

Cricket: India's passion

Sachin Chitta is a graduate student in the Department of Mechanical Engineering. His only claim to fame in the game of cricket has been that he shares his first name with India's best player, Sachin Tendulkar.

Why would a bunch of Indian students drag themselves all the way across Philly to a friend's house in the middle of a cold winter night? The answer- to watch a game of Cricket together! A game of cricket between traditional rivals India and Pakistan can bring the whole Indian sub-continent to a halt. The morale of a nation rises and drops with the fortunes of its team on the field. Schools are let off early, classes cancelled and offices closed as people go home to watch the game. Post game analysis is heated and emotional. When India wins a match, the celebrations frequently include the lighting of loud firecrackers on the streets. For a country which spans a vast and varied terrain and a breathtakingly diverse culture, it may be difficult to imagine many events or activities which bind the nation together as one. The game of cricket is one such activity where over a billion people can truly participate in unison by supporting and egging on the national team.

Children in India play the game almost anywhere they can, including the narrow alleys of big cities. A piece of wood, a couple of bricks and a tree stump are the most common things used as stumps. Although the actual game is played with a very hard ball, tennis or rubber balls are often used in the street variety of the game. Smashed windows are a frequent part of daily life in any neighborhood where the game is played on the streets. Most of the game's biggest stars have started out their careers playing this form of cricket. One of India's best batsmen, Sunil Gavaskar, is said to have honed his skills in the narrow streets of Bombay. With buildings situated close-by on both sides, he was often forced to hit the ball straight down the street and developed one of the best straight drives the game has ever seen.

Cricket is played widely all over the world. Australia, New Zealand, England, South Africa, West Indies and Zimbabwe are among the other principal cricket playing nations. Along with the Asian teams of India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and most recently Bangladesh, these nations play "Test" matches at the international levels. A test match is played over a five-day period with each team allowed to bat for two "innings". Over the last two decades, the popularity of one-day cricket (once derided as pajama cricket by the purists) has exploded. This shorter version of the game is perfect for television audiences. Every four years, the cricket playing nations come together to play in the World Cup, the pinnacle of one-day cricket. India won the tournament in 1983, beating the then mighty West Indies team. The Aussies crowned themselves the World Champions in a fighting display of temperament and grit in the last World Cup held in England in 1999.

Technology has played a big part in Cricket in recent years. Recent innovations include stump cameras, small cameras placed in the stumps providing a different view of the game. Instant television replays are now commonly used to refer close decisions to an umpire off the field. This takes the pressure off the two umpires on the field. Some of the teams use computer software to try and find the opposing team's weakness. Yet, cricket remains a game where most of the decisions are made on the field. The captain of the team makes the important strategic decisions on the field and plays a big part in the

game. There are no time-outs, only brief drink breaks and a lunch break. In the five-day game, players are frequently fielding out on the field for two or three whole days of play.

In India, cricket stars enjoy a fan following that far exceeds that of even the biggest film stars. India's favorite poster boy and best cricket player, Sachin Tendulkar, is revered by his fans and feared by his rivals. Gifted with an incredible talent for batting and a very cool head, Sachin made his debut for India at the tender age of 16 against Pakistan. His success in both test and one-day versions of the game since has been astonishing. Often he has single-handedly taken the opposition apart with a wide range of shots. Currently, Sachin has 25 centuries (more than 100 runs in a match) in one-day internationals (ODI's), a world record. Cricket is one of the few sports where Indian players have attained world-class status, and stars like Sachin are idolized by many a young Indian striving to emulate his success.

The passion for the game on the Indian subcontinent is such that stadiums are often filled to capacity even for the five-day test games. One of the best stadiums in the world is the Eden Gardens stadium in Calcutta, India. With a capacity of more than 100,000, the atmosphere in the stadium can only be described as electrifying. The noise levels in the stadium are so high that players can seldom hear their teammates on the field. Foreign teams that come to India often describe the matches at this stadium as their most memorable matches. Recently, a number of stadiums have cropped up in countries like the Emirates and Singapore to cater to the large South Asian population there and are frequently the venues for international cricket tournaments.

Cricket on the American continent dates back earlier than is widely known. The history of cricket in the US provides some fascinating facts. In the year 1844, Canada and the United States of America met in their first international at the St. George's Club in New York on the site where the New York University Medical Centre is now located. This match is widely believed to be the first international sporting fixture in the world, happening over 50 years before the first modern Olympics! In fact, several of the founding fathers of the US were avid cricketers, among them John Adams. Perhaps the most interesting piece of history about cricket in the US is the story of how baseball was evolved from it! The website <http://www.cricinfo.org> is an excellent resource for information on cricket. Follow the links to the history of cricket in the US under "Other countries" playing the game for more information.

The history of cricket at Penn dates back to almost 1864 when Penn played against Haverford College. Now, a group of South Asian graduate students frequently play matches during the spring and summer months. The games often involve visiting teams and players from Temple and Drexel. The Penn Cricket club, revived this year after a five-year gap, also plays matches regularly against other teams. Cricket lost ground to baseball at the beginning of this century and still has a long way to go in the United States. Given its popularity and appeal in other parts of the world though, it may only be a matter of time before it catches up here as well!