



# CRICKET'S 50



## MOST IMPORTANT MOMENTS



TIM EVERSHERD

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## The Laws of Cricket (*1744*)

MOST CRICKET fans know that the sport is governed by laws rather than rules. Today, there are 42 Laws of Cricket, which have evolved over time to help create the modern game.

Games resembling the modern sport of cricket have been played in England for centuries. What began as a pastime for boys was increasingly played by adults too.

However, the games themselves, and the laws that governed them, varied from area to area. However, as cricket attracted more and more gamblers, who were playing for higher and higher stakes, the need to establish a universally accepted codification of the laws increased.

In 1744 the Laws of Cricket were agreed for the first time. Although they have been subject to many revisions since, including major changes, such as leg before wicket (lbw) and overarm bowling, many of the 1744 laws remain largely unchanged in the modern game. As such the agreeing of the first Laws of Cricket remains a watershed moment in the development of the sport.

Prior to these laws, rules were generally agreed by the participants in advance of a given match. Eventually, verbal agreements began to give way to written Articles of Agreement.

These provided agreement on likely areas of dispute, an important consideration when significant sums of money

were often at stake. Gambling was rife amongst the English aristocracy in the 18th century. They assembled their own teams and challenged their contemporaries to matches for large sums of money.

The handwritten Articles of Agreement from two matches organised by the Duke of Richmond and Viscount Midleton in the summer of 1727 are kept in the West Sussex Record Office. This is the first time that rules are known to have been formally agreed.

The articles are a list of 16 points that are largely recognisable today although not identical to the modern game. Batsmen will be out if the ball is caught, including behind the wicket.

However, the match was played by 12 on each team on a pitch that was 23 yards long and the batsmen had to touch the 'Umpire's Stick' in order to complete a run.

Then, in 1744, a meeting, between the 'noblemen and gentlemen members of the London Cricket Club' – which was based at the Artillery Ground – and other players from various cricket clubs, at the Star and Garter public house in Pall Mall agreed the first Laws of Cricket. The earliest known code of laws was enacted in 1744 but not actually printed, so far as it is known, until 1755.

Today they are preserved on the edge of a handkerchief, which is housed in the Melbourne Cricket Club's museum, entitled *The Laws of the Game of Cricket*. In small text, the laws surround a scene of an early cricket match. The central illustration, a reproduction of Francis Hayman's painting *Cricket in Mary-le-bone Fields*, is considered one of the earliest known depictions of cricket. In it the batsmen wield curved bats in front of wickets with just two stumps, the bowler is poised to release an underhand delivery and two umpires stand on the field.

Like the 1727 Articles of Agreement, these laws are also a mixture of points that remain true today and those that will feel alien to the modern cricketer. The pitch has now been reduced to the 22 yards that remains in use today while the two stumps must be 22 inches high with a six-inch bail. According to the specifications laid out, the ball must weigh between five and six ounces while overs lasted only four balls.

A bowling crease is to be marked in line with the wicket with a popping crease three feet and ten inches in front of it. If the bowler's back foot goes in front of the bowling crease a no-ball is the penalty for overstepping.

The umpire is allowed a certain amount of discretion and it is made clear that the umpire is the 'sole judge' and that 'his determination shall be absolute'. Umpires cannot give a batsman out if the fielders do not appeal. They must allow two minutes for a new batsman to arrive at the wicket and ten minutes between innings.

Methods of dismissal include hitting the ball twice and obstructing the field while the wicketkeeper is required to be still and quiet until the ball is bowled.

One area not covered by the 1744 Laws was bowling actions. Most bowlers would have rolled or skimmed deliveries along the ground at this time although this omission left the door open for pitched deliveries to develop in the coming years.

While anyone familiar with cricket will recognise the game described through the laws, there are some surprising omissions. There is no explanation of how a game is won or how many times a team may bat. Presumably these would have been agreed between the players beforehand.

The 1744 Laws of Cricket met the need for a consistent framework of regulations as the sport grew in popularity.

Further meetings at, first at the Star and Garter and later the Marylebone Cricket Club, which remains the custodian of the Laws of Cricket to this day, would continue to revise the rules. However, it was the first agreed, unified code that created the template on which the modern sport of cricket could later develop and evolve.