



## **Can America learn to love cricket?**

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**Even if the sport doesn't impress the locals, the amount of money involved should.  
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NEW YORK — A Kiwi and a Sri Lankan walk into a park in Fort Lauderdale.

Sounds like the setup for a bad joke? This is, in fact, news from Florida where last week the cricket teams from New Zealand and Sri Lanka played the first ever international cricket game on American soil. It was minor history in the making, albeit a bit perplexing to some Americans who witnessed it.

The young blonde at the ticketing window, for example: “I’ve never seen a cricket game in my life,” she said blithely from behind her dark sunglasses, as the strong Florida morning sun beat down through wisps of clouds, setting up for a fine day for cricket. “I’m gonna be here all day! What kind of game lasts all day?” she pouted.

Americans reserve a special brand of derision for cricket, often targeting the sweater vests, tea breaks and white-collared shirts that are features of the traditional form of the game. The enigmatic rules of cricket, meanwhile, prevent any interest from budding in those few who might actually witness a game.

But in case you hadn’t heard, cricket is big money. In the past decade, cricketers have become some of the highest paid athletes in the world. According to an independent survey of international sports published in March, the average salary for a cricket player in the Indian Premier League, for example, is \$3.6 million, second only to the NBA where average salary is nearly \$3.8 million a year. A cricket team from Bangalore, India, was listed as the 12th highest paid team in the world, two places above Manchester United. Meanwhile, in 2008 the teams from England and the West Indies played a three-hour game for prize money of \$20 million.

Inspired by this, some enterprising Americans have made a mission of bringing the sport to their country. The game played last weekend in Florida between two of the world’s top teams comes after years, perhaps even decades, of sputtering false starts for American cricket. Till recently, though, cricket in the United States appeared to be in shambles as usual. Amateur teams — mostly composed of immigrants from the Caribbean and South Asia — continued to play the sport from coast to coast in informal leagues, but America was unable to organize at a national level and was repeatedly suspended by International Cricket Council, the global governing body for the sport based in Dubai.

Enter Don Lockerbie. When one year ago the little known sports venue developer from Miami took the helm of the USA Cricket Association as CEO, few had imagined that the United States would be hosting a world-class game of cricket in 2010. Lockerbie did not have any special knowledge of cricket, but he did recognize the sport's moneymaking potential.

The USACA launched a “Destination USA” program to “show that the United States was open for business as far as cricket is concerned,” Lockerbie said before the game. His drive is apparent. Instead of fans he talks about the “market” and popularity of the sport as “market share.” While it may not appeal to sports fan, it is this approach — viewing cricket as a financial opportunity — that has allowed cricket to enjoy its first taste of success in America.

The brand new stadium in Fort Lauderdale is the only dedicated cricket facility in North America, built by the local county for a cool \$70 million. The cricket association, meanwhile, threw everything they could at the event this weekend.

The concession stands were selling hard liquor at 11 a.m.; jugglers and mimes entertained the children in the crowd; Japanese-style Taiko drummers beat on drums; and cheerleaders in short-shorts from local high schools danced to beats that blasted from the PA system every time a six, the equivalent of a home-run, was hit.

All over the world, cricket has been moving to such an approachable image. The new format of the game, known as T20, has cut down the playing time from the traditional five days to a more palatable three hours, and while staunch traditionalists have criticized the “spectacle” of T20 it has been a hit with cricket fans all over the world. Now it might even be winning over new ones among the 10,000 ticket holders in Florida.

Still, the game between Sri Lanka and New Zealand seemed more Vaudeville than sport. “The only way to create a true culture of cricket in America will be to get it on the high school playing fields and college campuses,” said Bernard Cameron who briefly ran the rival, and now defunct, “Major League Cricket” organization to promote cricket in America. But nurturing a culture of cricket in America, as it exists in many cricketing nations — mostly commonwealth countries — is a longer-term project with fewer short cuts.

Only one player in the American team that played over the weekend — the 16-year-old Steven Taylor — is American born. And the American cricket team has so far showed little promise. Team USA only won one game in the world cup qualifiers earlier this year and, in an ironic twist, was knocked out by Afghanistan. Last weekend on the field, things were still desperate as team USA played Jamaica in an exhibition game before the main event. One man, appalled by the sub par showing by the American team stood up in the stands, and in a thick Indian accent, yelled: “USA you suck! Go Home!”

But thanks to the visiting world-class teams, cricket did get some positive coverage for a change. A few New Zealand players held fielding practice with the Florida Marlins

baseball team and the Kiwi captain Daniel Vettori threw the ceremonial first pitch before the Marlins' game against the Arizona Diamondbacks.

There was even some hope in the stands. The blonde girl from the ticket window finally made her way into the stadium towards the end of the game to witness the strange spectacle. A few times, the ESPN camera stopped on her and projected her image on to the large digital screen in the stadium and beamed it across the world to an estimated 100 million viewers in 88 countries, which seemed to inspire her. The next time the camera landed on her, she jumped from her seat and threw her arms up in the air: "Woo Hoo! Cricket!" she decided.