

Kabaddi to build bridges across cultures

AFP, Hong Kong

Overlooked by high rises on the outskirts of Hong Kong, a group of students practise body-slam tackles and vicious ankle-wrenches at weekly training for an unlikely sport: the ancient Indian game of kabaddi.

Though its professional league has a huge following in India and surrounding nations, kabaddi – a highly physical game where the object is to tag the rival team, often by brute force – is relatively unknown outside the region.

But eight years ago, two Chinese anthropologists set up a Hong Kong team to encourage integration in a city which, despite its status as an international hub, can be less than inclusive, especially when it comes to non-white and non-Chinese residents.

"We often hear Hong Kong is Asia's world city but we really don't have much chance to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds," Wyman Tang, one of the anthropologists, told AFP.

"We live in the same neighbourhood, but it's like we are living in a parallel world."

Their project – Kabaddi United Hong Kong (KUHK) – began as a one-off workshop at a local university. It has now spread to nearly 80 schools and social organisations and has had more than 8,000 participants.

Royal Sunar, a coach at KUHK, was shocked to find the game of his childhood being taught in Hong Kong.

"Kabaddi was one of my interests," said the Hong Kong-born Nepali.



"Somehow local Chinese people also like the sport."

Kabaddi is said to date back 5,000 years with roots in Indian mythology, although similar versions of the game have appeared throughout Asia over the centuries, including in Iran, which also claims to be its birthplace.

Nepali immigrant Rojiti Sharma joined KUHK in 2019. For him, kabaddi offered a gateway to making Chinese friends for the first time, and to practise Cantonese.

"(There is) an emotional connection in kabaddi because we hold hands and then we know more about each other," he said.

But the 22-year-old said that off the pitch, ethnic minorities in Hong Kong have to fight to be recognised as "local".

He is no stranger to blatant discrimination.

"When I arrived in Hong Kong, whenever I would travel on public buses or public transport, and when I'd try to sit down, the person next to the seat would just move away," he told AFP.

Advocacy groups say his experience is the norm.

"I think there are significant issues in Hong Kong related to race," said Shalini Mahtani, the CEO of one such group, the Zubin Foundation.

Mahtani partly blames the issue on the education system.

"The truth is many Hong Kong Chinese will never have had the experience of engaging with ethnic minorities," she said.

That was true for Christy Tai, a final-year university student, until she joined her kabaddi group after trying it out and liking its "team spirit".

She said sport is a good way to get over language barriers. "We need to talk to each member in the team... When we talk, we cannot only talk about a sport, but we talk about our life, our habits, or whatever," she said.

Hong Kong still has a long way to go to begin a professional kabaddi league, but founder Tang is pleased how much the game has caught on in the city.

"As long as you follow the same sets of rules, then you can enjoy the game," Tang said.



'DRASTIC CHANGES' IMMINENT?

Current Bangladesh head coach Russel Domingo (R) is slated to arrive in Dhaka from South Africa today to get the Tigers into full swing ahead of the Asia Cup, which begins August 27. However, there was persistent confusion about who exactly would take up the reins as head coach for the tournament, with rumours swirling that the Bangladesh Cricket Board was considering batting coach Jamie Siddons for the role. According to sources, board president Nazmul Hassan Papon held a meeting with Siddons and later stated that they were looking to make 'drastic changes'.

PHOTO: STAR FILE

Stars of 2016 reduced to bit part roles

SPORTS REPORTER

The last and only time that the Asia Cup followed the T20 format was in 2016 and after over six years, the upcoming 15th edition of the continental tournament is once again set to be played in the UAE from August 27 in the shortest format.

While it would have been ideal for Bangladesh – who had played the final in that edition and made a major statement in the format for the first time – to have a settled T20 side and grow their riches in the shortest format since then, the case has been the opposite.

Not only have Bangladesh, in T20s especially, gone into a downward spiral since that tournament but most of the players who had shown glimpses and performed in that edition of the Asia Cup are either out of the national set-up or have just barely made it into the team.

Sabbir Rahman falls into the latter category. The right-handed batter was adjudged player of the tournament six years ago for ending as its highest-run getter. Sabbir had amassed a total of 176 runs at an average of 44 and 123.94 strike rate from five matches. He even surpassed India's Virat Kohli in that edition.

However, had it not been for the long list of injury concerns in the Bangladesh side at the moment and the eternally clogged pipeline, Sabbir would probably just be another mere spectator, watching Bangladesh play in the Asia Cup from his living room.

Even Bangladesh team director Khaled Mahmud

Sujon admitted that there was not any solid logic behind Sabbir's inclusion.

"If you are looking for strong cricketing logic behind Sabbir's call-up, there isn't any. So why did we include Sabbir in the [Asia Cup] squad? We included him because of the harsh reality that we [BCB] are facing currently," Mahmud said.

Injuries forcing Nurul Hasan Sohan, Liton Das and Yasir Ali out of the squad and an apparent lack of options available for the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) are part of the 'harsh reality' that Mahmud alluded to.



But while Sabbir could still barely make it back into the squad courtesy of that 'harsh reality', crucial members of the 2016 Asia Cup squad including the likes of Mohammad Mithun, Soumya Sarkar and Al-Amin Hossain – who ended the 2016 edition as the top-wicket taker with 11 scalps to his name from five matches – remain by the wayside due to inconsistency. Soumya was briefly in consideration for the Asia Cup but he too has not been around the national set-up for a while now.

Meanwhile, Mithun, who last played for the national side back in 2021, has now been put in charge of the Bangladesh 'A' side for their ongoing tour of the Caribbean.

It appears that the 'harsh reality' that Mahmud had talked about has actually been part of Bangladesh cricket for a while now, with little emphasis placed on remedying the situation.

India crush Zimbabwe

AFP, Harare

Opening batters Shubman Gill and Shikhar Dhawan starred as India cruised to a 10-wicket victory over Zimbabwe on Thursday in the first of three one-day internationals.

Gill (82) and vice-captain Dhawan (81) were unbeaten as the tourists knocked off a modest target of 190 with 19.1 overs to spare at Harare Sports Club.

Zimbabwe used eight bowlers, but none could claim a wicket as the Indian openers struck a six and 19 fours between them. India, third in the ODI rankings and 10 places above Zimbabwe, travelled to southern Africa without several stars, including Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma, who are resting.

Head coach Rahul Dravid also took a break after matches in England and the Caribbean with VVS Laxman taking charge.

The home side were all out for 189 in 40.3 overs, thanks largely to a brave 70-run ninth-wicket stand between Ngarava and Brad Evans.

Axar Patel, Deepak Chahar and Krishna shared the Indian bowling honours with three wickets each.

Although Krishna was the most expensive, conceding 50 runs, he claimed the prized wicket of Zimbabwe middle-order star Sikandar Raza.

Pakistan-born Raza, who scored unbeaten centuries in two of his three ODI innings against Bangladesh, had scored just 12 when he was caught by Dhawan in the slips.

BPL clubs spurn women's league

SPORTS REPORTER

A record 18 outfits have applied for club licensing, a pre-condition to play in the Bangladesh Women's Football League but unfortunately the only big name among them remains Bashundhara Kings.

The Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) is considering staging the 5th Bangladesh Women's Football League in November but ahead of that clubs must meet sporting, infrastructure, administrative and legal criteria under the club licensing.

Scrutiny of club licensing is expected to be completed in the first week of next month. Last season, 10 to 12 teams had applied for licenses and eight were granted.

In the first two editions of the women's football league held in 2011 and 2012, clubs like Abahani, Mohammedan, Sheikh Jamal, Wari Club, Victoria SC and others had participated.

But those big teams skipped the women's football league when it resumed after five years in 2019 as debutants Bashundhara Kings emerged as champions twice in the league. They are now on track to become complete a hat-trick of titles in the women's league, something their men's counterparts accomplished this season in the Bangladesh Premier League.

"We invited all clubs, including Bangladesh Premier League, Bangladesh Championship League and teams from lower leagues as well as districts. But we did not get much response from BPL outfits," BFF Women's Committee chairman Mahfuza Akter Kiran said. "We approached Abahani and Mohammedan officials, who told us they would see to the matter. But we don't know why they did not respond."

"However, a response from 18 teams is positive for women's football, which is gradually rising in Bangladesh," Kiran added. "But I think the standards of the league would have been better had clubs from Bangladesh Premier League joined."

'I need to return better'

REUTERS

Rafa Nadal was not too downhearted by defeat at the Cincinnati Open on Wednesday after the Spaniard lost 7-6(9), 4-6, 6-3 to Borna Coric on his return from a six-week injury layoff.

Nadal, who will aim for a record-extending 23rd Grand Slam title at the U.S. Open, had not played a competitive match since pulling out of his Wimbledon semi-final against Nick Kyrgios due to an abdominal injury in early July.

The 36-year-old also withdrew from last week's ATP Masters event in Montreal due to the issue but did not seem hampered by it against former world number 12 Coric, and instead put his defeat down to a lack of time on court.

"Obviously I didn't play my best match, something that can happen," Nadal told reporters. "So coming back from a tough period of time, something that's easy to accept and easy to say congrats to Borna that he played better."

"I need to improve. I need to practise. I need to return better. I need days, and that's the truth. It's obvious that I was not ready enough to win the match today. (It) has been a difficult injury to manage. The last month and a half haven't been easy."



South Africa fast bowler Kagiso Rabada completed a five-wicket haul as England were dismissed for just 165 on the second day of the first Test at Lord's yesterday. Rabada, who bowled with aggression and pace, finished with figures of 5-52 in 19 overs -- the 12th time he has taken five wickets in an innings.

PHOTO: AFP