



SKILLS & TECHNIQUE

REVERSE GEAR



Cricket NSW coach TRENT WOODHILL on the hows and whys of the reverse sweep

In the old days, the reverse sweep was a cheeky shot, disrespectful of the bowler and likely to get you out. Now, thanks to England's Kevin Pietersen and others, playing in reverse is an authentic play to get extra runs when you need them. Trent Woodhill, who once coached Pietersen and is now Cricket NSW's under-19s coach, talks about the revolution in reverse.

WHY PLAY IT?

Because players have to score off a higher percentage of balls faced now. The whole idea of the reverse shot is to hit the ball where there are more gaps in the field and score more runs off that ball. In the past an off-drive may only have scored one even if you beat mid-off. Now they're able to either hit it behind square on the off-side for four or at least two. Batsmen used to play it just one way: lapping and hitting it behind square and trying to use the bowler; now someone like Pietersen has taken it to a new level. They are not reverse sweeping; they are actually hitting the ball over the fence in areas like deep cover.

WHEN TO PLAY IT

You've got a batch of shots in your head that you'd like to play if you're trying to score a boundary, so you pick areas as opposed to the length of ball. You might set yourself up to sweep conventionally, but as you see the ball leave the hand you might see it's going to be wide of off-stump, and decide to reverse it. Someone like Pietersen picks the length so quickly with their in-built computer they can decide what shot to play very fast, reading the signs from the bowler whether it's going to be short or full.

THE DIFFERENT SHOTS

There's one where they'll be facing the spinners; let's say they're facing an off-spinner, they're right-handed and there's no one behind backward point. They'll reverse-lap, where it's almost a deflection behind square, and pick up a boundary if it's a quick outfield or a quicker bowler, or at least get two. Then there's the situation where the fielding team may not have

anyone at deep point or deep cover, so they're looking to hit hard and over, and get a boundary that way.

HIT THE NETS

Practise, practise, practise. Don't just try it in a game; get in the nets and play around with it to determine which style suits you best, reverse slogging or reverse sweeping. Which one do you play more naturally? During the game, you should be thinking, "OK, there's no fielder there, and the bowler's bowling this type of delivery, it's not pitched on the stumps – the risk might be low". So have a go.

TECHNIQUE

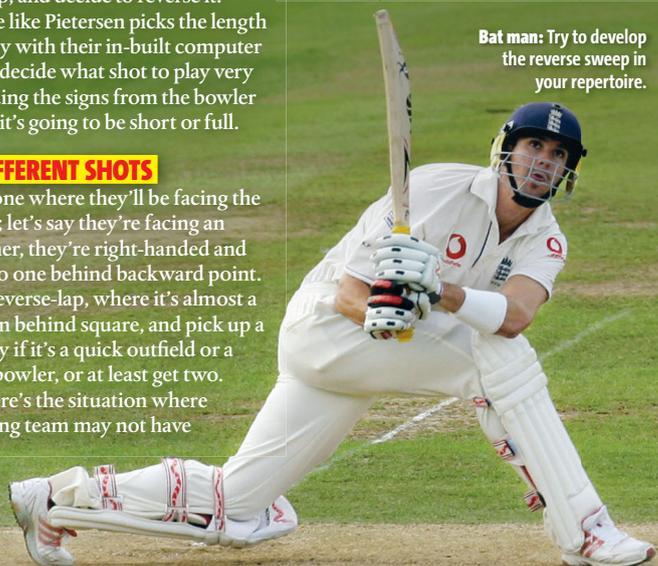
You've got to be balanced first and foremost, have good vision, and if you're going to reverse-slog, you have to be in position fairly early, so aim to change position when the bowler's in his delivery stride. The bowler's within his rights to stop and start again if he sees the batsman switch – it could be the never-ending over.

"The whole idea of a reverse shot is to hit the ball where there are gaps in the field and score runs."

SHOULD YOU TRY IT?

Some guys haven't got the strength and power or haven't even got the capability yet as a right-hander; I don't encourage them to reverse slog, but I might get them to practise the lap-shot behind point on the offside, to get a boundary that might not be available to them if they're driving. If you're a young cricketer, try it. It's a whole new ball game.

Bat man: Try to develop the reverse sweep in your repertoire.



MENTAL STRENGTH

Bat Out Of Hell

MARK TAYLOR talks about how to cope with sledging and other batting mind games



What's the best way to handle a sledge?

It's become more of a modern-day technique where – before a bloke's even faced a ball – there are various words yelled or screamed or muttered to him. My first advice would be to ignore it, because generally I find that when people bite back, the instigator then feels he's on to something and will keep it going. If you feel you've got to say something back, make sure you've got something good to come back with.

Batting well comes first.

Exactly right. I was not a big sledger and I think most people who know me would say that was true, so therefore I didn't cop much sledging, apart from "you lucky so-and-so".

But there's a lot said out there.

When a bloke plays and misses, or gets dropped and the bowler yells something out, I wouldn't call that sledging. That's just a reaction to an incident. Sledging is direct, premeditated verbal abuse.

How did you feel when a bowler intimidated you?

There were times a bowler would get in my face. My first approach, and one that served me well, was to look the other way. The advantage a bowler has over you is that he has the opportunity to go back and bowl another ball. I found if I got involved in a verbal stoush then the bowler's got you in; he has your concentration.

So ignore it, walk away, just concentrate on what you're

doing yourself. The bowler could bowl the next ball a shocker, you hit a four and you feel you've won the day. But if he gets you out in an over's time, he still wins. It's not about the next ball; it's about the whole innings. If he gets you out, he's won the day and you'll get sledged again.

How were you treated during a lean trot?

During that tough time I had in 1997, most people were very quiet around me, which was a bad thing. It would have been nice if someone did sledge me – it may have got me to bite a bit harder on the bottom lip and say: "Right I've just got to get some today".

Why were they being quiet?

I think because they felt that if your character's strong enough, words aren't going to make any difference and if anything, they should make you stronger. I always found as a batsman, if a bowler's running up to me and sledging me, or someone's making a genuine effort to put me off my game verbally, they obviously feel I can play and they need some other way other than the ball to get me out.

I much preferred a bowler to be yelling and screaming at me than someone like [Windies pace legend] Curtly Ambrose, who got me out the most in Test cricket and I don't remember him saying a word to me. Good bowlers don't need to. I always look at sledging as a compliment.

What qualities make a successful batsman?

I think there's two ways to go about it. The stereotyped opening batsman in my time was like me: you were a calm sort of person who would play and miss, get a couple of great bouncers and play the next ball on its merits. That's the way I went about batting.

In recent times there's been the Michael Slater-opening batter, [Sri Lankan all-rounder Sanath] Jayasuriya – those sort of guys who go out gritting their teeth, looking to attack the fast bowler and see how he likes it. It depends on the sort of person you are, as to the approach you take.

Don't try to find a medium between the two. You've got to work out what sort of player you are and set your game plan around that. So if you are a person of the Michael Slater calibre who likes to be aggressive – attack, fine and be prepared to stick with that. It doesn't matter where you bat, really; the essence of batting is working out how you do it best.

INNOVATION

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WE SAY Does it look good with shorts and thongs? Tick. Will I overheat wearing it while sitting in the MCG outer on Boxing Day? Nope, it's cool. Do beer spillages dry up quickly? Yep, it's got "moisture management" for pity's sake. Can I get it from Rebel for slightly less than a footy shirt? Yes, you can. A piece of sporting apparel that just about ticks all of the boxes for Team Alpha.



PHOTOGRAPHY: MATTHEW ASHTON/AP/GETTY IMAGES (PIETERSEN); ANTHONY WEATE (TAYLOR)