

From Maverick To Mainstream

The latest news is that pace is back on the agenda for cricket after Mitchell Johnson's brilliant summer, and I for one, am smiling!

Today, I am the Director of Mavericks Cricket Institute but when I first began a coaching revolution back in 1995, I was widely viewed as a maverick with crackpot ideas. My ideas have remained unaccepted by mainstream coaching for almost 20 years. However, in a batch of recent studies, evidence has emerged that there might actually be ways to change a bowling action that can increase speed.

My first course 20 years ago, offered money back to the students if they didn't bowl faster by the end of it. All 20 attendees increased their control and speed - some by as much as 16%. Using a new coaching methodology, I found success with teaching speed into bowlers rather than out of them. But no one was interested at that time. The main problem came as former players, commentators and current coaches didn't believe one could *teach* speed. Most thought fast bowlers are born and you have what you have, and so it cannot be coached.

Also at that time, the English Cricket Board (ECB) didn't even exist. Then it was the Test and County Cricket Board (TCCB) and the National Cricket Association (NCA) running the game. All the coaching was based on the MCC coaching manual dating back almost 50 years. I, for one, simply couldn't believe that whilst other sports improved how players kicked, punched, threw, ran, cycled etc., cricket couldn't teach improvements in speed. That's what got me focused on looking into how we could do it.

Drawing on my own background as a fast bowler, baseball pitcher and javelin thrower, I looked into what would be classified as 'best practice' for producing power safely. This led to identifying several common positions that could be adapted and adopted for fast bowling. And what was even more remarkable was that several of the world's quickest bowlers already shared those common traits. I discovered by speaking with baseball and javelin coaches that they had already researched into the best way to throw in their sports. We had nothing in cricket for fast bowlers, but when we looked further we found that some quicks already did those things.

My first book, "The Fast Bowler's Bible" was written in 2003 and came out in 2005. In it, I started to lay out much of this work from thousands of case studies and notes of students. And what I found was interesting - I found myself saying pretty much the same things to each bowler I worked with. After a while, I could tell whether they would lose pace or control, what parts of the body were working properly or not and exactly where they needed to make slight tweaks to improve. That formed the basis for the book.

Not satisfied with my own thought process, I also sought the input and coaching of top javelin coaches like Tertius Liebenburg and Jeff Gorski, and became influenced by baseball pitching coaches Al Widmar at Toronto Blue Jays and Bob Tiefenauer at Philadelphia Phillies. I also worked alongside Dr Kenneth West who had coached with 47 different sports in maximising performance. This set me off on a mission. I looked at physics, biomechanics, physiology, and motor movement and how many of these functioned for power generation sports. I looked at learning preferences and read books on a wide variety of aspects of skill acquisition. As a non-expert, I had to try to interpret and actually understand what I was discovering. But the challenge came from scientific papers. It is extremely hard for the lay person to understand scientific research. It is not written in a user-friendly way. It is also ambiguous most of the time too, so it can be easy to misinterpret and draw conclusions that simply are not there. Research is additionally limited as it only measures certain aspects of what is being looked at, so unless you are looking at the right things in the first place it might take you a while!

My coaching style was continually evolving and I also designed a series of protocols that I could use at workshops and academies which I was running. Some other coaches also started to use these methods as the success rates with them, was proving extremely high. In 2005, I took up a position as bowling coach in 2005 for my native Essex and was appointed ECB National Skills Set Coach at Loughborough, working alongside Ottis Gibson, who went on to become England bowling coach. But to my dismay, I was unable to implement any of my own coaching methods. The bowling work being done by the ECB at that time was geared exclusively to injury prevention. The ECB-based coaches and others were focusing on 'prehab' and avoiding injury in fast bowlers. They got sidetracked completely on this in my opinion rather than how we can develop a safe way to

coach fast bowling in the first place that has a strong efficacy for pace. That's because scientific research had highlighted how stress fractures were likely to happen. It had led to a restriction on fast bowling, which in my view, was causing many fast bowlers to actually lose pace or have their actions changed to the detriment of pace, but all in the name of safety. It meant that no thought was put into coaching speed. The irony appears to be that after all that effort, we seem to hear of more back injuries than ever!

My second fast bowling book titled "Ultimate Pace Secrets", was released in 2012. This contained drills, coaching points and more importantly, the positions a fast bowler should strive for to be the best version of themselves. One simply had to accept and understand that everyone bowls differently. But we all have the same skeleton, so here I was talking about creating the right environment to maximise speed based on a process. Baseball and javelin have coaching processes, as do other sports like Golf. There are processes in how to throw a ball or javelin and hit a golf ball if you have any coaching. Clearly if you don't have coaching in those sports, or very little, you can still be effective. But we accept those sports have processes for maximising performance. Fast bowling is obviously no different.

In more recent times, scientific research, whilst tentative, is starting to seek whether there is a commonality between bowlers and whether a protocol can be established for teaching pace. It is being suggested that a straight front leg may be an indicator for fast bowlers, as well as delaying the bowling arm, something I already coach to my wards. Both a straight front leg and delayed bowling arm are things I would always wish any bowler to master. There are very many other indicators that go with this like hip rotation, chest drive, alignment and many more mentioned in the books. I think that research into this area will ultimately lead the ECB to work with very similar principles I have been using for two decades. They might call it something different, but it will ostensibly be on the frame work of 'The Four Tent Pegs' and ABSAT, which are two of the main methodologies of my success with pace.

To be fair, I don't blame the ECB for being so stuck for answers for so long, if they are waiting for science to tell them where to go next. My work is based on results in the real world, good old trial and error and an understanding of what works first hand. I am not restricted by research into existing methods. My role is to create new ones. You cannot make a bowling model from measuring what you have now, which is already flawed.

As the current Head Coach of the Ultimate Pace Foundation in Bangalore, I have worked with Dale Steyn and Shoaib Akhtar. I am very open to helping any cricket board develop their coach education. The secret isn't knowing this stuff, it's how you pass it on to others - one can only do that if one has discovered the drills for coaching in the first place. You have to be able to coach people so they can understand why they should make changes and how they do that with their existing style of bowling. This is about enhancing a bowler's natural ability. My work is not a secret and it would be wonderful to finally realise that it is accepted as the way we should be teaching our youngsters if we truly want a legion of pace bowlers like Mitchell Johnson.

And that, more than anything else, really makes me smile!