



our town

Play Ball!

The days are longer, the grass is green—it must be cricket season.

BY BEN HUBBARD

Although the dandelions were out in force in Washington Park, the weather was unseasonably cool. But the chill in the morning air didn't discourage the players, who'd been waiting all winter long to take to the pitch and compete for runs and wickets. In their white shoes, shirts, pants, and V-neck sweaters, the all-male assembly looked more like caddies than athletes, but their careful stretching routines suggested that something seriously athletic was about to happen.

When it came time to play, two batsmen would take up positions in the creases and take turns defending their stumps against leg cutters and off spinners thrown by the opposing team's bowler. If the batsmen were striking well, they'd each score some runs and maybe even hit a sixer. But if the bowler was in good form with his googlies, wrong 'uns, and flippers, he might succeed in putting one of the batting partners out for a duck.

Every self-respecting sport has its jargon, but cricket has a language unto itself. Still, when the Chicago-based Midwest Cricket Conference kicked off its season on the morning of Saturday, May 17, the pregame prophecies sounded much like those of any other sport.

"Basically, we're going to win," said Tariq Ahmad, captain of the Flames. "We're a very good team, and we're playing a very good team. I think we are one of the best there is."

Members of the opposing United club were equally optimistic. "Today we are going to try the same tactics we tried against the Flames in the playoffs," said president Akber Khan. "We are looking forward to that, and hopefully we will win."

Of the four cricket matches held in Washington Park that day, the Flames-United match had the most history behind it. Last year, the Flames won their match against United in the regular season, only to lose to them in the playoffs. United went on to place second in the league, ceding the championship cup to the Chicago Wildcats in October.

Founded in 1965, the Midwest Cricket Conference now comprises 45 clubs, up from 27 just three years ago. Ahmad, who's league president as well as the captain of the Flames, puts its current membership at 800 and says it's the largest cricket body in the U.S.



Tariq Ahmad, center

He attributes the growth spurt to a combination of improved communications and the snowball effect. According to Ahmad, league players are, without exception, immigrants, most of them white-collar workers. (Ahmad says about 70 percent of MCC players work in computer-related fields; others are engineers, businessmen, and doctors.) Many had lived in the midwest for years before hearing of the MCC. But lately the word has been spreading more rapidly: potential players stumble upon a match in a city park and sign up with a team. Others run across the league's Web site and organize a new team. On any given weekend this summer, Ahmad says, there will be 20 league matches going on in Chicago, Evanston, Hanover Park, Hoffman Estates, Peoria, Saint Louis, and Madison.

A 40-year-old software consultant, Ahmad has been playing in the MCC since he immigrated from Pakistan in 1982 to attend the University of Illinois at Chicago, although these days he spends more time looking after league business than playing. At the start of the season, he says, he devotes close to 60 hours a week to obtaining field permits, scheduling matches, lining up umpires, putting the Web site in order, and answering cricket-related phone calls.

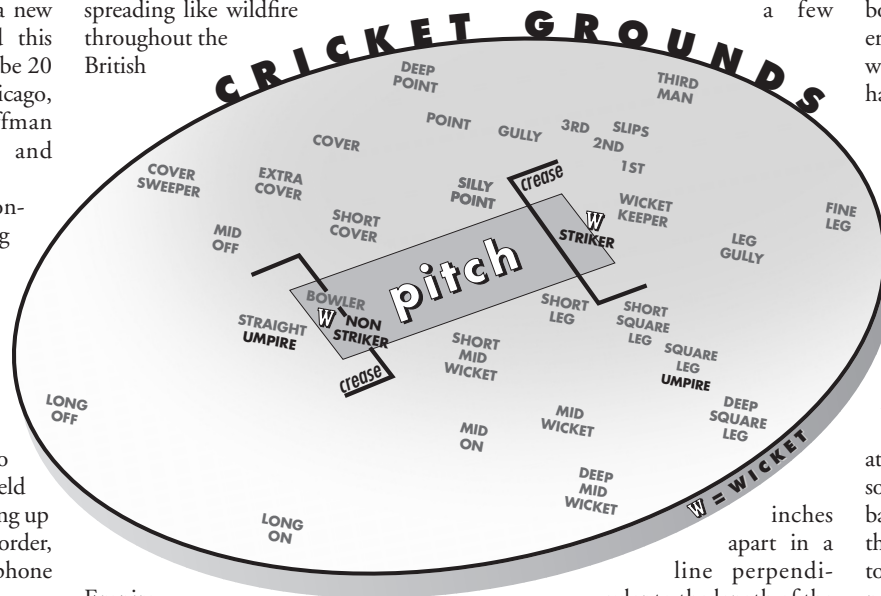
His motive for taking on all this work is simple: to enable people to play the game. Although the league admitted 13 new clubs this year, Ahmad had to reject 5 more applications due to a shortage of grounds. He has already begun talking with park district officials about constructing more pitches for next year, when he expects ten more clubs to join the league. He

realizes that further expansion will mean still more work for him but feels he has no alternative. "My problem is that we are the only legit cricket body in this region," he says. "How do you say no to people? What choice do you give them? No cricket? That's a shame."

Widely played by Americans from the colonial era through most of the 19th century, cricket was driven to extinction after the Civil War by the exploding popularity of baseball. But as cricket was dying in the U.S., it was spreading like wildfire throughout the British

Cricket resembles baseball in many respects, but the parallels to our national pastime have an odd way of making the game harder for Americans to understand. The following is the most succinct outline of the game I could muster: Cricket is played on an elliptical field roughly the size of a baseball field. The action is centered on the pitch, a narrow strip of packed dirt in the middle of the field. At the ends of the pitch, 22 yards apart, stand the wickets, thigh-high structures comprising three upright wooden stakes,

called stumps, planted a few



Empire.

Colonies in South Asia and the Caribbean took up the sport with a passion that would later enable them to challenge, and often beat, the British at their own game. (Since the first Cricket World Cup in 1975, Pakistan, India, and Sri Lanka have each won once; Australia and the West Indies have won twice. England has yet to win.)

When the game begins, 11 players from the fielding team spread out around the pitch. The bowler (analogous to the pitcher in baseball) and the wicketkeeper (catcher) stand facing each other behind opposite wickets, the bowler standing some distance

back. Two batsmen from the opposing team stand slightly off to the side at lines drawn in front of the wickets, called creases. The batsman facing the bowler, the striker, holds a paddlelike bat.

The action starts when the bowler runs toward the near wicket and flings the ball overhand and straight-armed at the far wicket. The striker tries to hit it back. If he hits the ball far enough, the batsmen run back and forth between the creases, scoring a run with each one-way transit.

The fielding team tries to limit the batsmen's runs by getting them out, or taking their wickets. There are many ways to do this. As in baseball, a struck ball caught before it touches the ground puts the striker out. And while a batsman is out of his crease, a fielder can take him out by throwing the ball at his wicket and knocking the bails off the stumps—knows as breaking the wicket. The bowler can also take the striker out by slipping a pitch past him and breaking his wicket. When this occurs the striker is said to have been bowled.

The bowler is not required to bounce the ball on the pitch but generally does so, with a good deal of wrist-imparted spin that makes it harder to hit. Much of the game's baroque vocabulary consists of names for the different trajectories produced by various combinations of spin and bounce. A googly, for example, is a ball thrown by a right-handed bowler that looks like it ought to break left after it bounces but instead breaks right. (The equivalent ball thrown by a left-handed bowler is called a Chinaman.)

The striker is not required to swing at any given ball, but he typically does so to protect his wicket. Nor are batsmen required to run after a hit; if they don't feel they can make it safely to the opposite crease, they wait for the next ball. Should the batsmen end up having switched places after making runs, the nonstriker becomes the striker.

In cricket, unlike baseball, teams change sides only once a match. The two innings are each divided into as many as 40 overs consisting of six balls.

Cricket was reintroduced to the U.S. in the latter 20th century by immigrants. CONTINUED ON PAGE 12