

Concentration - an article by JE McCall

*The LCU&SA is extremely grateful to **James E McCall**, our colleague in NIACUS for permission to reproduce his six articles on concentration which first appeared in the NIACUS journal, Follow-On. We think they will bear reading and re-reading by all umpires and scorers.*

Concentration - concentration - concentration

Concentration is a crucial attribute for umpires and scorers alike in cricket at all levels. The importance of concentration is obvious in many aspects of everyday life, for example, when driving a car. Different traffic situations require different levels of concentration and the same is true in umpiring. It is not possible to maintain the highest level of focused attention for hours on end when either driving or umpiring, nor is it necessary to do so.

On the road, normally the main focus of attention is the car in front, although it is important to be aware of vehicles coming in the opposite direction as well as those following. Similarly in cricket, each umpire will have a main focus of attention, with each delivery, whilst retaining an awareness of other events as they unfold on the field of play.

The level of concentration required when travelling at speed on a busy motorway, or in rush hour traffic, is much greater than that required on a quiet country road. In the more relaxed rural situation it may even be possible to 'take in some of the scenery' while retaining the degree of attention necessary to deal with the different potential hazards encountered. So it is in cricket umpiring.

Before each delivery, the umpires will have a wide field of observation, with a broad range of focus. As the bowler moves in, the focus of the bowler's-end umpire narrows progressively to the position of the feet in the delivery stride. The focus then switches quickly to the ball in flight and narrows further to the point of maximum concentration as the striker receives the delivery. Remember that, in addition to observation, concentration involves listening! After the batsman has had the opportunity of playing the ball, the focus either remains on the movement of the ball or broadens again to take in the fielders as well as the batsmen, depending on what happens to the ball. When the ball becomes dead, the focus broadens totally and the level of concentration can change into a more relaxed mode.

On any journey, the level of concentration required is frequently changing and it is essential to be aware of changing circumstances. It is never possible to relax or 'switch off' completely. Around 100 drivers are killed each year in the UK by falling asleep at the wheel and over 300 deaths occur on the roads due to the inattention or a lack of concentration by drivers.

Although it does not have the same fatal consequences on the cricket field, it is absolutely crucial that an umpire does not lose concentration completely or 'fall asleep' mentally. In an exciting match, with a close finish, it is absolutely essential that the umpires maintain the same high level of attention 'to the death' as they exercised at the start of the game. Even in a dull, one-sided fixture if an umpire's concentration drops for a second, it is likely that something crucial will occur at that moment. Always expect the unexpected!

Getting Into The Right Frame Of Mind

The ability to concentrate for long periods of time, depends on many things including temperament, physical fitness, attitude of mind and personal mood at the time. A good umpire will display authority, self-confidence and an air of quiet control on the field of play, all of which will assist his powers of concentration.

He should demonstrate respect for the players while striving to gain respect from them and from his colleagues. But this can only be earned over time. Remember that first impressions are vitally important in establishing the correct tone for the conduct of a match, even before a ball is bowled. Getting into the 'right frame of mind' requires being mentally prepared and focused on the tasks ahead.

Continuing the analogy between car driving and cricket umpiring, it is not necessary to understand the complicated workings of a modern computer-chip controlled car to be able to drive it. Nor is it necessary to be an expert batsman, bowler or fielder to be able to umpire a game of cricket. It is, however, important to know how to drive the car and to be familiar with the Highway Code.

Similarly, it is essential to understand how the game of cricket is played and to have a full knowledge of the Laws and their application on the field of play. Other factors, such as road conditions and speed limits, have a bearing on driving, just as, familiarity with competition regulations and local customs, play an important part in the control of a game of cricket.

Before embarking on a long journey, the wise driver will ensure that his car is fit for the task by checking tyre pressures, oil and water levels and, of course, that there is sufficient petrol. He will also ensure that he is properly prepared for the task by checking the route, being well slept, fed and watered and, as far as possible, by being in a relaxed frame of mind.

The conscientious umpire will similarly prepare for his 'long stand' of several hours duration. His preparation will include checking that he has packed all his on-field gear and equipment and that everything is clean and presentable - first impressions again! The Laws require umpires to be present at least 45 minutes before the scheduled time for the start of play.

There is plenty to do in this period, from meeting colleagues, including the scorers, to talking to the groundsman, club officials, the captains and other players. There are also numerous checks to be carried out including inspecting the pitch, the crease markings, the wickets, the boundaries and sightscreens, provision of covers and sawdust, to mention but a few. Carrying out these activities together helps the two umpires get into the 'right frame of mind' and make ready for task ahead.

This pre-match period is absolutely essential for preparing mentally for the fray. The two umpires should discuss, and agree, the details of the playing regulations for that particular game, how they plan to co-operate on the field of play with each other, and with the scorers, and the level of acceptable behaviour that they will tolerate from the players. This will assist colleagues to display consistent attitudes to all playing matters during the game.

It is important that this period is a relaxed time so that the umpires are prepared to apply the proper degree of concentration immediately they take the field. Late arrival can often mean that the pre-match duties are rushed or are not dealt with at all, that the toss occurs at the very last minute and, in the final rush, that an umpire forgets his bails or the match ball. This type of 'minor panic' can mean that an umpire's attention is not sufficiently focused at the call of 'Play' and he may not be able to concentrate in the way that his role demands.

Good preparation is crucial to provide the correct mental framework for the appropriate level of sustained concentration and focused attention for the duration of the match. However, there are

many events that can occur during the game that may disturb an umpire's concentration and some of these issues are dealt with in section 5.

Variation in the Focus of Attention

When concentrating, the level of attention ranges from broad external focus, to broad internal, to narrow external to narrow internal focus. Examples of each of these might be, respectively, assessing the situation in general, planning strategy before a match, focusing on a specific target and concentrating on a single thought or action.

During a game, each umpire's focus of attention will switch repeatedly from broad to narrow and back to broad as a passage of play develops. As indicated in section 2, it is essential for both on-field members of the 'team' to be fully focused before taking the field of play.

Prior to the call of 'Play', both umpires will have a broad focus of attention as they carry out their duties. The bowler's-end umpire has the major responsibility for the final pre-match checks. These duties include placing the bails on the stumps and aligning the wickets, with the help of his colleague; counting the fielders; ascertaining the bowler's mode of delivery and conveying this information to the striker, before giving him his guard; giving a bowler's marker and the match ball to the opening bowler; checking that the sight-screens are correctly positioned; checking with the fielding captain that his field is set and that he is prepared to begin; confirming that his colleague is in position and that the other members of the 'team', in the scorebox, are also in position and that they are ready to start.

The striker's-end umpire also has duties to carry out before the game can get under way. He should also count the fielders and check that they are in position; that the striker has taken guard and is ready to receive the first delivery, and that the bowler is about to start his run up. He is then in a position to confirm to his colleague that he is ready for play to commence.

As each delivery is bowled, the focus of attention for both umpires switches from broad, as the bowler approaches the wicket, to narrow, as the striker receives the ball. Once the ball becomes 'dead', the umpires' focus of attention should relax. However, both umpires should remain vigilant and be aware of any other 'incidents' which might occur following that delivery, e.g. a comment made by the bowler, or another fielder, to the batsman, or a remark or 'look' by the striker to an opponent.

Often this is harmless and is accepted as 'part of the game', but the umpires must maintain their 'standards' for acceptable behaviour and they should never shirk their joint responsibility for controlling the match within the Spirit, as well as within the Laws of the Game. More serious incidents, if they are not nipped in the bud, can easily escalate and get out of hand and they can become a major source of distraction to the concentration of an umpire. But this will be dealt with in more detail in section 5.

Switching between Broad and Narrow Focus

The bowler's-end umpire has a greater responsibility for controlling play, during an over, than his partner, with more situations to observe and more potential decisions to make. However, it is essential that the striker's-end umpire also maintains the appropriate level of concentration while the ball is in play. As a passage of play develops, the focus of attention of both umpires will alternate between broad and narrow, but not necessarily in the same way or at the same time. A couple of examples from typical incidents of play will help to illustrate the similarities and differences.

Scenario 1: A fast bowler bowls to the striker, who plays the ball into the cover region. Both batsmen begin to move out of their ground and the striker calls 'wait' as a fielder runs to field the ball which he picks up cleanly and returns to the wicket-keeper. Both batsmen return to their ground safely and no run is scored.

The focus of attention, for the bowler's-end umpire, changes from broad to narrow, as the bowler approaches the wicket, reaching its peak as he observes the grounding of the back foot, and then the front foot, in the delivery stride. He must retain this maximum level of concentration as he follows the flight of the ball and until the striker makes contact with the ball.

His focus then broadens as he quickly moves to the off-side to take up a position on the line of the popping crease, as far back from the pitch as possible in the time available. As he does so, he must keep the path of the ball, the fielding of it, as well as the movement of the batsmen, in his line of vision. As the ball is returned to the wicket-keeper and, it is clear that the action for that delivery has come to an end, and hence the ball is dead, his concentration can relax as he returns to his position behind the wicket.

The striker's-end umpire will start the passage of play with a broad focus of attention using his peripheral vision to note when the ball comes into play by observing the instant the bowler commences his run up. Having checked that the bowler's arm action is legitimate, his focus will narrow, centred on the striker playing the ball. But he will have a broader focus than his colleague at this stage as he takes in the wider picture of the fielders, including the wicket-keeper, and the batsmen as the action progresses.

As the ball is returned to the wicket-keeper, his focus will narrow and will centre on the position of the striker's bat in relation to the popping crease, and whether it is grounded or in the air. Again he should use his peripheral vision, and the evidence of his ears, to check that the ball is taken cleanly and that the wicket is broken correctly. It is good technique to move a few paces towards the wicket, as events are developing, in order to have the best possible view of the action but always making sure that a fielder is not impeded. Once the ball becomes dead the umpire can relax.

Scenario 2: The bowler bowls an away-swing that the striker plays at with his bat well away from his body. There is a noise as the ball passes the bat and deviates to the slip cordon. Second slip dives forward in attempting to catch the ball. There is an appeal and the batsman stands his ground.

For the bowler's-end umpire, the switch from broad to narrow focus is the same as usual except, that in this situation, his maximum level of concentration continues until the slip fielder has completed the 'catch'. If the umpire has any doubt about the legitimacy of the catch, he should consult his colleague. In this scenario, a glance across at the striker's-end umpire may be all that is required to confirm that the ball carried or otherwise. If, on the other hand, he wishes to discuss the situation with his partner, he must call and signal 'Dead Ball' before leaving his position and only ask factual questions. Once he has answered the appeal he goes into relaxed mode again.

The striker's-end umpire must also maintain his peak level of focus until the ball has been 'caught' by the fielder when the ball then becomes dead. He should also be aware of the possibility that his colleague may require his assistance in confirming whether the ball has been correctly caught, either by a simple signal or by consultation.

If the appeal is turned down, both umpires should be aware of the possibility of comments from the fielding side to the striker and be ready to nip any potential trouble in the bud. If the appeal is upheld, then both umpires should meet, having taken possession of the ball, to emphasise their co-operation and teamwork. This simple act also helps the umpires to relax before the next 'scene' is enacted.

The short periods of maximum concentration for any delivery may not last for more than three or

four seconds. Over the course of a 50 over-a-side match, each umpire may only be exercising peak focus of attention for between 15 and 20 minutes as the bowler's-end umpire and perhaps even less at the striker's end. However, it is vital that both 'custodians of the law' maintain the appropriate level of concentration throughout the match in order to control play in the manner expected by the players and as laid down in the 'Spirit of Cricket'.

Loss Of Focus

There are many issues that can cause an umpire to have a temporary loss of concentration when officiating in a game of cricket. When an umpire's attention is distracted by other matters, either on or off the field of play, his mind can wander from the action, perhaps resulting in him missing a vital call or being out of position for a line call or simply giving a poor decision. These 'issues' fall into two categories, external and internal, but they can both have a detrimental effect on the umpire's performance in the match.

'Internal issues' might include such things as personal matters; family responsibilities; pressure of work; physical fatigue; minor injuries - causing a lack of mobility; health concerns or simply 'feeling under the weather' on the day of the match. It is incumbent on every individual official, as far as possible, to put all these personal issues out of his/her mind for the duration of the game, difficult as that may be at times.

The need for physical fitness and mental alertness is crucial and any lack of condition or a sign of weariness will be apparent to the players, perhaps leading to a decrease in their respect for that umpire. Dealing with these internal issues is a matter for the individual umpire although the support of a sensitive colleague can often help.

'External issues' that can cause a loss of focus are usually 'part of the game', for example, excessive appealing, sledging, doubtful ground, weather or light conditions. Among many other examples of 'normal play', which can lead to a loss of focus, are the following: a bowler frequently 'over-stepping' or repeatedly bowling wide balls; successive appeals for LBW in a short period of time all being turned down; a poor decision of judgement by the umpire; players querying decisions; protracted discussions between an umpire and a player; lack of support or co-operation from a colleague; abuse from players or spectators; the constant pressure imposed by a close finish or that 'edge' inherently present in a 'needle match'. Some of these situations are under the control of the umpires and should be handled using good man-management skills. Others, however, are outside the control of the on-field officials and it is important for the umpires, acting together, to handle the circumstances, as far as possible, by keeping the players, particularly the team captains, informed using sensitive forms of communication.

Often, if a match is 'drifting', or if the outcome is obvious and the players are 'simply going through the motions', it is easy for an umpire to lose concentration. If a critical event occurs, the umpire will appear incompetent. Avoid being lulled into a 'relaxed mode' when the circumstances demand either broad or narrow focus of concentration. Always expect the unexpected! Every ball in a match is important and provides a potential 'banana skin', although a lapse in concentration towards the end of a game is more likely to be remembered by the players, especially those on the losing team! The 'better' umpires manage to avoid losing their focus of attention by controlling the players, and the game, through maintaining a smooth rhythm to play from the first ball to the call of 'Time'.

Preventing Loss Of Focus And Recovery Techniques

The 'playing' of the game of cricket has a 'natural rhythm' and, by maintaining the 'flow', umpires

will find it easier to retain their focus throughout a match. If there are frequent interruptions, which are often avoidable, keeping the necessary level of concentration becomes more difficult.

It is worth remembering that the Laws put the onus on the captain for 'ensuring that play is conducted within the spirit and traditions of the game'. Every over, a series of six fair deliveries is bowled, and each requires total focus from both umpires. At the end of an over, the 'custodians of the Law' should set the example by taking up their new positions promptly to minimise any delay in playing action.

Most of the examples of 'external issues' that can cause a loss of focus, mentioned in the previous section, can be avoided by appropriate man-management skills. An umpire must always retain his authority and maintain control of play. However, this must be done without losing the players' respect for his role. A minor misdemeanour by a player can be dealt with by an umpire using a few well chosen words, but with sensitivity. A quiet 'unofficial' word can often diffuse a potentially explosive situation.

When a more serious breach of the Spirit of the Laws requires the involvement of the captain, both umpires, acting together, should ask the captain to deal with the situation, having clearly explained the nature of the incident and, if necessary, any aspect of Law that may have been contravened.

Some of the following concentration techniques can help an umpire to re-focus if his attention has been distracted.

- Restructuring. Forgetting the events of the immediate past and turning thought processes to the present.
- Action Goals. Having a specific 'plan' to carry out at the next natural break, for example, something as simple as adjusting the bails at the end of the over, to get the mind back on the job.
- Routines. Getting back to the normal routines associated with the ball-by-ball structure of the game.
- Trigger Words. Repeating key words or phrases to concentrate the mind. This is a technique that many umpires use, for example, when an injured batsman has a runner. As the bowler is about to deliver the ball, repeating the phrase 'Go to the off' silently reminds the umpire to move to the off-side, if a run is attempted, in order to be able to observe the runner running wide on the leg-side.
- Relaxation and Centring. Relaxing, when the state of the game is appropriate, by flexing the shoulders to relieve tension or moving the legs or feet to avoid stiffness or cramp, followed by a conscious effort to get back to full concentration on the ensuing events.

If a loss of concentration occurs, it is important to get the rhythm back quickly. Focus on the next ball and give single-minded attention to the game by listening and observing. 'Keep in the here and now'. If an umpire makes a mistake, perhaps a missed call or a poor decision, it is essential for him to regroup immediately. He should acknowledge the error - but only to himself - let his emotions go and re-focus. Never try to 'right the wrong', it will only result in a second 'poor decision'! Getting back to the normal routines can help to eliminate negative thoughts, be positive and retain that vital air of confidence.

The single, most effective way of retaining the necessary degree of attention throughout a match is teamwork. Working closely with each other helps to keep both umpires totally focused. It should not be a matter of only conferring once an over to confirm the number of balls bowled. There should be regular eye contact, even as frequently as after every delivery. The striker's-end umpire can indicate to his colleague if the striker is taking guard in front of the crease and by how much.

Similarly, the bowler's-end umpire can assist his partner if fielding restrictions are about to be contravened. Both members of the TEAM can together 'enjoy' a brilliant shot or a superb delivery or the excitement of a close call. There are many other examples of co-operation that will

demonstrate to the players that the 'on field' partners are working as a team. All these examples of co-operation can be achieved merely by a glance or by a simple signal or by a smile from one umpire to the other.

However, it is important for the 'custodians of the Law' to meet as often as play permits, for example, at the fall of a wicket or at a drinks interval, to keep each other focused. Umpires can show by their attitude that they can enjoy umpiring 'the great game' just as much as the players enjoy playing it or the spectators enjoy watching it. Remember also that there is no 'I' in TEAM.

Article courtesy of Leinster Cricket Umpires and Scorer's Association