

What a £26,400 cricket ball tells us about our mania for sport

The ball that cricketing legend Sir Garry Sobers smashed for six sixes in one over at St Helen's in 1968 was sold at Christie's in 2006 - only, it turned out to be the wrong ball.

By [Martin Cloake](#)

Writing about sport throws up a unique challenge. The affection for the subject that most, if not all, sports writers have means that the usual journalistic scepticism wrestles constantly with the desire to believe that what we want to see is what we are seeing. Sport engages because of the glory that comes with achievement, because of its capacity to inspire, its ability to help us escape the everyday, if only for a moment. So when doubt emerges, when a tiny something suggests that all is not as it seems, it's easy to look away.

It's something the *Sunday Times* journalist David Walsh goes into in some depth in his book *Seven Deadly Sins*, in which he details his growing realisation of the enormity of cycling's doping culture and his pursuit of the truth about

Lance Armstrong. Everyone wanted to believe that cycling had cleaned up, and everyone wanted to believe that Armstrong had battled back from life-threatening cancer to achieve sporting glory. It was a magnificently inspiring narrative. For some years, Walsh was a pariah for questioning it but now, thanks to his efforts and the bravery of the cycling insiders who decided to speak out, we know it was untrue.

The need to believe fuels sporting passion, and it drives an increasingly lucrative market for sporting memorabilia. The chance to own a piece of sporting history is the chance to make a physical connection with the magic. That's why, in 2006, a cricket ball was sold at London auction house Christie's for a staggering £26,400. For this was not just any cricket ball. It was the ball that cricketing legend Sir Garry Sobers smashed for six sixes in one over at St Helen's in Swansea during a match between Glamorgan and Nottinghamshire in 1968. Sobers was the first batsman in first class cricket history to achieve the feat, and it has only been matched three times since. The ball came with a signed certificate of provenance from Sobers himself, and fetched a world record price.

The trouble is, it is not the ball with which history was made. Journalist Grahame Lloyd discovered that fact, for fact it is, when writing a book on the 40th anniversary of the Six Sixes over. And he's still trying to set the record straight.

The ball auctioned by Christie's was made by Duke & Son.

But the balls used by Glamorgan throughout the 1960s were supplied by the Stuart SurrIDGE firm. The bowler who bowled the over to Sobers that day, Malcolm Nash, remembers the ball was a SurrIDGE, not a Duke. In the lot notes, Christies said the ball was one of three used during the over. Nash is certain he did not change balls. What's more, BBC TV footage of the over clearly shows the same ball being returned to Nash after the first five sixes, and then hit out of the ground for the sixth. (It was returned two days later by a schoolboy who found it in the street).

The discovery presented Lloyd with a dilemma. He had wanted his 40th anniversary book, *Six of the Best*, to be the definitive record of an iconic sporting moment. But what he had uncovered called the integrity of Sobers, not only a cricketing colossus but a boyhood hero of Lloyd's, into question. Also called into question was the judgement of Christie's, an institution firmly embedded in the British establishment and with an international reputation. When you are an individual journalist about to go up against such reputations, and such power, you think twice. Lloyd thought, and decided that not to pursue the case would not be cricket.

In his book on the anniversary, he raised the doubts. In his latest book *Howzat? The Six Sixes Ball Mystery*, he pursues the protagonists in an effort to discover how the wrong ball came to be sold, and to set the record straight. It's a meticulously-researched investigation featuring a rich cast of characters, deployed with a deft storytelling touch

by Lloyd.