

COACHING TIPS

Dennis Amiss once told me that you only really start learning to bat after you get a hundred! Graeme Pollock is quoted as saying that batting is 70% in the mind! Sir Donald Bradman once said that, "When the bowler lets go of the ball it will eventually reach you!"

Three fairly simple statements but all very meaningful, they happen to come from three of the better batters of their eras. In the next few pages I will record some of the disciplines that batsmen need to have in order to succeed at the crease.

1. The Basics

Everyone talks about sticking to the basics but what is meant by "The Basics"? After much study, thought and practice I have come to believe that there are five basic principles to batting, which are cast in stone (adhered to forever). Although the methods of attaining these basics might differ, they are the cornerstone to batting technique. They are: -

- (a) Watch the ball
- (b) Keep your head still on release of that ball (be balanced)
- (c) Judge length accurately
- (d) Put your feet into the correct position
- (e) Select the correct shot

2. Technique

Preparation and practice are vital to hone technique and therefore care in practice is vital. Sir Richard Hadlee once said that only "perfect practice makes perfect". This is an important point. Practicing poor technique will make you worse. The higher the standard of the game the more incorrect technique is exposed. It is vital for the coach to understand technique and apply it differently to each subject. No two people are the same and coaching methods have to change for each player.

3. Hitting Area & Timing

An often misunderstood subject, what then is the correct hitting area? A simple way of finding out how timing and the optimum hitting area combine is simply by getting a bat and ball and bouncing the ball on the bat. **Timing** is the art of making the bat meet the ball at the correct point so that it will bounce under control and can be repeated easily. How then do we interpret this into the game of cricket, especially when we need to use both hands? To discover the optimum hitting area it is important to understand how the hands work together. A simple method is to hold the bat in two hands and simply let the bat hang down. You will quickly notice that the bat hangs under your eyes; in an ideal world this then is the optimum area. In order to gain maximum force and timing the arms should be almost if not completely straight when hitting the ball (not always possible, but games like Golf show you the reasons why) and the transference of weight from back to front foot or vice versa will complete the equation. Interestingly the co-ordination of all these factors is determined by your brain and the first signals to the brain are the signals that your eyes see. Vision enhancing techniques are now making it possible to improve co-ordination and timing. We spend many hours training the muscles of our body but very little on training the muscles around the eyes. New studies are proving a great success and as part of technical training vision should be part of a batsmen's daily routine. It follows therefore that if the first signal to the brain is from the eyes then the better they are working the better the information gets relayed through to the feet. Consider then your foot movements onto front and back foot if you wait for the ball to arrive under your eyes you will have a better chance of hitting the ball and at the same time you will be playing it late which is a sign of all great batsmen. This is something that you will come to understand the more it happens. Talented sportspersons can improvise where and when they hit the ball because they are able to watch the ball (concentrate) for longer and use their hands through better co-ordination. The less talented player can train these skills by repetition, hence the fact that the so-called average player has succeeded at the highest level.

4. Balance

Not only should you be balanced in your stance, but you should also be balanced in the shots that you choose. For example, when going onto the back foot you must transfer your weight onto the back foot, similarly when going onto the front foot your weight (balance) must be on the front foot. Too often when the weight is not transferred properly the hitting area is not attained nor do we adjust and wait for the ball, we tend to push away from our bodies at the

ball, leaning back and thereby causing an error. Transferring the weight is an extremely important factor in good technique. Bradman said that all batsmen should take up ball-room dancing so that they learnt to move their feet in a balanced way. Batsmen get caught in the wrong position because the timing of their movements is poor.

5. Technical Appreciation

It is important as a player to understand real technique from body position to how the hands work. Shot making can be both rustic and precise, the higher the level the better the technique has to be. Bat paths relative to the body should resemble straight railway lines, the body being on the one track and the hands meeting the ball on the other track. Problems occur when the two tracks cross (playing across the line) and cross again (playing 'into out'). Don't be lulled into the easy way out, you thinking that you mustn't be too technical, the faster or better the bowler and the greater the pressure of the game, the more technique will be exposed and crumble if not good enough. It is in precisely these situations that you will need good technique. By practicing good technique the more natural it will become. A recent study has said that for any movement to become second nature it needs be practiced over 13000 times! Importantly most shot bases resemble the hull of an old 9th century Man of war boat. The Bat-swing towards the stumps resembles the high bridge and Captains cabin. The hitting area resembles the flattened bottom of the hull and the follow through resembles the point of the boat.

Illustrated here: -

The bottom of the bat should follow the illustration as much as possible so that the hitting area (The straight line - bottom of the hull) is as long as possible.

One of Cricket's greatest problems is in how terminology can make such a difference to understanding. If hitting the ball is a science (Biomechanics) then the art of coaching is getting it across to the student! We have all been taught that Cricket is a sideways game and that batting is a top-handed game, yet the coach will shout at his pupil from any distance that you are using too much bottom hand! If you are confused so am I! It was this confusion that led to my personal quest to understand what the message really was; my current conclusion is that both hands are as important, that the top hand creates the start of the bat-swing and that the bottom hand concludes it. In fact, the reality is far greater. In my research, I found that the bottom hand was responsible for power, timing, and all the mistakes that creep into a particular shot. The top hand indeed was vital because if it was not used properly then the bottom hand came into the shot too soon. Further research led me to an understanding that the hands had to be working as a unit for perfect timing and that hand-eye co-ordination was easier when playing the ball under the eyes. This evaluation of technique was born out by studying great players and not so great players when they were hitting the cricket ball well.

While none of this is or should be new to anyone, it explained why so many young players do not have the basic skills. The actual methods of hitting a ball were not being explained correctly. Going back into coaching books of yesteryear it became even clearer that the initial teachings were slowly and inexorably being embellished or left out for convenience, maybe lack of understanding, so that over time the actual basics being taught became muddled. Even extremely diligent coaches were making costly mistakes, unaware that they were doing so.