

Negative runs can better the commerce and bat-ball fairness of T20s

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It is often said that modern limited-overs cricket is an unfair game between the bat and the ball, and more so the brash-hitting twenty-twenty (T20) cricket where bat heavily dominates the ball. There are many factors that add value to this statement. To start with, most pitches for T20 matches are batsmen friendly to ensure a constant influx of boundaries and sixes that provide viewer satisfaction. Second, bats have become thicker these days, to the extent, even risky edges off the bat go for boundaries and sixes on small grounds. Third, fielding restrictions in the modern T20 (or even ODI) game inside or outside the power play zone are heavily in favor of the batsmen scoring boundary runs. Fourth, no balls result in a free-hit. Fifth, a bowler can only bowl one bouncer an over. Sixth, the white ball used in T20 or ODI cricket, compared to the red ball, is popularly known not to swing enough. Seventh, in certain parts of the world like the Indian subcontinent, the popular 'dew factor' plays the role of a dampener to quality bowling during night times. Eight, in some parts of the world, the boundary sizes for limited overs cricket are made too small when compared to the modern bat quality and shot innovations. Finally, in T20 cricket, a bowler is often penalized for bad bowling with a four or a six against his/her name, whereas a batsman is at most out for a good delivery but mostly get off with either a zero or a single run in his/her favor, or sometimes even lucky to get a boundary off inside or outside edges. All of these factors ultimately contribute to increased number of boundaries and sixes in games induced by relatively risk-free and stress-free play by batsmen, and favors increased viewership; a consequent increase in TRP ratings; and the commercial gains to all stakeholders involved with T20 cricket competitions. These stakeholders include advertisers (both print and media), cricket boards, players, team management staff, television and streaming channels, and last but not the least on-field entertainment agencies.

In the midst of the soaring popularity of the commerce-friendly and bat-ball unfair T20 cricket, there is a 'hidden' dimension – bowler fitness, both psychological and physical, that often gets side-lined or ignored for the greater economic good. However, this dimension is of vital importance to (a) the long-term sustainability of good performance by quality bowlers who are in demand by their national boards to often play all the three formats of the game, and (b) the development of quality bowlers for longer-versions (e.g., test matches) of the game often touted by most cricket pundits as the real platform to judge career success. One could intuitively gauge that an increase in T20 cricket combined with the inherent unfairness between the bat and the ball in limited overs cricket has contributed to the negligence of bowler fitness and its consequential negative impact on sustainable quality bowling in longer versions of cricket over the years. One recent striking example (out of quite a few) of a bowler-fitness issue is attributed to the recently concluded (2021) Test series between Indian and Australia, where nearly all of the front-line test match bowlers from India broke down before the final match of the series – the reason given by many experts to be a combination of the out-of-schedule IPL of 2020 and the long COVID break. To see how sustainable quality bowling in test cricket might be affected with the 'aforementioned unfairness' factors in operation in limited overs cricket, to start with – quality bowlers in T20 cricket need to strive extra hard, both physically and mentally, to just keep a few runs down for their team – simply because dot balls are like 'gold dust', and at most times the root cause behind getting a wicket due to pressure created on the batsman to not waste balls. This is not so much the case, if at all, in ODIs or test cricket. This pushes quality bowlers to focus on bowling fast yorkers, slower bouncers, low flighted spin, immaculate line and lengths (that differ between test cricket and T20 cricket) most of the time in a span of their allotted four overs to constrain run flow from the batsmen. For pace bowlers, apart from an added psychological pressure to deliver, this significantly increases their risk of contracting thigh and hamstring injuries. Unfortunately, the stakes and economics of the cash rich T20 leagues are quite high and incentivizes most players to look attractive for these leagues despite the perfect knowledge on the increase of their chances of injury, and a subsequent decrease in their chances of playing the longer versions of the game. Moreover, a sequence of failures by bowlers in the much-watched T20 arena to get their team over the line often affects their future selection prospects in other non-related formats of the game. Few remember how many good balls one bowled if the team lost – only correlating the number of runs given away as an indicator of how badly one bowled and not how unlucky one was, thereby enforcing the 'winner takes all' mentality characteristic of the selectors in such a game.

The radical concept of a negative run for T20 cricket, can offer three simultaneous benefits: better the commercial prospects of the T20 game, and improve the much desired bat-ball fairness (that will subsequently lead to improved bowler fitness). Simply put, according to the concept ***for every dot ball bowled (that is not a wicket ball), the batting team gets a point off from their score instantly; alternatively, the team scores a negative run.*** We concisely justify that this updated T20 scoring method has the potential to simultaneously achieve the following three **significantly major goals:**

(I) Much Improved Bat-Ball Fairness in Real-Time- The obvious thing to note is that *taking points off in real-time will continually maintain a sense of scoring fairness between bat and ball throughout the game.* A negative run will on one hand act an incentive mechanism for the fielding side (and the bowlers) to always remain motivated to save singles; at the same time it will likely reduce the psychological guilt feeling of a fielder responsible for occasional lapses in the field, when compared to the scenario when no negative runs are incurred on dot balls. On the other hand, a dot ball will have a negative psychological impact on the (risk-averse) batting side that is comparatively more than what it does today, and will call for an extra amount of strategic thinking during the game for the latter — *ensuring more parity in psychological stress allocation between the batting side and the fielding side in real time.* Finally, as an important byproduct of the negative scoring rule, we could now have an additional metric, i.e., the number of dot balls bowled, explicitly mentioned on the bowler's match statistics for selectors and team management to take notice after the end of the match or season to take better and fine-grained strategic decisions in relation to performance assessment and team selection.

(II) Improvement in Commerce-Friendly Game Excitement Factors (TRPs) – Taking points off per dot ball is likely to make a game far more interesting and thrilling than one could imagine, directly improving match TRPs – one of the central commercial goals of T20 contests anywhere in the world. We have already argued above on the impact of dot balls on increased crowd cheering (feeding into bowling side performance) spread throughout the game. Such increased crowd energy is one dimension to increasing match TRPs. Scoreboard pressure induced “match drama” is another TRP increasing dimension induced by the negative run concept. The bowlers will have increased confidence to turn the match round its head within a span of a few dot balls. The occurrence of the latter could subsequently create an immense scoreboard pressure on the batting side, who probably will have to do away with the attitude of “it is just a matter of a few sixes and fours of bad deliveries”, as zero run deliveries would reduce the net team score. This real-time scoreboard pressure will likely

lead to more (TRP-improving) “match drama” – incorporating a mixture of exhilaratingly good shots, panic-induced bad shots, unnecessary run outs, and verbal player altercations. *Moreover, and most importantly, there will be a high likelihood of an increase in the number of close games.*

(III) Improvement in the Chances of Mitigating Bowler Injuries – The novel scoring method will make sure that quality bowlers (especially fast bowlers) suited for longer versions of the game will get additional support from both, the fielding side in saving runs, and also other bowlers who will be motivated enough to each do their bit in saving runs through their bowling. This team effort in turn will demand a comparatively lesser individual physical exertion by the quality bowlers, and reduce their chances of shoulder, thigh, and hamstring injuries – all in favor of these bowlers being available fit to play test cricket for their countries. It is widely acknowledged (and historically observed) that test matches are often won by teams (usually with a top fast bowling attack) who have the ability to consistently take 20 wickets, whereas T20 and ODI cricket demands a different pace variation/creativity from the same bowlers, primarily to save runs. Many bowlers are not able to smoothly adapt to these changes between test and limited over international (LOI) cricket and eventually succumb to injuries and/or the cash-rich mindset. Via the negative scoring method, the demands for bowling T20-specific variations will likely be reduced – simply because a (fast) bowler could align his/her bowling more according to a test match recipe in T20 cricket to handsomely reward the team on a dot ball.

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