



# The Robot Umpire

An Inside Look At Where Cricket Is Heading Towards The Future.....

HOWZAT?!" appeals a jubilant Steve Smith, as International Computer Programmed Umpire no. 214 calculated the angles and trajectory of his well disguised wrong 'un. After much whirring and beeping, ICP umpire no. 214 raises his robotic arm, monotonously declaring 'out' to this difficult LBW decision. There is no need for a discussion with a third umpire, as West Indies' Adrian Barath trudges off, kicking the green Hong Kong turf in disgust.....

It all sounds like tall tales, but one day international cricket may achieve such heights given how it has rapidly developed and evolved over the last 20 years. The way technology and computer software have imbedded itself into the heart and soul of the game makes it that much easier for umpires, viewers and spectators to come to decisions about a tricky dismissal. High definition film cameras record almost every blade of grass on the cricket field and can zoom in from almost outer space, giving us majestic views of some of the most beautiful international cricket grounds in the world. Super slow motion cameras give us footage of cricketers we've never even seen before, and when they film at over 1000 frames a second, it just makes that Ricky Ponting cover-drive look so much nicer.

However, it is umpire-decision aiding technology that has gone through the most radical of changes in the last ten years. Ever since the introduction of the stump camera in the late nineties, umpire aiding technology has grown and more prominent than ever and almost no difficult run-out or LBW decision is consulted without the third umpire. The introduction of Hawkeye and Snicko in 2001 brought much controversy of their assistance to umpires, but it is now a common feature used when televising international and domestic cricket. Perhaps the newest bit of technology used to help umpires make difficult decisions is Hotspot, which is an infra-red camera that detects heat created by the friction between the ball hitting the bat or pads of a batsman. It is ingenious in the sense that it makes it very easy for the third umpire to detect those thin nicks on the bat, or those close bat-pad appeals. Perhaps in the future, we may not even need human umpires anymore; with the amount of technology used to determine difficult decisions, the human eye is almost primitive and too error ridden to give the right call 100% of the time. Perhaps computer robot umpires could be a thing of the future after all, and wouldn't have been a foregone conclusion either....

More than anything, what international cricketers use and equip themselves with to play the great game has grown bigger, stronger and more powerful over the last two decades. Gone are the days when bats were toothpicks and were more of a protective shield than a six-hitting weapon. In this current era, cricket bats have become bigger, bulkier and more conducive to run scoring than ever before. Most international batsmen have blades with huge edges, carbon-fibre faces and softer wood which make them ideal for easy run scoring and shot making. The 'sweet spot' on most modern bats has almost doubled in its area, giving a mistimed shot every chance to go for six. This in turn makes viewing of the game much more exciting, albeit a little unfair on the bowler, who must pay for the mistakes a

batsman makes.

However, it doesn't stop there. Matthew Hayden brought a most unusual blade in this year's IPL, dubbed the Mongoose bat. This was a bat designed to hit sixes. It was crafted in such a way that it looked more like a paddle than anything else, with the bat handle being 33% longer than that of a conventional bat, and having a smaller, but more powerful hitting area. Although the success of this new style bat is debatable, we may see batsmen of the future wielding huge wooden clubs as they send balls flying out of the stadium.

Protective gear is another facet of modern cricket which has almost given it a separate identity compared to the times before it. Helmets are now a compulsory part of the batsman's attire. They've become more like mattresses to cushion the batsman's head, and are designed like bicycle helmets

## By Nuwan Ranasinghe

to offset the impact of a vicious bouncer. I remember when Lasith Malinga bowled such a bouncer to Michael Clarke in a Hobart test during the 07/08 Sri Lanka tour of Australia. It was such a ferocious delivery that it actually punctured the front of Clarke's helmet, making him change it for a new one before continuing to play. I was amazed at how the helmet acted like a sponge to absorb the impact of the ball, and Clarke reported that he felt no pain in that nasty ordeal with the Sri Lankan slinger. If player protective equipment continues to grow like a safety net, batsmen of the future could almost be like fearless gladiators as they step out onto the crease.

And gladiators are exactly what modern batsmen are beginning to look like. Metal grilles on helmets seem to grow more and more futuristic, when Brendon McCullum showed off his Star Wars-like helmet grille in 2005. There are now pads and protection for nearly every part of the body, and it is not uncommon to find a Kallis or Khan sporting leg guards, thigh guards, arm guards, inner-thigh guards, groin guards and even chest guards as they come out to bat. It is no wonder batsmen of the modern era are more fearless and attacking than their more traditionalistic counterparts of past eras.

So where does this take international cricket in the future? I believe it will lose much of its traditional values as it heads into the jaws of Twenty20 and big money. Test matches will be around for another 20 to 30 years, but once the bastions and supporters of test cricket leave this world, and I mean the likes of the Benauds, the Holdings, the Richards, the Chappells and other great test legends; who will be left to support the continuance of test cricket? India, cricket's financial superpower has already switched its alliance to twenty20, and with it test cricket will decline in its popularity. The one day game will also dwindle as it continues to draw sparse crowds around the world. However, I believe the World Cup will continue to thrive, as it is still a prized possession in the cricketing world.

Perhaps the reason for test cricket's decline is that it is too outdated for modern times. As our world continues to grow faster and faster, people simply do not have the time to sit down and watch a full day's test cricket. Twenty20 provides us with all the nice things condensed in a short time frame, fitting the bill in a modern, fast-paced world. We can often witness a glorious cut-shot, a wicket and even an electrifying run out in the space of half an hour when watching a twenty20 match, compared to the patience and severe cricket interest required when watching a test. Twenty20 is also unique in the sense that it is a good way of getting cricket on a truly global scale, and makes it a little easier for non-test countries to compete against the best in the game. After all, who could forget the Netherlands three run win over England in the 2009 Twenty20 World Cup?

Technology overkill is also another thing that could

affect what makes cricket so intriguing in the future. Having automatic, robotic umpires would be an exciting concept, but it then shuts down any sort of human debate or discussion we may have about umpiring decisions. If machines knew the outcome of each LBW appeal or caught-behind shout, then cricket would be very boring. There would be no need to consult with a third umpire and leave the crowd in suspense, as the robot on-field umpire itself is like a third umpire. It would be programmed with all the necessary devices needed to determine the outcome of an appeal, and so we would not have to worry or argue about the umpire's decision. Although this is good for the game in making it fair and just and unbiased, it does take out the fun and debate which can be obtained when a human umpire declares someone's dismissal from a very dodgy appeal. It is important to always keep things in perspective when using technology in any sport, not just cricket. This way it doesn't meddle with the suspense and excitement which could have been there without technology.

Lastly the plight of the bowler will be an interesting one to follow as cricket heads

into the future. As batsmen start to look more like knights and Roman warriors, bowlers will be hit for more and more runs. The excessive protection that batsmen wear allows them to play with freedom and with shorter boundaries



and flatter pitches, bowlers must feel like they're in hell. In an increasingly batsman-dominated game, finding top class bowlers will be difficult, and I see more cricketers becoming spinners rather than fast bowlers. However, the age old saying that "it's bowlers who win matches" remains true despite cricket's changing face.

So who knows, maybe one day Brazil could be playing South Africa in front of a packed house at Tokyo International Cricket Stadium. Maybe batsmen will wield bats shaped like oversized shovels and look like astronauts as they approach the crease. All of this sounds very far-fetched, but the seeds have been sown to create a very interesting cricket world of the future.



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