

Hit the gaps



Coaches Matter

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HIT THE GAPS

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As a batter your main objective is to score runs. Obviously it is wonderful when runs come freely and boundaries flow without a problem. However, some times that is not always possible.

Manoeuvring the ball is a vital skill for any aspiring batter to have in their armoury. The most important reason for this is that it gives players options of scoring opportunities. Sometimes they find themselves in situations where they feel the bowler is dictating the game, or the situation requires that they need to get off strike or keep the score board ticking over, and manoeuvring the ball allows batsmen to do that.

In one sense it doesn't sound that positive a phrase. Therefore it is important as coaches that we really make sure that manoeuvring the ball or manipulating the field is related to being very positive rather than just 'a nurdle for one'.

We need to make sure that we don't confuse manoeuvring the ball just with rotating the strike. Some people interpret manoeuvring the ball as simply looking for a single, but as coaches we need to ensure players get into the mindset that we work from scoring four down to one, rather than one up to four. In doing this, manoeuvring the ball, becomes a very positive step.

What is a gap?

We often talk to players about gaps in the field but what do we actually mean? In its basic form, a gap is an unmanned area. It is important to remember that there are just as many gaps in the air as there are on the floor. Some gaps are obvious, for instance when mid off and mid on go back then there is room down the ground for a single, but also more often than not there is normally an area over the heads of extra cover and mid wicket that is empty, so in essence it is also an unmanned area. It is important that we don't just look

for gaps in the inner circle but the spaces in the deep also. Usually there are no fielders directly behind cover or mid wicket, successful shots will result in at least two runs if not a boundary.

Most players when they take guard, look at the field and look where the fielders are. Yet aren't the fielders what they are trying to avoid? Instead, ask your players to look for the gaps, and in doing so they will have a much more positive outlook on where they can hit the ball.

We also need to ensure that players don't forget to look close around them. Against seam bowlers there is very rarely someone in a run saving position standing as close as your partner at the other end. If a batter can play what is just an orthodox, forward defensive shot with an outcome in mind rather than just keeping it out, then there is potential there to score runs.

The skills of manoeuvring the ball

The most important attribute that a batter needs in order to manoeuvre the ball is intent to score. If you set out to score a run off every ball you can achieve this far more often than many people realise. If you look at the best One Day International teams, it is not necessarily the four hitting that generates the big scores, but the amount of ones and twos

they build up to create a score at the end. We need our batters to have the mentality and the intent to score a single off every ball and not just be looking to play it on its merit assuming that if it's a good ball it should be a dot ball. Good deliveries should also be seen as potential one scoring balls.

As a bowler, if you are running up and feel you're bowling your best deliveries and firstly, you are not getting people out, but secondly the batters are scoring off you without any major risk, you need to rethink. The pressure is therefore, transferred straight back on to the bowler and the fielding side.

It is important to remember that with any skills, especially as you get to the more advanced skills, you need a fairly solid foundation and be able to master the basics. You need to have those in place before you can start to build on all the other things.

Developing players to manoeuvre the ball

As a group of coaches we have been very good at, but are starting to move away from, just the technical side of coaching. In order to win cricket matches players need not only a good technique but also the mental aptitude to succeed. They also need to apply that technique to produce not necessarily match winning, but match affecting performances. Sometimes it is easy to focus just on technical issues but now more than ever, we need to ensure our young players possess tactical awareness and an inner belief. They need these qualities in order to apply their technique but also to help reduce the fear of getting out and encourage experimentation. Fear needs to be removed so they can grow and learn from their mistakes more than they have done previously. Once that fear has

gone then they can develop and flourish as players. It is common place in our domestic game to see overseas players demonstrate an apparent lack of fear on the big stage and play to their full potential in high pressure situations. Our young players are starting to follow that example and we as coaches need to create an environment where players feel comfortable pushing their boundaries and developing.

Lose the fear

Once you have established a decent technique, then you can look to challenge your batters in practices. As a coach, your attitude and approach can have a big impact on how a player develops. Try and give your batters a little bit more freedom to express themselves without being bogged down purely through technique. I think we must get players to experiment tactically in our practices, to have a lack of fear of messing a practice up, because they will learn just as much if not more from messing it up and what it feels like. They will then be able to feel and see what is possible to use further down the line in more open situations such as 'match play'. So the key is to have more freedom in your practices, make them more exciting, make them more hands off and let players experiment a little.

Match Realistic Practices

When as a coach you design a practice, it is important to keep thinking about its relevance to a match situation. We want players to experience the feeling of widening their game. Instead of just having the technique to play certain shots we need them to have an understanding of how and when to play them.

If you overtrain players and they can gain confidence from achieving the skill they are trying to implement in a rehearsed match situation that is more testing or challenging than the reality, they will play with the self-belief from that achievement and take it into the game. If players believe in themselves then the fear of failure will be less important and won't be as apparent when they do go out and play.

It is important to make practices enjoyable as well. It needs to be something that sees their eyes light up to and they say 'Oh I can do that' rather than 'What would could go wrong if I had tried to do that?'. Risk evaluation is another

important component of manoeuvring the ball. This involves an understanding of where these shots can be played and understanding the risk behind them. Players need to be made sure that they have a game plan that suits them rather than having a mishmash of a game where they play every shot in their armoury but at the wrong time. It may be that the risk of certain shots is higher at different times of the innings or in a particular second, so we need to equip players with an understanding of when to play the right shots.

The success of any practice will be based around the review process at the end of the session. You need to look at what players do well and then draw it back in and advise that 'you have this shot you play well and this shot you play well' rather than having six shots they play ok. Players need to have options but they also need to know what their strongest options are. So it is up to us as coaches to give the players the

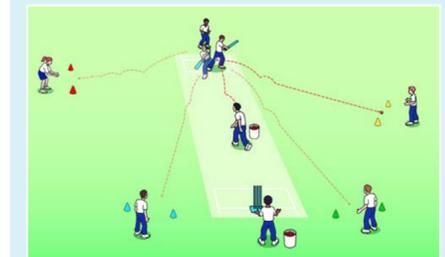
information so they have the confidence to go out into the middle and know what their strongest scoring areas are. If players don't have the chance to experiment with that then they will never know what their strengths are. If we give them too much they will become good players when the information is right for the situation rather than good or better rounded players full stop. We also need to make sure that we don't restrict players too much; otherwise neither you nor they, will ever know what their potential might be.

It is vital that practices end up being as realistic as possible so there is that element of fun and enjoyment. In addition to that there will be an element of achievement once they have done it, especially if challenged. We all know we are supposed to start off with our practices fairly simple then to add progression by building on the foundations. Let us try to make them game realistic and competitive, to add just that little bit more pressure on the batter.

HIT THE GAPS PRACTICE

Organisation

- Set out the activity as shown below:
- Underarm the tennis balls at a reasonably high tempo to the batter, bowling the ball as soon as the batter is back in position. The high tempo means lots of balls to hit in a short space of time, lots of action for fielders and keeps activity close to a match level.
- Place targets zones using the cones, large targets to include fielders and the smaller targets no fielders. Colour code the zones, and ask the batter just as you feed the ball to hit a particular colour. Vary the calls every ball, so the batter is encouraged to hit the ball in different areas on a regular basis.
- Once the batter has had success with this, ask them to select the colour as the ball is delivered. In this way you are putting the pressure on them to make the decision.
- Get the batter to face two overs (twelve deliveries) and count how many times they hit the gaps.
- The player chooses which gap to hit the ball, so selecting the appropriate shot



Easier / harder

- Once the shot has been played make the batter run, one, two or three depending on the shot in order to ensure match realistic practice.
- Throw hard balls over arm, or use a bowling machine with more advanced players, ensuring they are fully padded up with helmets for safety.
- Introduce a spin mat to exaggerate the amount of turn and bounce and repeat
- Face two overs of balls turning away and two overs of balls turning in.

