



Sticky wicket trying to make sense of cricket



Paul Warren

WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

HAVE just returned from my son's annual cricket camp in Hawke's Bay, where part of the boundary rope chatter concerned peculiar cricketing terms, of which there are so many. Boundary rope is one of them; there was no rope in the games I watched, but the term fits, even when the boundary is a painted white line on the parched grass or a ring of flags half-pressed into the hard-baked ground. Perhaps the plethora of cricketing expressions is a combined result of the complicated nature of the game and the copious amount of time available during a game for new terms to be invented.

As is often the case with language, some of the labels used in cricket today have meanings that have become obscured by history. As is also often the case, there are competing explanations for many terms, some perhaps based on "folk etymology".

Take for example the popping crease, a line about 1.2 metres in front of and parallel to each wicket. It is the line behind which the batsmen must ground their bats or some part of their body to avoid being run out or stumped.

I had never thought before about why this line is called a crease or why this one in particular is a popping crease (there are also bowling and return creases in cricket). One explanation claims that in the 1700s the playing surface included a hole into which the bat had to be "popped" to score a run.

Fielders, on the other hand, had to pop the ball into this hole to prevent the batsman putting his bat into it, thus running him out. A few broken fingers may have led to a change in the rules,

and the hole was replaced with a shallow groove, or crease. Now the crease is simply a painted line. An alternative and more prosaic explanation for the "popping" part is that "pop" here means to hit or strike, and that the popping crease is where the batsman stands when he tries to hit the ball.

The game has been claimed to derive from a game played by shepherds, using a gate as the target, hence "wicket", which is a small gate as found in a sheep pen. The structure of the wicket is currently approximately 69 centimetres high by 20cm wide, and consists of three vertical stumps (origin obvious) with two bails placed across the top. In earlier versions of the game it was made of two stumps with one long bail and was approximately 60cm wide by 30cm high.

The term "bail" is supposedly of French origin, referring to a horizontal piece of wood set across two vertical pieces, much like the top bar of a gate.

There are interesting origins for the myriad bowling actions, types of

delivery and fielding positions in cricket. Slips are probably so-called because they field where the ball is likely to slip off the bat; point is where the bat points when held out in front of the batsman; gully fields in the gully between slip and point; silly mid-off and silly mid-on are silly either because they are foolish or because "silly" also means defenceless (as when Shakespeare writes of "silly women").

The origins of the word "cricket" itself are rather obscure, with a number of competing suggestions why the game is called this. One links it to the game stool-ball.



apparently still played in some parts of England. A cricket is a type of low stool, and there are related words in some of the Scandinavian languages that suggest an earlier Germanic origin. Another claimed source for the word is the mediaeval French “criquet”, which was allegedly a piece of wood used as a target in a game of boules, though this is contested. It has also been argued that the game’s name derives from mediaeval Dutch, from a word related to English

“crutch”. In fiction, in Douglas Adams’ *Life, the Universe and Everything*, cricket is a racial memory of the Krikkit wars.

The defeated people of Krikkit were punished by being enclosed in a “time envelope” in which time passes incredibly slowly – some say this also bears some resemblance to the game.

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Dr W G Grace: English amateur cricketer (1848–1915).