

LEARNING TO 'FEEL' LENGTH

'It is obvious that these things, especially length, cannot be taught if the distance he was to propel the ball is beyond him' (Grimmett, 1934).

Bob Woolmer got a shock when first coaching in South Africa: 'I was astounded to discover that eleven-year-olds were playing on the same length of pitch as adult men. This was entirely counterproductive, since the bodies of young players only begin to develop in terms of strength around the age of fourteen or fifteen. Batsmen can graduate to full-length pitches a bit earlier, since they don't need to be as strong as bowlers (I first began playing on a standard pitch when I was thirteen), but bowlers can be thoroughly wrecked by forcing them to bowl beyond their abilities in this way.'

In other words, the first thing to do when teaching young players to bowl is to shorten the length of the pitch according to their physiques. This boosts their confidence, as they are getting the ball up to the bat nicely, with some decent carry to the wicket-keeper or into the back net; it prevents them from over-straining and injuring themselves; and most importantly, it allows them to develop their accuracy.

Bowlers deliver the ball almost entirely by 'feel': very few are still looking at the spot on the pitch they are aiming at as they deliver the ball. Each delivery in their arsenal has been practised so often, and experienced so many times, that each has an unmistakable feel. The moment the ball leaves the bowler's fingers, he knows exactly on which length it is going to pitch, simply because he recognizes the feeling of the delivery. Indeed it is not uncommon for bowlers across the whole cricketing spectrum (from amateur pie-chuckers to Test fast bowlers) to cry out in disgust or alarm as the ball leaves their fingers – a reaction to the delivery before it has even pitched, because they know where it will go, thanks to feel.

Young bowlers need to develop this feel for accuracy in conditions that will simulate those they'll encounter as adults. If an eight-year-old learns to bowl on a good length on an adult pitch (which is frankly impossible), he would grow up to find that his 'good length feel' is hopelessly off target, and will no doubt have a penchant for bowling waist-high full tosses or beamers.

Shortened pitches present no danger to young batters as young bowlers are unlikely to be able to get the ball through dangerously fast. In fact they will offer young batters the chance to develop their reactions more effectively.

The ideal pitch lengths for different age groups are therefore as follows:

- 7 – 10 years old: 15 yards
- 10 – 13 years old: 18 yards
- 14 and upward: 22 yards (full-size pitch).

Don't compromise on these reductions, or assume that your young bowlers are doing fine just because they're getting the ball generally straight and over halfway up on a full-size pitch. If a young bowler can regularly pitch the ball on a good length (for his developmental stage) from an early age, he has already laid the foundations of a successful career.

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