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“Mastering the basics” is a long-standing pillar of cricket coaching. I want to challenge the idea because I think removing it will lead to more effective cricketers.

Welcome to my TED talk.

Most of us have been brought up that nailing the basics equals success. I remember being a kid reading and re-rereading my coaching manual, knowing it contained all the answers. The idea is simple and intuitive: the basics provide a template.

Copy what works. No need to reinvent the wheel. Play straight. Sure, there is some natural variation but the basics are always at the core. They are the spelling and grammar of cricket.

We can see this at the highest level. TV commentators criticise technical flaws (against a template) in every player. When they fail we see this as the cause. When they succeed we see the player as finding a way to compensate in spite of this basic error.

We also see it when coaching. We use the basics template to tell players how to bat, bowl and field. If they get it wrong, they need to identify and correct their errors through hard work. You can add flair, but not until these basics are firmly in place and the flaws ironed out.

For many of us, these basics - and the underpinning assumptions behind them - are so ingrained as to be self-evident common sense.

The problem is, we don’t know if there are any basics.

Basics can be thought of as fixed, universal templates: by their nature they exist outside of any context. They are supposed to work *all the time*, that’s why they are called basics.

However, skills don’t ever exist out of context.

Every time we play a match, there is an ever-shifting context: Format and stage of the match; tactics, mindset and form of players; type and state of the ball; and conditions including pitch, weather and boundaries.

Can you see the problem?

There are no basics that apply in all possible circumstances. And if basics are supposed to be fixed and universal - or even close to universal - then how can they exist?

Of course, not everyone agrees with this logic. There are valid counter-arguments. Let’s put those aside and commit to a thought exercise: How do we coach if it’s true there are no fixed, universal basics?

It’s here the constraints-led approach (CLA) to coaching becomes compelling. Instead of correcting errors against a template, the CLA focuses on players exploring different possibilities, then honing in on what works in their context.

Sometimes this approach can looks very similar to “coaching the basics”. Often it looks very different and it always *feels* different to players who are no longer instructed towards an ideal, but instead invited and guided to develop a flexible solution that works in context.

While I appreciate this seems counter-intuitive for many, if you follow the assumptions I have outlined here, what other option do we have to coach optimally?