

THE ART OF CONCENTRATION

"What is your secret Don", I once asked him. "Concentration", he said. "Every ball is the first ball, whether I have just come to the wicket, or I have scored 200."

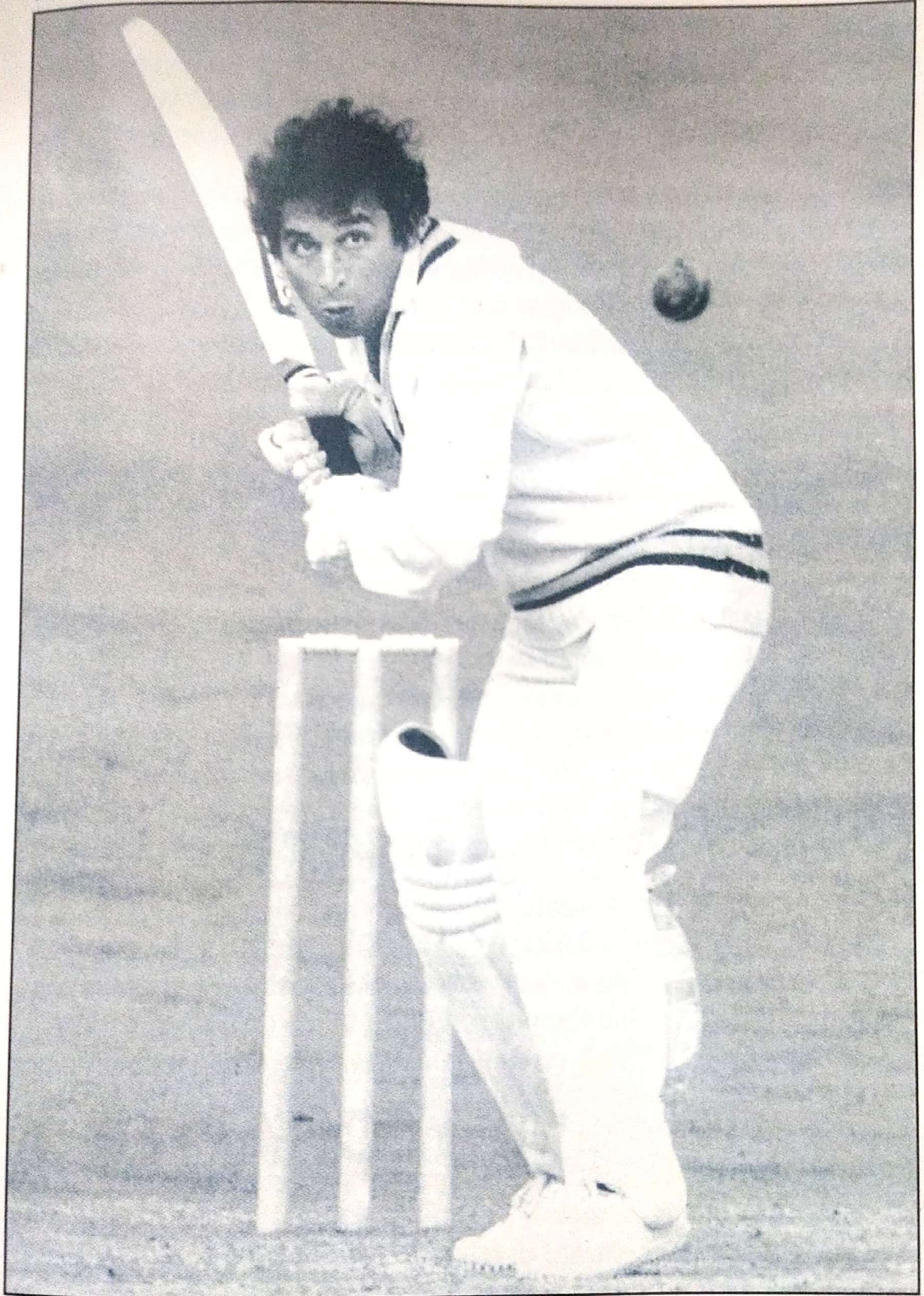
Then he took my breath away by adding, "and I never even consider the possibility that anyone will ever get me out."

Neville Cardus

Cricket demands many mental attributes and none more than the art of concentration. What is concentration? One may well ask. It is the ability to focus all your attention upon one thing here and now. The ball in the case of the batsman. ***In other words, concentration while batting means maintaining a fine focus on every ball from the bowlers hand on to the face of the bat.*** With regular practice, the judgment of the delivery and the batsman's response to it becomes instantaneous. The most important thing whether one may be just commencing an innings, or past a hundred, is the all-important word concentration. Without this essential asset one just cannot become a top class batsman. I have seen many batsmen who can bat wonderfully for a limited period or say till they have scored 20 or 30 runs and suddenly play an injudicious stroke for no valid reason and soon find themselves back in the pavilion.

If you reflect for a while on how you were out in the previous innings you might see a pattern emerging out of it. How seldom can you honestly concede that you were out to a superb piece of bowling or fielding. In fact more often than not you will discover that you are responsible for getting out and usually a lapse of concentration would have been the cause.

Concentration must be kept at its peak all the time if a batsman is to build a big innings. As soon as the bowler starts his run up you must switch it on and it should be red hot at the point of release and remain so till the ball is dead. In between the deliveries or overs you can



Concentration while batting means Intensely focusing on the ball and ignoring all other distractions. One of the masters of such concentration was Sunil Gavaskar as this picture tells more than any number of words can.

switch it off and relax while still remaining aware of what is happening around you. This will allow you to have maximum concentration over a minimum period of time so that you remain fresh to sustain your concentration over a longer period of time.

Sunil Gavaskar was a magnificent example of what concentration is all about. I cannot think of any other batsman who concentrated harder than he did. He hated being distracted by anything while he was batting whether during a match or in the nets. Even before he walked into the middle his mental process of concentration used to begin in the pavilion itself. He had developed it into sheer habit which stood him in good stead throughout his playing career. Rahul Dravid is another batsman who has mastered the art of concentration. Young cricketers would do well to emulate their example.

HOW TO DEVELOP CONCENTRATION:

The best place to develop concentration is in the 'nets'. Always bat seriously in the 'nets' and be determined not to get out. The only way it can be developed is through practice, practice and still more practice. You should bat as if you were batting in a match and visualize the kind of field the bowler would set to get you out. Bat in a way so that mistakes are minimized and never throw away your wicket. The intention of not letting him even beat you should be there.

I often see young batsmen batting carelessly and in the process getting out many times during 15-20 minutes of their 'nets' innings. Perhaps they think "how does it matter when it is only practice." They hardly realize that the purpose of practice is never fully served unless the mental attitude and approach is also correct. If bad habits are allowed to creep into your play, they will persist when you play in a match and you will not be able to get rid of them. Similarly good batting habits once formed and practiced regularly will also not forsake you during a match. So keep at it till it becomes second nature. Always concentrate one hundred per cent on the ball that is being bowled. *The golden rule is to always play one ball at a time and each one on its merit.* Unless you concentrate completely and totally on what is happening at the time, you may not be at the crease to worry about what is likely to happen later on. A batsman has to

clear his mind completely as the bowler runs into bowl and rely on his keen eye and conditional reflexes to do the job when the ball is actually on its way. Play the ball with your eyes is the best advice I can give. So trust your eyes only.

Greg Chappell used to repeat to himself “watch the ball, watch the ball” as the bowler ran into bowl. That was his way to concentrate ball after ball. Even when at the non-striker's end one should keep mentally alert to all that is happening as this will help you to keep the concentration when you get to the striker's end. This will also help to respond to the call for a quick single.

Do bear in mind that maintaining concentration against the pace bowlers is particularly difficult as compared to the spinners because of the length of time between deliveries. Fitness and concentration are closely inter-linked. Concentration is affected by fatigue so that the fitter the player the longer he should be able to keep his mind on the task at hand. In a game, many batsmen, whether taking strike or not, also count the number of balls in an over to assist their concentration. You may also segment your task into small manageable units, for example scoring ten runs at a time ten times will enable you to score a century.

There will be times when sledging, playing and missing a delivery, thinking about your century or team's score or run rate, excitement over the previous shot or thinking about non-cricketing matters, will distract you. But you should learn to do deep breathing and refocus your mind on the job. ***Remember to control the controllable.*** Have a calm mind, it will definitely help.

In fact it should be practiced even more than the stroke making. ***Make sure that no matter what else happens no one or no happening is able to break your concentration your key to success.***