

A New Look at the 'Quick' and the 'Slow': Bowlers and their Over Rates

It's been a Test cricket bugbear for decades: bowlers just can't seem to get through as many overs in a day's play as they used to. The collapse in over rates occurred quite a long time ago. In the 1960s you could expect to see 105 balls bowled per hour. By the 80s, rates had dropped to about 85 balls per hour, where it has firmly stayed, in spite of all entreaties, and even penalties. Australia even missed out on a place in the Test Championship Final partly because of over rate penalties, but there seems little prospect of improvement.

The reasons are too varied to cover in a brief discussion. Instead, let's look at some new data, comparing over rates at an individual bowler level. This data covers Test bowlers of the current era, with a comparison of their counterparts about 50 years ago, from 1968 to 1977. The earlier data has been extracted from detailed scores by Bill Frindall, which gave starting times for every over of a Test match. The recent data is from similar scores by Benedict Bermange. The comparison is limited to certain Tests in England, encompassing over 48,000 overs. This discussion will focus on Australian bowlers.

Between 1968 and 1974, an average over took about 3.4 minutes. This slowed to 4.0 minutes from 1975 to 1977, and further to 4.4 minutes today. It doesn't sound like a big change, but it is the difference between getting 105 overs into a six-hour day, and 80 overs; transforming four days of Test cricket into five days.

On average, a spin bowler will get through an over about one minute faster than a pace bowler. Back in the day, the likes of Ashley Mallet, Ray Bright and John Gleeson would get through a normal over in close to 3 minutes. Nathan Lyon averages 3.5 minutes (for comparison, Ravi Ashwin takes 3.23). Again, not a huge difference, but it adds up.

For pace bowlers, the change has been striking. In 1968, Graeme McKenzie, who it would be fair to say was genuinely fast, averaged 3.5 minutes per over, about the same time as Nathan Lyon. By the mid-1970s, Dennis Lillee and Jeff Thomson were taking 4.6 minutes. Today, the likes of Mitchell Starc, Josh Hazlewood and Pat Cummins take 4.7 to 5.0 minutes. Starc, at 5.03 minutes for an uninterrupted over, takes the longest among Australian bowlers, although he is well short of the slowest of all, Ishant Sharma of India, at 5.56 minutes.

More detail is shown in the table. To make the comparison fairer, I have excluded interrupted overs, including those with drinks breaks, wickets, and DRS reviews.

Average Time per Over: Australian Bowlers

Bowler	minutes/ over
MA Starc	5.03
JL Pattinson	4.98
PJ Cummins	4.80
JR Hazlewood	4.69
MR Marsh	4.33
PM Siddle	4.33
NM Lyon	3.50

from 1968-77

JR Thomson	4.64
DK Lillee	4.62
LS Pascoe	3.88
MHN Walker	3.79
RAL Massie	3.66
GD McKenzie	3.53
NJN Hawke	3.43
GS Chappell	3.33
AN Connolly	3.27
AA Mallett	3.03
RJ Bright	3.01
JW Gleeson	2.89
KJ O'Keeffe	2.78
RM Cowper	2.39

Part-timer Bob Cowper is the 'fastest' Australian bowler by this measure, among those who bowled a reasonable number of overs. Among major bowlers from other countries captured in this study, Lance Gibbs averaged 2.28 minutes per over, and Fred Titmus 2.46.

There are a few other factors that have slowed the modern game. Decision reviews typically add about 1.8 minutes to an over; Lance Gibbs could just about bowl a maiden over in that time. A wicket (even without DRS) seems to add a little more time nowadays than it used to, so batsmen have become a little more tardy in taking the crease. However, the difference is small, in fractions of a minute. Drinks breaks, which used to take about 2.5 minutes, now take about 3.4, a time equivalent to a spinner's over. (Curiously, drinks breaks were not taken in some Tests in England in the 60s and 70s, whereas they are always taken today.)

There will also be some mitigation from the increase in scoring rates. Scoring 10 or more runs now adds about 1.6 minutes to an over; in the 70s it added only 0.6 minutes or 36 seconds. That difference is puzzling, although the time taken to fetch six-hits, much more common today, might add to the effect.

It would also be fair to say that slow overs rates are not always the fault of bowling teams. Some batsmen have developed elaborate preparation rituals that influence the pace of the game, and have often resisted when bowlers have tried to get through overs more quickly.

I hope to extend this study to cover the intervening years, but there is a lot of data entry required!

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