

CATHERINE CHAMBERS

'A comprehensive account of this most noble game.
It will be enjoyed by all.'
—*Good Reading*

A HISTORY OF
CRICKET



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A HISTORY OF
CRICKET

CATHERINE CHAMBERS

black dog books

Introduction



Millions of people across the globe play the game and watch it for hours, days or even weeks at a time. They sweat under an Australian December sun, or shiver through cool English summers. Sometimes players run themselves ragged until the sun turns red in the sky. At other times, they hang around the outfield with the starry hope that they will make a match-winning catch.

So what is it about this sport that makes it so popular? Why do athletes suffer these agonies and endure these conditions? Well, there *is* only one answer. Cricket just has to be the mightiest, most noble game. The pinnacle of all physical, mental and emotional tests.

But how did it get to be the great sport that it is today? It took a rocky road, and an interesting one that is well worth reading about.

1 **Baffling** BEGINNINGS



The game of cricket developed in England over many centuries, but we don't know exactly how the game began, or why. There are many theories and countless claims. Did Vikings really row across the North Sea to play one-day events on England's east coast? Or was it brought to her shores by travelling sportsmen from the Lost Tribe of Israel, clad from top to toe in whites? These are hopeful rather than helpful suggestions. One thing we do know is that cricket most likely evolved from some type of bowls or skittles game. And, of course, there is no end to the arguments about the origins of bowls and skittles.

All balls and no bats

Ancient Egypt can lay the claim to many 'firsts'. It doesn't seem fair that bowls and skittles should be included, but they are. And how do we know?

About 49 kms south of Cairo — between 5,000 and 3,000 BCE — we know that a young boy loved the game of bowls. He loved the game so much that when sadly he died he was buried with two bowling balls

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made from stone, and four from crystal rock porphyry. There was a moveable, marble bowls gate as well. His parents spared no expense, for they also laid by his side nine conical-shaped skittles sculpted in alabaster and beccia stone. Then they set the whole kit in a hall with a limestone floor.

It is quite possible that bowls and skittles spread both east and west from Egypt. Europe was no stranger to contact with this part of the world. Camel caravans carried rich silks and pungent spices all the way from China and India as far as the Mediterranean. From here, these luxury goods — and possibly games — spread west to Europe, including England.

By 300 BCE, Germany was enjoying a game called ‘kegeling’. It was a very simple nine-pin bowling game with no gate. Nearly seven centuries later and still in Germany there was a game called ‘kegel’, which is the name for a club used for self-defence. The idea was to stick the kegel in the ground and throw stones at it. And the inventors of this rather rough sport? They were monks. The kegel represented sin and temptation and the stones were meant to knock that sin right out.

An irritating start

So when did someone first try to stop the bowler from hitting the target? Did a sneaky, spoilsport passerby just stick a foot out in front of the ball and think, ‘That’ll stop him knocking those skittles over! What a great idea! Let’s make it into a new game!’

First a foot, then a stick, and finally, a bat. Sorted.

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Although you might have some better and equally acceptable ideas of your own. Now, which nation is going to claim credit for sticking the foot out first?

Here are some forerunners to cricket — or games that just came and went until the big one arrived. There were not a lot of balls around at the time, so people often used a small stick to hit instead. Some historians claim these games are the foundation of rounders and baseball, as well as cricket.

Gilli-danda

Sport is about skill and fun. And the Indian game of gilli-danda sounds a lot of fun. Gilli-danda was played from at least 800 CE and still is today. A small tapered stick (the gilli), about 9 cm long, is placed in a crescent-shaped dip dug in bare soil. It is surrounded by a circle of about 60 cm in diameter scratched out with a stick. A player takes a stick 60 cm long (the danda) and hits the smaller stick out of the dip. He scores by batting the stick out of reach of the fielder. The batsman is out if the gilli gets caught.

Gilli-danda is a very fair game because fielders also have the opportunity to score. If a fielder stops the hit stick, then the batsman has to place his bat across the large circle. A fielder throws the small stick at the bat to get a point. There are many different versions of this game, depending on which region of India it is played in. But all this hitting and stopping and throwing does sound remarkably like cricket.

It is worth considering that the Indian subcontinent had almost 1,000 years of practice in batting and fielding

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before they played the English cricket game. No wonder they're so masterful now.

Lapta

In Russia, there was 'lapta' which was being played by at least the 13th century CE. 'Lapta' just means a stick, or bat. The game is played in a field marked with a large rectangular court. The sides of the court are parallel lines, and within these are other, smaller markings, or bases. There are two teams, each with 5 to 10 players. One team supplies the batsman, who faces a bowler. Fielders stand at the bases. The bowler throws the ball and the batsman tries to hit it to the other end of the rectangle. Fielders try to stop the ball and hit the batsman as he tries to get to the other end. 'Brannboll' is a similar game played in Finland, but without the bowler. The batsman throws the ball up — a bit like a tennis serve — and then hits it.

Cat-and-dog or dog-and-cat

This strange-sounding game was enjoyed in Scotland sometime in the Middle Ages. The idea was that a player threw a piece of wood, the 'cat', at a hole in the ground. Another player with a stick — called the 'dog' — tried to hit the cat before it reached the hole. Sometimes there were two holes and players scored runs by running between them, which sounds a little like cricket. 'Ball-and-brandy' was similar to cat-and-dog, but it was played with a crooked stick and not a glass of brandy in sight.

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Tip-cat

This game dates back to at least the 17th century in Britain and was introduced by English colonists to countries throughout the world. The batsman takes a long baton and a 10 cm stick. He hits the small 10 cm stick up in the air with the baton, then he hits it again as far away as possible before it lands on the ground.

Trap-ball

This game dates back to the 1700s and was played in America and possibly came from the English colonists. ‘Trap-ball’ sounds a bit like warfare, and indeed its equipment could just have been based on weapons. A catapult launched a ball at the batsman who batted the ball into oblivion. A bit like a modern cricket-practice machine when you think of it.

Poison-ball

A great name, but what about the game? This game was mentioned in a publication in France in 1810 but had probably been around for much longer. A ball was hit through targets rather like croquet. If a player managed to get to the last target, he yelled ‘Poison!’ Other players could get extra points by hitting the triumphant ‘poison-ball’ in the next game.

These games certainly contained elements of cricket. However, there were other games much closer to the game we know today.

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Stool-ball

This ancient game can be traced back to at least the 11th century CE. A player with a stick defended his 'wicket' from a thrown stone, stick or ball of sheep's wool. Then the player ran off to another wicket to score a run. But what was the wicket? Some say it was a three-legged milking stool. Others, that it was a church stool.

Some believe that the game was started by milkmaids in the 15th century in Sussex, England, while they waited for their men folk to return from the fields. Others claim that the game was played after church on Sunday with the church stool.

Now we have a game that we're beginning to recognise as a kind of cricket. So let's move on to games that sound more like cricket.

Creag

Sounds a bit like the beginnings of the magic 'cricket' word, doesn't it? However, it means 'fun' in Gaelic. Although a later game called creag-a-wicket might just have been the foundation for our esteemed game, we only know for sure that creag-a-wicket was played in front of a wicket gate.

Cric or cricc, or even crick

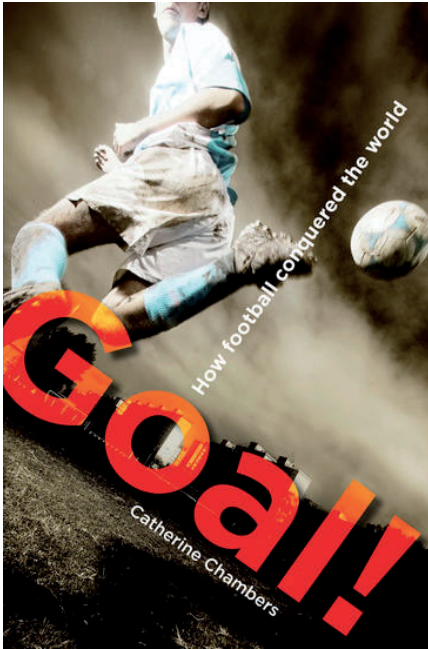
Sounds like an insect, but these names are a bit more hopeful. They are all versions of the Anglo Saxon word for 'crook', as in a shepherd's stick. And this stick, it is said, was used to hit a ball of oily sheep's wool away from the wicket, which was just a wicket gate that led into the fields. So that's that. Or is it? Well, no.

Baffling beginnings

Krikstoel

It's Sunday and we're back at church. Only we're on the other side of La Manche, or even the English Channel, around northern France, Belgium and the Netherlands. Flemish-speakers are playing a bat and ball game in front of a krikstoel... a church stool, turned upside down.

Names such as cric or crick or kristoel can give us a clue about who created the game of cricket. But it is where the game was played that was so important. 'Boring' old geography led to the game we know today. Soils, climate and vegetation probably had more to do with cricket's development than anything else. In England, the most rewarding place to play was the sunny, dry south, where the counties of Kent, Sussex and Surrey lie. The land where sheep graze on short, tufty grasses that grew on vast chalkland hills and downs, where a ball would skid and bounce in the hard earth. By the Middle Ages, close-knit iron and glass-working villages were batting and bowling on those cropped grasslands of the Kentish Weald and Sussex Downs. Flemish cloth-workers added to the mix, weaving the sheep's wool and binding it up into a cricket ball during their lunch break. Villages became competitive as they stitched together teams. A chance to have fun in the field and perhaps a bit of a gamble broke the weary week. Competitive cricket was born.



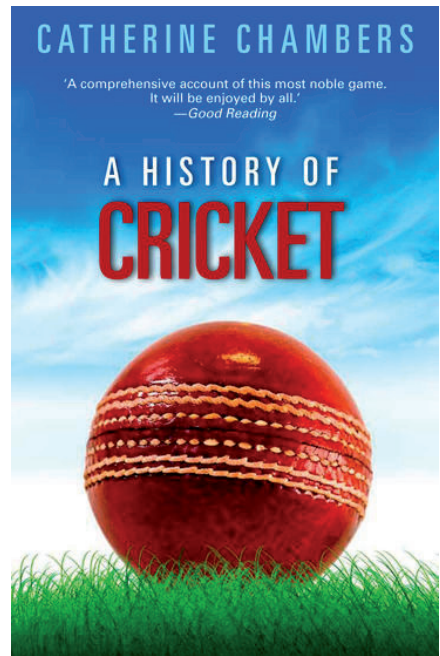
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