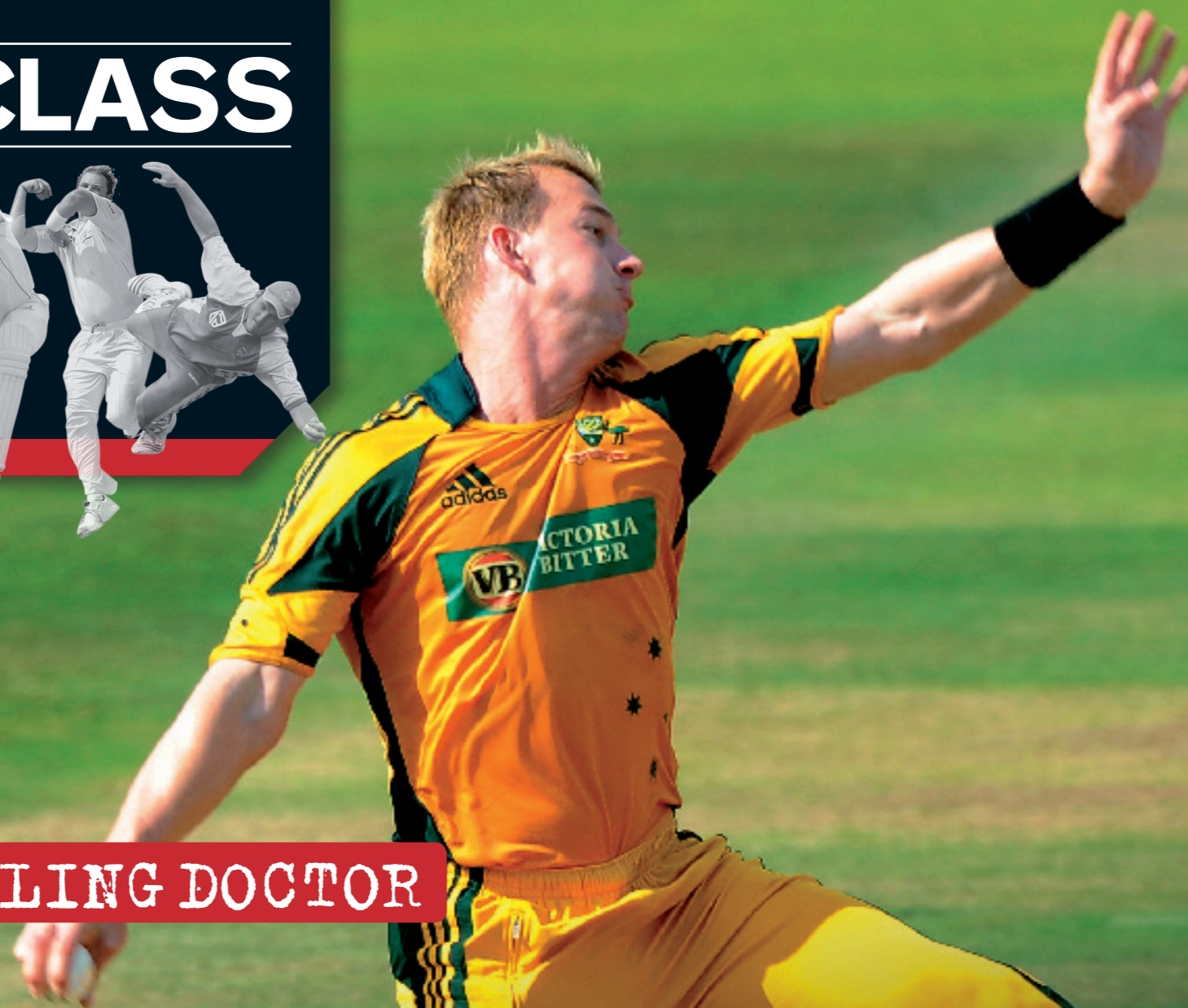


MASTERCLASS

FOR ANY
YOUNG LADS
OUT THERE...



THE FAST BOWLING DOCTOR

WITH IAN PONT

THE DROP-STEP.

As with my previous lessons, perhaps the most important thing I'll be emphasising today is that you shouldn't think that you are bowling with your hand or your arm or even your shoulder – as a fast bowler, your power should come from further down, from your legs and specifically your hips.

This month, I'm talking about the 'drop step, front-foot block'. Javelin throwers all use this technique and I believe that fast bowlers can learn from them.

WHAT IT IS

A 'drop-step front-foot block' is simpler than maybe it sounds. It means that in your bowling stride, your front leg is straight, while your back leg is bent as you drag your back foot through the crease and bowl.

You're trying to create a shoulder-hip separation ie you're trying to get your shoulders and your hips 90 degrees apart from each other. Reaching that position, with your arm out behind you, you create a stretch reflex – ie your arm will be propelled forwards as your body naturally, instinctively moves your shoulders back to

facing forwards, in alignment with your hips. That stretch reflex movement creates power from the core of the body.

A NEW WAY OF THINKING

This technique isn't what most cricket coaches will tell you: they'll tell you not to bend your back leg at any cost. They believe you shouldn't 'collapse' your back leg in your bowling stride because you'll end up delivering the ball from a lower position.

But the simple fact is that everybody collapses their back leg as they drive through the crease. Rather than trying to coach fast bowlers to avoid doing it, I want to make them aware that, in fact, this is where a lot of their power comes from.

The idea that a snapshot of a bowler at point of delivery will show the body standing straight and tall like a column, the ball 12 inches above the bowler's full height is simply wrong. At point of delivery, the body shape is more or less a 'V' shape: the legs and the top body make a right angle.

When Brett Lee's front foot lands, his hips are set back at about 45 degrees from

his foot. His top half is thrown forward, 45 degrees from his hips, creating a 'V' shape. Lee's head is probably at chest-height to the non-striking batsman. Lee is 6'1" – but when he delivers the ball his head is at around 5'4". Your back leg will come through bent anyway. What I want to do is show you why consciously working on bending your back leg in the right way will make you a faster.

WHY IT WORKS

Try running over the road and tripping over the kerb – when you hit the kerb, your foot stops and your top half is thrown forward. And the same principle applies in fast bowling – in a more controlled way.

Once you 'block' your front foot – ie you drop it straight, as an anchor to your action – the top half of your body and ultimately your bowling arm shoot forward.

You're looking to take advantage of your shoulder-hip separation, by creating a stretch reflex ie if your arm is out behind you – meaning your hips and shoulders are at 90 degrees to each other – it will be automatically snapped forwards as

your hips and shoulders snap back into alignment.

People often describe this as a 'slingshot' effect but that's confusing – it makes it sound like you are a 'slinger' and implies that only the likes of Malinga or Shoaib Akhtar achieve speed in this way. In fact, every fast bowler uses this stretch reflex to a certain extent'.

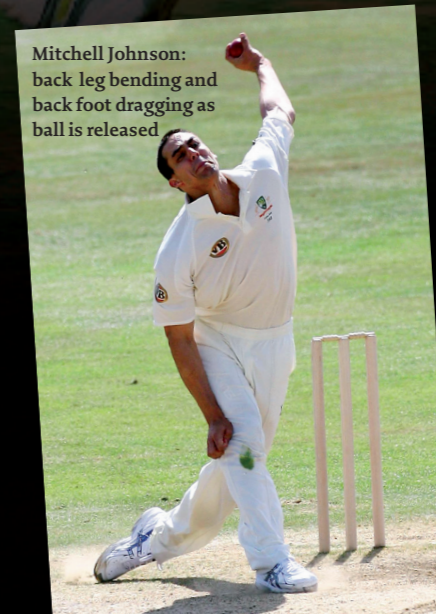
WHO DOES THE DROP STEP?

Every fast bowler does it – consciously or coached or not. But look in particular at Shoaib Akhtar, Mitchell Johnson and Brett Lee. To my mind, none of these has what I would call a perfect 'drop-step front-foot block'. But all use the technique of hip-shoulder separation to power their action.

Shoaib Akhtar, for example, does not have a fully straight front leg when he bowls – but his use of the hip-shoulder separation and the resulting stretch reflex is about the best there is: he gets his bowling arm right behind his head and as his front foot lands, his body and his bowling arm are driven forwards with great power.

WHAT TO DO

Land softly with your back foot – not hard as most coaches tell you: you don't want to stop dead and lose the momentum of your run-up. You are then looking to drag that back foot through the crease for as long as you can through your action. Keep your front leg straight, so that it hits the ground quite hard. Just before it does, bend your



Mitchell Johnson: back leg bending and back foot dragging as ball is released

in practice



Javelin throwers throw with their legs. And a big part of my coaching, writes Ian Pont, is to encourage bowlers to do the same – because that is where the power will come from. Javelin-throwing is all about maximising power through technique. The last thing a javelin thrower does is throw the javelin – and the last thing a cricketer does is bowl the ball: everything else has to be in place first.

The vast majority of fast bowlers who come to me, especially young fast bowlers, have concentrated on their upper-body and on getting speed from their shoulders and arms. This means

they are missing out on all the extra power that can be achieved by making sure feet, knees and hips and providing the right base for the action.

The principles for the drop-step front-foot block are the same as in javelin: the only difference is that a javelin thrower is looking to launch it miles into the air whereas a cricketer has to bring the ball down within 22 yards. And, after working on the drop step, you may find yourself pitching very full with your extra power at first – those who try to get extra pace purely from their arm often ending up bowling too short.

back knee. As your back leg comes through, with your back foot dragging along the ground, your knees will come level with each other and your hips will shoot forward.

WALKING IT THROUGH

You can walk this though now, at home. Bring your right/back leg – with your foot pointing forward – down and just before your (straight) front leg hits the floor, start to bend your knee and drag your foot. As your front leg hits the floor, your knees should be level with each other: your bent back leg is pulled through, as your bowling arm comes over. Your knees will be level as your arm comes over, meaning your hips are now facing forwards. Instead of thinking of an (unrealistically) 'high' action, you are creating extra power from this consciously lower position.

• Ian Pont has been coach to Darren Gough and Dale Steyn and runs courses for players of all ages. Maverickscricquet.com. More from the fast bowling doctor – plus the return of Batting Doctor Gary Palmer – next month.