

Sachin Tendulkar “The Best Ever?”

ODI Version

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This is (yet) another attempt to answer the oft-asked question “How GOOD is Sachin Tendulkar, really?”

Disclaimer:

Outside Edge! loves Sachin Tendulkar. From the time he started smacking new ball bowlers over cover in New Zealand. From the time he went from 'ridiculously talented prodigy' to the batsman on whom India's chances rested. From the time entire stadiums erupted at the sight of the MRF blade emerging from the pavilion. and the very same stadiums went silent and started emptying when one got through his defence.

Through the time he assumed captaincy of the weakest travellers in world cricket just before tours of South Africa and Australia. Through the time India were routed by pace and seam and his captaincy derided. Through the time he alone stood at the MCG while the others looked club class.

Through the time he cried in the dressing room in Chennai after taking his team to within touching distance of victory. Through the time other talents emerged and became 'flavour of the season' as he kept scoring his runs, albeit, more sedately. The time when India were blitzed in the world cup final that he took us to.

Till the time he keeps striding out to take that 'just outside' leg stump guard, to adjust various parts of his equipment to then look down the pitch towards the bowler. He will remain the batsman to have played for India and damn near the best batsman of all time to have played this fantastic sport.

All statistics have been sourced from the cricinfo.com database and while efforts have been made to ensure correctness, some transcribing errors might still exist

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Background - Why this debate?

There are probably as many "top-10/20/100 best players" lists as there are cricket journalists. Over the years, forests have been leveled in order to present rigorously analytical points of view about why player A is better than player B because his average is higher on grounds beginning with the letter W while player C sucks because he only seems to score his runs on even dates in the southern hemisphere and none on the 13th.

On a significant percentage of those lists, for every Indian fan and many global ones, the contentions have centered around a certain Sachin Ramesh Tendulkar. Is he second only to Bradman or is he nothing more than "the greatest support act in Indian cricket" as described by holdingwilley¹?

With Tendulkar's changes to his game over the last 3-4 seasons coinciding with the rise of the new Indian middle order, the number of articles/books/conversations questioning his utility have exploded. So, it was a pleasant (yet dubious) surprise when I was gifted a book in the opposing vein "**IF CRICKET IS A RELIGION, SACHIN IS GOD**"² written by Vijay Santhanam. The book attempts to statistically refute specific assertions by noted cricket journalists in the "Why my grandmother bats better than Sachin" club. Having pledged my (unquestioning) lifelong allegiance to the Tendulkar fan club sometime in the middle of the last decade, I was quite chuffed by the book. But I couldn't help but question the process.

Relying on statistics to figure out who the great contemporary players are is like going indoors to log onto weather.com to see if it's nice outside.

Just like we don't necessarily need album sales information (classified by country of sale, time of the year and other miscellaneous information) to have an inkling that The Beatles, U2, Pink Floyd, Queen, The Doors probably constitute some of the best rock bands to have filled arenas. Or that another completely sane music-lover might swear by the likes of Eagles, Led Zeppelin, Grateful Dead and co, it does not detract from the 'greatness' of the first group. In short, great players are observed and enjoyed, not ordered and re-ordered based on filters on spreadsheets or database queries. Well, at least not completely.

So, I decided to take my own stab at weighing in on the discussion. To examine Sachin Tendulkar's claim to greatness without any (significant) overt preconceived bias going either way. To look at career statistics, not by first deciding on the argument and then looking for supporting data, but to first lay out what might constitute superlative performance and then to look at Tendulkar's numbers in relation to those of some of the others that we typically associate with being the best batsmen of this era. It's only fair that there be separate discussions for Test Cricket and One Day Internationals.

¹ <http://www.holdingwilley.com/thehwreport/sachin.php>

² <http://www.flipkart.com/if-cricket-religion-sachin-god/8172238215-vv23fya9lb>

What makes a good ODI batsman?

Is it one who takes the attack to the opposition in the first 15 overs? One who successfully finishes run chases? Has a high average from consistent performance? Has a high strike rate to indicate he makes good use of his time at the crease? What about those other more exotic statistics like percentage of wins when the batsman scores over fifty? And by extension, has a significantly lower average in games lost to indicate dependence by the team? Should a good ODI batsman have roughly the same average batting first as when batting second? Should he have a better average against the top sides and when playing away from home or should runs scored in big tournaments (like world cups) matter more? Test cricket would raise a different set of questions.

In a free-wheeling discussion to design the perfect batsman, the answers to almost all of them and another bunch of them would intuitively be 'Yes'. This also explains why every observer can, by focusing on a specific subset of those questions; categorically justify rating one batsman better than another. And that's my beef with most arguments that set out to prove that a batsman is in fact better or worse than another. The writers based on their own opinion, look for the statistics to support their argument all the while making it look like an unbiased assessment and a shrug of the shoulders as if to say "the numbers don't lie". And let's not forget that often the same data can be looked at in different ways to draw opposing inferences.

So, given this series is already called 'The Sachin Tendulkar debate', isn't it a foregone conclusion that a mountain of data will be presented to back up the credentials of the man? Not quite. Because the intent here is not to produce a ranking of the best batsmen with SRT on top. The intent is to answer the question: How good is Sachin Tendulkar, really?

And we'll do that in three steps

1. *Set out the top four-five attributes of top class ODI batsman by asking "What are the hallmarks of top class performance in the respective format?"*
2. *Pick a set of contemporary batsmen based, not on statistics, but simply as those that come to mind as the most prolific over the last few years*
3. *To see how Tendulkar compares with these batsmen on those key attributes from step*

The final objective is to attempt to structure a debate that is, at the very least, very subjective, and often, very emotional.

What the best ODI batsmen have...

Consistency

Yes, the high average is an obvious sign of a good player, but the quality of the runs matter. Shorn of the freebies collected against the likes of Kenya, UAE, Holland etc., do the player's averages stay afloat or do they dip significantly. Consequently, how has he done against the best ODI teams of the past decade and a half? Namely, Australia and South Africa. All players have favourite venues and do better at some versus others, but the great ones manage to do a decent job irrespective of country, whether, home or foreign. Do dips in career averages in specific years matter? I don't think so, every player I can think of has had the odd slow year.

Big Scoring Appetite

I consider this one more applicable to the limited overs version than test matches. Because big scores (100's and 50's) go a long way towards ensuring wins in ODIs. Brisk 30's and 40's are fine but the best players take control of the innings and set the tone, more often in the first innings. Sure, the top order has an inherent advantage on this count, but then there aren't many captains who hide their best players at numbers 5 or lower.

Ability to dominate

The big difference between tests and ODIs is the need for the best batsmen to stamp their authority on the opposition bowling sooner rather than later. Not the kind of mayhem caused by frantic swinging in the death overs, but a mix of proper yet assertive cricket while taking on responsibility to build the team innings. Flogging medium-pace so-and-so's from Kenya and UAE is one thing but destroying top class attacks with fearless strokeplay is a definite hallmark of the best ODI batsmen.

Big-match temperament

An extension of the quality of runs argument. Pre-20-20, ODIs were being scheduled on team stopovers on the way home from series. So runs scored in world cups, the tri-series in Australia, Champions trophy count for more than a 7 match bi-lateral series played between two bored and tired teams. So do runs scored in deciders like semi-finals and finals of these tournaments.

So, how does Sachin Tendulkar rate on these parameters? For that we compare him to some of the best going around. There could be debates about the individuals in the group, but it's unlikely that anyone would disagree with the lot of players in the peerset.

Here's my list: (in alphabetical order): ***Adam Gilchrist, Brian Lara, Hershelle Gibbs, Kevin Pietersen, Ricky Ponting & Virender Sehwag.***

The best ODI batsmen

We started with a set of six batsmen to compare on previously defined parameters. Their career highlights:

Batsman	ODIs Played*	Runs	Average	Strike Rate
Adam Gilchrist	287	9,619	35.89	96.94
Brian Lara	298	10,353	40.44	79.58
Herschelle Gibbs	244	8,038	36.37	83.32
Kevin Pietersen	90	3,109	47.83	87.60
Ricky Ponting	311	11,251	42.13	80.14
Virender Sehwag	198	6,378	34.47	101.83
Sachin Tendulkar	425	16,684	44.37	85.66

*matches until Aug 2009

Source: cricinfo.com

Why not Mohammed Yousuf, or Michael Bevan, or Saurav Ganguly, or so many other very good ODI batsmen? Because, these names came readily to mind, and combined, they should offer a reasonable comparison against the performance of the focus of this debate, Sachin Tendulkar.

We have tried to have a mix of Tendulkar's contemporaries and some new kids on the block. Going further back in time to pick out the Greenidges and Chappells did not make sense, especially in the ODI context.

Consistency – Removing the effect of Minnow-bashing

The first test was to remove all those runs scored against minnows to see whose averages get impacted the most. For the purpose of this discussion, the term 'minnows' includes the teams that suck more consistently, than others. The list includes: Bangladesh, Bermuda, Canada, Hong Kong, Ireland, Kenya, Namibia, Netherlands, Scotland, UAE, USA, Zimbabwe.

Batsman	Adjusted Average	Impact to Career Average
Pietersen	47.72	-0.24%
Tendulkar	42.43	-4.37%
Ponting	41.53	-1.43%
Lara	39.54	-2.23%
Gilchrist	34.99	-2.50%
Sehwag	33.91	-1.63%
Gibbs	33.68	-7.38%

Bad news for Tendulkar fans right off the bat.

Barring Gibbs, Tendulkar's average takes the biggest hit when the free runs against the lesser teams are excluded.

Predictably, all the batsmen in this consideration did a little better against the minnows, however, Pietersen's phenomenal average shows an imperceptible change while Gibbs loses the most. Note that the adjusted average still shows that SRT has scored (over his entire career) nearly 3 runs per game more than Lara, 7 runs a game more than Gilchrist and 8.5 runs per game more than Sehwag.

Performance against the top sides

	AUS	ENG	IND	NZ	PAK	SA	SL	WI	Variation
Ponting		(1.89)	(5.84)	0.19	(8.28)	(1.64)	(2.61)	6.94	4.82
Tendulkar	3.84	(0.71)		3.62	(2.75)	(10.60)	0.64	11.74	6.85
Gilchrist		(2.05)	1.87	(3.04)	(1.90)	(6.82)	15.38	(4.37)	7.33
Lara	(0.01)	(8.96)	(6.91)	11.32	3.66	(3.68)	9.25		7.80
Gibbs	(3.59)	(4.49)	13.13	3.53	(5.35)		(9.80)	9.28	8.44
Sehwag	(11.36)	3.52		17.49	2.69	(7.55)	(1.21)	(6.72)	9.63
Pietersen	8.28		2.42	(11.92)	(14.72)	50.95	(15.34)	(8.72)	23.53

The table above shows difference between the adjusted career average and average against each team. The negative numbers in red show opposition against whom the batsman scored lower than his career average. The right-most column titled 'Variation' is a measure of the volatility in the performance of a batsman against the various teams. Lower the variation, better the batsman. The assumption here is that the best batsmen shouldn't have glaring weaknesses against any teams.

For example, Gilchrist scores 2 runs/innings lower against the old enemy; England than his career average while scoring 15 more runs/innings against Sri Lanka

As expected, all batsmen have their favourites and their bugbears, some of them surprising. For example, Gilchrist seemed to have more trouble against the South Africans while gorging on the Lankans. Pietersen on the other hand has an astronomical average against his countrymen while having significant trouble against Sri Lanka, Pakistan and New Zealand. Pietersen has the best average of the lot but he will need to get more consistent against teams other than South Africa and Australia to be considered a great player. Similarly, Sehwag will not do his talent justice if he keeps under-performing against the Australians.

The table also shows how arguments based on Tendulkar's lower average against the South Africans are hollow because, apparently, every player has teams they've not quite been at their best against.

Going by variation, Ponting and Tendulkar are the most consistent irrespective of opposition.

Percentage of team runs

	'96	'97	'98	'99	'00	'01	'02	'03	'04	'05	'06	'07	'08	'09
Tendulkar	25	14	30	19	17	32	23	26	17	11	20	19	17	20
Ponting	14	36	21	18	16	22	18	20	16	18	15	31	10	13
Pietersen									46	29	19	19	21	10
Lara	30	23	22	13	17	21	20	21	17	13	15	18		
Gibbs	12	8	4	18	15	17	17	19	10	23	15	20	13	17
Gilchrist	4	17	15	15	14	18	15	16	18	14	16	14	14	
Sehwag					8	13	18	15	11	13	12	14	21	22

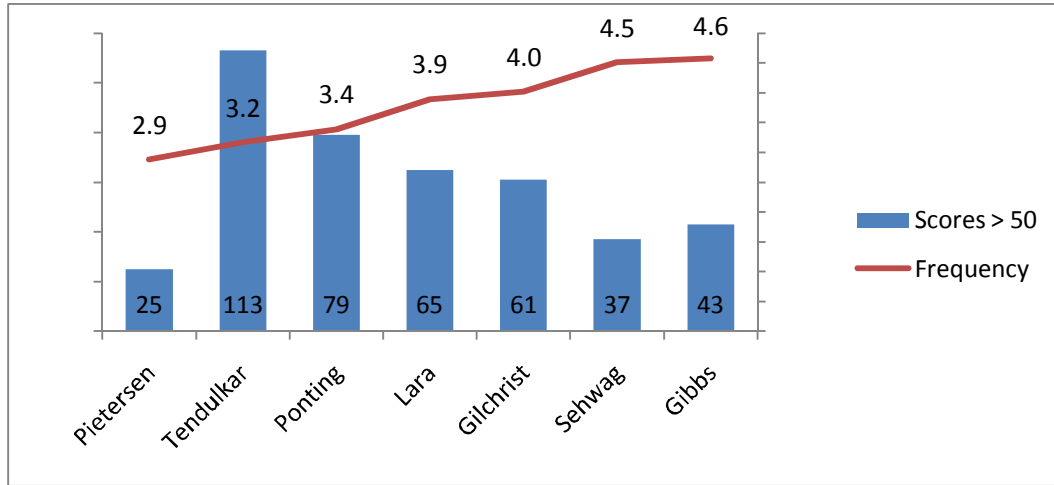
The table shows the runs scored in each calendar year as a percentage of the average team score. Considering that the typical ODI lineup, there are usually 6 specialist batsmen with a couple of handy lower order hitters, anything approaching 20% of team runs would indicate more than a decent contribution. What surprised me was that Gilchrist and Gibbs rarely breached the 20% barrier (Gilchrist never and Gibbs twice) – An indicator of the relative freedom they had to blaze away to wrest the initiative early. After his initial years of carefree stroke-making, Sehwag will see more of the run-scoring load over the remainder of his career.

Ponting has had one of the most consistent careers with substantial contribution to the team cause almost all through except in the last 2 years.

The frequency of highlighted numbers in the Tendulkar row underlines that he has been the bedrock of the Indian ODI innings for most of his career.

His worst year without a doubt was 2005 but the last four suggest that there's some gas left in the tank.

Appetite for the big runs

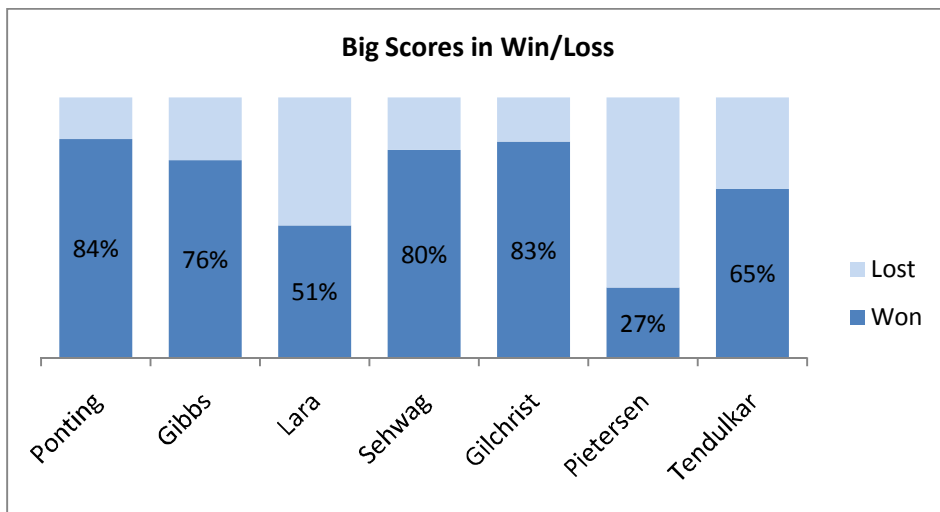


The chart shows the number of big scores (> 50) and how often the big scores come.

Example: Pietersen has scored 25 half-centuries in 90 matches which indicates he scores over 50 every 3rd time he goes out to bat

The longevity of Tendulkar’s career has been used as an excuse by many an expert as the sole explanation for the mountains of runs scored. The table shows scores over 50 against quality opposition. Only Pietersen, who has played all of 90 ODIs scores big more often than Tendulkar.

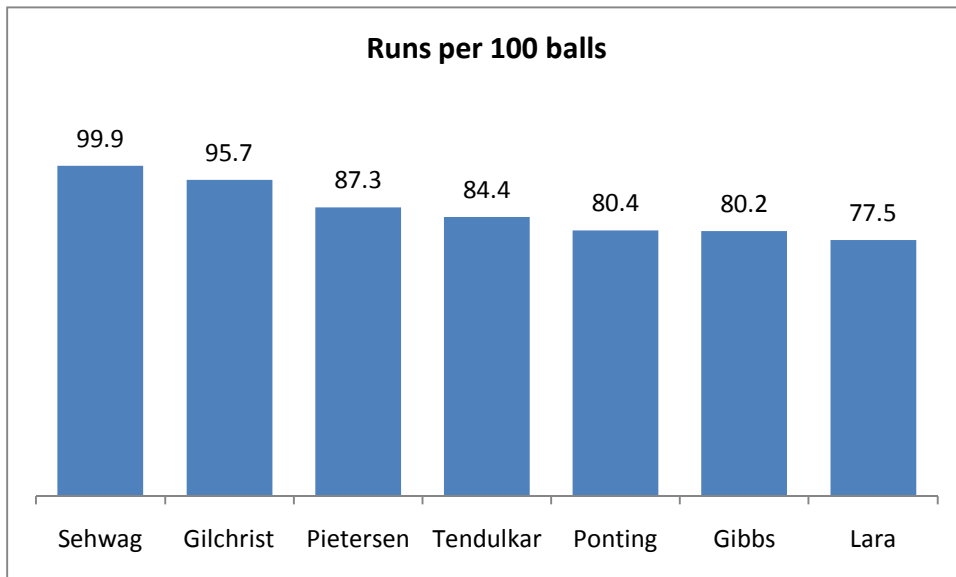
As an aside, a look at the results of their big scores show that Pietersen’s efforts have been in vain 73% of the time while Lara ended up on the losing side after scoring over 50 nearly half the time.



This statistic doesn't show much except the mediocre ODI sides that Pietersen and Lara play(ed) in.

The difference in Tendulkar and Sehwag's ratio suggests an improvement in Indian sides over the last few years. For those who use difference in "average in games won" versus "average in games lost" as arguments are just plain silly.

Ability to dominate



This is a simple one. Table shows comparison of strike rates (runs scored per 100 balls faced) and Sehwag and Gilchrist underline the sheer destructive capability they bring to their sides. Among the others there is not much to choose and considering the people Tendulkar scores faster than, there is not a lot anyone can detract from it all.

Big match temperament

The biggest drum his detractors like to bang on is that "Tendulkar is not a big-match player". If only world cup finals count, then our sample set is all of 8 games amongst the seven batsmen here. So, looking at Finals, Semi-Finals & Quarter Finals together and then the big tournaments together, the numbers surprised even me

Finals, Semi-Finals, Quarter Finals

	Innings	Runs	Average
Tendulkar	47	2137	50.88
Gibbs	12	465	42.27
Lara	25	861	37.43
Ponting	49	1613	36.66
Gilchrist	39	1277	34.51
Sehwag	18	515	32.19
Pietersen	1	6	6.00

I expected a marginally lower average in 'big games' for Tendulkar when I set out to do this exercise. What turned up however indicates even less substance to the argument about Tendulkar not performing in important games.

World Cups, ICC Champions Trophy, Australian Tri-Series

	Innings	Runs	Average
Pietersen	13	644	58.55
Tendulkar	101	4262	46.84
Ponting	170	6378	41.69
Gibbs	55	2050	41.00
Lara	93	3303	40.28
Sehwag	46	1616	36.73
Gilchrist	146	5032	35.69

Tendulkar's world cup performance are legendary and so it's no surprise to see him up there with over 5 runs a game over Ponting and over 10 runs a game over Gilchrist.

What a lot of us do tend to remember are the blistering centuries Gilchrist scored in the world cup finals, what we don't is that its the other batsmen that took Australia to those finals.

Summary

	Consistency	Performance against top sides	Percentage of team runs	Appetite for big scores	Ability to dominate	Big Match temperament (Deciders)	Big Tournament temperament	TOTAL
Tendulkar	2	2	1	2	4	1	2	14
Ponting	3	1	2	3	5	4	3	21
Pietersen	1	7	3	1	3	7	1	23
Lara	4	4	4	4	7	3	5	31
Gilchrist	5	3	6	5	2	5	7	33
Gibbs	7	5	5	7	6	2	4	36
Sehwag	6	6	7	6	1	6	6	38

Numbers indicate relative ranking on that parameter. Top 3 have been highlighted. Lower 'Total' indicate better scores.

This is not a ranking system. Pietersen and Sehwag are only half-way into their careers and their numbers could move either way. The idea is that we should be able to swap the 6 names in this comparison and we can be fairly certain that the numbers in the table here wouldn't change significantly (although I personally believe the numbers would tilt further in favour of Tendulkar).

BOTTOMLINE:

So, is Sachin Tendulkar the greatest ODI batsman of all time? Maybe. Might he be beaten to that title in a completely objective comparison of decimals against his contemporaries? Possible. 10 years from now, will he be beaten in the same study by emerging stars like Virender Sehwag? Probable.

Based on his performance spanning two decades, applying the most logical criteria defining successful ODI batsmen:

Is Sachin Tendulkar the best ODI player ever? We do not have a doubt.

Epilogue

Now, we know that when it comes to this subject, there is no word that even approaches 'final'. So, I'd encourage you to weigh in on what you think. About the argument that five points of view can yield five different top-10 lists. That greatness cannot come out of a database query. Or can it? If not this guy, who do you think is the greatest? Email outsideedge.wordpress@gmail.com