

VIRENDER SEHWAG ON ATTACK

‘I HAVE NEVER BEEN IN THE ZONE’



Interview by Nagraj Gollapudi

September 2009: *Last five overs of the day? Forget the nightwatchman, Virender Sehwag would rather go out there himself and take 20 runs, thank you very much. Is there method in the madness of modern cricket's greatest attacking maverick?*

Perhaps more than he would care to let on. Sehwag talks us through his approach to taking constructive criticism on board, keeping his mind clear, and how he got out of the worst slump of his career.

It has been ten years since your first international game. How has experience changed your batting?

To be fair, I count it only as eight years. I became a regular only in 2001. Till then I had only played few games after my debut, against Pakistan in 1999. As for my batting, the best part about it is, I have never changed it. I have never changed my thinking. I have batted the way I batted in local tournaments and then first-class cricket, and I have applied the same approach in international cricket. Because I knew I had got success at Ranji level, I was confident I would get some success in international cricket too. But I was never expecting to become the first Indian to hit two triple-centuries, and become only the third player to do that after [Don] Bradman and [Brian] Lara. But that's destiny.

Would you suggest the same approach to a youngster who comes to international cricket: just play the way you have been playing?

A youngster should know his game first. If he knows his game, he can modify it at the top level, if required. But if he doesn't know his game, then it is difficult to get success at international level. You will get success occasionally but not regularly. If you know your game, you can handle pressure, you can handle any kind of situation, back yourself and play your own game and get success.

With so many coaches who pass through a player's career, is it not difficult for a youngster to maintain his own game?

The most important thing for any athlete is to know his ability. If you know your ability and have even a little bit of a strong mindset, you can get success, because your ability takes you to success. Then things like technique, hard work and practice come automatically, because when you get success, you want more. Then you will work hard on your fitness, on your batting, on your technique, and you

will want to learn how to tackle various situations and start talking to a lot of experienced players.

Were there instances where coaches or senior players tried to change your batting?

There were a lot of players who gave me suggestions when I was young. At times they were very good suggestions and I took them seriously, applied them to my batting and got success.

I will give you a very good example. Mr [Sunil] Gavaskar asked me why I stood on the leg stump. Instead, why didn't I stand on the middle stump, because if I did that I would cover more area. He said, in any case I did not move my feet, so if I'm on leg stump then I'm too far from deliveries outside the off stump, and risk nicking them. But if I stand on middle, I'm in a better position to play the delivery. This was around 2006, when England came to play India.

The same thing was pointed out by Mr [Krishnamachari] Srikanth, who even suggested I stand on the off stump because I'm very good on the on side and I can pick the ball easily off the pads. According to him, if I'm standing on middle and off and my front leg goes across, the impact will be outside off and I will negate the lbw factor. Also, I have lots of time to play the shot.

So now, depending on the wicket, I change the guard: if the wicket is flat, I can manage to stand on the off stump, because nobody wants to bowl into my body, as I will easily hit them for fours. So they will pitch it outside off. And if the wicket is doing a little bit, I stand on the middle stump. I have tried these things straight in a game and never in the nets.

Many former cricketers, especially, tend to believe your game is based solely on attack. Do you agree?

I don't think so. Yes, my game is very aggressive and very positive. I love to play my shots and love to hit fours and sixes. I love to

score runs rather than defending or leaving the ball. I don't want to waste balls in any form of the game. When I was growing up, we would play a ten-over or 15-over game, and the asking rate would always be high, and I would end up scoring 30 or 40 runs in 15 balls, so I built that mindset, and I continue to bat that way.

There is this story about you declining a nightwatchman, where you said you were not an able batsman if you couldn't last 25 balls at the end of the day. Is that true?

It is true. What is the difference between batting at the end of the day or at the start? If you make a mistake, you'll get out. So I don't think a batsman really needs a nightwatchman. But it is totally an individual decision. Whenever a captain or coach asked me about a nightwatchman, I would say, "No, why? If I can't survive ten or 20 balls now, then I don't think I'll survive tomorrow morning." I believe that's the best time to score runs, when everybody on the field is tired and you can score 20 runs off those 20 balls.

When you take guard, what goes through your mind?

I like to clear all the negative thoughts out of the mind first. That I do by singing a song or a *bhajan* [hymn]. Then, if there is a ball to be hit, I will hit it. It doesn't matter if it is the first, fourth, 12th ball. But if it is a good ball, I have to respect it, because you cannot hit every ball.

What are the thoughts you look to drive away?

When I take guard, thoughts like "Hit the first ball for a four or six", or "Try to defend" enter my mind sometimes. But if my mind is blank, then I will play according to the merit of the ball. So if I'm singing a song, I concentrate hard on getting the right lines and finding a rhythm. And when I'm concentrating on something, I'm automatically concentrating on the ball. (*More in the book*)