

Umpire's Positioning

The following article is based on discussions at an umpiring workshop held by the Leinster Cricket Umpires' Association. Views and practices in relation to umpires' positioning have changed quite markedly over the last ten years so and this article attempts to set out some of the thinking behind those changes.

The striker's-end and bowler's-end umpires are considered separately. Throughout the injunction in Law 3.11 is paramount: *'The umpires shall stand where they can best see any action on which their decision may be required.'*

Striker's End

Which Side? The leg-side is preferred for reasons of tradition and also because the umpire is less likely to get in a fielder's way. Occasionally a fielder may be very square and there may be a risk of his unsighting the umpire (or vice versa). A quick word to find out the fielders' intentions will usually lead to a small adjustment which will avoid the problem; the umpire should be prepared to move a little to one side or deeper to accommodate the fielder.

Sometimes the side the umpire stands on will be determined by the position of the sun, fielders or the slope of the ground which will make it essential to go to the off side.

How Deep? Traditionally the stock reply was 'about the same distance as at the bowler's end'. However, since the bowler's-end umpire now tends to stand deeper (see below), it may need re-thinking. There is no obvious reason why the distances should be related at all. If there is a 30-yard fielding 'circle', the umpire will need to stand fairly close to the line to monitor the position of the fielders. Standing deeper also gives an improved view of the colleague and the bowler. Many umpires like to stand a little closer to the wicket and even a little backward of the popping crease when the wicket-keeper is standing up.

Crossing Over for Left- and Right-Handers. Usually any discussion of this topic leads to more heat than light, but on this occasion there was a remarkable unanimity.

In general, umpires need not cross over with a change of striker. Given that umpires will stand almost 30 yards from the wicket, crossing over involves a significant physical effort and will result in the game being held up. The possibility of moving 60 yards five times in an over hardly bears thinking about and, if continued over many overs, will almost certainly lead to a loss of concentration. Specifically, the management of the 30-yard 'circle' regulation is likely to suffer because crossing over will reduce the time for the umpire to check the positions of the fielders.

The advantages in sighting for stumping, wicket-keeper in front and slip catches were regarded as negligible compared to the disruption and fatigue. Of course the umpire should immediately cross over to the off side if there is a risk that Law 41.5 (fielders behind square on the leg side) may be infringed

Bowler's-End

Again the primary requirement is to stand where the umpire can see the important matters on which decision may be required. This means that the umpire will want a good view of the popping crease and to be able to pick up the ball as soon as possible after release while keeping the head still.

How Deep? This dual requirement means that the umpire will stand further back from the wicket than was traditional. The exact position will depend upon the relative heights of the bowler and the umpire as well as the closeness of the bowler's front foot to the popping crease. (Some bowlers never get any where near the crease, while other are always at risk of no-balling.)

The shorter the umpire and the taller the bowler, the further back the umpire will want to stand to pick up the ball early. Often this will result in an 'engineering compromise'; not quite far enough back to be completely comfortable but far enough forward to be able to watch the front foot. All this implies that the umpire may well stand in several different places during the match.

Bowler's Requests. In general any request from the bowler to stand up to the wicket or further back should be complied with. Of course the umpire must stand in line with the wickets and must resist any requests by the bowler to move offline. However, that apart, if there is a risk that an aspect of the umpire's role might be compromised, it is worth saying to the bowler that if there is a difficulty, the umpire will re-open discussion.

(Note that it is virtually impossible for a slow, round-the-wicket bowler to no ball on the back foot if the umpire is standing up to the wicket.) If the bowler is usually close to the popping crease, Darrell Hair has advised asking the bowler to give something in return in that area and to come back a little if possible. That at least shows that bowler that the umpire is watching the front foot. The initial response of wishing to comply with a bowler's request shows a willingness to accommodate players in getting on with the game.

Movement. After the ball is played, the bowler's-end umpire is required to move to the side to adjudicate run outs. It is important to avoid getting in the players' way and the umpire must also watch the batsmen in running to see that they do not run on the pitch or run short. The two last points can be managed with 'swift checking glances' or even using peripheral vision. The following sections consider the timing of the movement, the ideal and optimal positions to get to and finally which side to go to.

When to Move? The umpire should be poised to move quickly once the ball has been played. However, the umpire should not move too quickly otherwise s/he could be well to one side when raising the finger to dismiss a batsman lbw. While it may be a perfectly correct decision, it is unlikely to be accepted with a good grace by all concerned!

Where to Move to? The biggest priority is to be stationary at the moment of decision. Players probably expect the umpire to be square with the wicket for such judgments, but the umpires were less convinced. They thought that it was much less important to get absolutely square with the wicket which is ideal for the judgment of the bat on the crease.

An angle of 45 degrees will probably be enough in most circumstances. The further away from the wicket, the better because the wider angle will help to get both the popping crease and the wicket in the same field of view. (There will always be a tension between watching the crease and seeing the wicket broken, but that is a matter for another time!) A minimum of about 12 ft (4m) ? slightly more than a pitch width ? is probably acceptable.

This is another case of an 'engineering compromise' between the ideal solution and what is possible in the specific match situation.

Which Side? This has been a vexed question for several years. The traditional dictum was to go to the same side as the ball at all times. However, the faster game with more throws to the bowler's end has placed a greater emphasis on the umpire avoiding getting in the players' way ? not to mention getting hit by the ball! In effect this means that the umpire should try not to cross the line of the ball on its path from the fielder to either wicket.

This problem can be dealt with by two means. Firstly the bowler's-end umpire can take up a position less than square which provides a view of the receiver. However, this is probably not very practical. Secondly, striker's-end umpire can advise on whether the wicket is correctly broken.

This requires an important change in the duties of that umpire and would have to be embedded in umpiring practice.

Of course it is always important to keep out of the players' way when moving. An obvious danger is that of collision with the fielder backing up the throw. Again, this happens rarely in practice, but problems can be reduced by good awareness of the fielders' positions, particularly those square with the wicket and behind the wicket.

The less slavish attitude to getting absolutely square with the wicket, discussed above will also help to reduce the risk.

When moving to the offside there is risk of colliding with the striker who is required to run off the pitch and therefore runs wider. Umpires need to move the first few strides as quickly as possible to get outside the striker's line. (We have seen the strike behind the umpire!)

Conclusion

During this discussion we have replaced dogma by practical conclusions based on the logic of each situation and the over-riding consideration of the umpires' being in the best place to see 'any action on which their decision may be required.' A second important consideration is helping the players to get on with the game and keeping out of their way.

At the same time, we recognise that the ideal position may not be possible in all circumstances and that an intelligent, well thought out 'engineering compromise' will work very well. Making the adjustments will not be easy as many of us have found in learning to go to the side opposite the ball.

But then much of the satisfaction of umpiring lies in a difficult job well done. Managing these changes will require further development of teamwork between umpires and an increased awareness of fielders' positions.

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