

FT Magazine Cricket

The irresistible mystery of the beautiful batsman

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Until 1995, the year my family moved back to India and I joined a new school there, I'd watched very little cricket. So a classroom full of teenage boys felt to me like an abbey to a novitiate. Everyone knew all the scripture; everyone already existed in a higher plane of bliss and enlightenment. Fortunately, a new friend saved my soul. Under Ravi's wing, I soaked up the basics — once he drew an oval on a piece of paper and quizzed me on fielding positions — but also his particular predilections. Which was how I learnt that he maintained, in his head, two lists of batsmen to love: the empirically best ones, of course, the ones who made heaps of runs or who made their runs fast, but also, less obviously, those who made their runs most beautifully.

In the latter camp were several inconsistent players who wilted under pressure or produced mostly modest scores. The Sri Lankan Marvan Atapattu managed five 0s and a 1 in his first six innings, as if he was batting in binary code. He got better, but it almost didn't matter. Ravi loved him all the same.

As I grew consumed by cricket, I found that Ravi wasn't alone. Anyone who talked about the game, or wrote about it, treasured some batsmen for their beauty. On broadcasts, a commentator would often let out a soft "Oh!", or fall momentarily silent, when one such batsman coaxed the ball to the straight boundary. I felt the urge too, as if I'd mislaid my breath. Even a defensive shot, drawing the sting out of the ball and dropping it dead on the ground, was described as beautiful. There were plenty of euphemistic adjectives for these batsmen: "elegant" was one, "effortless" another. Here's the crux, though: it was almost always the same batsmen, as if selected through some unspoken consensus. And even without explanation, I found that I intuitively discerned this beauty. I understood in my gut why one made the cut and the other didn't.

The Australian twins Mark and [Steve Waugh](#) were the canonical example of my boyhood, separated by four minutes at birth but by an aesthetic gulf otherwise, because Mark was universally held to be the stylish one. Not once did anyone argue the opposite. When I first watched them, during the 1996 World Cup, I seemed to see it right away. They batted together for a while in the quarter-final, and where Steve trod heavily, nudging or flaying the ball, Mark was feline, his paws landing surely, his weight balanced, his strokes easy but true. Once, after he reached his century, he refined the position of his feet by the merest inch and sent a ball to the boundary; it took more energy for me to gasp than it did for him to play that shot.

Other beautiful batsmen were unexpected. Inzamam-ul-Haq, from Pakistan, wobbled and shambled as he walked, but at the crease he transformed into a light, nimble man. Sometimes beauty went against the run of play: beauty in a despairing cause, beauty cut short swiftly, beauty as an alternate reality to the business of winning and losing.

I cannot think of another sport that prizes beauty so highly. In cricket, everything is aesthetics, down to the white uniforms and the red ball on a field of utmost green. [CLR James](#), the archdruid of cricket writers, wanted to include images of Greek statues in his book *Beyond a Boundary*, to draw comparisons with the harmony and balance of the cricketers he admired. There is beauty in how a spinner drifts a ball through the air, and in how the cordon of fielders advances and retreats together after every delivery, in a rhythm that is almost respiratory.

Batting, though, is singular in its evocation of beauty, and even the unbeautiful players know it. [Mike Brearley](#), the former England captain, told me about a batting partner of his at Middlesex named Mike Smith, a very good county player but one with “an off-putting technique”, in which he shifted clumsily into his position to play the ball. Once, when Brearley commiserated with him about not being picked for a team, Smith shrugged. If you’re a selector and you aren’t sure which of two equally good batsmen to pick, he told Brearley, you should pick the more beautiful player. Beauty, he implied, is cricket at its best.

Through decades of following the game, I never came across any codifications of this beauty, any convincing scheme to define it in real terms. Perhaps dissecting beauty is like pulling apart a butterfly's wings to see how they function — an exercise that kills the thing it loves. Too often, elucidations of the abstract notion of beauty end up demystifying it. We're told beauty is subjective, that it boils down to the neurons, chemicals and proclivities behind the beholder's eye. Or that it is a social construct, varying between societies or over time.

But all this just makes beautiful batting too delicious to ignore. Here we have a constant, rare, cross-cultural unanimity, which at least raises the old-fashioned thought that beauty is an inherent quality, existing in the world just waiting to be recognised. Somewhere in this investigation, I figure, there must be a greater truth about cricket, or about how the human body moves, or about how we see the world outside our heads.

In cricket, you encounter beauty early. "I think when you first start playing cricket with the under-10s, you're aware of the people who look good," Steve Waugh told me. "They're the ones you want to watch in the nets. They're relaxed and loose, and it all seems to come easy to them." Steve is an all-time great, the player you'd choose to bat for your life or to come good on any kind of wicket, thanks to his technique and his bloody-mindedness. "It was funny, later on, when Mark would be described as the really talented one, when it was the opposite," he said. "When we were young, I probably had more natural talent."

There was something about Mark Waugh, though. For one, he played the conventional strokes — the drive through the covers, the cut square, the whip to leg — perfectly, and in a sport that holds convention dear, that counts a lot towards beauty. After KS Ranjitsinhji, an Indian prince in England, began playing the unusual leg glance in the 1890s, clipping the ball almost off his hip, it was said of him that he "never played a Christian stroke in his life". The remark was made in disdain.

The leg glance may well be the last new stroke to subsequently be deemed beautiful over time. “The beautiful thing seems — is — incomparable, unprecedented,” Elaine Scarry, the scholar of aesthetics, once wrote. But the cricket spectator, I think, wants the comparable and the preceded, wants a shot to hew to its Platonic ideal in a classical, dare I say ossified, vision of the sport. (I love that vision, mind you, count me among the fuddy-duddies.) Batters today paddle the ball right over their heads and over the boundary behind them — a new shot, forged in the nuclear heat of the compressed Twenty20 game, but unlikely to ever be called “beautiful” in quite the same way as the classic cover drive.

“I think it was also Mark’s flair, the way he finished his shot,” Waugh told me. I went to YouTube and saw what he meant — the bat’s further curlicue of motion at the finish, just south of flamboyance. I remember that in Brian Lara, the Trinidadian genius, as well — the tiny leap back and across as the ball was delivered, the bat lifted back almost umbrella-vertical in readiness to crack down upon the ball, the strokes rendered in the baroque, but never wasteful or excessive.

This, too, fits neatly with cricket’s initial conception of itself: a game for amateurs with quirks, rather than professionals milled from the same machine, a game so unhurried it is almost anti-efficiency. When Brearley batted for Cambridge, the cricket writer John Woodcock told him, with what Brearley describes gently as “a certain old-fashioned snobbery”, that he played like a professional rather than an amateur. It wasn’t a compliment.

Even the word “effortless”, so inevitably linked to batting beauty, must be a relic of cricket’s history. “There was a class angle to it,” Brearley said. The gentlemen originally playing cricket weren’t the kind who wished to be seen sweating and exerting themselves. That was left to the village blacksmith, who could run in and bowl fast or, as Brearley put it, “swing the bat with strong arms, brute force, not economy of effort. They’re the labourers, they’re the feet. We, the batsmen, are the head. We’re the polish.” In *Beyond a Boundary*, James recalls reading “of a player a hundred years ago that he was elegance, all elegance, fit to play before the Queen in her parlour”. You didn’t perspire before the Queen.

The label of being beautiful — or not — sticks. In 1999, in a Test match in Jamaica, Steve Waugh and Lara both hit centuries, but Waugh made his considerably faster. “I remember reading reports of the match, saying Lara scored a graceful, elegant 100, whereas Steve Waugh scored a gritty 100,” Waugh said. It still rankles. “Once you have the tag, it doesn’t change.”

The beautiful players feel the pinch, too. “To the detriment of their career, they think they’ve got to play that way all the time,” Waugh said. “Sometimes, if you aren’t in form, you have to get down and dirty and play ugly to survive, to get through it. Some of these players think, ‘Well, I can’t do it, that’s not my style,’ so they play a shot that’s probably not on. They feel they can’t play an ugly innings because people don’t expect that from them.” Being celebrated as beautiful can become its own curse.

On the premises of Loughborough University, the National Cricket Performance Centre serves as a kind of research lab for the England cricket team. It has a practice area that can be heated to resemble a Dubai afternoon, a performance analysis suite to pore over video footage and a biomechanics unit in which cameras track both ball and players. It also has Stuart McErlain-Naylor, who usually describes himself as “a biomechanist who’s had to learn cricket, rather than a cricketer who’s had to learn biomechanics”, and who studies the primal act of the sport: how best to smite the ball.

The hardest part of investigating batting, McErlain-Naylor told me, was trying to define what makes one stroke “better” than another. “Maybe that’s why there’s so little research into batting, because we don’t know what it is we should be measuring in the first place.” He decided to focus on a simple question with an objective solution: how to hit the ball as far as possible. In itself, that doesn’t relate to beauty; if anything, an overt exhibition of power in cricket runs counter to the idea of effortless style. But perhaps there are concordances? “When a thing works better, usually it is more beautiful to the eye,” Enzo Ferrari tells his son in the film [Ferrari](#). If form follows function, I reflected, maybe I could learn something about form by understanding function better.

To optimise what McErlain-Naylor, borrowing a golf term, calls “carry distance”, two factors matter more than any other: the speed with which the bat swings, and the spot on the bat where it strikes the ball. In the first of many studies, 20 volunteers, ranging from club cricketers to senior England internationals, put on Lycra suits and reflective markers — the kind that actors in a movie like *Avatar* wear before they’re draped in CGI — and tried to swat balls for six straight down the ground. McErlain-Naylor’s team tracked their bodies, the snap of their wrists, the angle of their elbows, the slope of their shoulders, all the instinctive quantifications of batting mechanics.

The studies yielded some physiological truths: a sequence of three movements that produced the longest hits. First, the shoulders and hips pulled away from each other as the batter twisted into a coiled position, like a golfer at the height of a swing. McErlain-Naylor, seated on a Zoom call, demonstrated this well enough to remind me of *contrapposto*, the idealised stance of ancient Greek statues of discus throwers and warriors: shoulders thrown away from the hips, chest expanded, one leg more tense than the other, the frame taut and strong. Next, the most effective batters flexed their front elbow at the top of the swing and straightened it back out as they brought the bat through their stroke. Finally, they cocked and uncocked their wrists — a final lash of momentum.

It’s a tremendous package of co-ordination and power to fit into a matter of microseconds, and it struck me that maybe we find it more pleasing when shorter, slighter players manufacture this. The ranks of beautiful batters are stuffed with small cricketers — Lara, a meagre 5ft 8in, foremost among them. Just as impressive, though, is the cricketer who seemingly manages it all with time to spare, who never appears rushed into action.

James Moore, a psychologist who studies voluntary movement, and who singled out the compact Englishman Ian Bell as among the most elegant players he's seen, told me that the brain craves certainty and likes things that flow predictably. "Economy of movement and timing enhance predictability," he said. "With those who muscle their way through, there are more moving parts, therefore less economy of movement and less predictability." The best-timed strokes, the most beautiful ones, are those that appear to require nothing beyond a minimal, sweet connection with the ball. "Great art," he said, "offers no more and no less than the subject matter requires."

In the coal-mining region of Essen, in Germany, there was no cricket around when Guido Orgs was growing up. Orgs found gymnastics instead; then he studied contemporary dance and psychology. He's a man of such breadth and height that one imagines him forever earthbound. "Jumping is really hard, but the idea in ballet is that when you jump, it looks light, like there's no gravity," he said. Like cricket, ballet's modern form emerged during the 18th and 19th centuries. "Everything was all about class then, and about proving status," he said, so you never wanted to engage in visibly physical labour. "In dance, the emphasis on showing effort as a virtue — that's a much more modern thing."

At University College London, Orgs now researches movement and exercise neuroscience, but he has also devoted years to the brain's perception of the aesthetics of human movement. Being a dancer helped. He knew things already. Like: "A beautiful movement in dance is one that has big changes in speed — very fast to very slow — but done very smoothly." Or that we like symmetry, clean lines and firm angles. I recalled a sentence from an Edna St Vincent Millay poem: "Euclid alone has looked on Beauty bare." Even for the most mathematically uninclined minds, geometry is the fount of visual pleasure.

In an early study, Orgs assembled a group of “dance-naive” participants and showed them images of people holding various poses as part of a sequence of motion, as if they were from a flipbook of a man doing jumping jacks. Among these individual images, Orgs recorded a preference for “maximally symmetrical postures”, the ones echoing the ordinal organisation of Leonardo da Vinci’s Vitruvian Man. From the air, what is a cricket ground but a compass rose? The square cut and the straight drive — two of the three most beautiful strokes in cricket — send the ball due west (or east, for a left-hander) or south. The cover drive, the last of the trio, bisects those directions precisely — a maximally symmetrical shot.

More generally, our minds also like to categorise things, Orgs told me: “The moment something is a perfect example of a category, you can put a name to it. Our minds like to categorise.” A “prototypical” dog, representative of all dogness, pleases the brain — and, I imagine so does a prototypical square cut, hewing to the purest version of itself.

In movement, too, we want temporal symmetry, actions that end the way they begin. Here is Lara’s cover drive, in the poor approximation of text: the bat rises so high behind him it’s almost pointing directly above, then flashes down at the ball, then carries on through in its momentum until it is nearly back where it started, in front of the body but gesturing at the same patch of sky. “If I give you a symmetrical movement, you watch half of it and you know the other half, you can complete it in your head,” Orgs said. “It can be more efficiently processed, which means it costs the brain less energy. We’ve evolved to always try to spend as little energy as possible.” That impulse translates into a gratification so keen we feel it as pleasure.

In another experiment, Orgs showed his subjects excerpts from a choreographed piece named “Duo”. Each excerpt was recorded twice — first to capture a dancer performing it at a constant pace throughout, then again with an emphasis on dynamic changes in speed and energy. People liked the moves that varied in their velocity profile, Orgs told me: rest interspersed with a fluid burst of energy. Like a batter in his crease, I thought, poised until he explodes into action, in a pattern that repeats through his innings — very different from the continuous motion of an Olympic swimmer in the 400m, say, or a Formula One car racing around the track. “We tend to think these dynamic moves are harder to do, even if they aren’t — and we like to see things that are harder to do, that we think are beyond us.”

There must be more, naturally, more than dynamic velocity and symmetry and *contrapposto* and the history of the English class system. None of these, as yet, explains the joyful wrench in your innards when you watch Lara smoke one through the covers. But now we’re running up against the limits of science as we know it, which means we’re doomed to remain perplexed. Maybe Keats had it right. Beauty is truth, truth is beauty, and one ineffable thing can only be explained in the terms of another.

Beauty is mysterious even to its creator. In my father’s generation, the most beautiful English batsman was [David Gower](#), a left-hander whose cover drives felt preordained since the dawn of time. He first played for his country in 1978, “a non-streaming age”, as he told me, when “you watched the highlights or nothing”. Until he appeared on TV, he’d never had the chance to watch himself bat. “You’re not really worried about how you look, until you know that people are looking at you and saying nice things.”

When he did watch himself, I asked, did he ever think, “Now I understand what people mean when they call my batting beautiful”? Gower laughed. “Modesty prevails here.”

Sometimes, after the day's play, fielders from the other team would come to Gower to say they were always surprised at how hard the ball came to them off his bat. Gower made batting look simple — as simple “as drinking a cup of tea” the great Yorkshire batsman Len Hutton once said — but it was also the only way he knew how to bat. At school, his tutors tried to shape him only very slightly, leaving his natural manner intact. As a boy, he admired three other left-handers: the South African Graeme Pollock, the West Indian Garry Sobers and the Englishman John Edrich, who he describes respectively, as “muscular”, “flamboyant” and “nuggety”. He ended up batting like none of them.

Could he coach a young, unformed pupil to play beautifully? Gower thought about this hypothetical. You could, he supposed, give them some hints. Don't try to hit the ball too hard. Your arms go here. Your legs go like this. “But in the end, they will all end up with their own game. It's like the position of the nose on your face, or the size of your ears,” he said. “If you play sport in a way that looks beautiful, it's like you've lucked out genetically.” Besides, why would you even try? You'd want your ward to score runs. “If you do it beautifully — well, that's just cream on top.”

For beauty to even exist in sport feels like a miracle, since beauty is not the point. This is more true today than ever, given that both play and players are engineered for efficiency. Bats, diets, muscles, rules — everything has been tightened and tuned to the mass production of runs. Yet, fortunately, the game is still played by humans, each of whom is singular. Some bring beauty to their craft not because they've been coached into it but because they are who they are — an increasing rarity. It is precisely the non-essential nature of beauty that makes it, somehow, essential. Beauty doesn't matter, and yet it's there. That's the beauty of it.

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