



American Baseball Coaches

Give Tips to Young Indian Players



By GIRIRAJ AGARWAL

Could baseball, the national pastime of the United States, become popular in cricket-crazy India? If there is any indication from the enthusiasm of hundreds of students, amateur players and coaches who participated in baseball clinics conducted by American Major League Baseball coaches across India, this bat and ball game could gain ground.

"I have learned new ways to catch the ball. I have also learned how to throw fast in the right direction," says Sarita Rani, a ninth class student at Government Girls Senior Secondary School in Dilshad Garden, New Delhi. She started learning to play baseball during this school term and participated at a clinic conducted in November by

Coach Jeffrey Brueggemann (above right) and Coach David Palese (below) give tips to players from the Blue Birds and Red Angels teams at the U.S. Embassy baseball ground. Rajendra Negi of the Blue Birds winds up to pitch the ball (above left).

American coaches Jeffrey Brueggemann and David Palese.

The two men are among 700 high school, college and professional coaches who have been sent by New York-based Major League Baseball International to introduce and upgrade the playing of baseball in 72 countries. The aim is to internationalize the game, says Paul Archey, vice president of the organization. Working with First Pitch: The U.S.-Manipur Baseball Project, based in New York and in Imphal, Major League Baseball International also coordinated with the U.S. Embassy and consulates across India to send the coaches to Imphal, Chennai, Calcutta, Mumbai, Chandigarh, Goa and Hyderabad.

The coaches told young players that the ball should always be caught with both hands. If the ball is above the belly button, the hands should point upward; otherwise the hands should point downward. Brueggemann and Palese taught the players how to align their shoulders, hands and legs to throw in the right direction with maximum

power. The basics of better pitching and hitting were also covered. Brueggemann was a pitcher for the Minnesota Twins for six years and coached the Chinese national junior team. Palese is assistant baseball coach at Rochester University in New York.

Their first stop was Manipur, where baseball has been played for decades. In Imphal, 25 sports clubs play the game. First Pitch was established in 2005 to upgrade the level of play, the quality of equipment and the venues. "What these people do have," says First Pitch Chairwoman Muriel Peters, "is great joy in the game and tremendous athletic ability. It is this enthusiasm in such a remote corner of India that gave us the impetus to create First Pitch."

In New Delhi, Ambassador David C. Mulford threw the ceremonial first pitch to start an exhibition game between two amateur teams, the Blue Birds and the Red Angels. "Baseball is to America what cricket is to India," he said. "We are delighted that we can... share this game with Indians. As sports enthusiasts, the Indian people may one day embrace baseball as they have cricket and other sports." At the event, Deputy Chief of Mission Geoffrey R. Pyatt presented balls and gloves donated by the Springfield, Massachusetts-based sports equipment manufacturer Spalding.

"These baseball clinics need to be organized regularly. We have recognized that we were following wrong rules," commented Anup Kumar, chief baseball coach for the

Government of Delhi Directorate of Education. He also said, "Baseball in India cannot become popular until we can assure the children that they can grow in some way while playing baseball. We need more tournaments and recognition for the players."

Kiran Dabas, a sports teacher at Indraprastha International School in Dwarka, Delhi, agrees. "The coaches helped us understand new rules as well as better methods of throwing, catching, pitching and hitting." However, Dabas says, the biggest hurdle in the popularization of baseball in India is the same obstacles that other sports face, lack of facilities and meager support. "There are no (playing) grounds," she says. "The cheapest gloves, balls and bats cost several thousands of rupees. Many Indian baseball players cannot afford this kind of expenditure."

Summing up his experience, Coach Brueggemann said it's true that the right infrastructure is needed and, more importantly, children need helmets and properly padded gloves so they are not injured. But he was hopeful that baseball may take root. "India is a country of more than one billion people. You do not play that many sports. Baseball is a very good option in such a scenario. The good thing about baseball is that it can be played by people of any shape or size." He also said that people who are already crazy for a game played with a bat and ball (cricket) are likely to find baseball interesting, too.



Photographs by VIKAS MARILIA