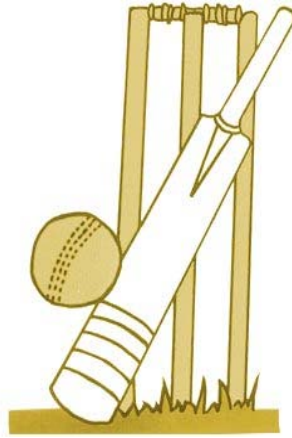


**ZEN AND THE ART OF NURDLING:
Life-Lessons From a Straight Bat**



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Life-Lessons From
a Straight Bat**

by

Steve Rudd



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Lyte Lowys my sone, I aperceyve wel by certeyne evydences thyn abilite to lerne sciences touching nombres and proporciouns; and as wel considre I thy besy praier in special to lerne the tretys of the Astrelabie. Than for as mochel as a filosofre saith, “he wrappith him in his frend, that condescendith to the rightfulle praier of his frend,” therefore have I latitude of Oxenforde; upon which, by mediacioun of this litel tretys, I purpose to teche the a certain nombre of conclusions aperteynyng to the same instrument. I seie a certain of conclusions, for thre causes. The first cause is this: truste wel that alle the conclusions that han be founde, or ellys possibly might be founde in so noble an instrument as is an Astrelabie ben unknowe parfitly to eny mortal man in this regioun, as I suppose. Another cause is this, that sothly in any tretis of the Astrelabie that I have seyn there be somme conclusions that wol not in alle thinges parformen her bihestes; and somme of hem ben to harde to thy tendir age of ten yeer to conceyve.

Geoffrey Chaucer

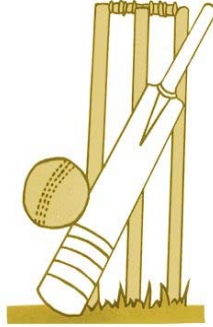
A Treatise on the Astrolabe, 1391

This they all with a joyful mind
Bear through life like a torch in flame,
And falling fling to the host behind –
‘Play up! play up! and play the game!’

Sir Henry Newbolt (1862-1938)

from *Vitai Lampada*

For
ADAM,
in the hope that he may grow
to read it one day.



THE PROLOGUE

Well, little Lewis, you have asked me to explain cricket. I hope you realise that this will take some time, because to explain cricket to you, I will probably have to explain life *itself* to you, so inextricably are they linked, still, someone will have to explain life to you anyway, even if it ends up that life itself explains life to you, so I guess I had better knuckle down to my task.

Right. It's nearly the cricket season. I can't do this any more, and I have given my cricket gear to my brothers in law, who show no signs of using it constructively. So I would like to pass on this knowledge. I choose to pass it on to you, Lewis, not because I expect you to use it yourself, but more because I can trust you to make sure that at least, if I am not around any more, it won't be lost, and you will know people who might make use of it.

I think also that I should point out that I can only *really* explain the bits of cricket which I have been personally involved in. Batting, Spin Bowling, and Fielding. The rest of it, I see through a glass, darkly. The rest of it you will probably have to

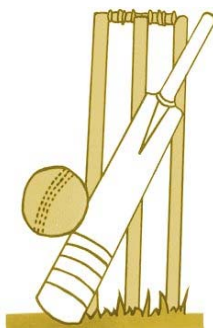
learn from someone else, but don't worry. In my experience of life, when the pupil is ready to learn, the teacher usually appears. And, as you will learn in life, all that a teacher can really do is to open the door for you, you have to decide to enter the room. The journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step, as you will hear me say more than once.

Because this book is only about those parts of cricket which I have direct, personal, experience of, it does not claim to be a coaching manual. In fact, it sort of assumes a basic degree of knowledge about cricket which is necessary to understand what I am talking about. On the other hand, though, you can read this book without necessarily knowing all of the finer points, you can go with the flow while you are reading it, and just look up everything you need to know, afterwards. From the pine tree, you can learn about the pine tree, and from the bamboo you can learn about the bamboo.

So, little Lewis, what is it about cricket? It's supposed to be a sport, but, in its purest forms, it includes intervals for meal breaks, which your Auntie says demotes it to being merely a pastime, along with darts. I once said, when trying to impress a very beautiful young girl with my knowledge of cricket, that cricket was a metaphor for life. She replied that she didn't need a metaphor for life, because she had life. Which told me, I guess.

Cricket involves long periods of inactivity, and, unless you make alterations to the rules to force a conclusion, the most common result is usually a draw. So, what is it that keeps drawing us back to the game over and over again, summer after summer. What is it that makes us get up at 4AM on an English winter morning to listen to a crackly transistor radio giving live commentary from the second day of Australia versus the MCC from the Gabba at Brisbane?

I will try and tell you, in the hope that you may come to love it as much as I have done...



The Plan of the Book:

Introduction - the game and its rules

Batting - defensive shots

Batting - attacking shots

Batting - playing with the spin, go with the flow

Batting - running between the wickets

Batting - knocking in the bat & looking after your gear

Bowling - the basic bowling action

Bowling - over, or round the wicket, line and length.

Bowling - fast bowling, outswing and inswing

Bowling - spin bowling, offspin, legspin, left arm spinners

Fielding - the fielding positions

Fielding - backing up

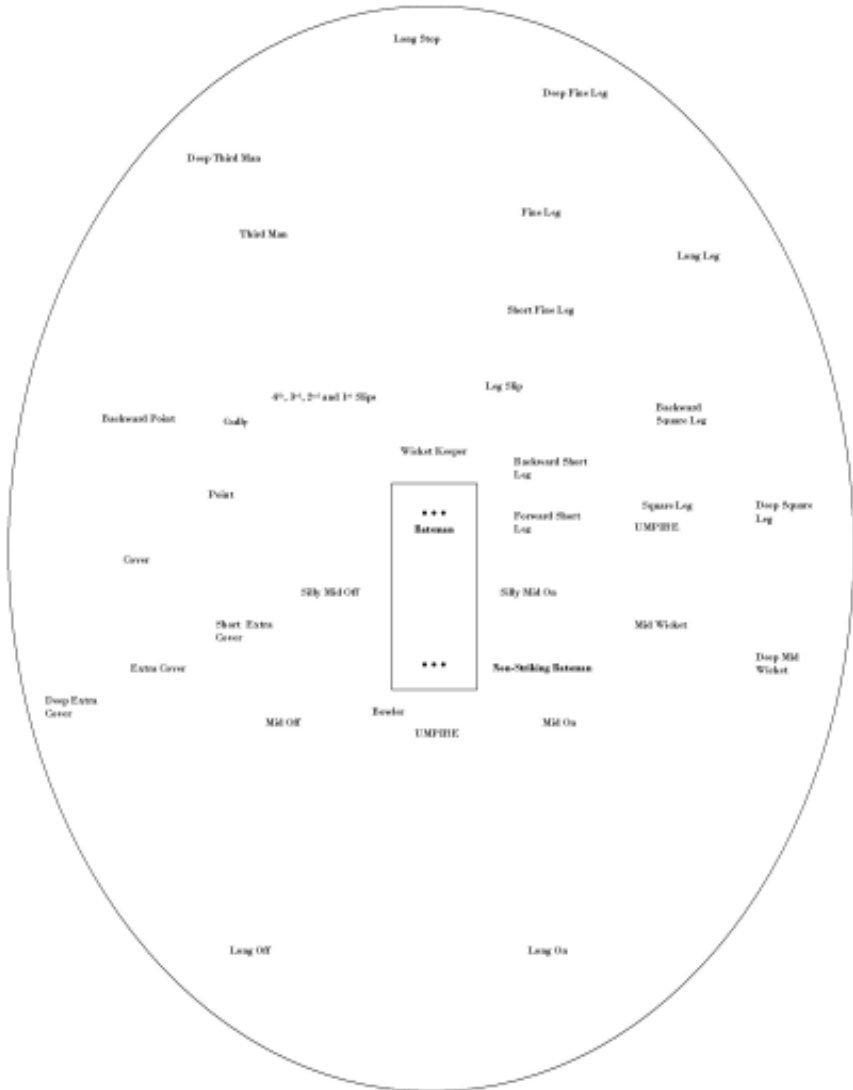
Fielding - wicketkeeping - do *not* let it go with both hands!

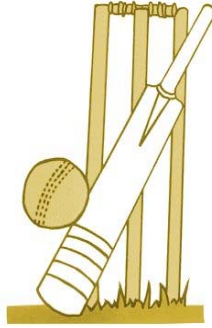
Captaincy - tactics, tact, and declarations

Umpiring.

A Potted History of Cricket

**THE FIELDING POSITIONS: A SIMPLIFIED DIAGRAM.
 BASED ON A RIGHT HANDED BATSMAN ON STRIKE**





INTRODUCTION

In essence, Lewis, cricket is a relatively simple game that is fiendishly difficult to explain in a few words. When you first look at it, it seems baffling, and you need somebody to describe to you what is going on, whereas with football, say, you can grasp the principle immediately; someone has to kick or head the ball into the goal to score.

In cricket, the teams take it in turn to “bat”. They do this in pairs, with each one of them in turn standing in front of the wickets (the three stumps with the two bails balanced across the top), trying to hit the ball as far away as possible, and running the length of the pitch (while the other side try and fetch the ball back) with his colleague, the one who stands at the other end, running at the same time, but in the opposite direction.

Each time they successfully run the length of the pitch and cross in the middle, they score a “run” for their side. If the batsman hits the ball far enough so that it reaches the edge of the field (the “boundary”) he gets four runs added, without even having to run. And if he hits the ball in the air over the boundary, so that it does not bounce first inside the field, he gets six runs added for that.

The other side, meanwhile, are trying to get him “out” using one of the recognised methods which the rules allow, to bring his particular stint at the wicket to an end, and replace him with the next man in the batting order.

The quickest and cleanest way of ending this particular man’s turn at the wicket is of course to bowl him out. The bowler runs up, lets go of the ball, the batsman heaves or swishes his bat at it and misses, and the ball hits the wicket. That is out, bowled. It does not happen as often as you might think, Lewis, because often the bowler is not bowling straight at the wicket anyway, but rather employing some devious tactic to make the batsman give a “catch” to one of the other fielders. Sometimes the batsman does manage to make fleeting contact with the ball, but plays it onto his own stumps. People refer to this as “played on”, but in the scorebook it usually goes down as “bowled”.

If the batsman hits the ball in the air, and one of the fielders, or the bowler himself, catches it, either one- or two-handed, and has it completely under his control before it touches the ground, then that is out, caught, and that is, surprisingly, the most common form of dismissal. If the bowler himself catches it, it is usually recorded as “caught and bowled”.

The final method in the “big three” of the most common ways to be out, is Leg Before Wicket. This can sometimes be controversial because, whereas bowled and caught are often self-evident and can’t be argued with, the case of Leg Before Wicket rests on the judgement of the Umpire. The “before” word here refers to the old English use of the word, to mean “in front of”. It is about the only place you will hear it used in that way, these days. The batsman is out LBW if, in the opinion of the Umpire, he fails to hit a ball which then goes on and hits him, anywhere but the bat or the arm holding the bat, and which would have, if left to its own devices, gone on and hit the stumps instead.

Now, that is a gross over-simplification of a complicated rule, Lewis, because there are special circumstances depending on whether the ball pitched outside of the line of the leg stump, between wicket and wicket, or outside the line of the off stump. And to make matters worse, every few years or so the bigwigs who are in charge of the Official Rules of Cricket at the MCC all get their balls in an uproar about it and decide to alter the criteria. So the basic principle will have to suffice for now, but go and look up the actual law about LBW at the time you are playing.

Other ways of the fielders getting the batsman out include “run out” and “stumped”. Sometimes these are confused by people who say one when they actually mean the other, so let’s take them in turn. The batsman usually stands waiting to receive the ball within his “crease” which is a line marked across the pitch just in front of his stumps. He isn’t obliged to stand there, but it would be a dumb move to stand anywhere else, because if he’s not in front of the stumps it makes the bowler’s job easier, and he also runs the risk of being out in other ways, as we shall see.

If the batsman comes “down the pitch” - either walking or leaning forward to meet the ball, takes a shot at it and misses, and the wicketkeeper gathers the ball and, using it, breaks the batsman’s stumps before he can get any part of his body back on the ground behind the crease, then that is out, stumped.

On the other hand, if the batsman does hit the ball, and sets off for a run, but before he can reach the wicket at the bowler’s end, a fielder intercepts the ball and either throws it straight at the bowler’s end stumps and breaks them, or throws it to someone standing next to the stumps who then does the same thing, then the batsman is out, run out. Run outs are doubly dangerous for the batting side. If the batsman who hits the ball makes it safely home, but the ball is thrown to the other end and his colleague, the non-striking batsman, doesn’t get there in time, then he is the one who is run out. Thus it is possible, by

misjudgement, to bring your team-mate's innings to a premature end, and this is the source of much contention, but there are things you can do about it, as we will see.

There are other, more obscure, ways to be out. If you hit your own wicket with the bat, or tread on it, or fall on it, as long as you dislodge at least one bail, you are out, hit wicket. Other methods include handling the ball, obstructing the field, and hitting the ball twice, though there are exceptions to the latter, but in any case they are so relatively rare that we needn't dwell on them here and now, as you can always look them up in the Rules of Cricket, should you need to.

One point to note about dismissing the batsman is that, just as the batsman is under no obligation to offer a shot or play at any ball, and unless the bowler forces him to defend his stumps, he can stay there all day waving loftily with his nose in the air as the ball whizzes past into the keeper's gloves, he is also, technically, under no obligation to leave the crease when out unless the fielding side have "appealed" (by shouting "How's That?") and the umpire has given him out. Of course, with obvious dismissals like clean bowled and most catches, the batsman usually "walks" straight away, there is no point in hanging around, as it is clear that he's out; but in the case of things such as LBW and, sometimes, stumpings, it is customary for the batsman to wait for the umpire's "nod".

Once a batsman has been dismissed by the fielding side, the next one on the list (the "batting order") takes his place, and so on until the last batsman has been dismissed (unless the batting captain exercises his team's prerogative to declare the innings closed early) at which point that is the end of the batting team's turn, or "innings" as it is collectively known. Since they can only bat in pairs, for every completed innings there will always be an odd, leftover batsman who was not dismissed, but neither was he at the batting end when the last

wicket fell, and whatever *he* scored is recorded in the score book against his name as “Not Out”.

Once the batting side has completed their efforts, the sides swop over, and what was formerly the fielding side, take their “innings”, while the former batting side now become the bowlers and fielders. In most grades of cricket that you will encounter, Lewis, at least in your early days as a player, matches will be limited to one innings per side, but in professional cricket, at county level, and, in its purest form, in test matches, each side has two innings, which brings with it more complicated rules, but also additional opportunities for strategy and tactics, as we will discuss later.

Obviously, the way the second side would win the match would be by scoring more runs than the first side. The results are expressed differently, though, depending whether or not this happens. If the first side scored 200 all out, and the second side only reached 150 all out, then the first side has won by 50 runs. However, if the first side scores 150 all out and the second side passes that total with only six wickets having been lost, then we say they have won by four wickets.

Most matches that you will be involved in, Lewis, will be artificially limited to take place over one day, and to produce a result at the end. In the purest form of the game, test cricket between national teams, there is only the time limit of five days, and the most frequent result is a draw.

The way in which one-day cricket is limited is by reducing each side’s innings to a set number of “overs”. An “over” is a series of 6 balls (originally 8 in Australia, but they have now come back to the fold) all bowled by the same bowler from the same end. After that, the bowler has to relinquish the ball and the fielding team “changes ends” and another member of the side bowls from the other wicket at the other batsman. This happens throughout the game, and is designed to prevent undue wear and tear from people running on the pitch,

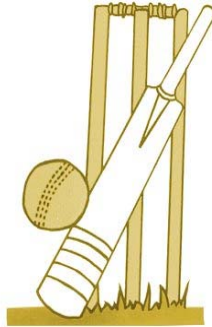
which would quickly deteriorate if the fielding side bowled from the same end all the time.

Well, what started out as a brief and simple explanation, *Lewis*, as you can see, is anything but. Quite often in life you will find that things which have a seemingly-simple surface explanation are actually the result of quite subtle causes and effects, and it pays to be sure that you do your research.

I realise at this point, as well, that I haven't even mentioned extras. These are runs which the Umpire allows to be added to the score of the batting team if the bowler bowls a "no-ball" (by overstepping the crease before letting go of the ball) or by bowling too wide for the batsman to hit it, or when the batsman and the fielders all miss the ball, and the batsmen take a run anyway, or when the ball hits the batsman, the batsman isn't out LBW, but manages to take a run anyway.

I realise also that I might have unwittingly confused you by my use of words. "Wicket" can, at one and the same time, mean either the physical set of three stumps stuck in the ground with the bails balanced on top, the individual batsman's innings, as in "they have lost two wickets already", or the actual pitch itself, the twenty-two yards of track between the two sets off stumps. So, like so many other words in our curious English language, "wicket" is one where the meaning depends heavily on the context.

That, then, *Lewis*, is the bare bones of cricket, and it really is just the skeleton, believe me. In order to simplify the past few pages, I have had to leave *out* all of the rest of this book - so we had better read on!



BATTING

As an opening batsman, your task is not so much to score runs, though it is obviously advantageous to your side if you can do so. Your job is really to see off the initial shock attack of the other side's opening fast bowlers, and specifically to see the shine off the new ball, so that when your middle order batsmen come in, they are able to play their natural game and to make runs. As a middle order batsman, your job is to play your natural game and make runs. As a lower order batsman, your job is to score what you can and frustrate the opposition, make their bowlers just that bit more tired with the extra effort of having to remove you.

To know where you are when you are batting, it is customary to “take guard”, by asking the umpire to line your bat up with either middle stump, leg stump, off stump, middle and leg, or middle and off. You then make a mark on the crease so you know where you stand in relation to your own stumps. I always took middle stump as guard, because I felt that then, my head was more or less over the line of off stump. Knowing where the line of

off stump is, is important in two respects, from the point of view of knowing which balls to play at if you want to avoid being given out LBW, and also knowing which balls to leave well alone when the opposition's fast bowlers misjudge it, and bowl you a ball you don't have to play at. Stand comfortably, sideways on, with your bat resting on the ground beside your right boot.

The most important decision you have to make, as a batsman is, for every ball, do I play forward, or back. If you play forward, you have to know that you can get your left foot (assuming you are right-handed) alongside the pitch of the ball, get your head over it, and bring the full sweep of the bat through alongside your front pad, smothering any movement off the pitch, and either blocking or actually stroking the ball away before it has chance to move or deviate off the pitch.

If you cannot get to the pitch of the ball, your only other option is to play back, shift your weight across and over on to your right foot, presenting the broad barrier of both your pads in front of the stumps, while you decide whether to just drop your wrists onto the ball, à la Geoffrey Boycott, or actually play an attacking stroke such as an off drive through the covers off the back foot, or an on-drive, pull, or hook.

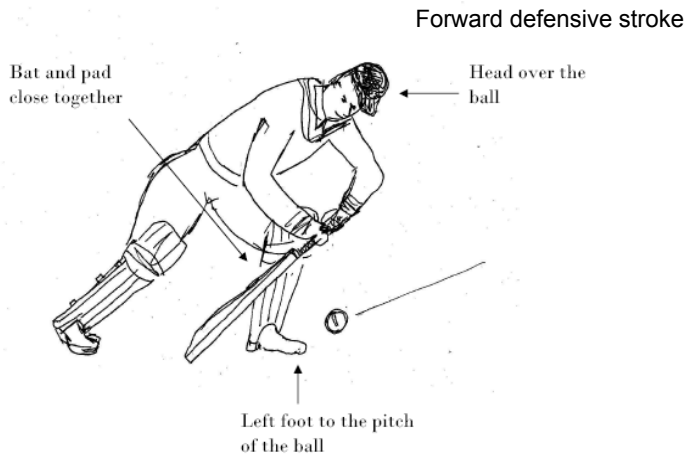
Defensive strokes

Assuming you have decided to play the ball, and not just let it go by outside the off stump, you have two choices. The forward defensive stroke or the backward defensive stroke. In the latter, you step back and across in front of your stumps, getting your head in line with the ball, getting your wrists over the ball, and as it bounces up to you, you present the face of the bat to it, and just dab it into the ground.



Backward defensive stroke

For the forward defensive stroke, you get your left leg next to the pitch of the ball, bring the bat through, so close to your left leg that it brushes the pad, so as not to leave any gap between them that might be exploited by the bowler's off-cutter or nip-backer, and either crisply play the ball away or again just drop your wrists and deaden the impact as the ball connects with your bat and drop it on to the pitch. The gap between the front pad and the bat is known as the "gate" and most bowlers are always looking to exploit it.



Attacking strokes fall into two categories, drives off the front foot, and attacking strokes off the back foot. Of the attacking strokes off the front foot, by far the most flamboyant, appealing and well-known is the cover drive.

There is a famous black and white picture of Wally Hammond on conclusion of a cover drive, but I cannot find it. The nearest I can do is this crude little line drawing: Even there, you can see that he has got his left leg well down the pitch, his head over the ball, and the bat has come swishing down and gone



Cover Drive

through and met the ball with the full meat of the bat, and it is now speeding away across the turf neatly bisecting cover and extra cover on its way to the boundary, as the bat will end up over his shoulder.

On-side drives on the front foot are executed with the same basic technique as the off-drive, but in this case, instead of opening up the face of the bat and in essence “pushing” the ball through the off side field, you roll your wrists over the ball as you hit through it and, depending on the point where you actually make contact, the speed of the ball, and whether you are hitting with or against the swing or spin that the bowler has imparted on the ball, you can send it anywhere through the on-side field in an arc between mid-on and long leg.

You can, of course, if you wish, instead of keeping the on-drive on the ground as you hit it, lean back, and deliberately “loft” the ball over the fielders in an attempt to hit a six or a first-bounce boundary. This is sort of tending towards the infamous “cow shot” down to “cow shot corner” which has been the mainstay of one-day cricket for many a year.

Front foot on-drive



Attacking strokes off the back foot (off side)

In the UK, attacking strokes off the back foot on the off side of the wicket are always going to be chancy. In places like Australia and South Africa, the pitches are always hard, fast and true, and they get lots of sunshine. Thus, you know, in that environment, if the bowler pitches the ball short, that it will always bounce up to a nice, convenient, consistent height, that allows you

to rock your weight back onto your right foot and bring the bat swashing down across the line of the ball and crack it away through the off side, anywhere from mid-off to cover, depending how late you leave it before you actually make contact. Sadly, in the UK, where we have weather, and pitches, which often mean that you can only just see the bowler, let alone the ball, it is often more problematic, but it can still be done, just make sure you have played yourself in before you attempt it, and you are seeing the ball well.

By far the most superior attacking stroke off the back foot, on the off side, in my opinion, is the late cut. You rarely see the late cut played, sadly, but when it is played, and played well, it is, as Neville Cardus once said Sandham's late cut "as enigmatic and witty, as a couplet from Pope". The idea behind the late cut is basically the same as that behind the back foot off drive or square cut, discussed above.

The difference with the late cut is that you wait, until the ball is almost past you, before you play it, and then you dab it down and roll your wrists over the ball, and it goes fizzing across the turf down to third man for a boundary before the opposing fielders can even pick up their feet. I once saw Doug Padgett, the finest batsman never to play regularly for England, play a perfect late cut off Roger Prideaux in the County Championship Yorkshire



Back foot cover drive (1)



Back foot cover drive (2)



The Square Cut

v Northamptonshire match at the Circle, in 1970. The single most perfectly executed cricket shot I have ever seen in my life, and bear in mind I was at Headingley when Boycott scored his hundredth hundred.

Attacking strokes on the on side off the back foot are all variants of the hook or the pull. Even Bill Edrich's "London Particular" was basically a pull shot played very early

There is a picture of him doing it. Again, this is a famous photo, in H. S. Altham's *History of Cricket*, which isn't on the internet. So here is my approximation!

If you are hooking, you need your head to be in line with the ball, get over the ball and roll your wrists over the ball as you make contact, so it goes straight to ground. You can, of course, also hook in the air, but you need to consider the risks and rewards of hooking.

Lowis, you remember how, when we talked about the basics of batting, I said that it is always important to keep your bat perpendicular, so that as you lean into the stroke your top hand provides the guidance and your bottom hand provides the power, but if your bat is perpendicular then it doesn't matter if the ball bounces higher or lower off the pitch, it will still make contact somewhere with the bat, and all you have then to be wary of is that a catch will pop up off the splice or the shoulder of the bat, to some predatory close fielder, crouched like a praying mantis nearby.



Back Foot On-Drive/Pull



The hook - point of contact

If you play a cross-batted stroke at the ball, then, instead of the whole length of the bat being presented to the ball, you are only presenting the $4\frac{1}{2}$ inches of its width. Despite that danger, there are, nevertheless, some shots which are deliberately cross-batted, and these are chiefly the cut, the sweep, and the hook. The true, full-blown hook, as opposed to the “pull” shot and other forms of back-foot on-drives, is played in response to a short pitched ball which rears up to the height of your chest or throat, or sometimes head, and which is usually still rising when it reaches you. This makes it quite a dangerous shot, both for the obvious reason that there is a physical risk involved, and also of course because, with a rising ball and a cross-batted shot, there is always the danger that you might give a catch and be out.

To play the hook, you step back, and across your stumps, so you are facing the ball squarely, then, with both arms outstretched, swing the bat at it, hitting across it, like a baseball player. As with all shots, you should keep watching the ball until it hits the bat, and classical batting theory holds that, at the point of impact, you should roll your wrists over the ball, so that it goes to ground, and speeds to the boundary rope. As you follow through, and your bat ends up behind you, you must twist the upper torso so that you are now facing in the direction the ball has gone.

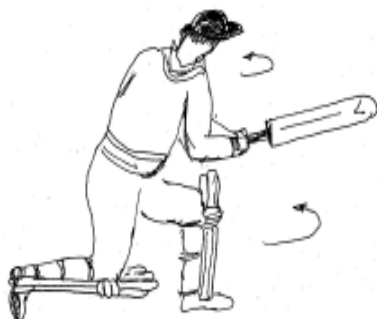
There are those who say that it does not matter if you fail to roll your wrists over the ball because if you connect with it properly, it will still go over the boundary rope, and if it does so in the air, you will be rewarded with six runs for your efforts instead of four. This is very true. But the operative word is “if”. As with so much else in life, as you will learn, Lewis,



The Hook - finish

it is a question of balancing risk against reward. Every day we must all make decisions, starting when you see the ball rearing up towards your face, the decision then being, do I hook or do I duck? And then, having decided to go for the hook, whether to play safe, roll your wrists over it at the point of impact, and hook to ground, or whether to risk hitting it in the air, maybe even getting a little deliberately underneath the ball, to loft it higher, and hope that your blow will be lusty enough to carry your effort to safety in the crowd.

The same risks and considerations can be applied to the sweep, another risky cross-batted shot. The circumstances of playing the sweep, however, are different. You play the sweep when the ball is turning or drifting to leg, and its line is already on the leg stump or outside it. You can play the sweep against the grain of a ball which is coming in at you from outside the line of the leg stump (either a leg-break or the natural ball of the left arm finger-spinner) but then you are hitting *against* the spin and, while you are unlikely to be leg before wicket, the chance of giving a catch to the close infield is increased. To play the sweep shot, you must be confident that you can get your left foot to move more or less where the ball will pitch, or that you can hit the ball *before* it pitches. Just in the same way as with the hook shot, you have to make the decision whether you can get back and across and hit it in time before it hits you, so with the sweep shot, you must make a split second decision to accept the risk. The same sort of choice that you will face many times in life, little Lewis:



The Sweep

do you trust this person, should you fall in love with them, do you dare to climb the mountain, is there time to dash into the road and snatch the runaway dog from the path of the oncoming traffic? You either accept the risk and its consequences, or you don't, and what might have happened disappears into the land of might-have-been.

Assuming you have decided to sweep the ball, you thrust your left leg (if you are right-handed; if not, for "right" read "left" and vice versa) down the pitch to the place where the ball is going to land, and you go down on your right knee, for all the world as if you were going to propose to a girl (something else that requires you to accept the



The Sweep

risk) and you bring the bat horizontally across in front of your left pad, and send the ball scudding over the turf for four runs. As with the hook, you can increase the risk, and the likely reward, by using your right hand to put more power into the shot, getting under the ball, and scooping or flipping it upwards as you hit it - hoping again that you have caught it sufficiently well to clear the boundary and not to drop into welcoming cupped hands of deep midwicket.

Some audacious, buccaneering batsmen choose to *reverse* the direction of the sweep at the last minute and to dab the ball away towards third man. As it is very difficult, if not impossible, to hit a six off that type of shot, all you are really doing is increasing the risk without increasing the potential reward. It is the sort of shot you would be lucky to get away with twice, especially in England with its unpredictable pitches. However, a batsman might do it to demonstrate his supposed dominance over a bowler, in the hope of knocking him off his stride and making it easier to score runs off him thereafter. This is mortgaging the present to the future, little Lewis, and many men and women do it all the time in life, as you will discover. Of course, little Lewis, there is risk and uncertainty in everything we do, not just in batting. Miss the hook and the ball

may hit you. Miss the sweep and the ball will probably thud against your broad front pad, triggering a huge appeal for leg before wicket from the fielders. If you are lucky, you will survive, if you have placed your leg wisely, just as if you are lucky, you will survive in life if you are accused of a transgression and you have to submit yourself and your good name, and maybe even your freedom to come and go as you please, to the judgement not of a single umpire with a white coat, a panama hat and the bowler's jumper tied around his waist, but of a judge robed in ermine and wearing a horsehair wig, sitting in a panelled courtroom under the Royal Arms.

The ordinary strokes also have their risks. The ball may rise higher or keep lower than you expect, or deviate more widely. The only way to be free of risk is to disengage. You can never be "out" if you decline to play the game, but then, you have never played the game. The issue of the conditions, the state of the game, and the actions of others also need to be taken into account. If it is a bright, broad, sunlit day, your team are doing well, and your colleagues have already scored a stack of runs, you are feeling the sun warm on your back, and "seeing" the ball as large as a football, why then, why not embark on some expansive, adventurous shots? At a different time, those same shots would be the height of folly, if your team was struggling on a rain-affected pitch, the ball was turning square, also you needed to bat out the remaining time till close of play. Blindly accepting all risks or blindly rejecting them all, is not enough. The skill lies in knowing *which* risks to accept or reject, and *when*.

Going with the flow, and playing with the spin

I want to talk to you now, Lewis, about batting against spin bowling. You recall how we said that, when facing fast bowling, many runs could be accumulated by the simple expedient of nudging or deflecting the ball, actually using the speed of the bowler to confound the fielders. When you are facing a spin bowler, unfortunately, you have to work harder for your runs because, by and large, you have to generate the pace off the bat.

The first thing you must do with a spin bowler is to learn to “read” his hand as he releases the ball. You remember that we said there are two types of spin bowler, wrist spinners and finger spinners, and of course some people are right-handed and some are left-handed, so from the start you have four possible alternatives:

Right-handed finger-spinner: this will be a bowler who is bowling off-breaks, i.e. a ball which breaks in towards you from the off side after it pitches.

Right-handed wrist-spinner: this will be a bowler of primarily leg-breaks, i.e. a ball which breaks away from you, from leg to off, after it pitches.

Then you have the left-handed versions of the above, which means that a left-arm finger-spinner’s natural ball will break away from you after it pitches, and a left-arm wrist-spinner’s natural ball will break towards you after it pitches.

So your first task is to identify what type of spinner you are facing. Having done so, you can then try and work out any variations or tricks he might be employing. Once you have worked out what his “normal” ball looks like as it leaves his hand,

you can then be alert to anything out of the ordinary. Remember, in addition to mixing up his types of bowling, he will also be trying to deceive you with the flight, the pace, and the angle of delivery. He may also choose whether to go over or round the wicket, varying the angle of attack still further.

Assuming you are facing a right-arm finger-spinner, then, his “natural” ball will be the off break, as we said before. But even then, he may decide to impart more or less spin on the ball, from delivery to delivery. His variant ball is likely to be one on which he imparts no spin at all, holding the ball with the seam vertical instead of round the seam. This is known as the “arm” ball, because it goes on in the direction of the bowler’s arm after he has bowled.

In addition, as we said before, most bowlers have some kind of “killer” ball as well, which they mix in every so often. This varies from bowler to bowler, obviously, so there is no way of describing it here. You just have to watch out for it.

Once you have developed the knack of “picking” the delivery, you then need to combine this with the other normal parts of batting; in the split second available to you as the ball leaves his hand, you have decided it is an off-break. You then need to decide if you can get your front foot to the ball, and either block it or drive it before it has a chance to deviate far off the pitch, or whether to step back, let it pitch, and then watch it all the way on to the bat.

If you do decide to drive it, you should always try, wherever possible, to hit *with* the spin. This is an extension of the same idea behind making use of the fast bowler’s pace, since the off-break bowler is already doing his best to impart spin on the ball and turn it to leg, then driving it on the leg side will only help. While it is perfectly possible, provided you get your foot to the pitch of the ball and time it right, to drive an off-spinner through the covers for four, if you get it even marginally wrong,

and you are hitting *against* the spin, you are much more likely to balloon up a catch, and be out.

It is often the case in life, as in batting, Lewis, that things don't turn out as we had planned. All things change, and shift, and a man called Heraclitus once said that it is impossible to jump into the same river twice. Because by the time you come to do it a second time, what was originally the river has moved on, and is somewhere else entirely, and a whole new set of water is in its place. Sometimes the watercourse goes the way we want it to, while at other times it is dead set against us. It is always better to go with the flow, bide your time, and make what progress you can against the prevailing tide. By all means jump into the foaming Tiber if you must, if there is no alternative, but if you do this too often, just once too often, you will come unstuck. You must develop your own judgement about what constitutes "too often", but generally you will be happier, more fulfilled, and maybe even achieve more, if you go with the flow, play with the spin and not against it, and bide your time until conditions once more turn in your favour.

Wrist spinners are harder to pick, because the ball can come either out of the front of the hand or out of the back of the hand. The basic leg break action involves the bowler ripping his fingers around the seam from right to left as his arm comes through and he releases the ball. It is also possible, though, at that moment, for him to drop his wrist instead of leaving it cocked and deliver the ball from the *back* of the hand. The resulting delivery might be the famous "googly", the ball that looks like a leg break but in fact, when it pitches, turns in at you like an off break instead of leaving you off the pitch. Or it could equally be a top spinner or flipper. The top-spinner doesn't necessarily break *either* way after pitching, but instead *gains* speed off the pitch, and may also bounce higher.

So you need to keep your wits about you when playing wrist-spinners. There are left-arm wrist-spinners as well, in the same way that there are left-arm finger-spinners. So everything I have written needs to be *reversed* if the bowler is left-handed. A left-arm wrist-spinner's natural ball, which to him would be the same as you or I bowling a leg break, will actually *behave* like an off break when it pitches, and come in at you. And his googly, which, when bowled by a left-handed wrist-spinner is called a "Chinaman", will actually *leave* you off the pitch, like a right-hander's leg-break.

A crucial part of playing forward strokes to spin bowlers is to keep your bat and your front pad close together. The off spinner, particularly, is always trying to exploit the gap between bat and pad, to try and sneak the ball through that gap, which is sometimes known as "the gate", as we said before.

Coming down the wicket

In addition to spin, Lewis, the bowler will be using other methods to deceive you, as we discussed. He will be bowling some balls faster, some slower, pushing the ball through one time, holding the next one back; he will be using the flight of the ball to try and get you to play too early, or too late; he will be varying the angle of attack, bowling from near the stumps, and then from wide, at the edge of the crease.

But there are things you can do, in return. Remember that (currently) you cannot be out leg before wicket to any ball that pitches outside of the line of the leg stump, so if the bowler unwisely allows his line to drift in that direction, it is relatively safe to try and hit him out of the ground, provided you are careful to stick your pad in the way as well, in case anything goes wrong. One word of warning, though. If you are batting on a pitch which has had a fair degree of use, inevitably the area just outside your

leg stump will be torn up and disrupted by the follow-through of the bowler at the other end. In top class cricket, which lasts over more than one day, these areas can develop almost into craters, where the top of the wicket is cracked and broken, and the grass is non-existent. Bowlers will attempt to exploit this, so if you are going to try and smack the ball to the boundary when it pitches outside leg stump, make sure you catch it sweetly and correctly, and not off the edge of your bat, onto your pad, so it rebounds into the hands of a gleeful close fielder.

The other way you can put a spin bowler off his stride is to decide to alter the length of the pitch yourself. The bowler is hoping to drop the ball in just the right place on the pitch to put you in two minds over whether to play forward or back. You can decide, almost before he has released the ball, to go “down the wicket” and take him on. There are two ways of doing this, the elegant way being to cross your right leg behind your left, then repeat the operation, until you reach the pitch of the ball. Or you can stick your left leg down the pitch, bring your right leg alongside it, and repeat as necessary. If you time it right, you can turn what *would* have been a good length ball into a half volley or even a full toss, and smack it away with impunity, in the air or on the ground, and have the satisfaction of seeing it cross the boundary.

If you do it too early though, or do it too often, the bowler will see you coming and may decide to bowl a deliberate full toss that arrives at an awkward height to deal with, or he may decide to put the maximum spin on the ball and drop it short, in an attempt to get it past you so that the eager wicket keeper can stump you as you are stranded half-way down the pitch. As with all risky manoeuvres in life, Lewis, the timing is all.

Running between the wickets

*As the run stealers flicker to and fro,
To and fro:
O my Hornby and my Barlow long ago !*

Because it is dreadfully easy to make a mistake and run yourself out, or, even worse, run out a team-mate, most pairs of batsmen at the wicket have developed a “code” by which they call for a run, or not. What generally happens is that the striking batsman, the one receiving the bowling, hits the ball, and if it goes in front of the wicket, ie forwards, remaining in his field of vision, then he has the “right” to call for the run (or runs) if he judges the ball is far enough out of the reach of the fielders, and then set off down the pitch. The non-striking batsman, who should have been subtly “backing up” by taking a judicious step down the wicket as the bowler released the ball, does have the right to say “no” if he thinks for any reason a run should not be attempted, but he should do so immediately, because, like so much else in life, little Lewis, dithering and delay can lead quickly to disaster.

If the striking batsman hits the ball and it goes anywhere behind him, either by accident or design, then it becomes the responsibility of the non-striking batsman to call for the run or not, and the striking batsman can then set off, or he, too, can refuse, as above.

Sometimes, it is better not to run, even though a run might be had. Suppose your best batsman and your worst batsman are at the wicket together, batting as a pair. The worst batsman is facing the bowling, and there is one ball to go in the over. Even if the batsman contrives to hit it far enough for a single run, it would be better not to, because if he does, he will then be left still facing the bowling when the field changes over. Obviously, if they can manage two runs, this won't be an issue.

When running between the wickets, you should avoid running on the pitch itself more than you absolutely have to. The umpires do not like it, and will tell you off if you persist. Plus you could be tearing it up and making it harder for people (including you) to bat on. You should also, for obvious reasons, avoid crashing into any fielders. This is not always as easy as it sounds when there is a hulking great fast bowler following through down the pitch in the opposite direction, but remember that you can be given out for “obstructing the field” and also of course, if you bump into him, bounce off, and end up flat on your back, you will probably be run out.

It goes without saying that you need to keep an eye on the fielders and the ball when you are running, to decide how many runs it is safe to take, and many established “pairs” of batsmen, who are used to batting together, tend to develop an intuition over this, and swop intentions as they pass each other half way down the pitch.

Finally, as you approach the other wicket, don’t forget you should always “ground” your bat by pushing it ahead of you along the ground, one handed, as you run. That way you “make good the ground” in the words of the Rules, as soon as possible. If it’s touch and go, dive for the crease and make sure your bat is flat along the ground!

Knocking in the bat

My first ever full-size cricket bat came from a seaside novelty shop. Novelty shops were where you bought your bucket and spade for making sandcastles on the beach, and you could even buy little paper flags on what looked like lolly-sticks to decorate your sandcastle when you’d finished. They sold windbreaks and ice-cream and sun-tan lotion. Those were the days when a week at Withernsea by the cold North Sea was a once-a-year holiday, Lewis, before

anyone had even thought of the unimaginable luxury of Butlins. These shops also sold “beach cricket sets”, including cricket bats, stumps and “composition” cricket balls, made of solid plastic with a crudely moulded seam.

The bats in these sets weren’t intended for proper cricket. They were often slightly smaller and thinner than “proper” cricket bats and their splice (the V-shaped point where the handle joins the blade) wasn’t as strong as that of a proper bat. They were meant to play beach cricket with, not to be used against a real life “corky” ball, hurled at you over 22 yards. Anyway, I kept that bat after the holidays, I kept it through the winter, and next season I used it in school matches. It performed quite well and, being lighter than a bat from a sports shop, it was better for “swashing” back foot shots. I’d bound some white tape round the “meat” of the bat to help prevent it splitting. And I had knocked it in.

You had to buy your bat, then season it with linseed oil and then “knock it in” with an old ball. What this involved was banging an old cricket ball against your bat over and over again until the blade of the bat had absorbed the impacts and had become tempered enough to be used in anger in a competitive match. My first “real” cricket bat was a Slazenger “non-oil” Geoffrey Boycott bat.

Slazenger also pioneered “polyarmoured” bats which were coated with polyurethane varnish, so again there was no need to oil them. Something is lacking in these new, ready-made bats, though. My favourite bat when I played for my college was a Gunn and Moore. Gunn and Moore have been making cricket bats in Nottinghamshire for over a hundred years, and it showed. Sadly, I could not afford one of their bats for my own.

But why does it matter, little Lewis? You are probably asking yourself why. One cricket bat is just the same as another, right? But that is like saying that one willow tree is just like another, and any time you walk down by the riverside you will see

that this is not the case. And just as no two willow trees are the same, so no two bats are the same. Why does this matter? What is the difference between the Nottingham willow of Gunn and Moore and the Robertsbridge willow of Gray Nicholls?

Well, it matters because, if you remember, the bat has to become part of you. There need no longer be a bowler who bowls a ball which the batsman hits with a bat he is holding. They are all part of one thing - one thing called cricket, which still goes on regardless, even though the bowlers and the batsman change from year to year, or even from over to over.

So, Lewis, your cricket bat stands in a way for all cricket bats, even though it is individual to you, it is a fleeting replica of an eternal "Form" or "Idea" of that thing. In heaven, or somewhere, there is a perfect bat of which earthly bats are but feeble reflections, in the same way that all other swords were just a pale shadow of King Arthur's Excalibur. The same with individual cricket games. They are like the leaves of the willow tree, there are many leaves, all different, but the all go back to the same root.

So if you and your bat are to become one, it is best that you try out many bats and choose in the end the one that feels most like an extension of yourself. When you have chosen your bat, keep it close to you. Even if there is no one around to bowl at you, take it out every day and swish it around, playing imaginary strokes at imaginary balls. But watch out for ornaments. If it is that sort of bat, be sure to oil it and knock it in. Like a friendship, Lewis, it is worth investing time and effort.

Your bat will become your best friend and you need to know that, like a friend, it will be there for you when you need it most. In purely practical terms, you need to consider the length and weight of your bat. Does it suit your type of game? Are you a defensive stonewaller or a swashbuckling adventurer? I remember reading an interview where George Hirst was talking about batting in a test against South Africa in the early 1900s, and he had cheekily borrowed someone

else's heavy bat, and he said "And I played forward defensive to Tibby Cotter, and it were a *four!* Money for nowt!" or words to that effect.

The cricket bats you buy from sports shops these days are pre-treated, but still need knocking in. In fact, even bats which claim to be pre-treated are probably worth the precaution of oiling and preparing before you stand there with it in your hands facing a new ball at 80mph. You remember that I said about learning about the pine from the pine, this is the time to learn about willow from the willow. Willow is quite a soft wood, and the idea of knocking in your new bat is to compress the fibres of the wood and thus make it more resistant to the impact of the ball.

You start by giving it a light coating of raw linseed oil, applied with a cloth, but only to the blade, not the splice, then leave it overnight, then repeat the process the next day. Once you have got it to this stage you can start sitting with the bat and hitting the face of it with an old leather ball. You should do this for some hours, for as long as you can stand it, just sitting knocking the ball against the face of the bat to condense the wood. You may find this therapeutic, or annoying, but the important lesson to learn is not to feel that it is beneath you. As the Zen folk would say, before enlightenment, you chopped wood and carried water; after enlightenment, you chopped wood and carried water. After enlightenment, the laundry!

There is a lot to be said, Lewis, for being self-sufficient and being able to fix your own gear. If you extend that later in life to fixing your own car and fixing your own food, yes, even sewing on your own buttons, then nothing much can faze you. Not being reliant on others is a great strength, it means you can survive where others will fail, so never be afraid to ask questions. If you ask a question, you are a fool for a moment; if you never ask a question, you stay a fool forever. Learn how to do lots of stuff. Once you have knocked in your bat, you should be able to try it out at the nets, but not against "composition" balls, until you are sure that the impact is not leaving any dents.