

CRICKET

Cricket is for everyone. And Ontario schoolkids could use a little joy, especially girls

The pandemic has given the Ontario Schools Cricket Association's founders time and space to launch while exacerbating the need for the active outlet they're promoting.

By [Joe Callaghan](#) Special to the Star
Sat., Feb. 26, 2022 | 5 min. read

Article was updated 12 hrs ago

JOIN THE CONVERSATION (2)

On first hearing, a declaration that [cricket](#) can be the pathway back to healthy lifestyles for Ontario's schoolchildren may sound far-fetched. Out near the boundary, if you like. But it's worth bearing with Martin Buckle and Ranil Mendis.

The game, after all, is Canada's forgotten national sport. And after two-plus pandemic years of cordoned-off playgrounds, bans on contact sports and learning from the kitchen table, the joy of physical education likely feels a little forgotten too.

Its importance, however, hasn't been.

Multiple medical studies and social surveys during the pandemic have warned of the immediate and long-term implications of COVID-19 disruptions on the physical activity of Canadian youth. [One study found that less than five per cent of the country's children were meeting movement behaviour guidelines](#) during the pandemic. Which is why Buckle and Mendis got to work.

"A lot of challenges that kids may have been facing with sports and staying active, well, they didn't actually start from such a good place," Buckle told the Star. "The pandemic screwed things up doubly. Now we have redouble our efforts."

In truth, the pair had been putting in the work for years. The pandemic merely gave them the breathing room to finally figure out how to redouble efforts. They set up the [Ontario Schools Cricket Association \(OSCA\)](#) in 2020. It was partly an exercise in rebranding.

Mendis and Buckle are both immigrants to Canada. They're also management accountants. The Chartered Institute of Management Accountants, or CIMA, brought them together in the same way the British-based professional body has brought so many newcomers here together: on a cricket oval.

"CIMA, it's 102 years old and historically was quite popular in Commonwealth countries — 97 per cent of our members in Canada are immigrants, primarily from Commonwealth nations," said Buckle, originally from England. "One of the few things we have in common, apart from double-entry bookkeeping, is cricket."

But in the mid-2000s, an annual social and networking cricket match began morphing into something bigger. Mendis, who emigrated from Sri Lanka and worked in Toronto City Hall at the time, invited then-mayor David Miller and police chief Bill Blair along to iron out budgetary differences with ball and bat. Rob Ford surprised CIMA by continuing the tradition. Doug Ford came along too, and pressured the organizers to get the city's kids involved.

Buckle and Mendis set up an East Toronto Schools vs. West competition which hadn't even run its course before schools from farther afield were pleading to join. Peel, Durham, Hamilton, Niagara, even Ottawa. By 2019, Ford, now in Queen's Park, had agreed to call the competition the Premier's Cup School Cricket Championship. Over 8,000 schoolchildren were taking part.



“We’re supposed to be a bunch of accountants organizing events for our members and now we have this massive schools tournament on our hands,” laughed Buckle. “Our betters in London were not too happy. They love that we’re doing this and love that it’s super positive, but get a little nervous that we’re now a cricket organization with an accounting institute on the side!”

Both are struck by the irony of the pandemic allowing them the space to finally focus efforts and launch the OSCA while exacerbating the need for the kind of active outlet they’d offered, particularly among schoolgirls. That same pandemic study found that while 6.5 per cent of Canadian boys were meeting activity standards, just 2.8 per cent of girls were.

“Our objective is not necessarily to promote the game for the good of cricket. Instead we are using the game to promote physical activity for the kids,” said Mendis. “It’s about getting out there.”

As restrictions again loosen and physical education classes get back to something closer to normal, the OSCA has run a competition in schools to help design its new logo. It will be unveiled in late March, when there will be a formal changeover from CIMA with the organization’s president flying in from Britain for a hoped relaunch of the Premier’s Cup.

But both men know there is much to do. Having gone virtual with teacher training during the pandemic, recruiting more coaches, particularly those from non-cricket backgrounds, is a focus. So too is equipment, Buckle is hoping that stories such as an Ottawa phys-ed teacher who had his school’s woodwork class make cricket bats can be a thing of the past.

Mahendra Ram is a chemistry teacher at York Memorial C.I. and also the TDSEB’s girls cricket co-ordinator. He has seen the impact that CIMA’s work had on the girls’ side of the game as it boomed pre-pandemic, bringing in not just those of cricketing powerhouse South Asian heritage, but girls from all backgrounds. When Pakistan’s iconic women’s captain Sana Mir came for a visit, Toronto schoolgirl players were awestruck. Now there’s a fresh generation to first recruit, then inspire.

“I’m hoping that we can start where we left off, but that’s the dream,” Ram, who emigrated from Guyana in the 1980s, told the Star. “The reality is that a lot of the players have graduated in the last three years, and so most coaches are starting from scratch. That’s where OSCA’s contribution is going to make this impact: that we have new teachers comfortable with a sport that they didn’t play and are passionate to coach it.”

Once declared Canada’s national sport by Sir John A. Macdonald, recreational adult cricket has been booming in the GTA for some time and defying the climate in the process. The city caused a stir in 2019 when a \$2.2-billion master plan pointed to changing demographics as it prioritized the sport (and others) over hockey with five new cricket pitches in the proposal. Brampton and Mississauga have already poured money into outdoor and indoor venues.

“If Brampton invests hundreds of thousands of dollars in a new cricket facility, we want to fill it with kids,” said Buckle, “while making sure girls are involved with the game. We know that Canada’s women’s soccer team, hockey team, rugby team are among the best in the world, but the girls who should be playing cricket aren’t playing.

“If Canada one day become one of the best women’s cricket teams in the world ... that’d be awesome, but that’s not the idea. The idea is that those girls are missing out right now, and we have to find a way to get them interested and happy and healthy.”



Joe Callaghan is a Toronto-based sports and feature writer and a freelance contributor for the Star. Reach him via email: joe-callaghan84@hotmail.com or follow him on Twitter: [@Joecallaghan84](https://twitter.com/Joecallaghan84)

YOU MIGHT BE INTERESTED IN...

