

Has a relentless diet of 50-overs matches gone too far?

A Three-fold proposal for 2019

These three proposals – see later - are to some extent linked. Let me begin with an anecdote from last year.

I went to watch a schools match which had started (I thought) at 11.30am. Nowadays this school apes the professional game in having lunch between innings (can't quite see why, even in the professional game). Normally that means a very late lunch at about 2.30pm; not great for the adolescent stomach, not to mention most people's.

Anyway, I pitched up at about 3.10 expecting to watch the whole of the second innings, only to find the match in progress. On enquiry I discovered that there had been a slightly delayed start (11.45am) but the over-rate had been so slow that lunch was actually at 3.30pm.

A second reflection: more than anybody else in the country, I do actually see a large number of schools cricket results. One week last year, almost every single result that I published – I admittedly don't receive anything remotely like all of them, more's the pity – showed that almost every single 50-overs match was very one-sided (eg 284 for 4 or more played 150 all out) whereas virtually all declaration games (mostly MCC and the like) were exciting finishes. This is extremely common, indeed not far off the norm.

I was Master i/c at Clifton for 29 years and so I can claim to have some experience. In my day we did not have sports scholars of any kind; they were frowned upon by HMC until 1990 and then for 10 years after that we had a Headmaster who didn't agree with them.

This is probably the experience of most schools (ie no sports scholars). It means that you may build up to a very strong team, but then after two or three years you have to re-build (ideally you carefully construct a balanced team of year-groups but you can't really drop three very good Upper Sixths in favour of two callow Fifth form etc). Etc etc.

It really doesn't help anybody that a relatively young and inexperienced side gets stuffed week after week. Next year they'll all choose frisbee or swimming. For those schools with sports scholarships, who can refresh their team with new talent aged 16 (effectively poached from other schools, incidentally) it is a very different matter. Even if they come in at 13 you can still have a team almost

entirely composed of sports scholars indefinitely. I could expand much further on this but I shall move on.

Every year I have a sort of working dinner with Mark Williams, whom many of you will know. Last year I was startled to discover two things:

- 1) In league (ie most adult) cricket they play a 50 /50 mix of declaration and overs cricket. Most wandering sides (MCC, FF et al) play just declaration cricket, of course.
- 2) There are penalties (cf T20 regulations) for falling below a certain over-rate, most commonly 17 overs per hour for declaration cricket, 16 for overs games (there are more wides etc).

My proposals:

- 1) At least 50% of all all-day school matches should be timed games. To prevent what some people fear, though I very rarely experienced it myself (namely very late and defensive declarations), I'd propose so-called 110-over games. I'd suggest a declaration of **no later than** 60 overs, leaving the other side 50. For all the years I was a Master i/c, most people normally declared about 10 minutes after half-time (sort of 57/53). But there were occasions when you could be put in on a green-top and were 17 for 3 and had to battle your way out so it was reasonable to give yourself a bit longer. On the other hand, if you made a massive score you'd declare early so that the other side had a chance of winning (a factor completely missing in overs cricket). Etc etc.
- 2) **Introduce a penalty for slow over-rates in all cricket.** As per league cricket (apparently) – 17 per hour minimum for declaration games, 16 for overs games (see above). **110 overs should be perfectly possible in playing hours of 11.30am – 7.00pm**, though if those are not your times then adjusted.
- 3) **Return to traditional meal-times.** Apart from the adolescent (and umpires' and spectators') stomachs, this would probably perk up the over-rate. We all used to try to squeeze in 36 before lunch and the equivalent 18 per hour rate before whenever tea was after the 50-minute rule disappeared. *Or maybe even bring back the 50-minute rule at least for schools.* Incidentally, abolish drinks breaks except when exceptionally hot.

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