

CRICKET IN AMERICA! WHAT A 'SILLY POINT'?

By JAY PATEL



That is the first thing that comes to mind when one speaks of Cricket and America in the same breath, more like an oxymoron. What many are blissfully unaware of (including me) is that the English game arrived here early on with the settlers. Jamestown, Virginia which was settled in 1607 reported ball games as early as 1609, and the first recorded reference comes from Governor Bradford of Plymouth, Massachusetts who took away 'implements' from new recruits who were recent arrivals to the colonies in 1622, as they were found playing, 'stool ball and other such sports', Cricket maybe?

The earliest reference to a possible game of Cricket was found in 1656 in New Netherlands (Manhattan Island) which was as the name suggest was a Dutch settlement (Hartford, Connecticut was also first settled by the Dutch and a fort was built here called 'House of Hope') and here a strict Sabbath Law was passed that fined one pound Flemish for, "playing ball, cricket, tennis, ninepins, dancing, drinking" etc. The next Cricket reference comes from the James River Plantation in Virginia in 1709 where William Byrd (founder of Richmond) who kept a dairy makes the following note, "I rose at 6 o'clock and read a chapter in Hebrew. About 10 o'clock Dr. Blair, and Major and Captain Harrison came to see us. After I had given them a glass of sack we played cricket. I ate boiled beef for my dinner. Then we played at shooting with arrows and went to cricket again till dark."

Wherever the British went Cricket followed, so it should have been no surprise to find that America has a very old and rich Cricket history, and the first ever 'International' match between two countries started in 1844, and who would be that other country – Canada! No its' not the English and the Australians, but the US and Canadian series which predates it by more than 30 years. 1859 saw the first English team set sail for Canada and America to play matches with teams in Philadelphia and New York. Philadelphia was to become the cradle of American Cricket which produced one of the greatest American Cricketer in John Barton King at the turn of the century. He has the distinction of taking the wicket of Ranjitsinhji in the very first delivery and that was the only time when he was bowled out in the first ball. After the English came the Australians followed by the Irish Cricketers and the first West Indian team to travel overseas was in 1886, and teams from Philadelphia and Canada also made trips to Ireland and England, though not a single trip was made to Australia.

Cricket and Baseball went side by side before the Civil War

Before the civil war in 1861 Cricket and Baseball went side by side but after the war, Baseball took hold and gradually became the American ball game. But here is the sixer, or a home run in this context – Baseball is also an English game! Albert Spalding the player and businessman in his patriotic zeal, wanted to prove that baseball was an American invention and set up a commission to do so, and came up with Abner Doubleday as the inventor of Baseball. Henry Chadwick who is now known as the Father of Baseball and Spalding's friend commented that as a kid growing up in England he had played rounders which was similar to baseball. A recent find discovered by David Block, has come to light in the form of a physical fitness book from 1796 describing the 'English game of Baseball' and of all things, it is a German book, "Spiele zur Uebung und Erholung".

There were more than 400 clubs at one time in America, and they were all over from Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Vermont, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Connecticut, Virginia, Georgia and as far as New Orleans. Detroit, Chicago, St Louis, Washington State then down the coast to California. The demise of Cricket in America is attributed to a number of reasons, a few being that it took 2 days to complete a game whereas a baseball game was over in less than 4 hours with results and the pace was more suited to the American psyche. The Cricket matches would not start till noon and the players would also be late in commencing a game and too much time was spent in taking breaks etc. The 'English eliteness' also contributed to its decline and till the turn of the century, there was lot of detailed press coverage which gradually tapered off in the early 1900s which basically made it, 'out of sight out of mind'.

A variation to Cricket existed mainly in Connecticut called Wicket which lasted for almost 300 years and the peak period was around the Civil War and the most watched rivalry was between Bristol and New Britain! Wicket had 30 players on each team, the bat was tubular at the bottom and a softball size ball was rolled along the ground on the pitch that was referred to as the 'alley' and the player had to defend the wicket which was just 3 or 4 inches off the ground and about 6 feet wide. Windsor Historical Society has a Wicket bat and ball on display along with a few pictures. A Cambridge educated English clergyman who came to America in the 1850's claimed that Wicket was the ancient form of Cricket that was played during the reign of King Charles the First in 1600! The last time a game of Wicket was played, was in Newington in the 1950s.

I started writing on American Cricket history after acquiring a great collection and it has been a wonderful journey and it has taken me 3 years of non-stop writing/research to finish my book, "Flannels on the Sward, History of Cricket in Americas," which should be out by October on Amazon in B&W, Color and eBook.