

Cricket: The rules for the casual viewer

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Raymond Chen

The 2019 Cricket World Cup is under way. I learned cricket by reading the rules, never having seen a match. During the 2015 World Cup, I finally got to watch parts of a match on television with a colleague of mine, who patiently answered the questions I couldn't answer from reading the rules.

This is the first in a series of sporadic entries on “the minimum you need to know about a sport in order to watch a match and not be completely confused”. We'll see how it goes.

As I noted some time ago, most Web sites that try to explain the rules to a game get bogged down in irrelevant details, like the number of pieces of leather which are sewn together to make the ball. Let's assume that the equipment conforms to regulations, and that the players generally follow the rules.

Given those assumptions, here are the rules for cricket for the casual viewer.

- The object is to score more **runs** than your opponent.
- Each **side** (team) consists of eleven players.
- The playing area is bounded by a **boundary** line, and in the center is a lane (**pitch**) with a wooden contraption (a **wicket**) at each end.
- One side is **batting** and the other is **fielding**.
- The batting side places one **batsman** at each wicket. The remaining players from the batting side remain out of play.
- The fielding side may place its players pretty much anywhere they choose.
- One player from the fielding side (the **bowler**) bounces (**bowls, delivers**) the ball from behind one wicket toward the opposite wicket in an attempt to dislodge a piece of wood (the **bails**) which sits atop it.
- The batsman assigned to the attacked wicket (the **striker**) wields a **bat** in order to **defend** the wicket by using it to hit (or at least block) any ball that threatens to strike the wicket.

- Whenever the batsmen deem it safe (usually after the striker hits the ball a safe distance), they may attempt to exchange positions as many times as they wish. Each exchange scores a **run**. (Note that if an odd number of runs are scored, the non-striking batsman becomes the new striker.)
 - If the ball leaves the playing field, four runs are automatically scored.
 - If the ball leaves the playing field without hitting the ground, six runs are automatically scored.
- A batsman is **dismissed** or **out** when one of the following things occurs. (This list is not complete but covers what you will normally see.)
 - **Bowled**: The bowled ball dislodges the bails.
 - **Caught**: The striker hits the ball, and a fielder catches it inside the boundary before it hits the ground.
 - **Stumped / Run out**: A batsman is **out of his ground** (not in the safe zone near each wicket), and the fielding team throws the ball and dislodges the bails. (The striker is **stumped** if this occurs without ever hitting the ball; a batsman is **run out** if this occurs when trying to exchange places after the ball is hit.)
 - **Leg Before Wicket (LBW)**: The striker would have been bowled, except that the striker blocked the path of the ball with his body. This is a judgement call by the umpire, and consequently is a fertile source for argument.
- For various offenses the umpire may declare a batsman out (to penalize the batting side) or award runs (to penalize the fielding side).
- A set of six balls (an **over**) is bowled toward one wicket by a single bowler, and then the fielding team must change bowlers. At this time, the bowler changes ends so that the ball is delivered to the other wicket. (The batsmen do not change ends, so that the non-striking batsman becomes the new striker.)
- When a batsman is out, he is replaced by a teammate who is not yet out.
- After ten batsmen are dismissed, the fielding side becomes the batting side, and the batting side takes the field. (Ten is the magic number because that leaves the batting side with only one player. Batting requires two batsmen, one for each wicket.)
- After each side gets two turns in the field and two turns at bat, the match is over, and the side with more runs is the winner.

Traditionally, a cricket match is played over five days. If five days elapse and the match is not yet finished, the entire match is declared a **draw** regardless of the score. A side that has the lead may choose to forfeit its remaining outs (**declare**) in order to try to finish the match before time runs out.

There are variations of the rules designed to shorten the length of a match. The most common variation is to limit the number of overs.

Notes

- A no-bounce delivery is permitted by the rules, but it does not occur in practice because bouncing the ball confers an advantage to the bowler. There was also the infamous [underarm bowling incident of 1981](#).
- There are two general classes of bowler: **fast bowlers** rely on speed; **spin bowlers** use spin to produce a trajectory that is difficult to predict.
- The ball starts the match smooth and hard, but becomes rough and soft as the match progresses. Fast bowlers prefer a hard ball, because it bounces faster. Spin bowlers prefer a more worn ball, because the roughness allows the ball to grip the ground better, thereby imparting more spin.
- Bowlers rub the ball against their trousers in order to make one side of the ball smoother than the other. The aerodynamic difference between the smooth side and the rough side allows the bowler to impart more curve to the ball.
- The rules for catches at the boundary are rather complex. You can watch [these videos](#) to get an intuitive sense for how it works. For something more boring, watch [this instructional video](#).
- In a game-theoretic sense, the batting team is on the offensive (since they are the ones who score runs). Psychologically, however, the batting team is on the defensive, trying to protect their wicket and avoid being dismissed.

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