



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Jatin Patel demonstrates his bowling technique to a student group.

That's a right sticky wicket!

Teaching kids cricket, despite the odds

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The careful follower of local politics may recall that day when Mayor Greg Ballard got a wild hair and announced that a North American Cricket Tournament in Indianapolis would be just super. That idea has progressed just as far as Ballard's notion announced at the same time that a Chinatown in Indianapolis would be just as grand.

But Jatin Patel, who makes the my-sport-is-better-than-yours claim that fans in India love cricket more than Americans do football, is determined to make a little of Ballard's dream a reality. A native of India with an American belly and salt-and-pepper mustache, Patel is president of the Indiana Youth Cricket Association, a group dedicated to promoting the sport at the grassroots level in schools across the state.

"It's a slow process to introduce cricket to anyone," Patel admits, but by training gym teachers at free workshops and conferences, and, when possible giving away the expensive equipment needed to play the sport in gym classes, Patel hopes his organization might help schools and groups to at least overcome economic barriers to entry. A partnership between INYCA's parent organization, the United States Youth Cricket Association, and Reebok is helping to make possible equipment purchases on a national level; locally, the INYCA gets additional help from cricket supplies website thecricketspot.com. With almost 100 schools already participating in INYCA programs, the organization is shifting gears from individual sessions to larger conferences.

But it's more than financial concerns that keep cricket on the margins of the American sporting conscience. The

unmatched complexity of its rules make explaining cricket difficult.

Patel focuses on the basics during training sessions at schools across the state, giving kids the opportunity to hit the ball instead of worrying about laying out all the game's rules. It's a strategy that speaks to his experience working with kids — he's more eager to have them play the game at all than to have them play it the right way. They all get excited as soon as you give them the flat bat," he says of the training sessions. "They all get solid hits, and it's a flat bat so it goes a long way."

As for those rules, if you know how baseball works, it's not much of a stretch to wrap your head around cricket; most sport historians see cricket as a formative influence on baseball's structure. Imagine a baseball diamond, except in the shape of a circle and sans bases. The pitcher, catcher and batter are in the middle of the circle in a small rectangle called a pitch. The rest of the field is filled with the fielding team's players who are all sort of akin to outfielders in nice sweaters (and sometimes goofy hats). And there are of course the two iconic wickets located at either end of the pitch. We haven't the space to explain the rest; rest assured the mighty Internet has a primers for the uninitiated.

In the long run, Patel's organization is most interested in promoting the short version of cricket, which takes three hours to play. "On every delivery, something is going to happen," Patel says of this short version. "And the result is coming in three hours," instead of three days, a not uncommon length for "full-scale" cricket matches.

Patel believes that the institutional system of soccer in the U.S. — where players advance from youth leagues to club teams, then on up to regional and then national teams — is one cricket can follow as it establishes itself. Seeing the way that soccer has blossomed in 25 years, Patel and cricket enthusiasts around the country hope to mirror its growth on an accelerated scale by taking a more proactive role in the sport's promotion and organizing the thousands of cricketers already in the U.S. to help the sport grow.

Patel and his cohorts welcome input from anyone else interested in being a part of the sport's progress. Patel directs interested parties to indianacricket.org, the organization's website that lists all their upcoming events and provides information on contacting Patel about bringing a cricket workshop to a school. It will also be the place to go for information on a local public workshop in September as plans solidify.

Patel's ambition for cricket's growth is tempered by realism. "We are starting a grassroots level program," he said. Laying out these roots is the first step to slow expansion of the sport, allowing the children learning the sport now to age and fill out rosters for school and club teams. They're poised to grow beyond the low-level work into something large and influential. Maybe Ballard's tournament isn't so out of the question, after all. ■