

Our Cricket Problem

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LAST week, the greatest sporting event of the year in terms of audience began in Jamaica, when the West Indies beat Pakistan in the inaugural match of the 2007 Cricket World Cup. A six-week extravaganza follows — 51 matches that are being monitored with nail-biting excitement around the world. The final, on Saturday, April 28, will take place in Barbados, but friends of mine in New York are already planning a World Cup party at the home of an expatriate with a satellite dish. The party will be attended by a raucous group of Indians and Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and Brits, Australians and Zimbabweans. But of course there will be no Americans.



No, it's not a case of ethnic discrimination. Call it willful ignorance. Americans have about as much use for cricket as Lapps have for beachwear. The fact that elsewhere in the civilized world grown men dress up like poor relations of Gatsby and venture hopefully into the drizzle clutching their bats invariably mystifies my American friends. And the notion that anyone would watch a game that, in its highest form, could take five days and still end in a draw provokes widespread disbelief among results-oriented Americans.

In a concession to the pace of life in our increasingly Americanized world, one-day international cricket matches were born in the 1970s, and the World Cup features one-day games (which take about seven hours, rather than 30 as in the five-day “test matches”). But that hasn’t made it any more popular here. A billion people might be on tenterhooks around the world for the results of each match, but most American newspapers don’t even adequately report the scores.

Ever since the development of baseball, the ubiquitous and simplified version of the sport, Americans have been lost to the more demanding challenges — and pleasures — of cricket. Because baseball is to cricket as simple addition is to calculus — the basic moves may be similar, but the former is easier, quicker, more straightforward than the latter, and requires a much shorter attention span. And so baseball has captured the American imagination in a way that leaves no room for its adult cousin.

There was a time when that used to bother me. I have buttonholed sports editors at receptions and urged them to think of their duty to civilization. I have tried to explain the allure of the sport to a skeptical Yankees fan by sketching a cricket pitch on a napkin in a sports bar during World Series commercial breaks. I have even appealed to the Hemingway instinct that lurks in every American male by pointing out how cricket is so much more virile a sport, how fielders have nothing but their bare skin to catch something that is considerably harder than its padded American equivalent.

But now I’ve given up. As legions of missionaries have discovered before me, you can’t bring enlightenment to people who don’t realize they’re living in the dark. “You mean people actually pay to watch this?” exclaimed one American I tried to interest in the game. “It’s about as exciting as measuring global warming.”

“And just as vital to the rest of the planet,” I retorted.

Does it matter that Americans haven’t a clue about what they’re missing? Actually, no. You can ignore America and enjoy your cricket. Today, although none of the 103 channels on my Manhattan cable television set

offer a glimpse of the king of sports, suburbanites with satellite dishes can buy a World Cup package hawked by Indian-American television entrepreneurs.

During earlier World Cups, movie theaters in immigrant neighborhoods that normally screened Bollywood blockbusters had nocturnal telecasts of World Cup cricket matches instead. This time you don't even have to get up at 3 a.m. to watch games being broadcast from South Africa or Sri Lanka — the action's all taking place within an hour of Eastern Daylight Time. And thanks to the Internet, you no longer need to mortgage the house to buy a package that video-streams all the matches onto your computer. Living in America is no longer cricketing purgatory.

So why care what Americans think? Every four years when the World Cup comes around, there are opinion pieces in the press extolling the virtues of cricket, telling Americans why they should be interested in the game. And every time the Cup barely registers as a blip on America's consciousness. I had found myself hoping that salvation lay in increased immigration from the Indian subcontinent, that just as the growth in the Hispanic population is making soccer a mainstream sport in the United States, the enthusiasm of South Asians might yet spill over to their American neighbors. But why bother? Why try to sell Kiri Te Kanawa to people who prefer Anna Nicole Smith?

Indeed, cricket is no longer what Americans imagine it is, a decorous sport played by effete Englishmen uttering polite inanities (“marvelous glance to fine leg, old chap”) over cucumber sandwiches. World cricket now uses Hindi terms (the “doosra” trips off the tongues of Oxonian commentators) and 80 percent of the global game's revenues come from India.

In any event, nothing about cricket seems suited to the American national character: its rich complexity, the infinite possibilities that could occur with each delivery of the ball, the dozen different ways of getting out, are all patterned for a society of endless forms and varieties, not of a homogenized McWorld. They are rather like Indian classical music, in which the basic

laws are laid down but the performer then improvises gloriously, unshackled by anything so mundane as a written score.

Cricket is better suited to a country like India, where a majority of the population still consults astrologers and believes in the capricious influence of the planets — so they can well appreciate a sport in which, even more than in baseball, an ill-timed cloudburst, a badly prepared pitch, a lost toss of the coin at the start of a match or the sun in the eyes of a fielder can transform the outcome of a game. Even the possibility that five tense, hotly contested, occasionally meandering days of cricketing could still end in a draw seems derived from ancient Indian philosophy, which accepts profoundly that in life the journey is as important as the destination. Not exactly the American Dream.

So here's the message, America: don't pay any attention to us, and we won't pay any to you. If you wonder, over the coming weeks, why your Indian co-worker is stealing distracted glances at his computer screen every few minutes or why the South African in the next cubicle is taking frequent and furtive bathroom breaks during the working day, don't even try to understand. You probably wouldn't get it. You may as well learn to accept that there are some things too special for the rest of us to want to waste them on you.