

Missed Chances in Test Matches: Historical Trends

Dropped catches and other missed chances have altered the course of countless Test matches, but even so the broader statistics of missed chances have always been a difficult area of study. Most scores historically do not record missed chances, while match reports can leave many cases overlooked. This study attempts to address this by bringing together missed chance data from sources that are relatively complete and consistent.

For Tests in this century, the source is the Cricinfo ball-by-ball texts. The texts do not systematically label missed chances, but with the right keywords there is almost always sufficient detail to discern instances. The texts have been searched using thirty or more synonyms or jargon for dropped chances, from “drop” and “life” to “grass” and “shell” and many others. Every ball where the text produces a ‘hit’ is examined separately, and labelled as a missed chance if appropriate.

Cricinfo has been archiving Test match ball-by-ball texts since 1999. The early ones sometimes lacked detail (and contained gaps) and so are not included in this study, but by 2001 a more detailed and consistent style of description made this form of analysis worthwhile. From the 2001 Ashes onwards, commentary texts in Cricinfo are, or were, quite consistently detailed. I say “were” because there are quite a number of texts that are no longer online, having been replaced by simpler (but perhaps more accurate) versions over the years. I have used the original versions downloaded at the time the matches were played.

For Tests prior to 2001, missed chances are sourced from Bill Frindall’s linear scoresheets. (Copies of many of these scores, dating from 1966, were obtained from Frindall himself years ago; gaps in this have been kindly filled by John Kobylecky from his collection.) As with the Cricinfo data, I felt that the first couple of years of Frindall’s scores were best not used for this purpose, and I have commenced the data collection at 1968. The beauty in Frindall’s data is that we have a single observer recording events in a continuous and consistent style spanning decades. Since a large majority of the Frindall scores are for Tests in England, the analysis has been limited to Tests in England for both the Frindall and Cricinfo sources. There have been more than 1200 missed chances logged in the Frindall data and more than one thousand in the Cricinfo England data.

Naturally, there must be caveats. Assessing an incident as a dropped catch can be uncertain or a matter of opinion. Nevertheless, I feel that a large majority of missed chances would be agreed on by most observers. Instances described as ‘technical chances’ or ‘half-chances’ are included in this survey.

As a check on the correlation of the Frindall and Cricinfo sources, the two were compared for the years 2001 and 2002, where the analyses overlap. The sources, while not matching precisely, proved to be very similar. In 2001 (Ashes only), there were 36 missed chances in Frindall and 35 in Cricinfo; in 2002 it was 46 in Cricinfo and 44 in Frindall.

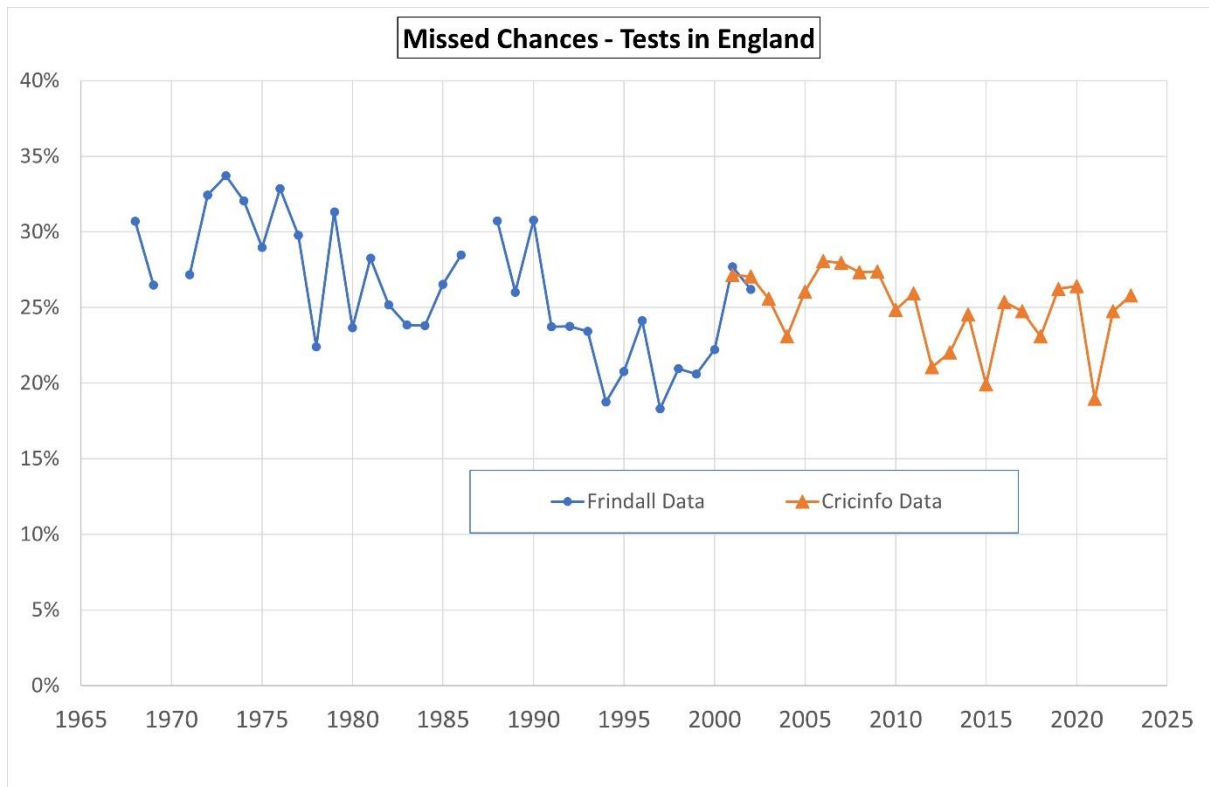


Figure 1. Missed chance data (catches and stumpings) from Frindall and Cricinfo, 1968-2023. Tests in England only. Note: for 1969, not all Tests were available, and 1987 has been excluded because some of the scoring was not in Bill Frindall's hand. Data for 2001 is Ashes only. Percentages are missed chances divided by total chances (catches + stumpings + missed chances).

Without trying to read too much into year-to-year fluctuations, a general improvement in catching efficiency is seen in the data. In the 1970s about 30 per cent of chances were missed, declining to 24 per cent in the 2010s. In the 1990s there was a departure from the general trend, with catching efficiency improving suddenly, only to rise again in the 2000s. One could speculate (admittedly without confirmatory evidence) that the rise after 2000 is associated with the introduction of 'superbats', with batsmen hitting the ball harder than ever before. (The batsman with the highest percentage of career chances missed is the hard-hitting Virender Sehwag, on 37 per cent.)

The low figures in the 1990s also coincide with the reintroduction of South Africa, a team associated at the time with exceptional catching, to Test cricket. In England in 1994 and 1998, South Africa's drop rate was a very low 15 per cent. England missed 22 chances to South Africa's 14 in those two series. In the 1997 Ashes, Australia enjoyed a similar low rate (ten misses and 66 catches), while the England fielders missed 20 chances.

In the most recent decade, the gradual improvement in catching has resumed. The emphasis here is on 'gradual'; the claims sometimes made of a revolution in fielding standards is an exaggeration. My own (qualitative) observation is that a critical factor has been an improvement in fielding standards of weaker fielders; everyone in a team is now expected to practice and hone their fielding. In the

one-day game, there is nowhere to hide a weak fielder; no one can get away with being a passenger in the field.

Curiously, the absolute numbers of missed chances has not changed dramatically. The average number of misses per Test was about 8.05 in the 1970s and 6.9 in the 2010s. One influencing factor is in the number of catches/stumpings per Test, changing over decades from 18.6 in the 1970s to 22.0 in the 2010s. Based on these figures, about one-third of the increase in the number of catches taken can be attributed to improved catching; the rest of the increase must result from other factors.

Figure 1 above shows data for Tests in England only. It invites the question: how representative of all Tests are Tests in England? For comparison purposes, Figure 2 shows the Cricinfo England data against the data for all Tests since 2001 (all-Test data for 2023 up to September only). There are more than six thousand missed chances represented in this dataset. The England data, being a subset of the whole, is more variable, but there is no particular difference in the trends. This establishes the England-only data as a reasonable proxy for all Tests.

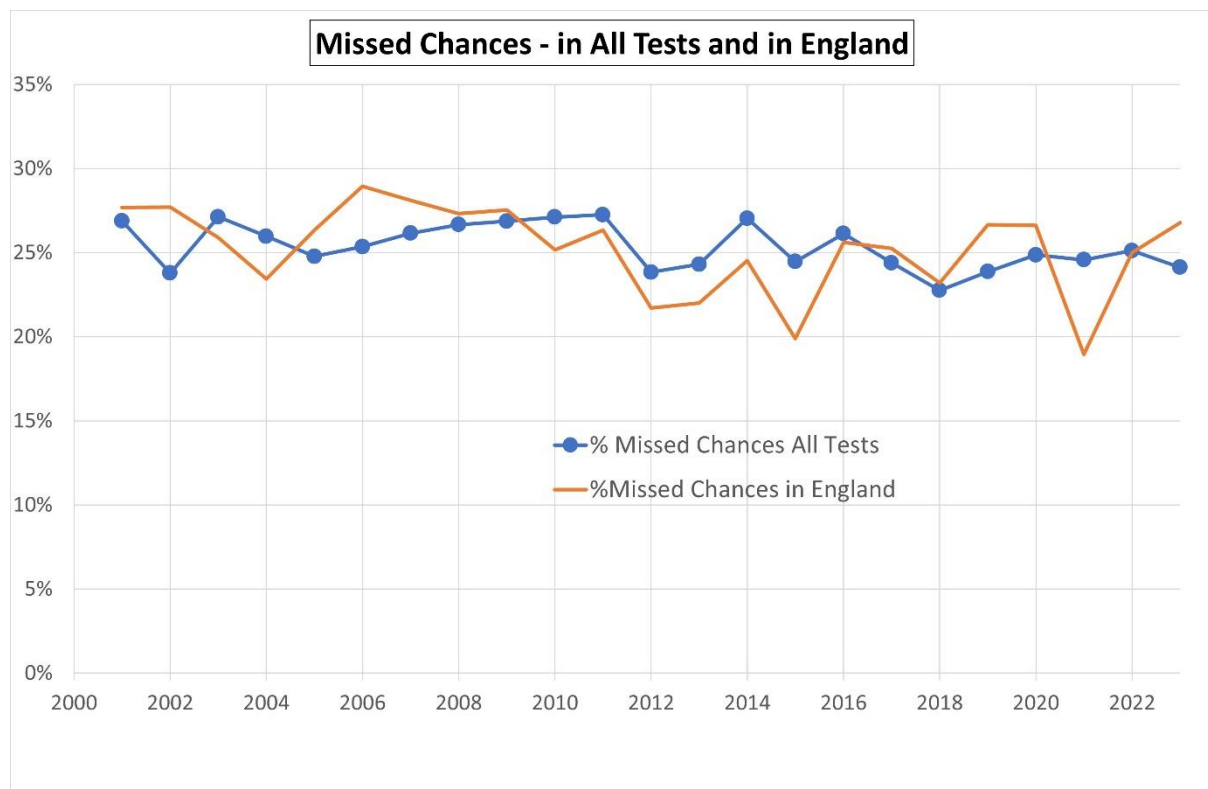


Figure 2. Missed chances for Tests in England v all Tests, 2001-2023 (Cricinfo data).

The Ferguson Data 1920-1953

The renowned Australian scorer Bill Ferguson included unprecedented detail in his linear scores, and even in his traditional scoresheets, over many years. The surviving material (post-1920) has been scoured for mention of dropped catches. Barry Valentine has conducted additional extensive research into Ashes Tests from the Ferguson era, including searching of many detailed match reports, and has shared the resulting ball-by-ball records. More than 500 dropped catches in Ashes Tests have been identified from 1920 to 1953.

We cannot be sure how well the criteria for a missed chance in those days would match current standards. Among other things, television coverage with replays was completely absent. Nevertheless, the incidence of known missed chances can be summarised in a simple table.

Dropped Catch Averages – Ashes Tests

1920s	32%
1930s	29%
1940s	29.5%

One issue here is that by the late 1940s reporting style in newspapers was evolving into a style with less narrative description and more writer-based impression. There was reduced emphasis on incidents like dropped catches, for tailend batsmen in particular. Ferguson's later scores appear to no longer record dropped catches. By the 1950s, it becomes more difficult to make definitive lists of dropped catches from scores and match reports; nevertheless, Valentine has continued his research into this decade. The 1950-51 Ashes recorded an unusually low drop rate (for the time) of 24 per cent, and Valentine's data gives an average of 26% in the 1950s. In my opinion, we cannot be certain if this represents a real improvement over the previous decades or not.

In light of this uncertainty, a detailed breakdown of the data is not presented.

As an addendum, here is a list of extreme cases of batsmen benefiting from dropped catches in a Test innings. This is very much a 'where known' list; undoubtedly there is potential for additional entries.

Batsmen dropped most times in a Test innings

7 or 8	GJ Bonnor (87)	Aus v Eng (4), Sydney (SCG) 1882/83
5 or 6	WH Ponsford (266)	Aus v Eng (5), The Oval 1934
5 or 6	BF Butcher (209)	WI v Eng (3), Nottingham (Trent Bridge) 1966
6	CH Lloyd (242*)	WI v Ind (5), Mumbai (Wankhede) 1974/75
5	WG Grace (170)	Eng v Aus (3), The Oval 1886
5	A Ranatunga (135*)	SL v Pak (3), Colombo1 (PSS) 1985/86
5	AM Blignaut (84*)	Zim v Ind (2), Harare 2005/06

5	HM Amla (253)	SAf v Ind (1), Nagpur 2009/10
5	Taufeeq Umar (135)	Pak v WI (2), St Kitts 2011
5	KS Williamson (242*)	NZ v SL (2), Wellington (Basin Reserve) 2014/15

An interesting aspect of the Butcher innings is that the match was scored by Frindall, one of this first Tests. However, the reports of five or six missed chances come from newspapers. The *Daily Mirror* lists Butcher's chances as on scores of 53, 57, 102, 103, 156 and 192, with the 'chance' on 156 not actually going to hand. Most of these chances were not noted by Frindall; in fact, his early scores are quite sparing in terms of notes of any kind. By 1968, he was recording far more detail in the notes columns of his linear scores, and mentions of missed chances can be regarded as far more comprehensive from that point on.

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November 2023