

That's cricket: Worldly old sport taking roots across Memphis and area

By Zina Kumok

They quietly take the field, from a distance resembling tiny white dots on a green landscape.

They stand out not only in their all-white uniforms, but in their game.

Cricket.

With coolers, canopies and players watching from the backs of their cars, it looks like a typical football tailgating scene -- except for what's happening on that patch of grass.

When they play in public parks strangers frequently ask what they're doing.

Cricket, they say.

"They're like, 'Cricket? I thought it was a cell phone or an insect,'" said Vikram

Venkatesh, captain of the Germantown Cricket Club and native of Bangalore, India.

Despite being almost unknown here, the sport is growing. In the era of globalization, it only makes sense that sports migrate and spread beyond their original boundaries. As Japanese baseball players enter the ranks of Major League Baseball and European hoop stars leave their native countries for the NBA, immigrants from cricket-playing countries -- mostly former colonies of Great Britain -- have brought the sport to the melting pot of the U.S.

The Arkansas-Tennessee Cricket League (arktennccricketleague.com) includes the Germantown Cricket Club, Bartlett Cricket Club, Bartlett Youth Cricket Club, Memphis Cricket Club and the Memphis Jackson Cricket Association.

"We've come a long way," said Berzin Devlaliwalla, a member of the Bartlett Youth Cricket Club and emigrant from Bombay, India. "Immigration and a lot of help from the cities and parks and all that has certainly helped."

With members from India, Pakistan, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, England and the West Indies, the teams are diverse. Despite the sport's exponential rise, they still have work to do.

"We're fledgling," said MCC president Murali Balasubramanyam, another Bangalore native. "We don't even have our wings."

The MCC spent close to \$4,000 refurbishing its field in Collierville.

"It's all passion, passion, passion," Balasubramanyam said. "We really want to grow the game and popularize the game."

The team's members are mostly professionals, many of them doctors and computer programmers. With cultural, professional, religious and age differences, sometimes only one thing brings them together.

"The unifying factor is cricket," Venkatesh said. "We have been playing since we were young and just want to continue playing cricket. It's kind of hard for us to live without cricket."

The game offers both athletic and social opportunities for its members. Venkatesh said he meets with other players to watch cricket matches on TV or have lunch together.

"In most cases we have become friends playing cricket," Venkatesh said. "Outside of cricket very few of us know each other."

Without a manager or coach, each player is responsible for improving his individual performance, as well as his team's.

"We know how to play the game, we just need to fine-tune ourselves," Venkatesh said.

The teams practice twice a week, with games usually on Sundays. Spending so much time on the game draws complaints from families, but Venkatesh has a reply.

"We tell them cricket is our first wife," he said. "We started playing cricket before we knew (them). We've got to be loyal to both wives here."

GCC player and Brisbane, Australia, native James Avenell -- who hadn't played for almost 20 years before joining the team -- said his family gets involved.

"You have to have a family effort," Avenell said. "The families are understanding of the passion and they join in and come out and support the guys."

Joe Schmulian -- captain and star player for the MCC -- began playing "parking lot" cricket in college like many of his teammates and competitors.

"It'd be like playing golf on a miniature course," Schmulian said. "Instead of having a full-length (course) where you can hit drivers, at least you can putt and chip."

For immigrants -- especially where cricket's popularity has no rival -- the sport, also played by girls and women around the world, is fed from the cradle.

"They grow up on cricket, just like Americans grow up on baseball," Avenell said.

While some Americans have expressed interest in learning cricket, the players say the best way to expand the sport and ensure its longevity is by teaching children. Because of the game's complex nature, teams are trying to reach out to schools with clinics and camps. Avenell -- whose son found fellow cricketers at school -- hopes to teach cricket next summer to other children.

"It's a pretty intricate game, very unorthodox," Avenell said. "It's very tough to teach. If you haven't grown up playing cricket, it's hard to learn."

One of its main traditions -- the solid-white uniforms -- shows why cricket fans call it "the gentleman's sport." Because of the inherent length of the game -- the longest

version is played over five days -- there is a lunch break. Usually players' wives bring food, to be involved in some way. On Saturday Venkatesh's wife was out of town, so lunch consisted of store-bought sandwiches. Balasubramanyam grabbed pizza for his team from a nearby strip mall.

With lunch over and sunscreen reapplied, the players returned to the field, white dots once more.