Cricket in the USA

By Brian Murgatroyd

New Zealand's Rob Nicol, right, bats as West Indies wicket keeper Denesh Ramdin stands behind him during a Twenty20 cricket match played at the Central Broward Regional Park Stadium in 2012. The Lauderhill, Florida, stadium's cricket pitch is accredited for international cricket play by the ICC. © *AP Images/Lynne Sladk*

If you had to guess which country hosted the first-ever international cricket match, the United States of America might not be your first answer. But it is widely recognized to have done just that in September 1844, when teams from the United States and Canada played each other at Bloomingdale Park in Manhattan. Canada won the two-day match by 23 runs. The contest is regarded as the first international cricket match and the world's oldest international sporting contest.

Since the mid-19th century, cricket has slipped from being a mainstream sport in the United States. Baseball overtook cricket as the country's summer sport of choice, thanks to baseball's simplicity — cricket requires a specially prepared pitch, among other things — and the fact that America could claim it as its own. It didn't help that the Imperial Cricket Conference, when it formed in 1909, denied membership to the United States since it was not part of the British Empire.

But cricket has a special place in U.S. history. The game was so well known in the early days of the American republic that the second U.S. president, John Adams, registered his disapproval of so ordinary a title as "president" for the head of state by noting that there are "presidents of fire companies and cricket clubs."

Today cricket is regaining a U.S. following. There are currently 49 leagues across the United States with 1,100 registered clubs and around 35,000 active participants, all under the country's governing body for the sport, the United States of America Cricket Association (USACA). The United States, together with Fiji, was the first new country to be admitted when the Imperial Cricket Conference changed its name to the International Cricket Council (ICC) in 1965 and opened membership to non-Commonwealth countries.

Although the United States is yet to appear in an ICC Cricket World Cup, the sport's elite global tournament, it holds the distinction of being one of only five countries — along with Bermuda, Canada, the Netherlands and Papua New Guinea — to participate in every qualifying tournament until 2014, for which it failed to qualify. It played in another elite event, the ICC Champions Trophy in 2004, where it lost to New Zealand and Australia, two of the sport's major powers.

Women's cricket and development of world-class cricket venues are potential growth areas. Lauderhill, Florida's accredited venue for international matches has hosted four Twenty20 Internationals, two between New Zealand and Sri Lanka in 2010 and two more between New Zealand and the West Indies two years later. Twenty20 is a much shorter match format.

An 11-year-old student practices cricket skills she learned in her gym class at Maple Crest Middle School in Kokomo, Indiana. Cricket is played in some schools and colleges across the United States. © *AP Images/Kokomo Tribune/Kelly Laffert*

United States of America Cricket Association Chief Executive Darren Beazley wants to bring cricket to American youth. *Courtesy of Darren Beazley*

The USACA and New Zealand are among the prime movers of a plan to develop a franchise-based Twenty20 league in the United States. They see the shortest form of the game — with each match lasting just three hours — as the best way to take the game to the masses.

USACA Chief Executive Darren Beazley said, "My goal is to make cricket a game for all Americans."

"The challenge is to move from amateurism to professionalism," he said. Given the uptick in U.S. participation, he believes that "with a professional and strategic approach we can become a very stable and competitive cricketing nation."

Pakistan-born Muhammad Yousaf bowls in a club match at the Poinciana, Florida, YMCA cricket field. *Adeela Siddiqui@ powerplay photography*

Beazley envisions cricket being played in schools across the country and national teams that provide role models for the next generations. He also wants to promote the United States as an attractive venue for international matches.

"One of the things I love most about our great game is that it is accessible to everyone — boys, girls, all peoples regardless of where they originally hail from, regardless of ability. There is a role for everyone."

MUHAMMAD YOUSAF

Muhammad Yousaf's story is typical of many who play and follow cricket in the United States. Born and brought up in a cricket-playing country, he moved to Florida to study at the University of South Florida in 1997. He earned an MBA and has been in the United States ever since.

"I come from the city of Peshawar in the north of Pakistan and so cricket is in my blood," he explains. He started playing cricket in the United States in Orlando in 2002 after completing his studies. "I also started working for cricket equipment and clothing firm Boom Boom and that brought me into contact with league presidents."

Yousaf, now 38, is Boom Boom's main U.S. distributor. He is also youth coordinator for grass-roots cricket across five states in the southeast region, covering North Carolina to Puerto Rico. Four of those states have active leagues and there are plans to constitute one in the state that does not: South Carolina.

"I am an opening bowler and I grew up idolizing Imran Khan," he said. Khan is the former Pakistan captain who led the country to victory in the 1992 Cricket World Cup.

"The biggest challenge is to introduce the sport to young white Americans who have been brought up on baseball and American football at an early age, so that cricket does not depend on the immigrant population to prosper."

"I am very optimistic because the numbers [of players and clubs] are growing all the time." He adds, "More than half are under 15."

NADIA GRUNY

Nadia Gruny's pathway to become one of the United States' leading women's cricketers could never be described as straightforward.

She was named player of the tournament in the ICC Americas Women's Twenty20 Championship in the Cayman Islands in April 2012, just three years after she took up the game on a regular basis.

"I come from Trinidad and Tobago where cricket is part of the culture," the 28-year-old said. "I did not consider playing seriously but enjoyed many casual back-yard and street cricket games with my brothers."

Gruny moved to the United States to study in 2002. She eventually started working for IT company Oracle in California's San Francisco Bay Area, managing its global employee volunteer program. In 2009 she started playing hard-ball cricket.

"I heard the USA Cricket Association were organizing a first women's tournament and friends encouraged me to get involved, even though I had never played hard-ball cricket, just in the streets with my brothers.

"I aligned with a men's cricket club before moving to California and starting at Oracle. The guys at the club encouraged me to get involved in the women's cricket movement," she said. The first USACA women's tournament was well underway. At Oracle, she said, "My manager recognized my interest in cricket and encouraged me to start a women's team in the Bay Area, and I did.

"I have now become involved working with the Bay Area Women's Sports Initiative to try and get the sport taken up in schools and they like the idea of that."

Gruny became the second woman in history to score a century in U.S. women's cricket in June 2011. She believes the future is bright for the sport, although there are plenty of challenges ahead.

Nadia Gruny, originally from Trinidad and Tobago, has become one of the leading U.S. women cricketers. *Bryan Vandenburg/ICC*

Gruny works on building American women's interest in cricket. "The key is to get schools and colleges involved," she said.

"There are not a large number of countries playing the [women's] game globally so it is quite feasible for us to get to the top."

Asked if she would go back to play in her native West Indies, which reached the final of the ICC Women's Cricket World Cup in 2013 she said, "The West Indies has crossed my mind," she said. "But now my life is in the USA."

KEITH GILL

Keith Gill is a person who brought not only himself but his love of cricket with him to the United States.

"I was born in Trinidad and Tobago and migrated in 1974, and when I came here cricket was not very popular at all," said the 56-year-old IT professional in the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

"The Washington Cricket League had just started and I joined as a player. There were only about eight to 10 teams back then, but numerically it really has grown in popularity and now there are 45 teams." As time passed Gill's involvement in the sport switched from playing to administration, and now he is a USA Cricket Association board member.

Keith Gill channels his love of cricket into youth outreach. *Courtesy of Keith Gill*

Members of the Sunnyvale Cricket Club huddle during a match in El Sobrante, California. The San Francisco Bay area is a center for cricket's resurgence in the United States, thanks to high-tech workers from cricket-loving countries. *© AP Images/Noah Berger*

Above: The Compton Cricket Club, known as "the Homies and the Popz," began in 1995 to provide young men in Compton, California — a gang-ridden suburb of Los Angeles — an alternative to gang membership. Now a successful American cricket team, they have toured Britain and Australia. Here they prepare to play another local team, the Simi Sloggers, in Los Angeles. Both clubs are members of the Los Angeles Cricket Social Alliance cricket league, which boasts eight teams. Cricket's code of conduct and civility offers a positive model for street kids. *©AP Images/David McNew*

Left: Scoreboard at a cricket match between the Compton Cricket Club and the Simi Sloggers. *©AP Images/David McNew*

Based in Brandywine, Maryland, near Washington, he has thrown himself into grass-roots organization, helping to set up an indoor cricket facility. He hopes to reach children through summer camps. "Right now it is the Indian and Pakistani communities that are most heavily involved." The challenge, he said, "is to get native youngsters engaged."

Gill's love is test cricket, the longest form of the game that can last up to five days, but he accepts the way to get the current younger generation involved is through short-form games. "Our main focus is to introduce Twenty20 cricket to youngsters."

TODD MYERS

In the development of cricket as a mainstream sport within the United States, U.S.-born Todd Myers has a pivotal role. The 40-year-old works as director of programming and acquisitions for ESPN Inc., the broadcaster that has the rights to show major cricket events such as the International Cricket Council World Championships and the Champions League World Twenty20 through 2015.

"In the past these events were strictly available on a pay-per-view basis on a limited distribution," he said. "Now ICC events are available to more than 85 million US households [and] viewer feedback has been tremendous."

Myers, who lives in Connecticut, where ESPN's offices are based, admits he is a late convert to the sport. "I had very limited knowledge of cricket before taking the reins to strategically guide ESPN's U.S. live cricket strategy," he said.

"I have become a fan and continue to learn more each and every day. The strategy involved and the incredible athleticism the players exhibit makes it easy to quickly become a fan of the sport." Myers has even started playing cricket himself.

He is in no doubt there is room for significant growth in the popularity of U.S. cricket. "The squad needs to be a regular contender," he said. "There is no reason why Team USA cannot compete with squads from

ESPN's Todd Myers, center left, next to former India cricket captain Anil Kumble on a float promoting ESPN3 coverage of the autumn 2012 ICC World Twenty20 tournament at the India Day Parade in New York City, August 2012. *ESPN/Peter Della Penna*

Ireland and Afghanistan." He would like to see a future ICC World Twenty20 tournament in the United States.

"No doubt there are some logistical hurdles," but FIFA bringing the World Cup to the United States in 1994 "sparked soccer in the U.S.," he said. Cricket has the same potential, "especially if Team USA makes the tournament field."

Brian Murgatroyd has worked within cricket as a writer, broadcaster and administrator for more than 20 years. He spent three years as media manager for the England and Wales Cricket Board, four years doing the same for the Australian Cricket Board and for another four years he headed media and communications for the International Cricket Council, the sport's global governing body. He is based in Dubai in the UAE.

Haverford College, near Philadelphia, has one of the oldest U.S. college cricket teams. It played the first U.S. collegiate varsity match in 1864 against the University of Pennsylvania and has fielded its eleven ever since. Today's team is enriched by players from all over the cricket-loving world, some of them women.

Alisa Strayer *(above)*, class of 2013, bowls while another player watches during alumni matches at Haverford's Cope Field in April 2012.

Head coach Kamran Khan, who played for the U.S. national cricket team from 1972 to 1992 and was its captain for 10 years says, "Cricket has grown so tremendously it is unbelievable." A businessman who gets satisfaction from working with young people, Khan has coached at Haverford for decades.

"We have more American-born on the team than overseas players — at least 50-50. Some students come to Haverford just because they can play cricket," he says.

Women's skills match men's on this co-ed team. "Alysa was best bowler last year, she took the most wickets, and this year I think she is very close, she has performed very well."

Haverford is the only U.S. varsity-level team. They play intercollegiate matches against club teams from other colleges. The team has toured the U.K. twice in recent years, doing well against established teams in England and Scotland, including Oxford and Cambridge.