



RANKING THE GREATEST ALL-ROUNDERS IN TEST CRICKET

BY A. TAN AND R. RAMACHANDRAN

It is almost unanimously acknowledged that Sir Garry Sobers was the greatest all-rounder in cricket history. He was voted one of the five greatest cricketers of the century and the only all-rounder among the five. It is also generally acknowledged that before the advent of Sobers, Keith Miller was the greatest all-rounder. Since the time of these two cricketing stalwarts, other great all-rounders like Sir Richard Hadlee, Imran Khan, Ian Botham and Kapil Dev have followed (Trevor Bailey, 1989). In this article, we shall attempt to rank the great all-rounders in accordance with mathematical formulae derived from their batting and bowling records.

Trevor Bailey (1989) defines an all-rounder as a player who is able to command a place in his side for either his batting or his bowling. Batsmen and bowlers are most frequently judged by their batting and bowling averages, respectively, even though there are other statistics (such as the aggregate runs and centuries for batsmen, and total haul of wicket for bowlers) which should be taken into consideration. However, to simplify things, we shall consider the batting and bowling averages only, subject to minimum qualification criteria. We shall construct several mathematical formulae by which the all-rounders will be judged.

First, we recognise the fact that the batting and the bowling averages are quantities of opposite nature. The batting average (BA) is a direct quantity: the greater the BA, the better the batsman is thought to be. The bowling average (bA), on the other hand, is an inverse quantity: the smaller the bA, the better the bowler is. Thus, we cannot add BA and bA to measure an all-rounder. One way to resolve this problem is to convert bA into a direct quantity which can then be amenable to addition to BA. First, the reciprocal of bA is indeed a direct quantity. But then we need to normalise this reciprocal to render it additive to BA. Data analysed by the authors (unpublished) have shown that both the mean batting and the mean bowling averages of all players in Test cricket have remained nearly constant at 30 since the post-World War I period. Hence, during this period, the batting equivalent of bA is $30^2/bA$, or $900/bA$. We can now add this quantity directly to BA to obtain a quantitative measure for the all-rounder in Test cricket: $BA + 900/bA$ (Scheme I).

Alternatively, one can also convert BA into an inverse quantity. The bowling equivalent of BA is similarly $900/BA$. This quantity is now amenable to addition to bA, giving us a second measure for the all-rounder in Test cricket: $900/BA + bA$ (Scheme II). However, one should bear in mind that this measure is now an inverse quantity: the smaller the quantity, the greater the all-rounder is. We shall soon find out that Scheme I slightly favours all-rounders who are batsmen first, while Scheme II gives a slight edge to the all-rounders who are bowlers first.

Thirdly, we can also devise a subtractive scheme to obtain a third measure for the all-rounders, which is simply $BA - bA$ (Scheme III). This measure, like the first, also favours slightly the all-rounders who are batsmen first.

Finally, we can construct a multiplicative scheme which takes the product of BA and $1/bA$ which is simply the quotient BA/bA (Scheme IV). Mathematically, this is the soundest of the four measures, where the batsmen and bowlers have an equal chance of being regarded as all-rounders. Unlike the first two, this is also independent of the mean batting and bowling averages of the era and is applicable for all times.

We can now get down to the business of ranking the greatest all-rounders in Test cricket. The qualifications used are: 2000 runs; 100 wickets; $BA > 25.00$; and $bA < 35.00$. (The data are gathered via the Internet at <http://www.cricket.org>.) Among the retired players, only 11 met all four criteria. Table I shows their batting and bowling averages in Test cricket. Also shown in Table I are the derived quantities to be used for ranking the all-rounders according to the four different schemes discussed above. Table II summarises the results of the rankings and the overall ranks of the 11 greatest all-rounders in Test cricket. Table II further shows that out of the 11, four were from England, two from India and one each from West Indies, Pakistan, Australia, South Africa and New Zealand.

A glance at Table I shows that Garry Sobers was, by a wide margin, the best batsman among the all-rounders. His BA of 57.78 places him between Hammond (58.45) and Hutton (56.67) and between Weekes (58.61) and Walcott (56.68) and ranks him among the greatest batsmen of all times. However, his bA of 34.03 was also the worst among the 11 all-rounders. If Sobers is considered to be the greatest all-rounder, then that is largely due to his batting.

Table I also shows that three all-rounders Richard Hadlee, Imran Khan and Keith Miller were outstanding bowlers. Their respective bowling averages of 22.29, 22.81 and 22.97 would place them among the greatest bowlers of the game. Imran Khan and Keith Miller also had decent batting averages (third and fourth in the list), even though they were more than 20 below Sobers. By all accounts, the contest for the greatest all-rounder narrows down to that between Garry Sobers, Imran Khan and Keith Miller.

Table II shows that according to the batting-based formulae (Schemes I and III), Sobers topped the rankings with Imran second and Miller third. According to the bowling-based formula (Scheme II), Imran was adjudged first, Miller second and Sobers third. According to the neutral formula (Scheme IV), it was again: Sobers first, Imran second and Miller third. The overall ranking for the greatest all-rounder is Gary Sobers followed by Imran Khan and Keith Miller in that order. Whereas Gary Sobers attained his place largely because of his batting prowess, Imran Khan and Keith Miller did so mainly by their bowling figures.

Is Garry Sobers also the greatest all-rounder in all first-class cricket? Here, he faces serious challenge from Keith Miller. Miller's first class averages (BA 48.90, bA 22.30) improve significantly in batting and marginally in bowling. Sobers BA (54.87) diminishes slightly while his bA (27.74) improves considerably. In first-class cricket, Keith Miller leads Garry Sobers in Schemes I, II and IV while trailing Sobers in Scheme III only. Overall, Keith Miller has to be considered the greatest all-rounder in all first-class cricket.

Is Garry Sobers' status as the greatest all-rounder in Test cricket safe, or are there any challengers to his title on the horizon? Among the active players, Jacques Kallis of South Africa is a serious challenger. He is an all-rounder in the Sobers-mold and his batting and bowling averages in Test cricket stood at 53.06 and 30.23 respectively at the end of 2003. With these numbers, Kallis leads Sobers in Schemes II, III and IV and trails Sobers in Scheme I only. As of now, Jacques Kallis has a chance to dethrone Sobers from the title of the greatest all-rounder in Test cricket.

Reference

Trevor Bailey, *The Greatest Since My Time*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1989.

Table I. Batting and Bowling Averages of the Greatest All-rounders

| Test Player | Batting Average (BA) | Bowling Average (bA) | BA + 900/bA | bA + 900/BA | BA-bA | BA/bA |
|----------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------|-------|
| Garry Sobers | 57.78 | 34.03 | 84.22 | 49.60 | 23.75 | 1.69 |
| Imran Khan | 37.69 | 22.81 | 77.14 | 46.68 | 14.88 | 1.65 |
| Keith Miller | 36.97 | 22.97 | 76.15 | 47.31 | 14.00 | 1.60 |
| Trevor Goddard | 34.46 | 26.22 | 68.78 | 52.33 | 08.24 | 1.31 |
| Tony Greig | 40.43 | 32.20 | 68.38 | 54.46 | 08.23 | 1.25 |
| Richard Hadlee | 27.16 | 22.29 | 67.53 | 55.42 | 04.87 | 1.21 |
| Ian Botham | 33.54 | 28.40 | 65.23 | 55.23 | 05.14 | 1.18 |
| Wilfred Rhodes | 30.19 | 26.96 | 63.57 | 56.77 | 03.23 | 1.12 |
| Kapil Dev | 31.05 | 29.64 | 61.41 | 58.62 | 01.41 | 1.04 |
| Trevor Bailey | 29.74 | 29.21 | 60.55 | 59.47 | 00.53 | 1.01 |
| Vinoo Mankad | 31.74 | 32.32 | 59.31 | 60.91 | -0.85 | 0.97 |

Table II. Ranking the Greatest All-rounders in Test Cricket

| Test Player | Rank (I) | Rank (II) | Rank (III) | Rank (IV) | Overall Rank | Nation |
|----------------|----------|-----------|------------|-----------|--------------|--------------|
| Garry Sobers | 1 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 | West Indies |
| Imran Khan | 2 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | Pakistan |
| Keith Miller | 3 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | Australia |
| Trevor Goddard | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | South Africa |
| Tony Greig | 5 | 6 | 5 | 5 | 5 | England |
| Richard Hadlee | 6 | 5 | 7 | 6 | 6 | New Zealand |
| Ian Botham | 7 | 7 | 6 | 7 | 7 | England |
| Wilfred Rhodes | 8 | 8 | 8 | 8 | 8 | England |
| Kapil Dev | 9 | 9 | 9 | 9 | 9 | India |
| Trevor Bailey | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | England |
| Vinoo Mankad | 11 | 11 | 11 | 11 | 11 | India |