

**Batting**

**Conscious Incompetence to Conscious Competence**

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**Second Edition – November 2012**

**First published – February 2011**

*'Be relaxed, be calm and watch the ball as closely as possible because that is what a batsman is meant to do. The thought process has to be free-flowing and that's when you react and your body movement is not stiff and tight.'*

*Sachin Tendulkar*



It's a simple game really.

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## ***Introduction***

The aim of my commentary is to help players who have reached a stage in their cricket careers where they recognise their weaknesses and are looking for help on how to correct them. This book doesn't really offer much advice on cricket basics, but rather looks at the thinking that may help you before and during an innings. It also looks at techniques you can employ as you move from 'conscious incompetence to conscious competence'. The final stage takes you to 'unconscious competence' and comes from hard work, practice and experience – which, unfortunately, you can't really read in a book. As I have said, I have assumed a certain level of competence – in other words, this won't be as much value to you if you are just starting out in the game rather than if you have been playing for four or five years.

It is with thanks to Wikipedia for this:

*The conscious competence theory is another name for the 'Four Stages of Learning', a theory posited by 1940s psychologist Abraham Maslow. The Four Stages of Learning describe how a person learns, progressing from:*

- 1. Unconscious Incompetence – the individual neither understands nor knows how to do something, nor recognises the deficit, nor has a desire to address it.*
- 2. Conscious Incompetence – though the individual does not understand or know how to do something, he or she does recognise the deficit, without yet addressing it.*
- 3. Conscious Competence – the individual understands or knows how to do something. However, demonstrating the skill or knowledge requires a great deal of consciousness or concentration.*
- 4. Unconscious Competence – the individual has had so much practice with a skill that it becomes 'second nature' and can be performed easily (often without concentrating too deeply). He or she may or may not be able to teach it to others, depending upon how and when it was learned.*

Batting is about keeping it simple and clearing your mind. When Pete Sampras won Wimbledon with a second-serve ace, he was asked what he had been thinking at that time, and is quoted as saying: 'There was nothing whatsoever going through my mind'. That is the perfect mindset for batting. By clearing your mind and solely focussing on the ball you will allow your talent the best chance to shine through. You will also be distracted less by doubts that may creep into your head or mindless chirping from the opposition fielders.

However a word of warning, if you read this book from cover to cover and try to take everything in its entirety into an innings, then the chances of you making a duck are somewhat higher than making an unbeaten hundred.

I suggest that you use this book as a reference guide; take out bits that help you when you need them and leave the rest of the commentary in each section that you don't find as helpful for another time. In fact, you may totally disagree with parts of the commentary in this book – if there is something that works better for you, then great, definitely don't let me stop you – if possibly, please can you go further and share that opinion with me. My goal here is to make you think about batting and to challenge your mental approach, rather than telling you how you have to bat.

As a final caveat, when I have seen interesting articles or relevant comments, I have included them as a point of interest. They are mostly sourced from people far more qualified to talk about this stuff than me! These are typically sourced from ESPNcricinfo, with Aakash Chopra often the main contributor.

*Cricket has long misunderstood technique. For too long, the word has been wrongly linked to obduracy and self-denial. Technique is simply a set of skills that allows you to respond to the challenges of your sport. It is as much about attacking options as watertight defence. It is Lionel Messi's exceptional technique, his control of the ball that allows him to play with such flair for Barcelona. It is Roger Federer's basic technique that allows him to play such a dazzling array of shots from any part of the tennis court. So it is with Verinder Sehwag. It is his technical mastery of attacking shots that puts extraordinary pressure on the bowler.* Ed Smith

[ESPNcricinfo](http://ESPNcricinfo)

### ***The stance and back-lift***

In short, stand comfortably and stand still.

It doesn't matter where or if you tap the bat, what matters is *where* you bend your back – it is important to bend from the hips and to not hunch your back. Keep your eyes level and your head still. If you are not sure how it should feel, stand up tall, tense your lower stomach muscles and bend forward from your hips. Bending or flexing your knees should make it more comfortable and allow you to move your feet better too.

A bad stance can inhibit your stroke play – your muscles are designed to move in specific ways and getting your posture right will help you move more freely and hit the ball more powerfully.

Remember, if you are experimenting with your stance, your outside eye should be over the top of the off stump when the ball is bowled. So, standing a bit taller will change your perception of where the stumps are and, as a result, your guard may also need to change. Personally, I would always encourage a batsman to stand relatively tall and side on – this allows you to move your head/eyes less from the moment when the ball is delivered to when you hit it, especially if you are facing a barrage of short-pitched bowling.

This is what Geoff Boycott has said on the subject:

*First of all, I would always say to somebody: whatever is comfortable (your stance) or whatever allows you to get runs. Your job as a batsman is to make runs, your job as a bowler is to take wickets. How the hell you do it doesn't matter. But if you have an open stance against right-arm over the wicket bowlers, you'll be in a great position to pull and hook the ball, sweep and play through the on-side, because you are already opened up and ready for it. It might be more difficult to score on the off side. You've got to make up your mind on which is best.*

*As for a side-on stance, nearly all great batsmen, from time immemorial, have been side-on players. Whether it's been Don Bradman in Australia; Jack Hobbs, Wally Hammond and Len Hutton in England; Sachin Tendulkar in India; Jacques Kallis among the current players; Sunil*

*Gavaskar in the past; George Headley, Brian Lara and Viv Richards. It is important when left-arm bowlers bowl over the wicket that you do open up a little bit. Perhaps get further across your stumps, because the ball is going across you and it's a very awkward angle. So you play a little further over your stumps to play the ball back from whence it came.*

*For left-handed batsmen it is different. Around 80–90 per cent of the bowlers bowl over the wicket, so the ball is always going across you. It's a little like a right-handed batsman facing a left-arm seamer – it's going across you at an angle. I'm telling you as a right-hand batsman to open up a bit more chest-on so that you can face the bowlers a bit more with your shoulders and body. For left-handers it is very important to open up a little bit, because while facing right-arm bowlers it's coming at a similar angle. The great batsmen have always been side-on but you have to find whatever gets you runs.*

I think the indication from what Mr Boycott is saying is that trying to stay side-on is preferable as it allows you to play all around the park. If this method is good enough for the greats of the game, it will be good enough for you.

As for your back-lift, you can take your bat towards gully like Shiv Chanderpaul or over the top of off stump in Graham Gooch-style you should be comfortable and be able to bring the bat down straight. What is also important is that you push the bat back away from your body when you pick it up and not to the side, by pushing the hands straight back you give them some room and it keeps the body side on.

Be careful if you have a short back lift as it can 'cramp up' the batsman, making you play late in a 'jabbing' movement which also makes you susceptible to being out lbw playing across the line or being caught – for an example of this see Paul Collingwood's troubles in the 2010/2011 Ashes series.

Finally I talk about 'keeping your shape' in this book a few times. What I mean by this is having a strong diamond shape created by your arms/elbows. As you take the bat back and bring it back down, the feeling should be akin to 'rocking a baby', pushing the bat back away from your body and rocking it on the way down. These are more basic technical

steps which Bob Woolmer's book, *The Art and Science of Cricket* is a much better place to learn from!

### ***Getting 'inline' and moving your feet***

Douglas Jardine, as far back as 1936, talks about leading with your head as 'the topple' in his book on cricket techniques, effectively leading with your eyes causes you to topple your front leg onto the line of the ball.

Another way of describing this is to set yourself up in your normal stance then as the bowler releases the ball, your first movement is to lean with your head towards the ball. With your our second movement, your foot should follow your head in to line so that you are able to play the shot, hitting the ball under your eyes. By getting in-line with the ball you stand the best chance of protecting your wickets when you are playing yourself in and playing with a traditional straight (vertical) bat.

This is the same whether you are playing off the front or back foot, and also it is just as important that you want your weight moving forward as you hit the ball. This will help your timing and keep you in control of the shot. I have included this because I mention positive (and in some cases aggressive) foot movement later and I wanted to outline what leading with your head meant.

Typically most people are good at one or the other - front or back foot shots. When you are practising, it is important to work on both to even this out.

As I also mention in various sections of this book, picking up the ball from the bowlers hand is the easiest way to pick the length. Look to watch the seam of the ball from before the bowler enters his delivery stride all the way through his bowling action. This should really help you pick up the length and whether to go back or forwards – rather than the common club mistake of planting the front foot down and playing around it. An example of this is looking at an out of form Ricky Ponting in the 2010/2011 Ashes series.

## ***Trigger movements***

In my experience, the refrain 'I am having trouble with LBWs' is frequently mentioned in the same paragraph as 'I trigger back and across'. Well, at least 99 per cent of the time. It is not to say that the trigger is at fault, but more that this can be a symptom of this particular movement.

The first things that you should be concerned with are where you stand and what your stance is. It is a modern fad that batsmen are encouraged to stand with a wide base and then have a trigger movement. Personally, I see people trying it, but I believe it totally over-complicates batting – watching an out-of-form Kevin Pietersen or Paul Collingwood will emphasise this point.

Your stance should be comfortable and relaxed, a trigger is used to release the tension and help your feet move against fast bowling. Unless you are playing Division 1, Premiership or a higher standard, I think it is unlikely you are facing anyone fast enough to make it worth considering a trigger movement. Look how still and balanced Michael Clarke, Matt Prior or Eoin Morgan are at the crease, even against the quickest of bowlers – these players thrive on simplicity of technique, which I like to encourage.

If you must have a trigger movement, ensure that it takes you into the correct position, rather than moving you away from the correct position, which is the classic fault of an amateur cricketer. If you have a chance, watch how Ian Bell and Jonathan Trott play – they are two wonderful contemporary technicians, who are very relaxed and natural at the crease; when they play, their trigger movements almost glide into position. Both aim to retain a still head.

As I have said, the key is in the position you are standing when the ball is released, which must be still, regardless of trigger movements, with your leading eye (or outside eye) over the off stump. To get this right, work backwards from where you need to be at the moment of release – your right eye (if you are right-handed) should be over off – stump. You might need to spend some time in front of the mirror to get this right – work out where your trigger takes you and take a guard that results in your ability to arrive in the right position to play the ball. Your key objective should be

to stop moving into a position that leaves you vulnerable to being 'trapped' or 'pinned' on the crease and then either out bowled or more likely LBW.

A useful practice method is to have someone underarm used tennis balls (so they don't bounce as much) at you get used to your new stance and batting routine. This is an especially good way to work on the front foot shots, while you practise either with or without your trigger. Then, progress to over arm tennis ball deliveries and, finally, facing a cricket ball.

Just to reiterate, I warmly encourage you to ditch the trigger!

## ***Playing the moving ball***

There will be occasions when you are batting and the ball is moving in the air or off the pitch. All too frequently, some of your teammates will say 'just play your shots – if one has your name on it, so be it.' This statement is, in my view, nonsense. You just need a plan. Playing the ball late right under your eyes is a good place to start. This will help negate the problem many people, myself included, have in planting their front leg early, getting pinned on the crease without moving their feet positively, and subsequently they are trapped LBW.

Remember that swing when it happens; regardless of whether it is 'in' or 'out' swing, will either be early swing straight from the bowlers hand, or the more dangerous late swing.

Early swing is usually much easier to face and I tend to try to play the full ball behind square and to really try to attack the short or very over-pitched ball.

For a batsman, if the bowler is on top and the conditions are in his favour, the most important thing is to try to make life as hard for the bowler as it is for the batsman so look to upset the bowler's rhythm – the easiest way of doing this is by running singles and rotating the strike. Bowlers love bowling six balls at the same batsman and trying to set them up – Martin Bicknell was the absolute master at this.

## ***Outswing***

Facing good consistent outswing is difficult, when it is bowled at pace you can find yourself fencing for the ball, which is not a good situation to be in. Early in your innings, my view is to try and protect the line of your off stump and if possible, to let the ball go through to the keeper. The idea is to try to force the bowler to bowl straighter at you, which will hopefully give you more opportunities to hit through the on-side in a controlled manner – and continuing to rotate the strike and following the comments above. If this isn't working – the next option is to come down the track at the bowler to intimidate him, colloquially the Matthew Hayden approach. I try to do this a lot, especially against a medium pacer, and look to hit

through the line before it swings, or attempting the late cut utilising the pace of the ball.

The key to this is to not over commit, to be patient and too not over attack too readily. The ball will only swing for a bit and you need to weather the storm in the short term until the bowler is tired and bowls you some friendly bad balls.

### ***Inswing***

Inswing is a different challenge. In this instance, I try to ensure my stance is not too open and, where I can, work hard to get outside the line of off stump. When the ball is moving in like this, you are more likely to be hitting the ball through mid-on, rather than extra cover, so this makes playing inswing easier. Typically, the bowler will have to start the ball outside the off stump to allow it to come back in and hit the middle stump, so using a strong aggressive stride (different from a big stride, which can cause you to lose your balance) or, occasionally, a slight trigger across the crease that will aim to cause the bowler to either bowl straighter at you, giving you a scoring opportunity through the leg side, or to bowl too wide outside the off stump, giving you room to open your shoulders. The danger of this is moving too far across and losing your leg stump or getting trapped LBW. Work hard in the nets on playing the ball through mid-on and watching the ball fly through midwicket for runs!

### ***A bit of both***

Occasionally, although fortunately not too frequently, you get a bowler who swings it both ways at will or worse at pace – think and inspired James Anderson on a warm damp day with a new ball! If this is the case, work out which type of swing is going to be the most dangerous for you. Personally, I find inswing harder to face, so I play the bowling as if every ball is an inswinger and if it moves away from me I either let it go or drop it into a gap to get to the other end. If you are better at playing inswing and struggle against the ball moving away from you, wait for an in-ducker and knock it in a gap, while concentrating on protecting your off stump. The crucial thing is to make your footwork decisive, to not over commit and to try not to plant your front foot.

Committing to a shot very early, especially if you find yourself playing down the wrong line of the ball, is a common failure especially against the moving ball. Players frequently attempt to play the ball before it is bowled, rather than waiting and trusting their instincts. In this case, clearing your mind and just concentrating on watching the ball and doing nothing else will really help.

### ***Playing off the front and back foot to the moving ball***

When playing the moving ball, it will be pitched on a fuller length more often than not and, as a result, if you look to come forward, to be positive against the bowling, you will get over-pitched balls to hit and work around for singles.

Bowlers love to see a batsman play off the back foot when the ball is moving around, they know you will be vulnerable to the full swinging delivery. Conversely, if you find that a bowler is bowling too short, and therefore wasting the conditions, enjoy it – he has got frustrated, which means you are on top: so make it count!

The below, the first of a series of articles by Aakash Chopra, fits well with my commentary.

*While the world sat admiring Dale Steyn's swing bowling, which caused India's capitulation in Nagpur, the batsman in me couldn't help but feel sorry for our lot. Steyn was impeccable with his line and length, crippling even the best in the line-up. As he showed his calibre with a seven-wicket haul, I wondered if anybody spared a thought for how batsmen feel when the ball is darting around.*

*Why did Murali Vijay and Wriddhiman Saha shoulder arms when the ball was coming in? Why did Sachin Tendulkar play at the one going away only to nick it to the wicketkeeper?*

*It's harder to judge a swinging delivery than it looks. For one, it requires a lot of guesswork. Even the most skilled batsmen in the world rely on their instincts and years of practice to gauge where the ball will end up when it reaches them. There is no device to tell you the ball will move x inches in the air after release and y amount after pitching. And if the ball is moving*

at 145kph, the time to assess becomes shorter and the margin of error smaller.

*There are certain things that a batsman keeps in mind while preparing to play the new ball. It helps if you have played the bowler in the past or if there is some video data to structure your game plan. If you're up against Matthew Hoggard or Brett Lee, who swing the ball away from the right-hander, you draw an imaginary line outside off stump and leave alone all balls that pitch outside that line. In fact, you have to play well within that line to cover the movement in the air and off the surface. You can't play balls outside off stump with a straight bat, for it doesn't cover for swing – you would probably end up nicking it to the keeper. You have to play with a slightly horizontal bat, which ensures that you cover the movement. A good example of covering for swing with a not-quite vertical bat would be Michael Vaughan's drive on the off side. In this case, the batsman is beaten only when the bounce is more or less than expected.*

*However, you will need to play with a straight bat when you're up against someone like Shane Bond, who swings it back into right-hander. Not just that, you'll also have to play late and close to the body to ensure there is no gap between the bat and pad.*

*Whether the ball is moving away or coming in, you need to constantly judge the amount of movement a bowler will get.*

*Be watchful of subtle changes in the bowling action, wrist and seam position, and the bowler's use of the crease. Bond and Makhaya Ntini, who predominantly get the ball back into the batsmen, bowl from wide of the crease to use the angle. Outswing bowlers, on the other hand, prefer bowling from close to the umpire, for that allows them to start their line from the middle stump, the better to be able to get the batsman to play at it.*

*Then there are bowlers like Shaun Pollock and Praveen Kumar, who though they bowl close to the stumps are able to move the ball both ways. And if that wasn't hard enough to read, bowlers set batsmen up by bowling outswingers from the corner of the crease and inswingers from close to the stumps.*

*The wrist position is a good indicator of the way the ball will come out of the hand. Ishant Sharma tilts his wrist to push the ball inwards, while Zaheer Khan and Steyn bowl with a straight wrist, which allows them to swing the ball both ways.*

*Once the ball is released, the seam can reveal some more. It will be tilted towards slip if the ball is set to move away and towards fine leg if it is going to come in. That's not a guarantee, though. I remember getting bowled by Jason Gillespie in the third Test against Australia in Nagpur in 2004. He bowled close to the stumps, his wrist was straight and the seam pointed towards second slip. So I expected it to move away and shaped myself for it, only to find the ball darting back in after pitching. I was bowled, and so was Rahul Dravid, under similar circumstances. The only difference being that he managed to get an inside edge. On these occasions, you have to consider yourself unlucky, and in this case I wasn't the only one.*

*If you can't see the shine while playing reverse-swing, as a right-hander you need to be ready for incoming deliveries, because for right-handers it moves in more appreciably than away. Play inside the line to ensure that you cover the movement coming in. If it moves away, the most it can do is to beat the bat.*

*Another way of judging the path of the ball after release is to look for the shine. In case of traditional swing, the ball moves in the opposite direction to the side the shine is on; if the shine is on the right, the ball will move to the left and be an outswinger for a right-hand batsman. This is not guaranteed either. At times the ball misbehaves and holds its line – which may not be as bad as it swinging in the opposite direction but still causes trouble.*

*To make life difficult, bowlers like Zaheer have mastered the art of hiding from the batsman which side of the ball is shiny. When the ball is reverse-swinging it moves in the direction of the shine, unlike with conventional swing. If the shine is on the right, it will move towards the right, as an inswinger to the right-hand batsman. It's similar to traditional swing but the swing occurs a little later in the air. Good exponents of reverse-swing have the ability to delay the swing till about a few feet before it lands. Most batsmen get duped into believing it's a straight ball till it darts in or*

*out at the very last moment. The later the movement, the more difficult it is to adjust.*

*It's slightly easier to gauge if you can see the shine, but a lot tougher if you can't. That's when the non-striker comes to your rescue, since he's in a better position to see which side is shiny. He can't tell you outright but his bat can. What he'll do is hold his bat on the side of the shine – in his right hand if the shine is on the right and vice versa. But there are times he isn't sure, so he'll keep the bat in the middle and you're left to deal with it by yourself.*

*If you can't see the shine while playing reverse-swing, as a right-hander you need to be ready for incoming deliveries because for right-handers it moves in more appreciably than it does away. Play inside the line to ensure you cover for the movement coming in. If it moves away, the most it can do is to beat the bat.*

*Bowlers like Mohammad Asif and Glenn McGrath rarely get the ball to swing in the air; they rely on movement off the pitch. There's little a batsman can do against these bowlers, at least as long as the ball is new and the shiny side is not visible. What you look for are subtle changes: does the non-bowling arm drop slightly earlier in the action? That may mean an off-cutter is on the way. If it is held on to till late, it is probably a leg-cutter. But again it's difficult to be sure every time.*

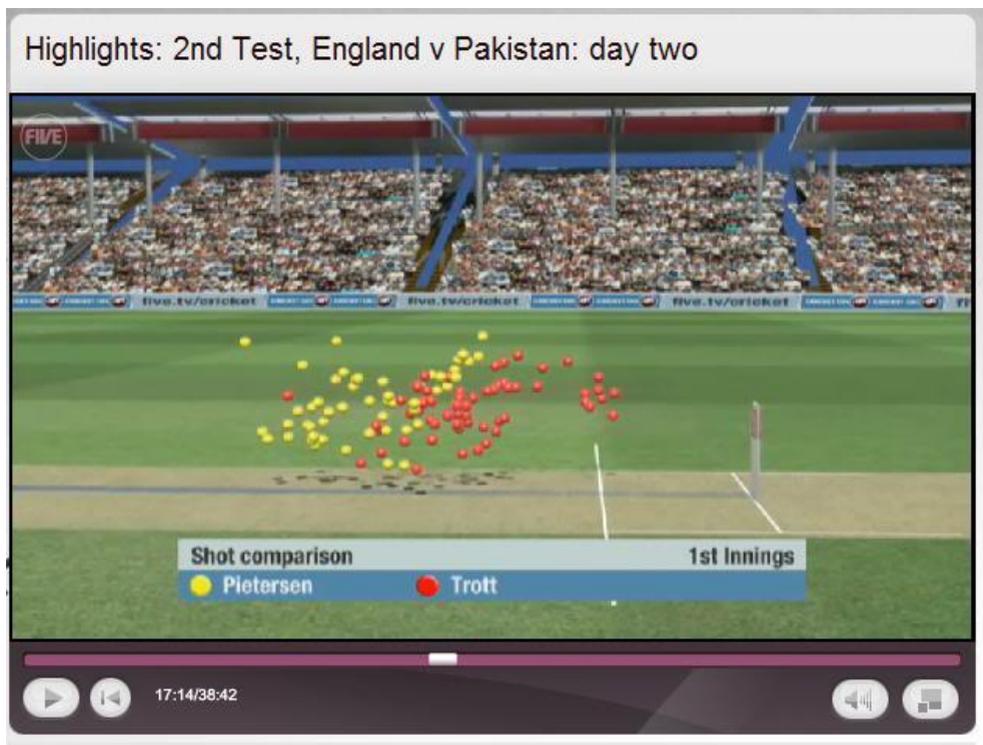
Playing the swinging ball is a tough proposition. Admire the batsmen who do it with aplomb and sympathise with those who struggle.

The 'Analyst' Simon Hughes did some analysis in the *Daily Telegraph* comparing how an out-of-sorts Kevin Pietersen was trying to play the moving ball and how an in-form Jonathan Trott was playing the same bowling during the second Test between England and Pakistan at Edgbaston, 2010 playing the outstanding, but now banned Mohammads, Amir and Asif.

The first thing is that Hughes talks about is playing the ball close to the body and as late as possible, however, the most interesting statistic was the Hawkeye image of where the two players were playing the ball – you have to allow for the fact that KP is 6ft 3in and will have a bigger reach

than Trott, who is about 6ft – but even so, the difference is really marked.

Fig. 1 Hawkeye comparison of Pietersen and Trott from the second Test between England and Pakistan at Edgbaston, 2010 playing the outstanding, but now banned Mohammads, Amir and Asif.



## ***Playing spin***

The best players of spin are able to judge the length extremely early then they can make a positive movement to counter the spin.

When facing a good spinner you will have to deal with pace, bounce, dip, drift, as well as spin – so balance is vital. If you topple over to a spinner when you have got the length wrong, either by being beaten in the flight or by going forward to a ball you could play back to – you can be in trouble.

The key is stay strong mentally and to play the ball late, but also not to over commit, you will have a moment to react as the ball drops or dips (depending on the quality of the spinner – a really good spinner will make the ball dip and shape late) so ensure you don't play the ball outside your natural zone. – Hold your shape – and definitely don't push at the ball.

Two ways I have seen of playing this (I am sure there are others) are the V.V.S. Laxman method, probably the best player of spin of his generation, or the Duncan Fletcher 'forward press' method – Marcus Trescothick is the ultimate exponent of this method.

V.V.S. plays the ball amazingly late with wonderfully quick wrists, a bit like A.B. de Villiers or Michael Clarke, all of whom are able to move their feet wonderfully quickly forward and back and picking the length of the bowling very early.

To help with your balance, practise shadow batting, try not to over commit, but lead with your head and let your foot move second, as a result you will then play with a bent front leg and hit the ball under your eyes.

Against offspin, I encourage players to get outside the line of off stump where possible, to force the bowler to bowl straighter, thus allowing you to work the ball through the leg side, or too far outside the off stump, giving you more room to hit the ball through the off side.

Legspin is a different challenge, as you are playing a ball that is usually spinning more, thus will drift and bounce more, which can be hard to

judge. Reading the ball from the hand is important and is usually easier against a legspinner. The nature of this style of spinner means there will be more bad balls to hit. Once again, decisiveness with your movement, forward or back, is important. If you hesitate, then you risk a gentle nick to the keeper, which is always something to be avoided.

Not allowing a spin bowler to settle is a good move. I believe looking to hit an early boundary can upset a spinner's confidence, or more crucially the fielding captain's confidence in the bowler, which will give you the advantage. A spinner requires overs to build a rhythm – as a batsman you want to stop that happening, so push the singles hard rotate the strike so the bowler can't set you up with a series of deliveries and then fool you with one of his variations.

Again, Aakash Chopra has written some excellent commentary on the subject:

*Haven't we heard a zillion times that batsmen from the subcontinent are not comfortable against quick bowlers on bouncy tracks? A lot of Indian batsmen received flak in the recently concluded World Twenty20 in the Caribbean for their ineptness against bounce. But are the same experts and critics equally harsh on overseas players who are found wanting while handling spin on the subcontinent? Isn't playing the turning ball as difficult an art to acquire as handling short-pitched stuff? I think it is and if you don't believe me, ask Ricky Ponting about his horror series in India in 2001.*

*Playing the turning ball on a spiteful pitch needs not only technical prowess but also a certain amount of decisiveness in terms of foot movement, and courage in shot selection. Not that the slow bowler can hurt you physically, but the mental scars, at times, are more difficult to heal.*

*This is an attempt to outline the basics of playing spin bowling effectively.*

### **Reading it from the hand**

*The reason most English batsmen struggled against spin for the longest time was that they were told to play the spin off the surface. Instead of trying to read the spin from the hand, they waited for the ball to pitch*

*before setting themselves up, which was obviously way too late – though they managed if the ball spun in the expected orthodox manner, i.e. from leg to off for a legspinner and off to leg for an offspinner. But the moment the bowler bowled a doosra or a googly, they were all at sea.*

*On the contrary, batsmen from the subcontinent are taught to read the ball right at the time of the release. A bowler needs to deliver a doosra or googly in a completely different manner to his stock ball, and if picked at the point of delivery, the batsman is always better equipped to handle it.*

*It doesn't end there. The seam position after release tells a story too. The direction in which the seam is tilted gives you a fair indication of which way the ball will spin after pitching. The shine on the ball informs you a bit about which way the ball will drift and also if the bowler has bowled an arm ball. An offspinner keeps the shiny side facing his palm for an arm-ball.*

*These may not be foolproof methods of reading spin, but isn't batting a lot about educated guesswork? Of course, all of this goes for a toss if you're playing a spinner like Muralitharan, who likes bowling with a scrambled seam; in which case you have to completely rely on your judgement at the point of release.*

### ***Playing late and using your feet***

*Your job doesn't end with managing to read the spin from the hand and drift in the flight. On the contrary it starts there. Just like while playing fast bowlers, you must allow the ball to come close to you and play as late as possible. Your foot movement needs to be decisive and distinct if you are to be a good player of the turning ball. Since the deviation off the pitch is far greater for a spinner than for a fast bowler, it's mandatory to get to the pitch of the ball to smother that movement. While getting to the pitch of the ball is always advisable, it is more practical against a spinner rather than a quick bowler.*

*Good players of the spin also use the depth of the crease to good effect. Michael Clarke is one of the best players when it comes to using the feet. I watched him from close quarters (standing at short leg) when he scored a century on his Test debut, in Bangalore. Gautam Gambhir is equally competent when it comes to using his feet.*

*The golden rule while stepping out is to wait for the bowler to release the ball, so that he can't alter his length or line. Another rule of thumb to use is to advance against balls that go higher than the eye level.*

### **Body-weight transfer**

*Correct transference of body weight is absolutely crucial while playing the slower bowlers. Since there isn't any pace to work with, it's the transfer of body weight at the time of impact that generates power and timing.*

*Playing on the up is rarely an option against spin bowling and hence the weight must go forward in the direction in which you intend to play the shot. Good body-weight transfer also ensures that you hit the ball along the ground and not in the air.*

### **The importance of the hands**

*Contrary to popular belief, keeping the bat and pad together while defending isn't the best method. Yes, there shouldn't be any gap between the bat and pad, but the bat must always stay slightly in front of the pad for a proper impact. Keeping the bat beside the pad occasionally results in the bat being hidden behind the pad, and it also gives the impression that you didn't offer a shot.*

*The golden rule while stepping out is to wait for the bowler to release the ball, so that the bowler can't alter his length or line. Another rule of thumb to use is to advance against balls that go higher than the eye level.*

*Another thing one must keep in mind while playing spinners, especially in the longer formats, is to keep the hands very soft. The top hand should hold the bat firmly, while the bottom hand should be there just to support. Soft hands will ensure that the ball doesn't carry to close-in fielders.*

*Hands and wrists play a bigger role in manoeuvring spinners and putting the ball into gaps, as compared to while playing the quick bowler.*

*Watching V.V.S. Laxman or Mohammad Azharuddin play slower bowlers was like watching a painter working his magic on a canvas. Obviously the lack of pace allows you to work it around, but it's still an art.*

### **Pushing the fielder back and sweeping**

*Being aggressive on rank turners is extremely important, because regardless of how solid your technique is, pushing and prodding won't be enough to survive. Vikram Rathour, a brilliant player of spin at the domestic level, told me that you must take the aerial route to push the fielders back. Once the bowler employs a long-on and long-off, batting becomes a lot easier.*

*A lot of non-Indian players are taught to sweep spinners as much as they can. While sweeping is a good option to disrupt the rhythm of the bowler, you must have other tricks in your bag. Matthew Hayden was one of the most ferocious sweepers of the cricket ball, but what made him dangerous was that he didn't shy away from using his feet. If the bowler knows that you only sweep, he varies his length and speed to make it tough. But once you start using your feet, along with sweeping, even good bowlers find it tough to negotiate. Brian Lara's epic series in Sri Lanka comes to mind straightaway.*

### ***Playing the ball from the rough outside leg***

*Negotiating balls pitched in the rough is extremely tough for a couple of reasons. One, since the ball pitches outside the leg stump, there's a blind spot to deal with. Two, you can never be sure of the amount of spin when it pitches in the footmarks.*

*Virender Sehwag has a unique way of handling it. He stands in his stance with both his feet in the crease. He reckons that this allows him to make the length shorter and play the pull shot. Laxman, on the other hand, has a completely different method. He steps down the track frequently and gets to the pitch of the ball, and he doesn't hesitate to play against the spin. But the majority of batsmen like to pad it away for as long as possible before trying an occasional sweep – normal or reverse.*

*A player is, more often than not, a product of his environment. If you're exposed to quick and bouncy tracks early, you'll automatically become comfortable against pace. Similarly, if you play your entire cricket on dirt-bowls, you'll be at home against spin. But like Clarke, Hayden and Lara, you could also work your way towards mastering this craft.*

### ***Hitting over the top***

When an attacking player hits the bowler back over his head it is one of the most exhilarating feelings for a batsman in cricket. Technically hitting over the top is mainly about how good your timing and how well you have judged the length of the ball, rather than the easier shot to the corner which requires much more bottom hand. As you hit the ball, you should be in a slightly more upright position rather than the classic position of the drive with your head right over the ball. I really wouldn't lean back at the point of impact, for it is then harder to keep your head over the ball and as you will end up missing or getting caught having a heave with your head in the air.

To practise hitting over the top, use the side of the net and hit an old tennis ball on the bounce into the net. After a few hits you will work out the best length for you to attack. Do also remember to practice hitting the ball along the floor as well, so you can get used to the difference between hitting the ball up and keeping it down and along the floor.

### ***Playing the fast short ball***

At club level, there aren't many genuine quick bowlers (fortunately!); however, having an idea of how you are going to play the fast short ball is important. Being a 'happy hooker' is not a viable solution! My general view is that those players who are weak against the short ball are either afraid of the ball (a very reasonable fear) or don't have the right technique – usually they have a poor grip which means they can't get the bat inline and straight. Watching the 2010/11 Ashes series is a classic example of this: the Australian opener Phillip Hughes holds the bat with a very strong bottom hand, which means he is strong on anything short and wide, but really struggles to get into position against a short straight one. There are many players at club level like this.

To be able to play the short ball well you need to have a well honed technique – spend some time reading the thoughts of Bob Woolmer in *The Art and Science of Cricket*. My view is that early on, unless there is a pressing need to make a statement, you should look to get in behind or get out of the way of the short stuff – try and encourage the bowler to bowl fuller at you to stop the short one. Also, look out for a change in action for the short one – usually it requires more effort (unless the bowler has an incredibly smooth action), so it will be pretty obvious when it is coming.

Sanjay Majrekar, also in an article in ESPNcricinfo, opines:

*I believe that you can have the worst technique in the world, but if you have a sharp, disciplined mind you can still survive at the international level. Technique, though, does become very important, at times where the ball didn't behave as predictably as it does elsewhere nowadays.*

*The short ball is something Indian batsmen are generally, and naturally, not too good against. I used to envy young Australian batsmen during my playing days. A bouncer was a scoring opportunity for them. The moment somebody bowled short, they pounced on it. It's like when an Indian batsman sees a spinner bowl short. For Indian batsmen against bouncers, their first instinct is not positive. Then we sort of tell ourselves that we are going to be aggressive.*

*In the nineties India started to look at Australia as the team to be. The kids in that era grew up idolising Australian batsmen. Perhaps that's why a lot of them are playing the pull shot today, to make a statement, even if it doesn't come naturally to them. For the Australians the pull shot is like the drive or the flick is for the Indians.*

*There is a notion that in limited-overs cricket if you don't pull, you give the bowlers free dot-balls. And you can't keep ducking either. That's what the young Indian batsmen often say. Suresh Raina showed he played the short ball better in Tests, when he wasn't under pressure to score fast. In limited-overs cricket, though, they start pulling, but unconvincingly, thereby making it a high-risk shot.*

*Sachin Tendulkar doesn't play the pull anymore; nor does Virender Sehwag. V.V.S. Laxman doesn't play it as often as he used to. They are all still effective batsmen at the international level. You don't always need to always play the pull shot to prove something to someone. Why play a high-risk shot at a time when you don't want to lose wickets?*

*You don't need to hit a boundary every time the ball is bowled short. I remember when they bowled short to Sunil Gavaskar in limited-overs matches in Australia, he would glide it to third man for a single. And then the bowler had a different batsman to adjust to. How does Tendulkar take care of short balls in Twenty20? He does not play aggressive shots; he just takes singles to fine leg or taps it over where slips would be. More importantly, he shows he is comfortable against the short ball. That is the key.*

*If someone is bowling short in limited-overs cricket, he is not going to do so right through the innings. It's just a matter of maybe two overs. And it is impossible to keep bowling short in Twenty20. How many pitches will allow you to do that? At any rate, India's main problem is not that they are stuck for long periods without scoring runs. Their problem is that they are losing wickets. It's not like they are three down for 180 in 50 overs.*

*Fast bowlers keep bowling short at a batsman only when they see he is uncomfortable against it. What happens with a Raina or a Ravindra Jadeja is that they show they are uncomfortable. If Raina, even in Twenty20, ducks under one, and guides the next one for a single to fine*

*leg, and shows he is comfortable, he won't get much more of it. It will only happen if it's clear to them that he is getting into strange positions while trying to pull. Being secure against the short ball is important. Even if you're not scoring off it, if you look reasonably comfortable against it without playing an attacking shot, you will be fine.*

*Therein lays the need for these young batsmen to discover their own game, what they are suited to do best.*

## ***Improving timing***

Quote often in club cricket batsmen go through periods where they lose their timing of the ball, sometime this is mid innings, sometimes it's just they are a bit down on their form.

As I see it usually this falls into two questions:

1. Are your timing issues to do with one type of pitch (slow and low, tennis ball bouncing/popping, or hard and fast?)
2. Are your timing issues to do with all pitches?

If you aren't timing the ball, this is also generally because of two reasons: part of it is down to your form; the second part is down to how much time you have spent at the crease. These two things are inextricably linked.

Firstly, if you aren't timing the ball well you are probably going for too many shots too early in your innings and trying to hit the ball too hard. The answer is simply to grind it out, get some singles, get off strike and get used to batting again, clear your mind and stop trying too hard and let your natural talent come back, remember it can only take one shot for your form to return. Typically it takes about 20 to 30 minutes, or more, of batting to really get your eye in and to get used to the pace of a pitch, which is usually 6–8 overs. As a rule of thumb, then, don't go for too many shots too early, unless it is a rank bad ball. I appreciate if you are playing a 20-over slog fest, this isn't that helpful, but if you're playing 50-over league cricket or a Sunday game, take the time out; you will reap the benefits later on.

If the pitch is hard and fast you can typically go for your shots a bit earlier as the bounce will be truer, but if you are playing on a soft track ( 'a bit of a pudding'), then it will take you longer, and the crucial thing is not to go hard at the ball early. If you are on a tennis ball-style bouncing pitch, then I suggest that you put the 'on the up drive' away in the locker for the day. Your scoring shots are more likely to be back-foot shots, especially the pull, for anything short, unless the ball is really over pitched.

Another tip I use is to hold the bat only very gently with my bottom hand early on, and to concentrate on hitting the ball along the ground. Timing

comes from playing naturally, so if you are struggling, look to simplify your game. If you go for a big shot commit 100 per cent in going for it – many dismissals are caused merely by a slight hesitation. Committing to the shot will increase the chances of executing a shot successfully.

This also goes for situations where you are timing the ball well but hitting the ball straight at fielders. I read somewhere Geoff Boycott saying in those circumstances he would move his top hand on the bat very slightly. That trick has worked for me, but don't move it too much.

## ***Using a bowling machine for practice***

Those lucky enough to have access to a bowling machine should really use this to its best possible ends. It's a fact that the bowling machine is the best tool for practising a specific shot and allows you to repeat this technique over and over again; repetition usually leads to good execution under pressure. Most people, however, use the bowling to receive some nice half volleys to practise their favourite shots, which is a total waste of time and leads to bad habits.

My suggestion is that you break the bowling machine session down by the number of sets (buckets) of balls you will receive. Typically, this will be about four sets per half-hour session – with about 25 balls in each set – and I would deliberately do this to get you used to facing 100 balls and subsequently the most common number of balls a hundred is scored from in club cricket.

Set one: this is your 'play yourself in set' using a comfortable speed, somewhere around where you aren't afraid but still find challenging. This can be anywhere between 55mph and 75mph. You want the ball to be bouncing over off stump on a good length – so you get used to playing the line of off stump, with the natural variation from the bowling machine allowing you to play forward or back so you really get your feet moving. Play this first set hard, force yourself to really use your feet positively and really concentrate to get your eye in. This isn't the time to change what you are doing, just work your feet and get your eye in, like you do in a match. Game situation practice is really important.

Set two: this is your 'technique set' you and the 'coach' feeding the machine should agree where the weaknesses are in your technique; this set should be spent working out a method to play that weakness more proficiently – once you have found a way groove the technique until you are happy with it.

Set three: this is your 'attacking set' – go back to the same setting as set one but play more aggressively, work your attacking shots but with a view to not giving your wicket away. This is usually where players try to

premeditate and plant their front foot before the ball is fed and should be avoided at all costs.

Set four: this is your 'final set', so ask the 'coach' feeding the machine to mix it up to test your weak areas and provide opportunities to play your stronger shots. While testing your newly worked-on technique, don't be afraid to increase the speed of the bowling machine if you wish during this set – after all, you are trying to challenge yourself.

Do play shots and have a few friendly deliveries at the end to ensure you finish full of confidence, but you want to come away feeling like you have had a positive session. If you have less time, I suggest that you would probably cut out the third set, but only if you have to. The third set should tire you out so that you get used to playing the fourth set when you are tired – this is again good match practice.

**Moving on from the technical side of batting the next sections looks at the mental side of batting, both preparing to bat and during your innings.**

### ***Understanding your game***

One important step in your batting, which sometimes comes from experience, is to totally understand your game. This means knowing how you play, where your scoring shots are, minimising your higher risk shots, especially at the start of your innings and being able to stay at the crease for long periods of time. Peter Roebuck when talking about this part of Tendulkar's game once said:

*In part he has lasted so long because there has been so little inner strain, it's hard to think of a player remotely comparable who has spent so little energy conquering himself. Throughout [his career], Tendulkar has been able to concentrate on overcoming his opponents.*

My experiences from when I have been coaching have shown me that many players experiment too much with their batting and frequently end up in a muddle trying too many different things, mainly because they don't understand the basis that they are starting from or why they are changing their basic technique. This is multiplied when a player is out of form which, perversely, is the time when most people look to change their technique, frequently making it more complicated, rather than looking to simplifying the way they play.

Some of the best players who really know their game understand about bad form are able to limit themselves and grind out some time at the crease until batting comes a bit more naturally. These players, as a cricket supporter, are a whole load less frustrating to watch than the flamboyant "this is the way I play" kind of batsman, who rely on one shot to get them back in to form – but when it clicks again they are devastating.

So my first challenge is to ask how do you learn what your basic technique is? – Whether you are Shiv Chanderpaul, Mark Waugh or

some bloke on the village green.

To help answer this question how about asking yourself:

- Why do I play the way that I do?
- How should that influence the way that I practice?

Then, and only then, can you ask yourself:

- When you are in the nets, what is your basic grip, stance and back lift?
- As you are getting your eye in, what are the first few things you concentrate on getting right?
- What you are trying to work on?
- Why do you think you need to work on something?
- Are you trying to correct a fault or try something new?
- And how will any of the above help me become a better player

My view is that you can only change something when you know what you are starting from.

Knowing you own game means knowing your strengths and weakness and playing within them.

I asked Dr Martin I. Jones, Senior Lecturer in Sport & Exercise Psychology from the [University of Gloucestershire](#) what his thoughts were:

*Part of my work (as a sport psychologist) with athletes is to understand the fallibility of human reasoning. We are hard wired to find patterns in the things that we see and experience. We are not always very good at finding patterns!*

*In sport this pattern seeking manifests itself in athletes seeing cause and effect relationships that do not exist. An example could be a batsman observing his own poor batting performance. He then tries to understand why his performance is bad (i.e., the cause) and then tries to change the cause of bad performance (to alter the effect).*

*The real problem exists when poor performance is not down to a single*

*cause, but might just be a fluctuation in the normal physiological and psychological rhythms that we all have.*

*The batsman effectively begins a self self-fulfilling prophecy where he changes his batting technique, and as a result gets worse. The result is a downward spiral of changing technique because of the belief that the technique is bad and causing poor performance.*

*It's common for players to fall into that trap. They seek advice from lots of different coaches because the root cause of poor performance is not poor coaching, it's changing something that didn't need to be changed in the first place. The best players trust their technique implicitly, to the point where they don't need to think about it. Poorer players are poorer players because they can't play shots on automatic pilot and as such cannot think about other important things (e.g. field placement etc)*

*The best skills any athlete can develop is self awareness and rational thinking. If I can help an athlete so see a poor performance rationally, the athlete often gets "better" without doing anything. They only get worse when they convince themselves that poor performance is anything but the normal ups and downs of performance.*

The ultimate example of this is in Verinder Sehwag. Ed Smith succinctly explained the Indian plays approach in an article for [ESPNCricinfo](#):

*We will hear a lot about Sehwag's remarkable hand-eye coordination, his natural ball-striking, his gift of timing and power. But those strengths needed to be nurtured, to be protected from the many voices that demanded that Sehwag curb his natural instincts and play a different way. Sehwag mastered one of the hardest tricks in sport: he reached an accommodation with his own flaws. He recognised that he could not iron out his weaknesses without losing his voice. In simple terms, he stayed true to himself. The whole game is much richer because he did just that.*

### ***The benefits of routine***

Almost all sportsman and women are superstitious, in cricket this is often taken to an extreme. At one stage of his career, the South African Test player Neil McKenzie would have to ensure his bat was taped to the ceiling, that all the loo seats in the changing room were down and a host of other things before he could go out to bat. Then there is Jonathan Trott, still marking out his guard at the crease, preparing for the next ball, when the match was in fact over. Steve Waugh famously always had a red handkerchief in his pocket for good luck, but one day forgot it, got over that and scored runs anyway. We don't need superstitions as a crutch.

The Neil McKenzie ridiculous extreme actually masks something more fundamental and useful for batsmen and that is the benefit of a consistent routine – it isn't just small children that require a routine. By creating order in the way you prepare for an innings, I believe you can be ordered in your head and find it easier to bat with a clear and open mind. Each small thing you work on will make the bigger things happen more regularly.

Many cricketers like to put their kit on in a certain order, or like to sit in a certain seat – if this gives you confidence great, though don't let it go overboard! By having your kit ready in advance means there is one less thing to worry about before you bat, which makes you able to better prepare mentally for your innings, thus taking you to the stage of 'relaxed intensity', which is optimal for batting.

### ***Concentration and controlling the red mist***

The hardest thing for an amateur sportsman is controlling concentration and emotions, whether that is the red mist coming down or the emotions and excitement when you are approaching a landmark.

These are difficult times for a batsman and effectively require you to think of nothing other than the bowler running in with the ball in his hand. You want to get your mental state into what is known as 'relaxed intensity'.

Relaxed intensity means keeping your body relaxed, flexible, prepared, and constantly adaptable, while simultaneously maintaining an intense concentration on everything that's going on inside of you and in your immediate environment. Sachin Tendulkar has said: 'Be relaxed, be calm and watch the ball as closely as possible because that is what a batsman is meant to do. The thought process has to be free flowing and that's when you react and your body movement is not stiff and tight.'

To help get you into the right mindset, it can be helpful to have a trigger for the mind – much like a hypnotist uses. I would recommend that as the bowler runs in you try to pick up the seam of the ball in the bowlers hand as early as possible, usually well before he enters his delivery stride, as your mental switch into concentrating mode. Other people use the way they tap their bat at the crease. Use whatever works for you. Having this trigger helps you to focus on watching the ball and closing out all the other distractions – taking you into your zone. Think Johnny Wilkinson crouched over a penalty in rugby, closing out everything other than his thoughts for kicking a goal. For extra help, if you need it, remind yourself of the task by saying to yourself 'concentrate', 'watch the ball', or 'stay still'. This can help a lot.

Finally, everyone at some stage feels the onset of the 'red mist'. When this happens, you are at your most vulnerable, so it is important to stay in control. I generally say 'respect the bowler' to stay in control. The only thing you can do is concentrate extra hard when you feel the rage hit you and try really hard to stay calm. Otherwise, you could do just what Pete Sampras did by thinking of nothing at all. I will repeat this mantra in the run chase section, but you can surprise yourself with the shots you can

play when you are totally relaxed.

## ***Scoring a hundred***

I have read plenty about people having scored hundreds, but not come across much guidance on actually going out and getting one. The last time I read something of this ilk was in an interview with Graeme Hick, which was twenty years ago but I have lost the clipping! As a result, I thought I would write some tips on how best to get yourself in a position to score a hundred, from a mental preparation point of view and during your innings thought process. This is by no means the only way, but if it helps you with just one 'light bulb moment' then I have succeeded in my aim!

Having the technique to score a hundred runs in an innings does pay a part, however I have seen people with shocking technique score hundreds, so it will depend largely on whether or not is it 'your day'. However, this thread is here to help you make it 'your day' more often.

Firstly, in club cricket, if you want to be a serious batsman in league competition, try to get yourself batting in the top three, therefore giving yourself the best possible chance to score the runs. I think the thoughts of Rahoul Dravid when speaking to Ed Smith are instructive:

*David once told me that Brian Lara and Sachin Tendulkar were so talented that they could regularly score Test hundreds in three or four hours. But David felt he had to be prepared to bat for more like five or six hours for his hundreds. But there are two sides to that equation. First, there is time. Secondly, there is run rate. David calculated that he possessed the defensive technique and psychological skills to spend more time in the middle than most great players. So he would compromise on run rate and extend his occupation of the crease.*

Before you go out to bat, work out how long it will take you on an average day to score 100 run. This is what Verinder Sehwag said after scoring 175 against Bangladesh: *It was easy for me to rotate the strike. I think I hit a six on 49, and after that [un]till 75 or 80 I was just rotating the strike because I knew I had to play 30-40 overs and if I do that I would get a hundred. Still my strike rate was more than 100.*

Given Sehwag is a bit of a one off, I think of the time it takes to score a hundred like this: I start with my average run rate is about 90 runs per 100 balls ( $90/100 = 0.9$ ) – taken from an average of innings over the last few years. On this basis I will need to face about 111 balls to score a ton in league cricket ( $100/0.9$ ).

Working out what 111 balls equates to in terms of overs, assuming an equal strike rate, which never happens but park that for the moment, you divide the number of balls by 6 (the number of balls in an over) then multiply that by two (to allow for the other batters) So in this case I have  $111/6 = 18.5$ ,  $18.5 \times 2 = 37$  overs in which to make the necessary runs.

Given the maths above I need to be able, mentally and physically, to bat for at least 35–40 overs to score 100. Having an awareness of how long you are going to need to bat helps mentally you to adjust from thinking ‘I want to score a hundred today’ to ‘OK, I am going to have to bat well for a long time to make this count and I really want this.’

To bat for 40 overs you are typically looking at being at the crease for two-and-a-half hours. Obviously in Sunday cricket, or at lower standards, you can accelerate the runs per ball and time taken, but the message is: ‘Are you prepared to bat for two-and-a-half hours?’

From the mental aspect to the physical aspect of batting, be honest with yourself, are you physically fit enough to bat for that length of time, especially on a hot day? When you get physically tired, your mental tiredness increases and you make a mistake. In other words, you may need to go out and hit the gym or similar.

If you are not fit enough or prepared to bat for 40 overs, you will need to get a shift on and take more risks therefore relying on it being your lucky day more often.

Physically and mentally if you are ready and your mind is clear enough you have already taken the first steps.

Before you go out to bat, make sure all your equipment is comfortable. If you aren’t comfortable you will lose concentration early in your innings, which is bad news. At this point, you have effectively distracted yourself

out. With the sheer choice of equipment available these days, there really is no excuse in being uncomfortable with your equipment.

Then you are walking out to bat – the first five overs are the hardest for a batsman, (ignore the state of the game for a moment). You need to play yourself in, so only play low-risk shots, though accepting that it is always nice to get an early boundary to give you confidence. If you do get a rank bad ball early on, commit 100 per cent to smacking it, don't have a waft. As I have said before, total commitment to the shot reduces the risk. Running well between the wickets also helps get the blood flowing and your feet moving when you are on strike. Really look to rotate the strike so that the fielding side is pushed onto the back foot (sorry for the clichés, but they do work).

An underestimated part of batting is being aware of where the fielders are standing, or where they have been moved to. If, for example, the bowler is bowling to a 7–2 off-side field, it is likely he is trying to move the ball away from you on a full length – so sitting on your back foot looking to work the ball through the leg side won't be a low-risk shot. As stated above, be wary of waft outside off stump! The way the field is set should tell you what the bowler is trying to do and where they are trying to bowl. Using the information available and knowing where your main scoring areas to that type of bowler, will make life easier for you. It is really important to use the fielders to help you work out what the bowler is trying to do. It will also present you with an insight into the mindset of the opposition, which will give you a clue as to when to try and seize the initiative, which can be a match-winning moment.

Throughout an innings, but especially at the start, I try to encourage players, to 'keep your shape', stay playing shots under your eyes early on and keep it really simple. This can also be described as playing close to your body, which encourages the bowlers to bowl at you, rather than in the 'corridor of uncertainty' on or outside the off stump.

After about five or six overs, you should be getting into your innings, you're possibly on 10–15 runs, or maybe you have got off to a bit of a flyer and are on 25-plus. At this point be warned, it is easy to feel 'in' when you aren't quite there, and remember most times a batsman is out

he has given it away playing a bad shot, rather than being dismissed by the bowler's skill (there speaks a batsman!)

By this time you are theoretically in for the long haul – break your knock down into five-over bursts, pick up the boundaries and play your own way. Don't panic if the ball is doing a bit, keep calm and wait for the bad balls – at most levels of club cricket there are two four balls every two overs or so.

The important thing by this stage is that you are in your own 'bubble', I don't think too much about what is being said to me, whether they're 'instructions' from the wicketkeeper or 'advice' from the slips. I just try to keep my mind clear and think about respecting the bowler and watching the ball.

Around the 15–18 overs mark your teammates are giving you a polite ripple of applause and you wave back, while there is always one guy shouting, 'Double it up, fella!' You are mentally ready for all that. Don't think about your own runs, the easiest thing is to look at the total and work on getting your team into a good position at this point. It will take your mind off your own innings and remember, cricket is a team game after all.

At some stage during an innings you are likely to lose your concentration. for some it is around 35 runs, for others 60, or it can happen around a break in play, such as a drinks break – it does happen. To try to stop that, you need to stay in your bubble – think Jonathan Trott still marking out his guard after he has won the match! I mentioned the example of Jonny Wilkinson taking a penalty or conversion and this is a better example, for Trott does verge on the edge of obsession. Don't be afraid to take a couple of overs to 'play yourself in' again if you feel like your concentration is going, it should come back pretty quick.

Usually you will need some luck in an innings, whether that is a dropped catch, a play and miss or a nick into a gap, sometimes you won't, but if you get some, double your efforts in attempting not to give your wicket away. Not 'giving it away' is a massive deal by this stage in you innings. After 25–30 overs you are heading towards the 'zone', you are on around 80 and right on top. At this point, trying to farm the strike is my usual

tactic – slightly selfish I know, but unless the other batter is smashing the ball everywhere, you are the inform player and will score your runs faster, so it is a legitimate thing to do.

As a rough rule of thumb, if there are no scoreboards on the ground sometimes it is good to know what you are on – look at the total, guess what proportion of runs you have, and taking 10–15 runs from that total usually gets you a pretty accurate estimate.

Either way, you are heading towards the nineties. Try not to change how you have been playing, but bat for those last tens runs as if they are your first ten. Go back to ‘keeping your shape’ run the singles hard, and commit 100 per cent into going for the shot. Then, the big moment arrives; well done. But don’t give it away!

Once you get to around 110, you are suddenly in the zone – where every ball can be deposited anywhere at will. In fact, you will feel like the bowlers are actually bowling where you want them to. If you get out having reached this point, you have let your team down regardless of the fact that you have made a hundred. By staying in, your next fifty frequently comes off about 30–40 balls, which a new batsman is unlikely to be able to replicate. Concentrate doubly hard and, as Graham Gooch says, ‘Make it a Daddy’, Keep batting and make it a 150 or more.

Obviously, there are lots of other factors to consider – the different bowlers, the different match situations, the different types of match, a decent opposition skipper who can try and get you off strike ... but the principles of batting long remain the same.

These are just some of the things I think about when I am batting: where the fielders are; who is bowling; their bowling style; where the high-percentage and low-risk runs can come from; how the player at the other end is doing; and it all differs as to whether I am setting or chasing a target.

It may well be that I think far too much and don’t allow myself to just let it happen, but this is what I have found helps me. But, the more I have worked at it and the more I think about what I am trying to do, the more consistent a player I have become.

## ***Maintaining form***

Well done, your first ton is one to treasure – actually in my book every hundred is one to treasure. The second one is just as hard because when you go out to bat you have to remember to start again on zero. Mark Ramprakash is the master of replicating this.

Cricket is a great leveller – make sure you work really hard for your first twenty runs next time you bat, don't take anything for granted so that second hundred can come as soon as possible! It is so easy to make a duck the innings after a hundred.

You may not have got to a hundred, but my message is always the same, especially as an opening batsman: if you feel full of form and confidence then fantastic, but the important thing is that you start on zero and you must play yourself in. It is a new day and a new innings, more often than not on a new pitch.

Work hard, try to rein yourself in for the first five or six overs, give yourself twenty minutes or so to get used to the new conditions. Remember, with the new ball, a good one can come along at any time, but after five or six overs, merely by hitting the bad balls and working the singles, you should be on 15–20 and once again in the groove and really well set. Look to build your innings ten runs at a time or five overs at a time. If you bat for forty overs you can score a huge hundred, but to do so you need to break your runs down, into ten blocks of ten, for instance. Remember, you are there for the long haul.

Trust me, as someone who has opened the batting at 11 a.m. for an all-day game and then been back in the pavilion at 11.03 on more than one occasion, giving it away when you are in form is the worst crime a batsman can commit.

### ***Setting a target and managing a run chase***

I will refer all mentions of managing a run chase' to the (un)official Michael Bevan method. Michael Bevan was the finest one-day 'finisher' in the business. The way he worked was to count how many overs you have left, take one away then work out the run rate required for the remaining overs. He then would work out how many runs were required off the next two overs. He would then recalculate after each over... I hope your mental arithmetic will be up to that! Actually, it works well at all levels, especially as you know in any run chase there will be a 'big over' where you have more than twelve runs scored off it. In club cricket, you will be amazed how often there are two big overs close together in a run chase, which will effectively kill the game. This is what you should be looking to do.

The other thing to consider is not to try and smash the ball too hard – eight-an-over is very attainable through running singles and twos, you just need to be able to work the ball into the gaps and really go for your running between the wickets. Look to see who in the field has a poor arm or is slow to the ball. If you put weak fielders under pressure, their heads go down and the other fielders start putting that player under more pressure; this in turn works in your favour, as you want the bowling side to be shouting at each other rather than concentrating their energies on getting you out.

Setting a target is more difficult as you need to do some research on what 'a good score' is on the wicket you play on. Looking at the home team scorebook – or these day websites like Play-Cricket.com, will give you lots of information about the grounds you are playing at. This will change depending on the weather conditions but you will need a guide.

Once you have a figure, I would go about setting the target in a similar way to chasing one down. The only difference would be that you should take six overs per 50 off rather than just one. This will give you hitting time at the end to push your score out of sight.

In both run setting and run chases there will be times when you need to increase the scoring rate, as a result you may need to increase the levels

of risk you are prepared to take on your shots. Having spent time working in the nets on where your run-scoring areas are, you need to get the bowler to bowl in your 'arc', allowing you to free your arms. My view is that you should always look to protect your stumps, so I believe backing away to 'give yourself room' is asking for trouble and makes you very susceptible to the full straight ball. I encourage players to come down the wicket, staying in line to avoid the stumping, or to move across to the off side, thus opening up the leg side for runs. This has the effect of making the bowler bowl further outside your off stump, which gives you room to free your arms in later deliveries; remember, stay still! It remains important that you don't try to premeditate shots (unless you have time to spend hours practising), allow your natural talent to score you runs, as I have said before, you can surprise yourself with the shots you can play when you are totally relaxed.

As written in numerous articles, higher risk does not mean slogging. If you start slogging you will just get out – even if you hit a couple of sixes on the way, though fun while it lasts, like a Freddie Flintoff innings, you are usually left wanting more and therefore ultimately frustrated,

To increase the scoring rate, look at the field placements: has the opposing skipper made a mistake leaving one of your main hitting areas unguarded?; are the long-on and long-off fielders on the fence; is there a fielder in 'the cheap seats' at cow corner? If all these areas are covered, there will be gaps elsewhere, you just need to work the ball there and run the two or three. It is vital that you stay in control at this point; don't let the red mist descend, stay in that 'relaxed intensity' state of mind.

Repeating what I have said before, as a batsman you are able to control where the fielders get placed, you just have to have the confidence to work the ball into the gaps, much like Sachin Tendulkar has demonstrated in the IPL, you can do it with orthodox shots, you don't necessarily need to do it with reverse sweeps or by switching hands to play the switch hit.

Here is Aakash Chopra once again:

*Batting at the death is as specialised a job as opening the batting. Not only do you need special skill sets, at times you need brute strength to clear the fence.*

*While you identify your strengths as a batsman and must go for broke if you get a ball in your area, it's highly unlikely that you will without doing something out of the box. For example, if you like going over midwicket, be assured that most balls to you will finish outside off, since good bowlers work to a plan. To make things work in your favour you must out-think the bowler and create the desired line and length yourself. It is something Sachin Tendulkar did with aplomb during his double-century against the South Africans in Gwalior. He constantly moved about in the crease to keep the bowler guessing.*

*Since as a batsman you are also aware of the bowler's three desired lengths, you can take a calculated risk, guessing what the next ball will be, leaving the option of taking a single as your last resource open.*

*While being a little cheeky doesn't hurt, the better players at the end of an innings are the ones who maintain a solid base all the time. You rarely saw people like Lance Klusener hit a shot while off position or off balance, because it's almost impossible to get power or timing if the base and the head are not stable.*

*Another point a batsman needs to keep in mind is to not get too close to the ball, for you need room to swing the arms; also, staying away from the ball a little is mandatory to help you get under it for elevation. Both Dhoni and Suresh Raina are brilliant when it comes to clearing the front leg out of the way to create room, going slightly deeper in the crease to get under the full ball, and also staying away to allow the arms to swing free for the off-target length ball.*

*It's also wise to keep a close eye on the constantly changing field positions, so you have an insight into the bowler's thinking and can then prepare yourself accordingly.*

*While chasing a target, it's imperative to think in terms of balls, not overs. Keeping a calm head while calculating your chances is what separates a good finisher from an average middle-order player. If you need 36 off 24 balls, it takes only four hits to the fence to bring the rather daunting-*

*looking equation down to a more realistic run-a-ball. But thinking of getting nine an over can create panic.*

*Batting in the death overs may not be the most pleasing sight for a purist, but if observed closely, the smaller battles within the big one make for interesting viewing. How a batsman reads the bowler's mind or vice versa speaks volumes about the strength of a player's character. Imagine the pressure a bowler must feel while bowling the last over, or the last ball of the match, with the opposition needing only a boundary for victory.*

*Things were not so tough for bowlers when the same ball was used till the 50th over, because the reverse swing allowed bowlers to have more than a say in proceedings. You would rarely see Wasim Akram shy away from these demanding situations. On the contrary his skill in making the old ball talk allowed him to dictate terms. But since the ball is changed after the 34th over these days, the bowler's job is cut out for him.*

*Make no mistake, though, the man who is expected to hit the last ball to the fence is under tremendous pressure too. It's the one who holds his nerve in the end who survives. Maybe that's why the term 'death overs' was coined, for failure isn't an option at that stage.*

The key remains to keep your innings simple.

## ***Conclusions***

Over the last century equipment has changed, batting techniques have changed, but in each era there are some things that have remained prescient. I hope you have taken value from my commentary and that it makes sense. To finish, I will leave you with a few final thoughts that you can take with you before any game you play. These are:

1. Stay still at the crease, the more still your head is, the easier it is to watch the ball.
2. Don't think too much about what you are doing (given the commentary in this book, that might be difficult initially!),
3. Make the bowlers work for your wicket.
4. Your luck will change but you will get some terrible decisions both for and against you, don't take them personally, accept them and work on your 'controllables', such as ensuring you watch the ball rather than other people's behaviour.

And finally:

5. Enjoy your batting.

As I said at the start, some of the commentary here is almost certainly, over thought and possibly over complicated. There are different players of the game, many of whom just want to go out and play instinctively and don't want to be burdened with thinking about their game too much. In fact, these players will get much worse for over thinking their game. The reason for that is typically they have reached the 'unconscious competence' stage – and to get to that utopia you need to have either played or practised an awful lot!

Most of the ideas and techniques written with this brief book I have worked on and used during the last two or three seasons. During that time, my league average has gone up by 15 runs, given that I have been playing league cricket at a reasonable level for more than ten years, playing about twelve league games or more a season suggests a considerable improvement. I hope this book will help you make a similar improvement.

If nothing else in this book works for you, I suggest you buy a new bat!

***Useful links***

[www.espncriinfo.com](http://www.espncriinfo.com)

Especially:

<http://www.espncriinfo.com/ci/content/story/author.html?author=276>.

Some of my initial musings on batting can be found here:

<http://custombats.co.uk/cbforum/index.php>