



20:20 VISION

Even a year ago, could you have predicted England's men would be cricket world champions? But that's precisely what happened in the Caribbean this May and, as **Richard Gibson** discovered, it's no accident... coaches throughout the sport have been adapting to a whole new discipline in the grand old game.

Twenty20 was dismissed as a hit-and-giggle fad upon its inception, but, seven years on, its increasing influence has led to a serious overhaul of how professional coaches prepare their players and teams.

Most intriguingly, having been derided for its lack of subtlety, it has delivered various strands of new thinking.

Cricket is undoubtedly the strangest beast among our major national ball sports in that it comes in three different packages. But its newest arrival is impacting positively on the approaches to the game in general.

The 20-over format's fast pace and concentrated time span has led those in charge to focus on the minutiae of nutrition, fitness and technique. After all, the smallest of gains can make the biggest of differences for a team, particularly when results are settled by the narrowest of margins.

Some will argue that modernisation of coaching methods was inevitable, but it is indisputable that the emergence of this sleek Twenty20 vehicle has put cricket on a road to greater wealth, and with greater wealth comes improved resources. For example, full-time nutritionists and fitness coaches on the county circuit would have been unthinkable just a handful of years ago.

Sussex's Mark Robinson and Paul Grayson, of Essex, are two of the head coaches who have embraced the evolution and been successful to boot; in four years at Hove, Robinson has overseen two County Championship titles, two Pro40 titles and victories in both 50-over and Twenty20 finals; while in two full years as head coach at Chelmsford, Grayson has celebrated Friends Provident and Pro40 Division Two crowns, promotion to the top tier of the Championship and an appearance at Twenty20 finals day.

Remaining competitive across all formats is their primary challenge given the 24/7 nature of English domestic cricket. 'Therefore, players have to be helped with their mental progression,' explains Robinson.

'They have to be able to think about what they are trying to do, trigger a mental switch to make sure they have shaken out of one mode when they turn up to play another.

'You find that your best sportsmen are usually the most flexible. You can prepare a team to peak for an important one-day game and then send them into a situation where you are asking them just 24 hours later to get ready for the task

of facing Steve Harmison and batting for a day and a half. Or it might go the other way, where you have been grafting for your runs in Championship cricket and then are expected to go out in a Twenty20 contest and crash it from ball one.'

Encouraging players to visualise what they are trying to accomplish in forthcoming matches and familiarise themselves with their upcoming surroundings has become a major component in the modern coaching ethos. So, whereas traditionally batsmen would tinker with techniques and bowlers seek line and length in regular net sessions, they now take an altogether different approach: often working on the particular match venue's square to get used to its idiosyncrasies – the distance to each boundary, wind direction and general visibility.

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But, as Grayson – who takes his team to his county's largest ground, Billericay, to target clearing the ropes – explains, there is far more finesse to their aerial assaults. 'You don't see nine, 10 and jack getting runs in Twenty20 cricket, it's the technically correct batsmen who are clearing their front legs to hit over midwicket or giving themselves room to hit over the off-side, like we have seen Craig Kieswetter do for England.

'It's no coincidence that the guys who are successful six-hitters practise so hard – and they are helped of course by how great these bats are these days.'



England's Kevin Pietersen, Craig Kieswetter and Paul Collingwood celebrate with the trophy after they defeated Australia in the final of the ICC World Twenty20, 2010

Batters will also spend designated periods reverse-sweeping or switch-hitting. Repetition drills also apply for bowlers in delivering yorkers, slower balls and bouncers. And with greater volume of time now spent on magnified technical areas within the game itself, even fielding practice has altered.

Gone are the days when the entire team followed a uniform session. Now individuals are asked to concentrate on skills specific to their role in the field.

And the influence of day/night cricket has resulted in practice sessions being arranged in twilight with the floodlights on, so that eyes are trained for every possible match situation.

'There is definitely more intensity in fielding drills than before and it has become more specialist,' Grayson says.

'Someone who fields deep cover or deep midwicket will practise boundary catches or running in to stop twos, while close fielders will concentrate on diving and under-arm shies at the stumps. The change in the way we think about fielding is emphasised by someone like Eoin Morgan, who does long-on at both ends for England. That is all part of the way the team under Andy Flower has been drilled. They all know their own games and know exactly where they need to go.

'Little differences can win games and so fielding becomes even more important: hunting



in packs, chasing the ball down in twos or relaying it back to the stumps. You only have one-and-a-quarter hours to field and players seem to have decided that they will give it their all before coming off.'

Conditioning of players has also come on in leaps and bounds in the past decade: Essex's squad, now au fait with regular ice baths, were given personalised diet plans at the start of the 2010 season and, whereas stop-offs at fast-food joints used to be the norm on long coach journeys back from away matches, they are now very much a scheduled treat.

'Body shapes and what players eat both pre- and post-match has changed considerably,' Grayson says.

'Protein shakes have become a staple part of the diet, guys are now even reluctant to have a beer, which is a big change from my playing days, and if they are not rehydrated sufficiently they are not allowed to take part in fitness work after the game.'

Sussex were market leaders in fitness in the early noughties, and their current 12-month-a-year programme is based upon building cricket-specific strength.

'Twenty20 has influenced players moving around the pitch in a more dynamic manner and you are now expected to dive, hit the ground and be strong enough to get back up without incurring injury due to the impact,' explains Robinson.

'We are looking for anaerobic rather than aerobic fitness – it's the short, sharp bursts that you want players to excel in, not run marathons. It's about being able to perform your action – whether it be bowling a ball, chasing in the field or running between the wickets, and then

make the right choices for your next move. Fitness has to be job specific and relate to performance, and that has to be supported by good nutrition and good sleep.

'We need players who can peak for events, although our events are complicated because our season is so congested. A lot of other sports involve peaking for a match on a Saturday, but we can't do that because we are playing five days a week. So endurance is another key part of being a professional cricketer.'

THE COACH'S EDGE

In 'quick' formats of sport, the smallest of gains can make the biggest of differences, particularly when results are settled by the narrowest of margins.

Encourage players to visualise what they are trying to accomplish and familiarise themselves with their upcoming surroundings – in cricket this may be the distance to each boundary, wind direction and general visibility.

Players with good technique can adapt, so spend designated periods on repetition drills.

Ensure individuals concentrate on skills specific to their role.

In short forms of a game, coaches look for anaerobic rather than aerobic fitness – it's the short, sharp bursts that you want players to excel in.

This article is taken from edition 20 of *Coaching Edge*, the subscription magazine of sports coach UK. Covering the latest methods and techniques, and featuring interviews with some of sport's leading figures, *Coaching Edge* is a must read.

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