

Some tips for batting

Footwork

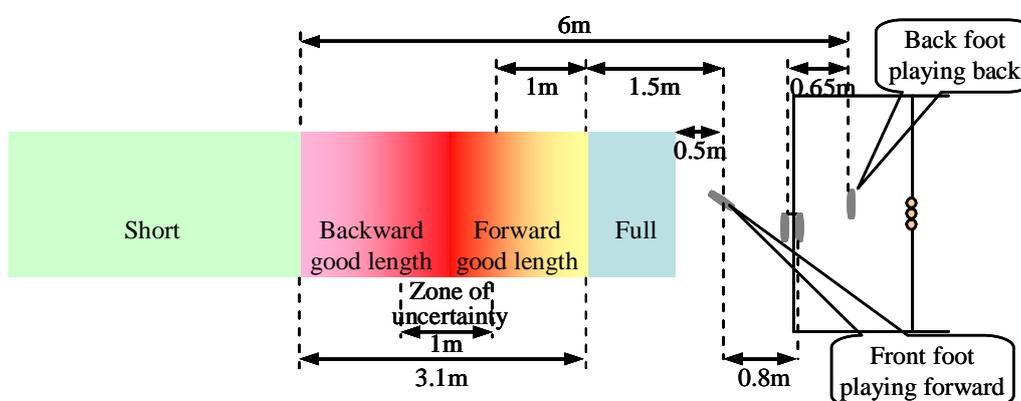
Good footwork is recognised as one of the keys to good batting. For example, it was often remarked of Don Bradman that he had very nimble footwork: it was one of the features of his batting that set him apart from many of his contemporaries. I believe there are two, self evident, fundamentals for good footwork. The first is your stance which should not inhibit the range of foot movement nor the speed at which your feet move in response to the position of the ball as it travels towards you. The other is that the feet should get into the right position to play the chosen shot when the ball reaches the batsman.

I believe that a good stance is characterised by your weight being evenly distributed between both feet, on the balls of your feet and with your feet relatively close together. The other important attribute of the stance is it should maintain a steady platform for your eyes so you can accurately assess the movement of the ball. This means your eyes should be as horizontal as possible and as motionless as possible.

The importance of the width of the stance can best be illustrated in the following diagrams where I have marked the position of the feet in the stance and when playing front and back foot shots. I have assumed that the batsman can take a step of about 0.8m when going forward, and about 0.65m when going back. In the following commentary I will specify widths of some typical bounce zones, but the exact widths will depend on a lot of factors: the speed of the bowler, the pace and bounce of the wicket and the stature of the batsman.

Figure 1 shows the zones in which a ball can bounce for a batsman with a relatively narrow stance (~0.25m wide overall). There is a range up to about 2m in front of his front foot where the ball can be considered to be of full length – and therefore drivable. When the ball lands up to 1m shorter than that, it is a good length and the best shot is for the batsman to play a forward defensive shot. Then we get the zone of uncertainty, where the batsman is unsure whether to play forward or back to the ball, as indicated by the red colouring. This is the most dangerous length ball for any batsman and the one that good bowlers will be targeting. For a batsman with a narrow stance, I have assumed that this is about 1m wide. After that we have a zone where the ball will be short enough to play back, though not short enough to play an attacking shot. The overall width of the non-attacking zone for this batsman is about 3m wide. Finally there is the zone where the ball is short of a good length and attacking back foot shots can be played with relative impunity.

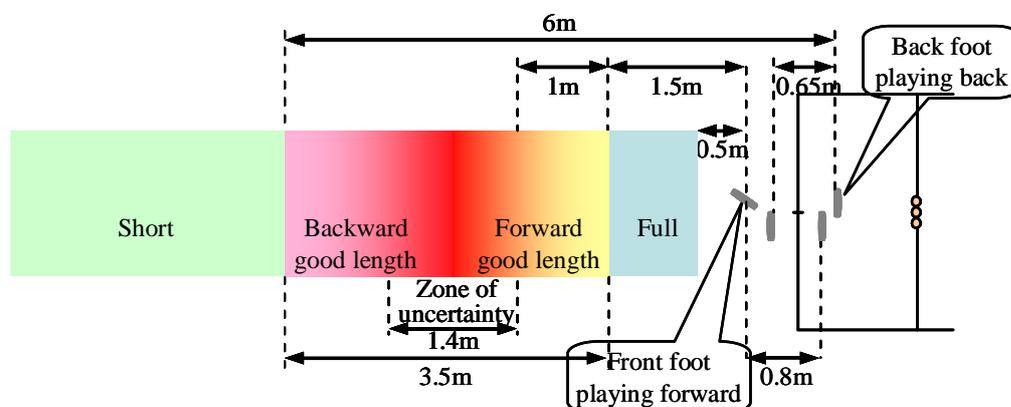
Figure 1: The zone of uncertainty for a batsman with a relatively narrow stance is around one metre in length



Now compare that with a batsman who has a wider stance as shown in Figure 2. I have assumed that the overall width of the stance is ~0.65m, or that the gap between the feet is ~0.5m. It can be seen that the range of movement available to this batsman is a lot smaller than to the narrow stance batsman. The result is that the zone of uncertainty increases by

40%, from about 1m to about 1.4m wide. This means that the batsman is allowing the bowler a bigger area of the wicket in which to land the ball that will cause him the most trouble. It also increases the size of the zone in which the batsman is unable to play attacking shots – about 3.5m compared with 3m for the narrow stance batsman: another advantage for the bowler.

Figure 2: A wider stance increases the size of the zone of uncertainty



My advice then is to adopt a relatively narrow stance in order to provide for a greater range of mobility which will in turn reduce the size of the dangerous or non-attacking zones in which the bowler can land the ball, putting more pressure on the bowler to bowl accurately.

Another all too common example of poor footwork, which hands the bowler considerable advantage, is moving your front foot forward at the time the ball is bowled. Any time the ball bounces more than 2m in front of your now committed and stationary front foot, it is difficult to play any attacking shot. If you make an early commitment to playing off your front foot every time, you are essentially giving the bowler an attacking bounce zone of anything shorter than say 2.5m in front of you: a huge advantage. The only attacking shots left for the batsman who does this are the slog to leg or front foot horizontal bat shots – typically the pull or hook to leg – with the consequent high level of risk associated with those shots.

Playing vertical bat shots

To state the obvious, a cricket bat is a lot longer than it is wide. This means that when playing vertical bat shots, it is sideways movement of the ball which is the most dangerous: the height of the ball is not critical as the length of the bat will cover that. The best position to view sideways movement of the ball as it travels down the wicket is to get your eyes in line with the ball: no other position of your eyes will enable you to observe sideways motion as clearly. As the bowler is often trying to get the ball to move sideways through the air as it travels down the wicket, the only sure way to get into the best position to play your shot is to move your feet as late as possible, giving yourself as much time as possible to observe and predict the sideways motion of the ball before committing your feet to a position.

The other aspect about vertical bat shots is that the bat should be vertical. This has consequences for the grip. For a right hand batsman, I believe it is impossible to play a vertical bat shot while holding the bat firmly with the right hand. The bat needs to be held predominately with the left hand and in the webbing between the thumb and the forefinger in the right hand: the other three right-hand fingers are not in contact with the handle. To use a boxing simile, the delivery of power by the right hand into the shot is more like a jab into your opponent's stomach rather than an upper cut or a hook. It is timing and placement that are the hallmarks of a well executed vertical bat shot.

Playing horizontal bat shots

When playing back foot horizontal bat shots, the eyes should not be in line with the ball. For these shots it is the height of the ball which is crucial: sideways movement is no longer as important as the length of the bat can cover that. The best position to judge the height of the ball is when you can look at the trajectory from side-on. The worst position is when the ball is coming straight towards you. Therefore for off-side horizontal bat shots, the eyes (i.e. head) should be moved so that they are inside the line of the ball. In that position you will be able to judge the height of the ball most clearly. For leg-side shots, the eyes should be outside the line of the ball. Ideally the ball should be travelling so as to be just outside of the line of the left side of your body after you have opened up your stance in preparation for hitting the ball. The major caveat about horizontal bat shots is that you should not play them if the ball is going to be higher than your shoulders, especially if they are going straight for your eyes: you are in the worst position to judge the trajectory of the ball and it is difficult to swing the bat when it is above your shoulders. For balls like that, simply get your head out of the way and let them go through to, or over the head of, the keeper.

There are a couple of fundamental things that should happen straight away when a batsman sees that the ball is short enough to play an attacking horizontal bat, back foot shot:

1. the right foot should go back and across as early as possible; and
2. at the same time the right hand should wrap around the handle with all fingers while raising your hands and the bat up to about shoulder height.

This should be the starting position for any back foot horizontal bat shot, both off-side and leg-side shots. If the ball is outside the off-stump and a comfortable distance away from the body, it is simply a matter of tapping the ball on the head with the bat coming slightly down and around the body in order to execute a cut shot. If the ball is still on the off-side but a little closer to the body then a pull shot can be played, or maybe a vertical bat back foot drive – in which case you should use the vertical bat shot techniques discussed above. If the ball is



on the leg-side a hook shot can be played. With the hook shot, it might be necessary to take an additional step with the left foot so that you can get the trajectory of the ball in line with the left hand side of your body. For example, if the ball is wide down the leg-side, the left foot can go back and out to square leg so as to get your body into the correct position to play the ball. This is illustrated by this fabulous photograph of Bradman playing a hook shot in his book 'The Art of Cricket' where his left foot has been moved well to the leg side and actually finishes almost on the bowling crease, a great example of good footwork. The photo has been taken just after contact with the ball and you can notice he has positioned himself so that his eyes are inside the line of the ball which has been hit just outside the line of the left side of his body.