

## **Bob Woolmer – the Darwin of cricket**

**by Tom Eaton – April 2007**

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It was a bright Cape Town morning; the cares of the build-up to the World Cup were months away; Pakistan's fortunes seemed to be on the rise, and Bob Woolmer was in fine form, holding court in his lounge at home.

His audience was small but fascinated. Clive During (the former editor of SA Cricket Action, this magazine's ancestor) and I had come to pick Bob's brain, to get him talking and writing on the last few topics he had not yet covered in the gigantic book on cricket that was to be his legacy; and once again we were off topic.

No conversation with Bob was linear: intriguing tangents were his forte, and for almost an hour, Bob had been taking us on a guided tour of some of cricket's most compelling questions. We were probably supposed to be talking about the grip for the flipper, but instead the discussion had wandered towards whether or not it was possible to manufacture a Test- or one-day batsman. For example, I had asked, would it be possible, or even advisable, to try to make a reckless showman more responsible, and therefore more consistent? Someone, say, like Shahid Afridi?

"Shahid Afridi..." sighed Bob theatrically, grinning. And then he said something that spoke volumes of the man and coach that Woolmer was. He just shrugged, and said, "Shahid is Shahid."

No sulks about inconsistent brilliance; no lectures about team men versus prima donnas. For Bob, his wild boy from the mountains of Pakistan (for whom he clearly had a very soft spot) was a cricketer like any other, blessed with certain gifts that should be treasured, and cursed with certain failings that should be worked on as far as possible and then ignored. To suggest to Bob that he should try to turn Afridi into a Mohammad Yousuf was to suggest that one try to turn a fast bowler into a leg-spinner. It could probably be done, with limited success; but what would be the point?

This was the brilliance of Woolmer: to cut through the theoretical and speculative nonsense, and to point out, simply but eloquently, that cricket is not astrophysics, but rather a sideways game, played along parallel lines, and that was that. Afridi was a phenomenal hitter, so let him hit.

But of course there is a difference between succinctness and simplicity. The concepts currently being explored at outer edge of modern science can no doubt be described in only a few hundred words, and their principles are as clean as a straight line or basic

arithmetic; but they boggle all but the most brilliant human minds. Bob saw this distinction, and for all his straight talk, and insistence that the game was being over-complicated, he never denied that cricket is a complex, subtle and often intuitive sport.

At his memorial service, and in some of the obituaries that followed his wrenching death, Bob was described as a missionary. It seemed a good analogy, given the boundless energy and almost religious fervour he had where spreading the gospel of cricket was concerned. But faith, to quote Richard Dawkins, is belief without evidence, and so perhaps religion is a weak metaphor, once one examines Bob's motives on his quest towards excellence. Certainly, Bob believed passionately in his job and the game it explored; but this was not belief without evidence: Bob had found the mechanics of the game, its quantum physics and sub-molecular particles, and was looking for something greater and simultaneously simpler. Bob was, to vastly simplify the achievements of Einstein, looking for a Unified Theory of Cricket.

Indeed, it was no coincidence that when Bob ultimately decided to record his life's research and insights in the form of a book, he turned to a scientist. Tim Noakes is the pre-eminent sports scientist in South Africa today, and as co-author of the impressive text, to be published later this year, fed Bob's hunger for intelligent, objective, and empirically provable facts. It was a perfect match. I saw firsthand the deep satisfaction Bob got out of reading and discussing Noakes' contributions to the book; and it seems that the feeling was mutual: at Bob's memorial, Noakes described the coach as one of the most influential people in his life. As Bob scratched and pondered and re-wrote, or stood up to test a cover-drive and to watch what the bottom hand did, you realised you were watching a man rediscover first principles for himself, like a Da Vinci fiddling with a bird's wing or a Galileo tinkering with spheres. Noakes is a sports scientist, but Bob, one felt, was a scientist sportsman.

This, then, is where the missionary analogy also fails. Missionaries teach and tell, but it is largely a one-way conversation: you accept what he says, or you show yourself out. Questions are encouraged, but only up to a point. And above all, the basic doctrine, passed on from generation to generation, is sacrosanct. All of this was anathema to Bob, who was ready and willing to challenge the very bedrock of cricket's conventional wisdom if it meant that the game could be played better, faster, more intelligently, and with more satisfaction to the players. And key to this was intelligence.

In our meetings, few things got him as irritated (if a mild rolling of the eyes and a slightly derisive snort could qualify as full-blown irritation) as stupid cricket; and for Bob, stupid cricket was unthinking cricket. Whether rash batting when consolidation was required, or pointless lines and lengths by bowlers, any cricket in which brains

had been put into neutral was utterly unacceptable to Bob. He was especially hard on fast bowlers: “Fast bowler, stupid bowler”, he’d snort from time to time, recalling moronic bouncer-barrages, or half-trackers dug in to masterful pullers and hookers, or macho sledging from bullies getting taken apart. (An exception, it seemed, was Allan Donald: when Bob spoke of the thoroughbred South African, his language and tone was what you might expect from the owner of a Lamborghini, describing the ritual of tuning the engine and nudging every last ounce of power out of the engine. In his eulogy Noakes said that he had always felt Jonty Rhodes had a very special place in Woolmer’s heart; but clearly working with Donald gave Bob immense satisfaction; the master technician tweaking the ultimate high-performance machine.)

The fastest route to stupid cricket, for Bob, was to follow conventional coaching methods unthinkingly (he had some extremely harsh words for some First Class coaches); methods that focussed only on the “how”. Good coaches, he believed, taught you the “how” – or at least checked that you were doing it right – but much more importantly, they communicated the “why”. And they communicated it in terms the student could understand, whether he was a 7-year-old learning how to hold a bat, or Donald needing someone to watch his pre-delivery gather: all cricketers carried equal weight for Bob, and all diagnoses needed to be equally carefully considered.

Indeed, it was typical of the sort of man he was that, just a week after the shattering semi-final loss at Edgbaston in 1999, a heartbreak he confessed was one of the darkest moments of his career, he was back in Cape Town coaching schoolboys at a clinic; partly because he’d promised to, but partly because that’s what coaches do: they coach.

There had been much talk in recent weeks about his legacy. A Bob Woolmer Cricket Academy is being planned in Nelspruit. His book, a magnum opus if ever there was one, is currently in the final stages of production. Gary Kirsten is being tipped as his natural successor, a thinking cricketer and passionate student of the game. But all these are reactions to the tragedy of his death. His legacy is not something friends, family and former players need to cobble together; because his legacy has been growing for the last twenty years, and today it is immense.

It was Bob, after all, who legitimised the reverse-sweep, encouraging Warwickshire’s Dermott Reeve to play the stroke in earnest. It was he who mentored Jonty Rhodes, helping the freakishly gifted Natalian to revolutionise the role of the fielder in the modern game. It was he who kept Donald firing on all cylinders. It was he who made it not only acceptable but essential for coaches to use digital media as tactical aides.

To look at this list is to see a startling collection of achievements: add the reverse-sweep to the fielding revolution; high-class fast bowling to laptop diagnostics, and

you have a cross-section of modern cricket. It is, in other words, not a wild exaggeration to suggest that Bob, more or less alone, dragged the sport into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Australians may claim (rightly) that it was they who pushed Test run-rates over four per over in 2000, but that escalation was based on half a decade, in the 1990s, of playing high-pressure one-day cricket. And that pressure, one could argue successfully, was injected into the international game by Rhodes at backward point, and Woolmer giving him the license to be brilliant.

When Bob spoke of the history of coaching, he spoke of two eras: “before video and after video”. It was a phrase that had epic overtones, as if coaching is a 5000-year-old profession; but even today there are those who doubt the efficacy of – and even the need for – cricket coaches. Recently an extremely respected cricket pundit – a legend of the game – wrote a brief piece on Bob and his work, and in the space of 500 words managed to show breathtaking contempt for the role of coaches, and of scientific coaching. It was startling, but not shocking: there is still a strong lobby in cricket, among the over-60 set, that insists coaching is irrelevant. After all, Bradman, Sobers and Pollock weren’t coached...

But such attitudes can no longer stand next to the overwhelming evidence compiled by Bob. The time of blind faith is over: cricket was not created intact in a flash of light 150 years ago. Bob Woolmer, the Charles Darwin of the game, knew that. The fittest survive. Small adaptations make all the difference. And things change. Cricket has changed, and will change again.

And perhaps, one day, we will speak of coaching “before Bob, and after Bob”.