

Runners, Obstructing the field and other matters

The International Cricket Council (ICC) says its decision to do away with runners in international cricket is because there had been "widespread abuse of the rule that allowed batsmen to ask for runners in the event of an injury". The Law that relates to runners has been formally part of cricket as far back as 1884 and perhaps even before then, but the ICC decided to change its playing conditions on the matter after its Cricket Committee recommended such a move at its annual meeting in May.

ICC chief Haroon Lorgat said "It's quite a difficult one for umpires to determine whether there has been a real injury to batsmen or whether it was a tactical use of runners, but there is a strong feeling that runners were used not in the right spirit".

The move was also an attempt to redress disparity between batsmen and bowlers, said Lorgat, for "if a bowler gets injured you can't continue bowling for the rest of the day and the feeling was that it would be better to not allow the use of runners".

In the 2009 Champions Trophy, England captain Andrew Strauss refused to allow his South African counterpart Graeme Smith a runner after Smith requested one due to cramp. Strauss said cramp was a side-effect of a long innings while Smith claimed runners had been granted for that reason in the past, pointing to an inconsistency in the rule's implementation. At the time the ICC agreed with Strauss' view.

Cricket Australia (CA) plans to introduce the 'no runners' rule into the playing conditions for its first class, one-day and Twenty20 domestic competitions for the 2011-12 season. Sean Cary, CA's umpires manager said "if the ICC went ahead with the 'runner' proposal, CA would automatically apply it in the playing conditions of interstate competitions".

In addition to the runner ban, CA is also understood to be planning to introduce other one-day playing conditions that were agreed to by the ICC this week. They include: restricting elective powerplays to between the sixteenth and fortieth overs of each innings; that batsmen should be dismissed (obstructing the field) if they change their course while running to prevent a run-out chance and the running out of a non-striker who is backing up unfairly

Whether some, all or none of the new rules will filter down to Australian Grade or Premier League club level is expected to be up to individual state cricket bodies to decide.

However, the Marylebone Cricket Club's (MCC) World Cricket Committee (WCC) believes that the International Cricket Council's (ICC) recent decision to ban runners in matches played under its auspices is a "a disappointing reflection on the 'Spirit of Cricket' at international level". The committee also considered the ICC's move on playing conditions that cover obstructing the field and the ability of a bowler to 'run out' the non-striker.

The WCC said that it heard one example of a lower-order batsman using a runner, claiming a hamstring strain, who then came out and opened the bowling. Nevertheless, it felt strongly that a batsman with a genuine injury will now be penalised because some players have recently been seeking to exploit the Law by requesting a runner when they are not injured. In its view an ICC decision two years ago that cramp should be considered an injury or illness has also made it easier for a batsman to have a runner.

A batsman who tears a hamstring will now have to continue batting and try to run, thereby risking aggravating the injury, or retire hurt, which could be akin to the loss of a wicket, says the WCC. Also, if runners are not allowed, then substitute fielders should not be allowed either, as this too was an area that is often abused it says. Instead of banning runners, "stronger umpiring" should be sufficient to solve such problems, says the committee, and that includes suspected breaches being reported under Law 42.18 (Players' conduct) as well as the 'Spirit' Preamble to the Laws.

The MCC committee went on to say that the approach umpires take also plays a key part in the obstructing the field issue. While it supported the ICC's decision that its umpires uphold appeals for obstructing the field when a batsman has deliberately changed his running path in order to prevent a throw from hitting the stumps, the WCC says that the Law concerned "has not changed in any way. Rather, ICC and MCC felt that a reminder was needed to inform players of what the Law says". Former West Indian umpire Steve Bucknor, who is a WCC member, "hoped that umpires would more closely monitor batsmen who run across the pitch while attempting to block a throw", as that in itself is a breach of Law 42.14 which deals with Batsman damaging the pitch.

On the other hand the decision by the world body to change its playing conditions in regard to a bowler running out the non-striker was welcomed by the WCC and the issue is to be referred to the MCC's Laws sub-committee for consideration. The ICC move means that in its games from 1 October, a bowler will be able to run out the non-striker "slightly later" in his delivery stride than is currently allowed.

This article contains some copy from the Tasmanian Electronic Newsletter