



Controlling the emotions in pursuit of excellence

As a cricketer one can have a lot of down-time. The moments actually spent executing a skill, whether it be diving for a ball in the outfield or cracking a shot through the off side, is something that can be measured in milliseconds.

Unless you are in the middle, you can be sitting on the balcony; making a cup of red bush tea (the so-called healthy non-caffeine type), or talking trivialities with a team-mate. In such periods, it is fascinating how the mind can wander, especially if one's form is poor. The extended period of time and energy not being expended out in the middle can lead to over-analysis and introspection, a tendency I developed too often in the early part of my career.

In what is becoming an ever more complex and technological age there is an increasing emphasis on analysis of players, opposition and the inner workings of one's own team. It's come to the point where I've begun to wonder what England's post-war players would have made of such an experience. Take my grandfather, Denis Compton, for instance. He was the David Beckham of his era, yet he often needed reminding what time a Test match actually started!

In his day, he and his team-mates would play golf on their days off to maintain fitness and nurture their competitive instincts. Today's regime involves bleep tests, measurement of skin folds, and computer analysis alongside technical practice sessions on specially-designed ball machines, for both fielding and batting. My grandfather is alleged on occasions to have missed the start of play, yet still made a hundred in someone else's kit and while using the No. 11's bat! What would he have made of life as a professional cricketer in the new millennium?

The modern professional arrives at first-class games on the eve of the match, participates in lengthy team meetings, highlighting opposition strengths and weaknesses with the use of computer-generated data to back up strategic points designed to enhance the team's education of the battle ahead.

And yet, has the modern player become too technically minded? My own journey has mirrored this, and in questioning the best way forward for me personally, I have gone through a period of exploring

alternatives. Finding the mental courage to free oneself up, and play with joie de vivre when the match intensity is at its greatest, is a paradox for all players seeking new peaks in performance.

One aspect that I've found increasingly interesting, is the balance between technical intelligence (ie knowledge of one's batting style on a physical level) and emotional intelligence (ie the ability to manage one's emotions). That old cliché, that batting is 90% mental and 10% technical has been repeated in many an article on the psychology of the game, but how true is this statement, and just what is meant by "the mental game"?

Take Andrew Strauss's Man-of-the-Match innings recently at Old Trafford, which won the second Test for England against New Zealand. For me, that innings was more about mastery of emotion than perfect technique. Strauss is leaving more balls outside the off stump and not searching for runs like he was 12 months ago. But is that as much a technical advance as it is an emotional one? He appears to have a calmness about him which is in contrast to his demeanour at the crease in the previous 12 months.

As cricketers, we hit hundreds if not thousands of balls on the bowling machine while refining what we hope will be the perfect technique, and how often have I seen batsmen after getting bowled, (and I definitely include myself in this category) walking straight to Cricstat (the program where we can watch our innings ball by ball) to check if their shoulders were sideways on or whether their front foot landed in the right place.

The problem is that in preparation we all want to achieve something tangible, something we can both see and feel at the same time. But this, in my experience, can create changes which can be cosmetic. I'm beginning to understand that real change must come from within in order to achieve consistency of thought, which can then lead to consistency of behaviour. Practicing behaviour is less tangible. It requires a patience and dedication. It is not something that can be seen by the naked eye.

We've all watched Johnny Wilkinson go through his routine when he takes his place kicks. Those cupped hands, the view of the seam drawing a line through the centre of the posts, and a dead aim through the middle before he fires his leg up and allows the rest to happen. The truth is it's no different each time; he repeats his routine whether in a club game, a training session or a world cup final. This is what he does. I'm sure it would be quite easy for him or anyone else to place the ball down and think to hell with all that visualisation, making myself calm stuff - I'm just going to put the ball down and kick it. It can be easy to become complacent in one's routines but I suppose what I'm learning is that behavioural consistency takes a lot of patience, a lot of time and certainly a lot of practice.

I was fortunate to spend some time with the ex-South African opening batsmen and current India head coach Gary Kirsten last winter, in Cape Town. Gary was a player not particularly noted for his

elegance or natural ability, but he was a top international batsman and someone who prided himself on maximising his strengths and working with what he “was given” on any particular day. His biggest message to me was to rid myself of ego. It's far more important to be willing to accept and work with what one has on any day than to tell yourself: this is how I should be playing and how I want to play.

He told me to take expectation out of the equation and go with: “Let's just see how I play today”. By spending more time with acceptance, I soon realised that in fact it's okay that things aren't going the way I would like. The irony is the more time you spend being displeased with your current performance the longer it's going to take for it to improve. So be accepting of how it is in the present, be kind to yourself and it won't be a surprise that as your ability to control your emotions increases, so will your performance.

I'll never forget one particular day. First he asked me: “Compo – how do you define playing well?”

I answered confidently: 'Timing the ball well, feeling at ease and dominating.’

His response astonished me. “Really? Well do you want to know what playing well is for me? It's about scoring runs irrelevant of how well or badly it comes off the bat.”

He described an occasion during South Africa's tour of England in 2003, the series in which Graeme Smith scored consecutive double centuries.

During the fourth Test at Headingley, Andrew Flintoff was bowling very quick and Gary told me there were times when he was genuinely scared. He even admitted that he feared that if a single one of the short-ball barrage he faced that morning had been smack on target, it might have been the end of his career. After two-and-a-quarter hours in that first session he managed just 13 runs. "It was simply a matter of survival," he told me.

Kirsten, that day, didn't fight the fact that he couldn't score a run; he didn't tell himself: “I'm a good square cutter”, or, “I know I'm good off my legs so if it's there for me I'm going to have a go”. Instead he looked deep into himself and said: “No I don't feel good today. I'm just going to stay with this as long as I can.”

As it happened he came out after lunch, hit one in the middle, and suddenly he felt in complete control. Gary stayed with his discomfort. He even became comfortable with feeling uncomfortable. He remained in the dark tunnel a long time, but through the dogged single-mindedness that was always his trademark, he emerged out the other end, with a brilliant 130 that rescued his side from 21 for 4, and won the match for South Africa.

His story is a great lesson in acceptance – for any cricketer to adapt and embrace the demands of any given day and always to make the most of what that day brings.

How often do you go out to bat and feel like a dog? How often do you fight it to the point where batting is no fun? These days I'm trying to steer away from judgement, because it's only your ego that judges you and builds unwarranted expectation. When I observe the leading players, I see that the honest players – the ones most true to themselves – are invariably the ones with the soundest work ethic. The ones with the soundest work ethic are invariably more consistent. They seem clear-minded; content; and appear to be at greater peace with themselves.

The key for me has been in understanding the important part emotion plays in performance. In doing so, I am re-discovering the “fun” element in the challenge between bat and ball after years of obsessively pursuing an unrealistic objective of “the perfect technique”, and getting too caught up in the analysis of my game. The writing process has also been very helpful in clarifying some of my ideas about how best to develop, and a good use of time when not engaged in matchplay. Thank heavens for down-time!