

Cricket Fatalities: Casting a Wider Net

The death of Philip Hughes was an especially shocking event. Not only did it occur to a batsman wearing the protective gear that has made serious injuries relatively rare, but it had no precedent in Australian first-class cricket, even in the days before helmets.

However, precedents can be found by casting the net wider. On his blog, “[Cuts and Glances](#)”, Gideon Haigh [shared some results](#) of a search of the Trove Australian Newspaper database. Haigh simply searched for articles containing the words “killed”, and “cricket ball” and came up with a remarkable number of hits. I extended this search with other combinations (death + cricket + ball, and fatal + cricket + ball), weeded out the duplicates, and compiled some statistics on the results.

As Haigh noted, there is no way of knowing how comprehensive such a survey would be. However, given that all were unusual and tragic events, and the fact that most cases were reported in multiple newspapers, I would expect (and hope, given the numbers) that a majority of cases have been uncovered. Some papers in those days would record all cases emerging from Coroner’s reports, and deaths of this type would certainly attract the attention of Coroners.

The number was surprising, even alarming. Over ninety separate cases were found of men, women, and children killed by cricket balls in Australia between 1880 and the 1950s. (The Trove database in its current state peters out after about 1954.) These cases are specific to blows from cricket balls, and do not include death from other causes during cricket matches. There were, incidentally, very few incidents reported during the World Wars; at other times, more than one per year was commonplace. Apart from wartime, the numbers of incidents per decade was fairly steady from 1890 onwards, except for a peak in the 1930s when there were 24 deaths reported.

Some victims were umpires or spectators, but most were players, and most of those were batsmen. While most incidents happened during organised matches, others happened at practice or in people’s backyards. In a few cases, the blow may have exacerbated a previously existing health problem, so the blow was only an indirect cause of death.

The most striking feature was how young many of the victims were. Excluding non-participants, the median age was just 18. Half the victims were that age or younger. Thirty-three cases were under 16 years old. Even allowing for their lower skill level in avoiding such blows, it appears that the young may be

particularly vulnerable to serious injury when struck. Some of the non-participant victims were also children, as young as eleven months (Annie Denison, killed in her family's backyard in 1894).

About 70 percent had head injuries; most of the others were struck on the chest ("over the heart" is a common phrase). It was notable that at least ten were hit 'behind the ear', presumably like Hughes. There were more fatalities from this type of blow than on the temple (seven). In some 27 other cases, the head injuries were unspecified and without further detail in the reports, so it is very likely that there were more cases similar to the Hughes injury. Perhaps Hughes' fate was not quite so rare as we thought. Information like this, had it been available, might even have led to different helmet designs and better protection for this very vulnerable area of the head (some recent designs are now taking this into account).

In about ten cases, the player was pronounced dead on the field. Most died later; in some cases the seriousness of the injury was not realised at the time. A few of the victims walked off the field, or even walked home. "Don't worry, I'm all right" were among the last words of David Mitchison after being struck in 1933.

Most freakish perhaps was a batsman, Robert Parker, killed by a ball hit from another game on an adjacent ground, at Artarmon in Sydney in 1925. In 1903, the unfortunate A.J. Collins died after being struck on the ankle; he somehow contracted blood poisoning.

We don't have much data since the 1950s, but deaths would certainly have continued in subsequent decades, until protective equipment improved. A friend of Jeff Thomson named Martin Bedkober was killed in a club match in the 1970s.

Haigh also notes that the frequency of these tragedies was unknown to authorities or any experts who were asked. Unlike the recent tragedy, most of these events attracted only fleeting attention, with just a few lines of reportage and no follow-up. In the few reports where any implications were discussed, no one seemed aware of more than a handful of prior cases. It was certainly a surprise to find how many times this happened, and how young the victims often were.

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April 2015