

Asian immigrants fire up Italian interest

Milan, September 24:

Cricket is finally getting noticed in Italy, more than 100 years after it helped introduce soccer to the country.

A group of British expatriates set up Genoa Cricket and Athletic Club in the Italian port in 1893 and it was only when English doctor James Richardson Spensley joined a few years later that soccer was added to the programme.

Spensley became known as one of the fathers of Italian football and the sport swept the nation, leaving cricket with little recognition except for its continued presence in the full name of top-flight soccer side Genoa Cricket and Football Club.

Now a new breed of expatriates in Italy - from India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Bangladesh - are putting cricket back into the limelight.

The lucrative new Indian Premier League found its way on to Italian satellite television in June and famed newspaper Gazzetta dello Sport has carried stories about the game.

“There are loads of people playing cricket in the streets,” the Italian cricket federation’s president Simone Gambino said.

Around 400,000 people from South Asia live in Italy and the federation estimates that further arrivals, despite the government’s crackdown on illegal immigration, could lead to 1,000 new clubs.

The national team, made up largely of players from Asian, Australian and South African backgrounds, hope one day to qualify for the World Cup.

They beat the Netherlands, who have played in three World Cups, in the International Cricket Council’s (ICC) European Division One championship in Ireland in July.

“Thirty years looks to be about right for us to reach the World Cup. We are about 27 in the world rankings and all it takes is for the World Cup to expand and for us to improve a bit,” Gambino added.

There are only 10 full members of the ICC where the funding is concentrated. Italy are associate members along with nations such as Ireland and Scotland, who have reached World Cups.

Gambino is irked by the fact that Zimbabwe remain full members despite having to practically pull out of international cricket because of the political crisis there.

“Take Ireland and Scotland. They are now definitely better than Zimbabwe. If Zimbabwe played Italy in a series of five matches, we would certainly win one game yet they are full members,” he said.

Fairytale victory

The lack of funding in Italy is most noticeable when it comes to pitches. Cricket, even the one-day version, takes up a lot of time, as well as space which Italian parks do not generally allow for.

The growing number of cricket teams often have to share with baseball sides or grab whatever piece of land they can.

Kamal Kariyawasam, 50, is captain of Italian second division champions Kingsgrove.

"Pitches are the biggest problem," said the Sri-Lankan born player, who has seen cricket in Italy grow from four or five teams in the early 1980s to a three-division league today.

On Sunday in the west coast town of Grosseto, third-division Azzurra completed a fairytale victory in the season-ending final of the Twenty-20 Italian Cup which featured 24 teams from across the country.

"The increase is down to the immigrants but not totally. Among the lads training with the juniors at Kingsgrove there are also three Italians and a Peruvian," Kariyawasam added.

However, most soccer-mad Italians still look utterly perplexed when told that test cricket lasts five days and that there are 10 ways to get out, suggesting that cricket may have a long wait to really take hold in the country.