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# Bowling For Bucks

**Beloved cricket is becoming big business in India.**

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By today's sports logic, cricket should be dead. In its purest form, the game takes five days to play. Its upper lip remains so stiff that a batsman who declares himself out when the umpire blows the call gets cheers instead of boos. Its heroes aren't giants, either of height or girth; the low penetration of performance-enhancing drugs is painfully obvious. Some players, like Australian spin bowler Shane Warne, look like they've just set down a plastic cup of beer and climbed out of the bleachers.

Strangely, though, cricket thrives. Over the past month or so, two new cash-rich professional leagues have been unveiled, ESPN Star Sports has launched a 24-hour channel devoted to the sport and a new, faster version of the Cricket World Cup is gaining steam. Based on future sponsorship rights being paid to the International Cricket Council, it's likely cricket over the next few years will earn well in excess of \$2 billion, twice what it's done since 2000. The reason: new competitive forces within India, as well as a burgeoning and cricket-crazed Indian middle class, are making the underdog sport big business. Australia may have won the last two World Cups. But James Fitzgerald, ICC spokesman, says that "it's no secret India is becoming the financial powerhouse of the sport."

Cricket is the cultural unifier of India, the most populous and most passionate of cricketing nations (which also include England, Australia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, South Africa, Kenya, Zimbabwe and Sri Lanka). Even bigger than Bollywood (which is limited to the Hindi-speaking population), televised cricket matches can capture up to 60 percent of the Indian viewing audience, which amounts to 450 million people. Yet the country has won a World Cup only once, thanks in part to bad management by its administrative body, the Board of Control for Cricket in India, which has failed to promote talent in recent decades. Political concerns dictate the selection of the national team (which favors players from the state of Maharashtra, which has historically dominated the BCCI). Local and state feeder teams are chronically underfunded and receive scant media attention.

Media tycoon Subhash Chandra, chairman of India's largest listed television company, Zee Entertainment, aims to change that. Last month he unveiled plans for a breakaway Indian Cricket League, with a \$1 million prize for the champions and player salaries as high as \$400,000 (top players in domestic leagues currently make about \$32,000 in India, and rarely more than \$80,000 even in England).

The Board of Control responded swiftly, threatening to ban players who decided to join the new league from the international squad. When that proved unsuccessful, it announced 40 percent raises, and revealed plans for its own conference—the Premier Cricket League—which will include players from many nations and pay \$3 million to the winning team.

The new leagues will be backed by global advertisers, including Unilever, LG, Hutchison, Honda and others eager to reach Indian consumers. Average Indian incomes will triple by 2025, making India the fifth largest consumer market in the world, according to the McKinsey Global Institute. Over the same period, India's middle class will grow from 50 million to 583 million. Cricket, notes Guru Prasad Rao, vice president of the Mumbai-based media-buying firm Network Media, "is the one language that unites the country." Ad rates for matches, already the highest in the country, are skyrocketing. Spots for a recent India-Pakistan championship match sold for \$25,000 for 10 seconds (compared with about \$5,000 for prime-time movies).

Sponsorship rates are rising, too. Indian mobile operator Reliance Communications and PepsiCo India have reportedly paid between \$60 million and \$100 million apiece for rights to various contests over the next eight years, more than double what was paid between 2000 and 2007. Similarly, ESPN Star Sports is reported to have paid \$1.1 billion for the broadcast rights for a package of games including two Cricket World Cups between 2007 and 2016.

What will it mean for the sport? Just as soccer's English Premier League attracts the world's top players through powerful franchises backed by loyal fans, the future could well see India displace both England and Australia as the

home of the biggest cricket matches. Top athletes relocating to India to play cricket may sound farfetched. But 15 years ago, the suggestion that top executives and coveted business-school graduates would be flocking to India would have sounded equally ridiculous.

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