
Forward Defence

Skill Performance

SKILL DESCRIPTION

The **forward defence** is played to a ball pitching on a good length that the batter considers is of such quality that they cannot attack off the front foot. It is mainly used to defend the stumps against a ball pitched on a good line and length. The ball would land within 2 to 3 metres of the popping crease. The flight path would be along the line of the stumps, although very often a ball pitched outside the line of the stumps may cut back towards the stumps, and so the batter is forced to play a defensive stroke.

While the prime purpose of the stroke is to play the ball safely, the batter should always seek the opportunity of scoring. As batters become settled at the crease, they should “work” the ball and direct it to gaps for a quick single.

SKILL EXECUTION

This stroke may be divided into four parts or phases:

1. Step and Backswing.
2. Downswing.
3. Impact.
4. Follow-through.

The Step And Backswing.

The front foot moves forward to a position alongside the ball’s flight path and in the case of the forward defence, the closer the better as you do not want to leave any space between bat and pad for the ball to slip through. The heel of the front foot may strike the ground first, but more importantly, the sole of the foot should be in total contact with the ground throughout the downswing, impact and follow-through phases. At the same time as you step forward, the bat is lifted backwards - this balances out the energy of the step, and also ensures that the step is completed before the downswing starts. It is a major error for the downswing of the bat and the step forward to the ball to occur together. In fact, many batters who get out playing defensive strokes do so because the bat and downswing are occurring at the same time.

The backswing may be lifted above the stump in height, but in most cases it is kept low for a defensive stroke. The best position for the bat to finish is probably just above the stumps, and pointing somewhere between the wicketkeeper and second slip. Your hands should be close to the rear hip, with the bat directly under the shoulders.

It is very important that the front shoulder rolls slightly downwards as you lift the bat. This means that an imaginary line drawn through both shoulder joints would point to the ground. The bat is initially lifted slightly up and back with the hands, as it is most easily moved from the vertical position. The shoulders then come into play, as the bat becomes “heavier” at the horizontal to complete the movement.

At the completion of the step and backswing, the weight should be balanced on the front foot, with the back heel raised slightly off the ground and pointing towards the wicketkeeper. The front knee should be slightly bent and braced.

The batter’s hands are best placed in the centre of the grip, with the top hand holding the bat firmly, while the bottom hand will be open and the last 3 fingers of the bottom hand off the handle. With the fingers away from the handle, you will see a small valley along the palm towards the bat handle. This open bottom hand position gives the batter greater range of movement and flexibility in stroke play.

Downswing.

The downswing should not start until the front foot is firmly planted on the ground, so that it can support all of the body movements in this shot. The legs should be braced, and the feet should not alter their position or move until the end of the follow-through.

The shoulders lead the downswing as they roll upwards, pulling the bat into position ready for the wrists to open during impact. The wrists should not alter their cocked position throughout the downswing, and the bat should remain vertically aligned under the shoulders and close to the body. If you start at the top hand and draw an imaginary line up the front arm, along the shoulders, down the back arm to the bottom hand and then down the bat, you will draw a figure “9.” It is this figure “9” that rotates during the downswing in a vertical plane - any oblique or horizontal rotation of the shoulder should be corrected.

It must be remembered that this is a defensive stroke, and speed in the downswing is not important. Bat control is the key - having control of the ball at impact is most effectively done by slowing the bat down prior to impact, rather than by increasing speed as you would to play an attacking stroke. Notice that the bat is not moving at a constant speed for either the attacking or defensive stroke. This is because a bat that is changing speed is easier to control than a bat that is traveling at a constant speed.

Impact.

The shoulders should now remain steady and stabilize, to enable the wrists to ease the bat through the impact phase. This will happen naturally, and you will not have to force the bat to play the shot. The concept of “soft” hands is very important, as the batter tries to absorb the speed of the ball and thus control the impact to hit the ball into the ground.

The grip should be firm enough to transfer the necessary power into the ball, and the bottom hand will still have the last three finger slightly away from the bat’s rubber grip, so that the palm is not squeezed onto the handle.

Present the widest face of the bat to the ball through the impact zone, and make sure that the bat swings along the line of the ball for as long as possible to ensure good contact. At contact the bat will be positioned beside the front pad, and will hardly be moving or may even be stationary.

Follow-Through.

The follow through occurs after impact and therefore has no direct contribution to the direction or speed of the ball. Because the defensive stroke develops very little power, the follow-through is almost non-existent. At the completion of the stroke you should remain balanced. The back foot should not swing through, causing you to walk through the shot.