".

However, he was not awarded his Kent cap. Mr Ufton, who played with him at Kent, says: "To our amazement, Kent did not retain O'Linn. None of us could understand it."

Mr O'Linn proved what a mistake Kent had made when he proved to be one of the leading batsmen when South Africa toured England in 1960, playing a memorable innings in the Trent Bridge Test which was only ended, just two runs short of a century, when Colin Cowdrey took a remarkable catch.

He earned the lasting respect of the England players. "He was one you always wanted to get out, he was a very good player. He worked for his runs," says Jim Parks, the then-England wicket-keeper, who adds: "He was very mobile in the field, because as a footballer he was athletic." According to *Wisden*, Mr O'Linn "showed that with perseverance even an ordinary county cricketer could succeed in a higher circle". John Arlott noted he had "immense guts, unending patience and an almost scientific understanding of his own limitations".

Mr O'Linn's career followed a rather different path to that taken by his ancestors. His father, Isaac Olinsky, was one of nine children of Jacob and Miriam (nee Sladowsky), who are believed to have been born in Poland. They ended up in South Africa, where they settled in Oudtshoorn, a small town in the Cape, where Sid was born in 1927.

Oudtshoorn was the centre of the ostrich feather industry, in which Jews were deeply involved as farmers and traders. The Jewish community was sufficiently vibrant for the town to earn the moniker “Little Jerusalem”, and, in 1904, South Africa’s first Jewish state school was opened there.

Although Isaac Olinsky and his brother, Joseph, married Mariki and Kana Kreyns, two Afrikaans sisters who were brought up in the Dutch Reformed Church, Isaac retained links with the Jewish community: he ran a kosher butcher in Oudtshoorn and was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Cape Town.

After his death, some speculated Mr O’Linn changed his surname to suppress his Jewish background. South African journalist Luke Alfred has surmised he “probably thought it prudent to reinvent himself as a gentile”, something he “did with a certain shrewd facility”.

One former cricketer, who did not wish to be named, comments: “Sid kept himself to himself. It was hard to get to know much about him. You have to remember that in South Africa at that time — he was from the Cape — you wouldn’t get into certain clubs if you had different blood in you.”

There were South African cricketers who took pains to hide their Jewish background. The Eastern Province captain Arthur Coy (1902-1983) was a Jew who converted to Christianity and changed his surname from Cohen. Manfred Susskind, second in the South African Test batting averages on the 1924 tour of England, took pains not to publicise his Jewishness. According to Norman Gordon, Mr Susskind “was Jewish but didn’t admit to it. The South African papers never mentioned he was Jewish.” When Mr Gordon, the first openly Jewish South African cricketer, ran up to bowl the first ball on his Test debut, he heard a heckler in the crowd shout: “Here comes the rabbi!”

But the claim that Mr O’Linn reinvented himself as a non-Jew, and changed his surname to hide his Jewish origins, has no basis in fact. It was not he who decided to change his

surname. When, in 1935, he moved with his parents and siblings to Cape Town, his parents changed their surname from Olinsky to O'Linn. "The children were told," recalls Mr O'Linn's nephew, Roy Wigmore, "it was better to drop the 'sky' because of the Jewish connotations. The parents thought it was safer for the children, with the antisemitism at the time."

The Jewish former South African cricket captain Ali Bacher praised Mr O'Linn for backing him when he was appointed captain of Transvaal at the age of 21. "I had two very difficult early matches," Mr Bacher recalls, "Some of the senior players, including Sid, called a meeting and made it clear to the troublemakers to toe the line with me. He was the ultimate professional."

Daniel Lightman is a QC and the co-author of 'Cricket Grounds from the Air'

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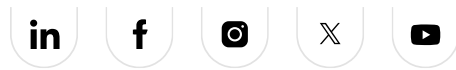
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