

Indian set to restore Canada's cricketing glory

Big-time cricket action is returning to Canada after about a century.

In a country where cricket was the premier national sport till National Hockey League replaced it in 1917, an Indo-Canadian, Atul Ahuja, has joined hands with the International Cricket Council (ICC) to restore the sport to its previous glory.

Languishing at the lowest 15th rank, Canada currently enjoys the status of only an associate member with the ICC.

For young Ahuja, who has just been appointed CEO of the Canadian Cricket Association, the advent of Twenty20 cricket has come in handy to mount a challenge to hockey and put cricket where it once was.

“The ICC has spelt out that Canada is a priority nation for them. So with their financial and technical backing, we are putting in place by mid-2008 a league system and a national academy to take this sport to the grassroots,” Ahuja told IANS, explaining his game plan.

“Twenty20 is like (ice) hockey. It is a three-hour, action-packed thriller which will excite all Canadians. So like the National Hockey League where city teams from Canada and the US vie for the Stanley Cup, we are raising four city cricket teams in Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver and Calgary, to begin with. Later, we will have more teams,” he said.

The inter-city league, he said, will make cricket a regular, year-round sporting feature in Canada. “This will make it the sport of the masses who would love permanence of cricketing action here.”

Each city league team, he explained, will have three international players, four senior players, three under-19 players and one baseball player.

Why a baseball player? “Since baseball is very popular in America and almost like cricket, we want to make T20 look like baseball and draw spectators. It is just a marketing strategy. And cricket boards of other countries will help us recruit international players.”

The year-long city league, he explained, will culminate in two semi-finals and a final to be played in a single day.

“It will be a day of two semi-finals and then a final...which will be telecast live at primetime in India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Europe, the Gulf, Australia and New Zealand.”

Hinting that it could be an indoor event at Rogers Centre in downtown Toronto, Ahuja said he was in talks with Ten Sports for worldwide telecast rights.

“And there is no dearth of corporate sponsors. In fact, we also plan a separate T20 professional league in July as 30 to 40 per cent staff of Microsoft, IBM, Oracle and banks here are South Asians with cricketing background. It will be played from 5 p.m. to 8 p.m.

“Then there is a huge pool of talented women players from India and the Caribbean for whom we

will have a women's league under way in early 2008."

On top of it all, he said, there will be a national cricket academy to nurture talent. ``Starting in March, it will bring the best coaches from Canada and outside to train youngsters and set the stage for cricket revolution in Canada."

Cricket has a long history in Canada, he said, revealing that the first-ever documented match in cricket history was played in Quebec City in 1775.

Revealing another curious fact, Ahuja said, ``Most people think the first international Test match was played between England and Australia in 1877. But records show it was a three-day match between Canada and the US on Sept 25-27 in 1844 at St George's Club in New York which we (Canada) won by 23 runs.

``On Day 1, the US was all out for 64 runs and Canada 82. On Day 2, there was no play, and on Day 3, Canada scored 62 and the US 58."

Gurmukh Singh (© IANS / India eNews)