

Wides - interpretation, explanation and application

Whilst no effort is spared to ensure that we all understand the conditions that determine what constitutes a wide in normal cricket, the definition of what (and when) circumstances constitute a one-day wide, is shrouded in confusion. We are constantly being asked what is a one-day wide?

Because the majority of cricket shown on television is of the one-day variety, the interpretation used is often taken by club cricketers to be the normal. This causes us problems when we (the umpires) have to operate the normal wide ball law on the field of play.

So, in order to try and explain the difference, let us look at both definitions of the wide and try and see where they differ.

The overriding factor in what follows is that any contact by the ball with the bat or striker his person or equipment, even though it may not be intentional or controllable, means that wide ball cannot be called. The whole essence of the law is that the striker **NEVER** makes contact with the ball at all and it is the reason(s) why he cannot do so that determine whether or not it is a wide.

The striker his movements and positioning will determine this.

Wide ball - MCC Laws 2000 definition

The wide ball is defined here as one, which passes wide of the striker so that he is unable to reach it with his bat by means of a **normal cricket stroke**. This criterion has to be applied from both **where he is standing when attempting to hit the ball** AND **when standing in a normal guard position**.

Let's break this down and explain each part.

a) **a normal cricket stroke** and this does not have to be classic textbook stroke but simply means that he should be able to hit the ball somewhere on the bat so that he can make a reasonably controlled contact with the ball. e.g. if the only contact he could make was on the toe end of the bat that would not be deemed to be a normal cricket stroke since there would be very little control over where the ball went. Similarly, if he had to stretch a long way in order to reach this position it would be wrong to consider that as a normal cricket stroke.

Each delivery has to be judged on its own merits and there is no defined distance down the bat or a defined spot on the bat which, if the ball passes beyond it, the umpire would deem it to be a wide. It is all a question of the umpire's judgement.

b) **where he is standing when attempting to hit the ball**

Batsmen will normally move from their guard position in order to try and hit the ball and it is a natural reflex action. However, this action is a crucial factor in the umpire's decision as to whether the ball is a wide or not. The criterion above regarding playing each normal cricket stroke has to be applied from the position the batsman is in when he tries to hit the ball.

c) **when in a normal guard position**

The important word here is **a** and it is not the striker's normal guard position. The phrase **a** normal guard position is meant as a general guard position that would be expected under normal circumstances (a leg stump guard (1): a middle and leg stump guard (2): a middle/centre stump guard (3). Any exaggerated, unusual guard positions are ignored and the judgement is made from where it is normally expected that a batsman

should stand. To try and explain further by taking things to a ludicrous degree let us assume that the batsman takes an unusual/exaggerated guard well outside leg stump, let's say a 18" (1/2m) outside leg. From that guard position (his own choice) he cannot reach a perfectly straight delivery which bowls him. He cannot claim that the ball was in a position that meant he could not play a normal cricket stroke since he decided to stand in this unusual position. Had he been in a normal guard position he could easily have hit it.

It is important to note that the judgement in (a) above MUST be made using the two positions as explained in (b) and (c) above. In other words, for it to be considered a wide, the ball has to be in a position where the striker cannot play a normal cricket stroke **BOTH** from where he is attempting to play the ball from (b) **and** also from a normal guard position (c).

If only one of these criteria applies to the delivery then it CANNOT be a wide.

Let's look at a few examples that may help to clarify this.

- the ball is delivered outside the off stump. The striker does not move his feet and waves the bat at the ball and it passes over it near the toe end of it. This **is clearly** a wide since he cannot hit it by means of a normal cricket stroke: and he cannot do so from both positions (b) and (c) above.

- same delivery as above but this time the striker moves from his guard position towards the ball thus bringing it within a distance from which he could play a normal cricket stroke. But, he decides to leave it and let it go through to the wicket-keeper. This is clearly **NOT** a wide because although he could not play a normal cricket stroke from his guard position (c) he has moved and put himself in a position where it was possible to play a normal cricket stroke, thus negating the criterion laid down in (b). (The same would apply if he had tried to hit the ball but missed and it is still **NOT** a wide because he had moved into a position where it was possible to play a normal cricket stroke and his incompetence at not being able to make contact with the ball is not the bowler's fault and therefore he cannot be penalised by the umpire calling wide.)

- the ball is delivered outside the off stump well within reach of the striker. The striker, in order to give himself a little more room, takes a step backwards towards square leg and plays at the ball. He misses it. This is **NOT** a wide because had he stayed in a normal guard position he could easily have hit it. By moving backwards he has voluntarily moved into a position where he could not reach it. Again, this is not the bowler's fault and he should not be penalised. The batsman cannot move in such a manner and create his own wide.

Having understood the meaning of the definition we need to look at 2 further points:

- **the stature of the batsman**

- **the height at which the ball reached the batsman**

a) **the stature of the batsman** every batsman is of a different height and therefore has a different range when it comes to how far he can reach. A batsman of 6' (2m) would be able to reach a lot further than one of 5'5" (1.67m). It therefore follows that the same delivery bowled to these batsmen may be called wide when bowled to the smaller batsman but would not be called so when delivered to the taller one.

b) **the height at which the ball reaches a batsman** would also influence the umpire's decision as to whether or not the batsman could play it. The lower the ball is the harder it is to hit. As the height of the ball rises so it becomes easier to hit. (Try the following: stand upright with a bat extended horizontally outwards towards point. Get a colleague, with a ball, to stand at the end of it and hold the ball about 3/4 of the way down the bat near the toe end. Keeping the arms extended slowly lower the bat and, at the same time, ask your colleague to lower the ball vertically downwards. You will see that at some point near the ground the ball arrives

in a position where it is not possible to play a normal cricket stroke. From the original position the delivery was never going to be wide, but as it gets lower it soon becomes so. Although the ball is the same distance, horizontally, from the striker, because it is lower it soon becomes out of reach.)

This reasoning has to be applied whether the ball is on the off side of the wicket or on the leg side. However, when a ball is directed down the leg side the reach of the batsman and the height of the ball is even more crucial. Provided the batsman does not move his feet the range of his reach on the leg side is much more restricted and so the ball can be nearer to him and the umpire will deem it a wide even though it may only be a foot or so outside the leg stump. (Repeat the above test on the leg side and you will see what we mean.)

Over head height deliveries

One extremely important factor regarding height is that if the ball pitches (bounces) and goes over the batsman's head then it is **NOT** a wide even though the criteria for a wide may well have been met. It is more serious than a wide because any such delivery will be a **NO BALL** (called by the bowler's end umpire).

Wide ball one-day variety

Now we can look into the one-day wide and see where it differs from the one explained above.

The first thing to say here is that the one-day wide is really mis-named as such and it should be classified as *the deterrent to negative bowling and a means of controlling the bowling of deliveries which are difficult (or impossible) to score from*. After all, the one-day game was devised rightly or wrongly to appeal to an audience who want to see action i.e. runs; not some clever athlete bowling balls that cannot be hit.

Whilst appreciating that such bowling can undoubtedly be skilful, it is not in the interests of brighter cricket; a feature of paramount importance in the one-day game.

If this philosophy is applied, then determining how to judge the wide becomes slightly easier.

With the law changes in the Laws 2000 Code the normal wide and the one-day variety are not that markedly different. Basically the same criteria, as we have discussed, apply and all that needs to be added is the consideration of whether the ball was bowled as a negative delivery. To try and determine this all the umpire has to do is reduce the margin of acceptability as far as the striker's ability to hit the ball is concerned. Basically, the ball should be delivered so that it should be possible to play a reasonable shot in order to hit it. This is particularly so when dealing with leg side deliveries. The margin of acceptability for leg side deliveries is almost zero and you will see from the following examples that deliveries that go down the leg side are treated, more or less, as unacceptable.

Let's look at three familiar examples to try and clarify the situation:

- the delivery that pitches outside leg stump and carries on to pass the leg stump is, invariably, going to be called as a wide and will be accepted as such by the players. It is unreasonable to expect that a batsman can play a reasonable cricket stroke at such a delivery and it should be called wide.
- The delivery that pitches between wicket and wicket and then goes down the leg side, is possibly going to be called wide. It will depend how near to the batsman it pitches and how wide of the leg stump it eventually goes. It will also depend on whether the batsman moves towards or away from the ball. The umpire cannot (must not) penalise a bowler for a ball which pitches on the stumps and then deviates slightly to miss the leg stump, when the batsman has moved across his wicket and let the ball pass behind him. Had he not moved, then he

could have played a normal cricket shot to the delivery. He cannot create a one-day wide, anymore than he can create a wide under the normal wide ball law.

- A delivery that passes the striker on the off side of the wicket is the most difficult one to deal with. However, the above criteria still apply. Any movement of the batsman either towards, or away from, the ball is still taken into account, although the margin of acceptability will be smaller than for a normal wide. i.e. the ball may well be closer to him but could still be a negative delivery which has to carry the penalty of being a wide.

There is one common link between the normal wide and the one-day wide and that is **CONSISTENCY of interpretation**.

Inconsistency in the interpretation/penalisation of any wide, whatever the game, is a major source of complaint from players and rightly so. The players have a right to expect that the umpire's interpretation remains constant throughout the game no matter what stage it be. It is bad umpiring to change the interpretation of what is or is not a wide ball late in the game, just because the situation has become tight and runs are at a premium, with bowlers striving to bowl as tightly as possible. As umpires it is paramount that the interpretation of what constitutes a wide should (must) be exactly the same at the end of the match as it was at the beginning and anything less is totally unacceptable.

Each umpire must set his own level of interpretation and stick to it, but it is even better to achieve consistency between BOTH umpires. i.e. not only should each umpire keep to his own adopted consistency but the two umpires should try and adopt a consistency that is compatible with each other. It is very confusing to have two umpires using two different sets of criteria in the same match.

In order to achieve this level of consistency it is useful for the umpires to discuss and agree before the match how they are going to interpret the wide (either variety). Once they have agreed between themselves then all they have to do is stick with that interpretation throughout the match and any subsequent variation by one umpire could cause embarrassment for the other as well as confusion amongst the players. It would not be beyond the realms of acceptability to discuss with the two captains, before the game, your decision about this interpretation so that they are under no illusions as to what to expect. Provided the umpires keep to what was agreed then there would be no problems during the game.

Remember: the umpires can be as harsh as they choose provided that they are consistent throughout the whole match.

Inconsistency breeds frustration and resentment.

Consistency breeds tolerance and acceptance.