



Bowling

HOW TO PLAY, COACH AND WIN

Mark Davis & Sam Collins

WISDEN
COACHING

BOWLING

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FOREWORD

Bowling hurts. It really does. Even spinners hurt (but they won't get any sympathy from me). The 'quicks' get the real pain. I don't know why we do it. Why would you run in all day and bowl as quick as you can on a block of, what is virtually, concrete? There's got to be a little of the sadist, and the stupid, in most bowlers, especially the ones that try to bowl fast.

I try to bowl fast. I've never been the fastest around, not by any stretch, but I've always tried. I hit the pitch, I ask questions. If it swings, brilliant, if it doesn't I hope for some 'nibble' off the wicket. But most of all I want bounce; some consistent carry to the keeper. I may try for it but I don't care too much for sideways movement. I don't care too much for a green seamer either. I just want some bounce, and I'm pretty sure that's what most bowlers want. If I'm going to run in and bang that ball in 120 times a day I want my bouncer to get up. I want my good length balls to carry to the slips. I want my bad balls to be hit away. I want a good, fair cricket wicket.

But that's not always what we get. And that's part of bowling; the ability to change tactics and draw upon different skills if conditions don't favour you. Work out your 'stock' ball; this is the ball that you go to for the majority of your overs, spells, games and career. The one you can bowl without thinking about it. It'll be a part of you, and it will define you as a bowler. On top of that comes the energy you bring, the fight, the aggression, the guts and determination to do a job that is going to hurt you at some stage.

There is no way around it, it's a matter of 'when' not 'if' you are going to be injured. We do what we can to try to avoid injuries, but they happen. I've always hated the gym but I have it to thank for staying 'reasonably' injury free in my career. Weights for strength and power, the mats for core work and stretching, the treadmills and bikes for cardio sessions; I hated them all, but they were the necessary evil.

Why do we put ourselves through it? That feeling of bowling a beauty, completing a maiden, sticking to a plan and eventually picking up that well-earned wicket. I don't mind the gift wickets either, the bad balls that get nicked or chipped up, I'll take them all, but the ones that are hard earned, toiled for, are the real prize.

I've had great battles with some of the best batters in the world, some all-time greats. I love those days. I've had successes, I've had failures too, and plenty



of them. It's all part of the battle, bat vs ball; me vs them. Days to savour and days to forget; well, not to forget, but to learn from. But the biggest battle was with myself. I forced myself to blog about what went on in my world when I was playing, to reflect on each day's play and my own performance. I know it made me a better player. I made myself work out why I had a good day or why I had a bad day; why my rhythm was great or why my 'demons' dominated me. I enjoyed the psychology of the sport, working on blocking those 'demons' (the anxieties, the negative self-talk, the self-doubt) and replacing them with a clear(ish) mind. It doesn't always work, some days they are too strong, but without it there is no way I'd have the success I have had.

It hurts, gym work is boring, the long hours in the field on low slow wickets, the mind games, the time away from home, the sweat, the blood, the sore feet, the blisters, the injuries (toes, ankles, knees, hips, back, shoulders, elbows, fingers...), the rehab, the bouncer laws, the into-the-wind end, not getting a bat (or only a very short one) in the nets, being expected to win or not lose a game with the bat, getting fully padded up and not batting, left-handed batsmen, your batsmen not scoring enough runs, net bowling, dropped catches, very hot and humid places, wrecking multiple pairs of expensive bowling boots, runs to third man, hotels, shorter careers than batsmen, the media (sometimes), ice baths, balls that don't swing, small boundaries and last-wicket partnerships.

Welcome to bowling. I don't know why we do it.

Actually I do. We love it.

Iain O'Brien

(WELLINGTON, LEICESTERSHIRE, MIDDLESEX AND NEW ZEALAND),

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INTRODUCTION

Bowling is the most important thing in the game. It's the brainiest part of cricket.

H.M. HERMAN, WRITER, 1937

The quick bowlers can come out from behind the sofa now, Iain's gone.

There are so many different types of bowler, such different personalities involved that it seems strange to categorise them as the same species. Yet they all live on planet cricket, and while they're there they face the same conditions and the same natural disasters (the Virender Sehwag typhoon perhaps), and all have to adapt to survive.

That adaptation can take on different forms – new deliveries, new tactics, different fields. Most levels of cricket are played across three platforms now – declaration, 40–50 overs and Twenty20 – and a bowler needs to be resourceful if he is to succeed across all three.

But let's strip it back for a minute. Being a bowler is a privileged position. When the bowler gets that ball in their hand, they know they have total influence over that next delivery. If they can put enough pace, swing or spin on it they know that no batsman in the world will be able to get near it. When the ball actually does hit those stumps it's a great feeling.

Pace bowlers, off-spinners, leg-spinners, swing bowlers, doosras, Chinamen – there are plenty of ways to hit those stumps or take wickets. If you need further proof, take a look at Sri Lanka's Lasith Malinga, a man with an action so extraordinary he could be skimming stones.

There will always be a place for the unorthodox alongside the orthodox bowler. It's where the ball goes that matters. Listen to coaches, read coaching books, but along the way the bowler should try to develop a technique that works for them and stick to it. This book is there to help the bowler understand their action, and why the ball behaves as it does when they do different things to it.

Read it, learn it, apply it, and then read it again.

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THE BASICS

1.

There's more in bowling than just turning your arm over. There's such a thing as observation.

WILFRED RHODES, YORKSHIRE AND ENGLAND SPINNER

TERMINOLOGY

'Line and length' are terms fundamental to any bowler. Generally bowling a good line and length refers to bowling the ball in an area where it is riskiest for the batsman to play an attacking shot. The line is off-stump, and the length sees the ball pitch between two to three metres in front of the batsman. The orthodox response to a ball landing in this area would be a forward defensive shot.

Being able to bowl a consistent line and length is actually the bowling equivalent of a forward defensive – the backbone of any bowler's game. Without the control this gives, any bowler will struggle to contain the batsman. The more occasions the bowler can repeat a good line and length, the more successful he will become. (The pitch maps of the great bowlers would show very close groupings of length and line – the lesser the bowler, the more erratic the distribution.) A good line and length will differ for a spinner, but if ever a seamer is in doubt, he can always retreat to the suggestion that the best line and length to aim for is to pitch the ball so it will go on to hit **the top of off-stump**.

Once a bowler has mastered bowling a basic line and length they can move onto other variations, such as swing, or spin, or learn tricks like the slower ball.

Not every ball bowled in cricket is of a perfect line and length. On the following pages are explanations that might help the bowler to understand further the subtleties that different lines and lengths bring with them.

Line

Line refers to the direction in which the bowler bowls the ball. For example, a ball heading in the direction of off-stump would be said to have an off-stump line, a ball on leg-stump, a leg-stump line and so on.

Depending on whether the bowler is a swing or seam bowler, the ideal line to bowl is generally to probe on or just outside the off-stump. This puts doubt in the batsman's mind as to whether they should commit to playing a shot or leave the ball alone, whichever way the bowler may be trying to move the ball, and this uncertainty can lead to mistakes in judgement and possible dismissal.

A tight line (offering no width) will restrict the batsman's ability to free their arms, limiting their stroke play and run-scoring options. This in turn will create and build pressure on the batsman, giving added chance that they will lose their composure.

Bowlers might look to change their line for a particular batsman. A bowler looking to get a batsman out bowled or LBW might bowl a straighter line, but with that comes an increased risk of being hit for runs through the leg-side. Similarly, an out-swing bowler might look to bowl outside of the off-stump to tempt the batsman into driving away from their body in search of an edge.

Tactical bowling can also be tailored around field placements. A captain might ask the bowler to bowl a specific line in an attempt to restrict the batsmen's scoring option. An example would be to pack the off-side with fielders and bowl consistently a foot outside the off-stump.

Below is a suggested list of ideal lines to the right-handed batsman for different types of bowlers:

- **Out-swing** bowler – middle and off, swinging away.
- **In-swing** bowler – two stumps outside off-stump swinging in.
- **Seam** bowler – on or just outside off-stump.
- **Off-spinner or Chinaman** bowler – three or four inches outside off-stump, spinning it in towards the wickets.
- **Left-arm orthodox or leg-spinner** – middle-and-off spinning towards the off-side.

Remember – A bowler can control the line they bowl the ball by making sure that their action comes through in a straight line at their target. This process is made easier by a controlled, straight approach to the crease, and a straight follow-through, although these are not imperative.

The best length is the shortest you can bowl and still get the batsman playing forward.

DOUGLAS VERITY REPEATING THE WORDS OF HIS FATHER, ENGLISH SLOW LEFT-ARMER
HEDLEY VERITY

Length

Length refers to the area on the pitch where the bowler pitches the ball, which in turn is decided by when they let go of the ball.

The ideal length is one which, when pitching, the batsmen is unsure whether to play forwards or back. This is known as a good length. Generally, a good length for a spinner will be fuller than that for a quick bowler.

Pitching the ball on the perfect length means the ball will swing, seam or spin (depending on the bowler) in a way that gives the batsmen very little or no time to react positively to the movement.

What constitutes a good length can depend on the type of surface a bowler is bowling on. A general rule is that a good length delivery will go on and hit the top of the stumps after pitching. If the playing surface is firm the bowler will bowl shorter to hit the right length and, conversely, if the pitch is soft then a fuller delivery is required.

Once the bowler can bowl their stock length on demand, variation of length can also be important to keep the batsman guessing. An example of this would be bowling a few short of length deliveries with the occasional bouncer to get the batsman's weight set up on their back foot, leaving the batsman potentially susceptible to the good length delivery.

LINE AND LENGTH

Full toss: 2 metres from the crease

Half volley: 2–4 metres

Good length/back of length: 4–8 metres dependent on type of surface, bowler and batsman

Bouncer: 8 metres or more

