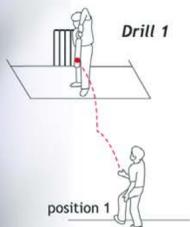


CRICKET

Decision Making

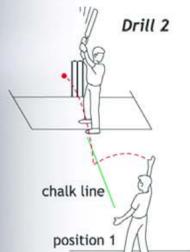


JUDGEMENT

Activity - The bowler delivers a series of underarm feeds from position 1, aiming the bowl at one of the six stumps. The batter then plays a number of back foot drives, calling out the number of the stump that the bowl would have stuck if the bowl had been left.

What to look for:

- In addition to general coaching points
- Awareness of off-stump
- Ability to leave the ball.
- Are they stating the numbers correctly.



JUDGEMENT - Advanced

Activity - using a piece of string or a chalked line, a coach can identify line as the variable and give two choices such as play or leave depending upon which side of the line the ball pitches. This drill works better with the coach delivery overarm feeds which can be thrown to ensure the batter has front and backfoot options.

What to look for:

- Batter watching the ball.
- Focus on the decision made and not the actual shot execution.
- Ask questions!



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COACHES MATTER

Understanding and Training Decision Making in Cricket

By **DAVID PARSONS**
ECB National Coach



For many coaches we are approaching the key time of the year - the cross over between what we have traditionally seen as being the coaching season and the playing season. Coaches all around the country will be eagerly waiting to see if those endless hours of drop feeds, throw downs, nets, target bowling, bowling from delivery stride, shying at stumps, nicks and so on will bear fruit with an improvement in performance out there in the middle by our young charges. For the vast majority of coaches, with our own time and that of the young player restricted, we will have spent most of our time over the winter months seeking to enhance or improve the young player's capacity to execute the skills of the game more effectively. We will have sought to make technical interventions so that the young player is more able to hit the ball to the areas he or she wants to, to bowl the ball where and how they want to, and to field the ball in the manner they and we would want. Furthermore, I would suggest that as soon as one of our young players (or for that matter watching a top-class Test cricketer on TV) is caught behind, plays across a straight ball, fumbles a ball in the field or bowls a full toss, we tend to look to the technical elements of the skill execution to identify where it all went so horribly wrong.

Whilst in no way wishing to downplay the importance of effective skill execution in all areas of the game, if we only focus on the technical execution of the skill in our training programmes and in our analysis, we may well be missing out on a key area in the development of effective performance, particularly in batting and fielding, that of **decision-making**. So, firstly, why the distinction of batting and fielding from bowling? This is because batting and fielding are **Open Skills** where the player has to respond to a set of variables over which he or she has no control. Bowling on the other hand is a **Closed Skill** where the player is able to execute the skill without reference to any other variables. To determine how we can train the decision-making process we first have to understand the process which leads to a skill being executed and I will use batting to explain. Before each delivery, the batter goes through a process - either conscious-

ly or otherwise - which will determine the shot which he or she will play. The first part of this process can be referred to as the **Situation Analysis** whereby the batter seeks to gather information about the set of circumstances which s/he is in. This comes in two forms - **Internal** and **External**. The Internal information a batter will gather includes feelings about his/her confidence, current form, their physical state, their emotional feeling and their own individual batting philosophy including their attitude to risk. Much of this information will already be locked in and will be relatively **stable**. The External information they will gather will include information about the current state of the game, the conditions of the pitch, recent history, their knowledge of the bowlers strengths, weaknesses or strategy and, again, this information will be relatively stable and will not vary greatly from ball to ball.

The second part of the process involves the gathering of information regarding the Ball Behaviours. For more advanced batters, this may start prior to the delivery of the ball whereby the batter will seek to pick up information about the delivery by the cues given off by the bowler in terms of their bowling action and release position. However most players will seek to gather information about the Pace, Line, Length, Height / Bounce of the ball by making visual observations of the small red spherical object which is moving towards them at a rapid rate. They may also need to gather information about the amount and direction of spin, swing or seam movement. In a nutshell, batters need to determine where the ball will arrive in relation to themselves, when it will arrive and how it will arrive. These factors are all **unstable** and will be different for every ball that the batter faces.

Having gathered information about the situation and about the behaviours of the ball, the batter now has to **decide** what to do and the choices they are faced with can be endless. Play or leave? Attack or defend? In the air or along the ground? Off side or leg side? Forward or back? And that is keeping things simple. At a higher level, clearly the choices a batter is faced with are less defined - to mid-off's left or right hand? The fine sweep or the paddle sweep? etc.

to gather the information about the ball behaviours, decide upon what course of action needs to be taken and to move his/her body in such a way as to execute an effective stroke.

I would dare to suggest at this stage that more dismissals at the top level can be attributed to the inaccurate gathering of information regarding the ball behaviours (pace, line, length, height, lateral movement) or the inappropriateness of the decision made (ie the skill chosen did not match the skill required) than to the actual execution of the shot. So, if this is the case, can we train our players to more effectively undertake these two parts of the batting process? I would assert that we can. Isolating the specific part of the process enables players to practice that part and this can be done in very simple ways.

Training players in gathering information about the ball behaviours can be done simply by removing the requirement of the player to make a decision and execute the shot. So, for example, a player can be asked simply to stand close to their normal stance position and having observed the delivery, to give feedback to the coach or a peer as to it's line, it's length, it's bounce. My experience suggests that you will be surprised how inaccurate players are initially when asked to pinpoint the place where a ball pitched. If difficulties are encountered, a simpler method would be to place a chalk line or string on the floor and ask a player to identify where the ball landed in relation to the line. Similarly, coaches can make the task more difficult by asking players to close their eyes before the ball pitches and to make predictions as to the line, length, bounce etc of the ball. This enables batters to improve their predictions and lengthen the time available to make a decision and execute the stroke. Whilst using a bowler allows a batter to practice gathering information from the bowlers action to support the process, using a bowling machine removes these additional cues, reduces the information available thus overloading the task and again improving a batter's capacity to gather information about the ball's behaviours.



Only once that decision has been made can a batter enter the final part of the process which is to **execute the necessary skill**. And remember, the batter only has approximately 0.5 seconds to a ball travelling at 80mph



Matthew Hayden makes a wrong decision which proves to be fatal

in terms of training the batter in the actual decision-making process, use of the simple **If...then... equation**, can give the coach an endless array of activities. In it's simplest form, the coach provides one **variable** and two **choices**. For example, again using a piece of string or a chalked line, a coach can identify line as the variable and give two choices such as play or leave depending upon which side of the line the ball pitches. This simple drill ensures that the batter watches the ball closely and focuses not on the execution of the shot but on making the correct decision. Similarly, it is vital that the coach, in providing feedback, focuses on the decision made and not on the actual skill execution. This straightforward method can be adapted to use any variable with any choice. With line as the variable, batters can choose between playing forward or back, attacking or defending, slog sweep or orthodox and so on. This simple method can be made more complex according to the skill levels of the batter (skill referring to their capacity to make appropriate decisions not in executing the stroke). A coach can either increase the number of variables or the number of choices. With advanced or mature players, the player him or herself should be fully involved in identifying and setting the variables and the choices.

Whilst these examples have primarily focussed on batting, the same principles can be applied to fielding and to a lesser degree bowling. In both fielding and bowling, the player goes through the process of Situation Analysis and in the case of fielding looks to gather information about the Ball Behaviours before deciding upon the appropriate course of action and executing the skill. The information a fielder would be looking to gather about the ball would be it's speed, it's angle, the bounce of the ball, the distance from the stumps and so on, but they would also gather information about whether the batter was running, how far they were from completing the run etc. The decision a fielder could make may include picking up one or two handed, attacking or defending, under or overarm, bowlers or wicketkeepers end, at the stumps or into the hands etc. The same 'If...then...equation' approach to training this decision making process can be applied.

With bowling, as a closed skill, clearly the bowler has a greater amount of time in which to make a decision as to what skill to execute and there are less unstable factors. However, there are some unstable factors - for example, a batter may come down the pitch late or move across his crease etc and we can help bowlers train making adjustments to their decision making process in the same way.

With more advanced players we can take the whole issue of decision making further to incorporate **Risk Management**. Players have to understand that some decisions contain a greater degree of risk than others and they must first begin to understand the possible **consequences** of their decisions. For every decision there is a potential **benefit** if it goes well and a potential **cost** if it doesn't and a player has to weigh up those potential costs and benefits against the likelihood of successful execution. For example, when batting, if a player is faced with a good length ball on off stump, s/he may consider defending or attacking. If the player chooses to defend the benefits are that they will still be there to face the next ball, but the cost may be that they didn't score a run in a tight run chase. On the other hand, if they choose to attack, the benefit would be that they may get 2 or even 4 runs, whilst the cost may be that they stand a greater chance of getting out.

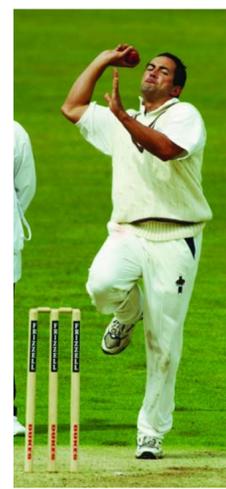
When bowling we are faced with similar dilemmas - do I bowl a slower ball? If it comes off I could take a wicket. If not, I may concede a boundary. Shall I opt for the option of lower risk, my stock ball, which probably won't get a wicket, but may only go for a single? In the field, do I shy at the stumps in trying to effect a run out but risk overthrows or hold on to the ball, concede a single but no more?

So our decisions are linked to risks in every area of the game, but can we train ourselves to be better at making these decisions? One way is to set up scenarios in practice where players have to consider risks and decide upon courses of action. In each scenario the course of action for which there is greatest reward or benefit should also be that for which there is greatest potential cost. For example, in a batting scenario, players should be faced with the option of hitting the ball through target area A for, say 10 points or target area B for 5 points. The risk however is that if they have a near miss on area A

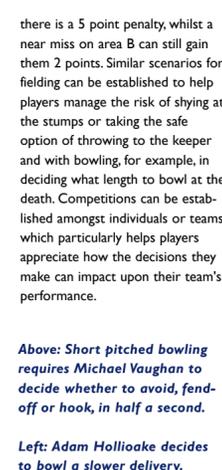
there is a 5 point penalty, whilst a near miss on area B can still gain them 2 points. Similar scenarios for fielding can be established to help players manage the risk of shying at the stumps or taking the safe option of throwing to the keeper and with bowling, for example, in deciding what length to bowl at the death. Competitions can be established amongst individuals or teams, which particularly helps players appreciate how the decisions they make can impact upon their team's performance.

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Above: Short pitched bowling requires Michael Vaughan to decide whether to avoid, fend-off or hook, in half a second.



Left: Adam Hoolioake decides to bowl a slower delivery.