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National Post

February 27, 2010

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Going cricket crazy

Residents rally to raise \$76,000 toward the opening of a new pitch in North Etobicoke

Follow Kipling Avenue to the top of the city, and just beyond, and you'll find yourself in a barren field framed by hydro towers and hulking high rises. There's not a whisper of the cricket fandom that will descend upon it; the ground is still frozen.

But come spring, the earth will move, the sod will roll out and the bleachers will rise. Then it's up to the youngsters. And the adults. And this whole cricket-loving community that has pitched in to build the top line Thackeray Park cricket pitch, only the second in the city.

Cricket in Toronto? Some call it the fastest growing sport in the city. Like soccer before it, the dynamic waves of immigrants settling here continue to transform the playing field, challenging anew the notion that this is a hockey town. To be sure, the recent debate over ice allocation at city arenas underscores how hockey remains supreme in some quarters, but in Scarborough, enrollment is plummeting. And in **Councillor Suzan Hall's** North Etobicoke ward, teens are lining up to try out for high school cricket. "As the population changes, the strong interest in any particular sport changes," Ms. Hall said yesterday.

North Etobicoke's large South Asian and Caribbean population provides fertile ground for cricket to expand, and local heroes to shine. Take Akash Shah, a 17-year-old cricket phenom at North Albion Collegiate Institute, who travelled to England as part of the Mayor's 2008 "Cricket Across the Pond" team. The program took 14 youth to practice and play against U.K. teams. Akash and his family moved from India, the land of countless cricket pitches, four years ago, and he did not even consider the sport an option in Canada.

Now he regularly suits up with his pals and anxiously awaits the opening of Thackeray Park's cricket pitch, which generated lively debate at city council this week, on 3.7 acres donated by the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority.

"The pitch itself is a great idea, and having it here too, because there are so many people moving in every day," Akash said. "Young guys like us are being exposed to the sport we love back home."

North Albion coach Ammer Askary has witnessed a surge of enthusiasm for a sport that dominated his Pakistani household, even if his heart always belonged to basketball. North Albion has seven or eight teams a year, indoor and outdoor, and he's been called on to explain the basics to schools like Etobicoke Collegiate Institute, in the Kingsway area. "Cricket is where it's at in [North Etobicoke]" he said. Akash's trip overseas is "when kids started noticing that cricket can take you places."

It was about two years ago when Fred Morgan, president of the Elmbank Sports Club, turned to Ms. Hall and asked her about a pitch. So, when the city earmarked \$200,000 to build a sports ground for the Jamestown-Rexdale community, a "priority" neighbourhood that grapples with crime, poverty and unemployment, the choice of sports was easy.

"There were questions about whether there would be interest in the community and I said that wasn't going to be a problem," chuckled Ms. Hall. Her pride is clear when she talks about the \$76,000 community-raised funds -- \$50,000 from police, \$10,000 from the Ontario Cricket Association, \$5,000 from a huge gospel concert organized by a local church, another \$5,000 from a tournament. Hundreds more have come from barbecues. "You have to realize, I do not live in a wealthy community," Ms. Hall said.

The city is contributing \$600,000 for the first phase, which is slated to start construction this spring, and could be open for play by the end of the summer. (Another \$350,000 will be spent to connect sewers for water fountains and toilets in the second phase, a plan that received vocal opposition from some councillors this week, who said the money should come out of the priority neighbourhood pot, not a water budget surplus).

"It will uplift the community," said Mr. Morgan, who played cricket as a boy in his native Jamaica.

Mike Kendall, president of the Ontario Cricket Association, says Toronto's changing demographics contribute to the resurgence of a sport that was once at the national fore. In the GTA, league enrolment has nearly tripled in five years (although at 5,000 players, cricket doesn't hold a candle to the more than 35,000 hockey participants in the Greater Toronto Hockey League), and that does not count the 1,000 Ontario schools that have introduced the sport. A shorter game that wraps up in three hours (instead of five days) has contributed to increasing popularity.

"We just don't have enough grounds to cover all the teams that have come up," said Mr. Kendall, who is talking with the city about converting lonely baseball diamonds into cricket grounds.

There is not enough land available to make Thackeray Park meet international pitch size, but it will be natural turf, critical for a game that relies on a delicate field.

"That the city of Toronto actually cared to put so much money into building it" says a lot, said Akash Shah. "It's more so for the people, helping them out to love the community that they live in."