


On a pretty playing field
close to the Surrey border,
the unlikely thwack
of willow on leather is
giving young Afghans
something to play for

BY CRISPIN ANDREWS
PHOTOGRAPHED
BY BARRY MARSDEN





Fourteen-year-old Amit* dreamt of batting like Sachin Tendulkar. Whenever he and his friends played cricket on the dusty plains outside their village, he'd pretend to be the Indian legend. But even the Little Master, with all his steely resolve at the crease, would have struggled to become a sporting success with Amit's upbringing.

The young Afghan lived in an impoverished community where the locals eked out an existence from farming and made their homes in little shacks with no electricity, TV or phones. At school, Amit and his friends sat on the floor, with a chalk and a slate each, but no books. Far worse, the ongoing conflict between the Taliban and Western forces meant death and terror were never far away. ►

SWAPPING WAR FOR CRICKET WHITES

◀ But, just over four years later, Amit is tasting cricketing triumph. He raises his fist with joy after hitting the winning runs in another victory for his team in London's Afghan Premier League. Teammates and onlookers cheer; opponents hoot.

The competition may not be the Indian Premier League, where Sachin earns millions playing in front of packed stadiums. But the one-off spring tournament at charity Cricket for Change's south-London base means a huge amount to the participants. For the 40 or so Afghan teenagers—joined by a handful of Tamils and Bangladeshis—are refugees, playing the game they love in safety.

Back in Afghanistan, there'd be no more cricket bats for many of the older boys—just AK-47s. In 2007, Amit's brother disappeared from their village north of Musa Qala.

"My uncle was in politics and had asked my father to join him," Amit says. "My father refused, and soon afterwards he disappeared. Then my older brother was also taken. No one has seen them since. Maybe they're fighting the Americans. Maybe they're dead."

The "politics" Amit is hinting at is membership of the Taliban, and his mother knew that he was no longer safe. Now the eldest son, he, too, would be expected to fight. Like many locals, the family had no love for the Taliban, but if Amit refused to join, he could be shot;

if he accepted, he could be killed by the Western allies. So she paid an Afghan agent to sneak Amit into Britain.

"There were 20 of us in the back of a lorry for many months," Amit, now 18, says. When he first arrived in 2008, he was taken to a detention centre before being placed with a foster family—as all unaccompanied under-16 asylum seekers are. For six months he felt friendless and isolated. Then someone at his school told him about Cricket for Change.

Now he turns up for the training sessions every week at the charity's well-appointed Wallington ground. "I've met

"NO ONE'S JUDGING THEM OR TELLING THEM WHAT TO DO HERE"



many new people here," he says. "It really helps boys settle into this country."

In the summer, the boys—referred to the scheme by the Refugee Council—play outdoors, often against local teams. When it's wet, they head to the centre's sports hall. All year, they can chill out in the pavilion, and they can also get advice on their asylum application from visiting Refugee Council volunteers.

"The young people have a safe space here," says coach Danny Baker, 29. "They can play cricket, sit on their own, watch

TV, or read a book. No one's judging them or telling them what to do."

Getting these youngsters to relax into their new sporting surroundings can be hard. Karim* was 15 when he first came to the club, three years ago. He, too, had lost his father to the Taliban, and had left his mother and three sisters in a small village to flee Afghanistan in a lorry.

During the journey, white European agents insulted and hit him, so when Danny first went to shake his hand, the coach got a kick in the shin for his troubles. Karim had also been racially abused in the street when he arrived in Britain

star player. "I'm medium pace now, but one day I will be like him," he says. He also works as a Cricket for Change apprentice, learning how to coach younger children, and wants to run his own business when he leaves college.

The Premier League matches—a six-a-side, 20-balls-an-innings form of cricket known as Street20—look chaotic, with balls covered in tape (to mimic the movement of leather ones, without the pain!) flying everywhere, panic-stricken running between the wickets, and lots of screaming and shouting. But the atmosphere is tolerant and warm, something that most



and, after years of watching his back, he'd fallen in with a bad crowd and was drifting towards petty crime.

But being part of a cricket team soon gave him a more trusting world view.

"Whether you're out for a duck or take five wickets, you're responsible for and contributing towards your own and others' success," says Danny. "You get recognition for batting, bowling and fielding, not being a troublemaker."

Karim's focus has shifted to bowling as fast as Hameed Hassan, Afghanistan's

of these youngsters—often from strict religious backgrounds—have never had. Controlled and suppressed for most of their lives, they can express themselves without fear of disapproval.

"No one's expecting them to keep up a grim-faced charade," Danny says. "These youngsters had to grow up very quickly back home. Here, they can be kids, talk about computers, films and girls—anything they want."

"A lot of them have been let down many times," he adds. "So if you say there'll ▶

HOW CRICKET IS MAKING THE WORLD SMILE

● **The Courtney Walsh Foundation** uses the sport to teach youngsters about responsibility in the disadvantaged communities of Kingston, Jamaica, where the West Indian legend (left) grew up.



● **Japan Cricket Association** sends coaches into 250 schools in the tsunami-hit north-east of the country. The youngsters play Kwik Cricket, using plastic bats and rubber balls. The new

sport provides a diversion from the disaster's after-effects, and the association always leaves a cricket set behind so that pupils can carry on playing.

● **The Maasai Cricket Warriors** team (below), whose members come from the semi-nomadic tribe, run HIV-prevention courses in the Laikipia region of Kenya. They



attract participants to the sessions whom medics alone would fail to reach.

● **The Cricket Foundation's StreetChance** project (above) keeps children positively engaged in several British inner-city areas. The Met and other police forces provide coaches.

◀ be a game, there has to be game. If you tell them someone is coming to advise them on their asylum case, that person has to show up. If you promise that they can improve their skills, you have to provide the coaches.”

Though Cricket for Change set up the asylum-seekers' project in 2009, the charity dates back to 1981, when it started running games for disadvantaged youngsters after the Brixton riots. It now provides an alternative to boredom and gang culture in several deprived London areas, organising Street20 games anywhere from basketball courts to small public spaces on estates. The charity also coaches in young offenders' institutes and organises matches for disabled children. It travels abroad, too. In 2008, Danny and his

colleagues were in Sri Lanka, teaching child soldiers life skills through cricket. In November 2010, they taught boys—and girls—in Kabul how to play Street20. And, last February, they coached a mixed group of Israeli and Palestinian children on the West Bank.

As well as bringing people together and boosting self-esteem, Cricket for Change is hot on teaching respect. Karim, angry at being given out, has flung his heavy cricket bat across the pitch. He's lucky no one's hurt. Throwing your bat across a dressing room might be OK for some club cricketers, but not here. Time for a chat, then.

“We use what happens in the games to show youngsters the consequences of their actions,” Danny says. He gathers the

group round and reminds everyone of the importance of umpires.

One lad agrees. "People would cheat, argue and fight [without them]," he says. Another adds that if you lose your temper when things don't go your way, at school or on the streets, you'll get into trouble.

"Let the captain talk to the umpire at the end of the game," Karim says eventually. "Don't shout or throw your bat." Later, during a quiet moment, Karim apologises to the match official.

It's not just respect for umpires that's on the agenda, either. After the game, PC Simon Harris from the Metropolitan Police gives a talk about the need for stop and search. "In Afghanistan, the police beat and shoot people," he says. "It's no wonder that these kids can be scared of us. But they feel comfortable here; more receptive to our message."

That's out! Karim is bowling and has taken a wicket with a faster-than-usual delivery. As the batter walks off, Karim nods, acknowledging his opponent. Hameed Hassan would be proud.

On the sidelines, Amit is psyching up Abdul*, a fast bowler who played for the

Surrey youth team last year. If their team wins its next game, they'll take the trophy, and Amit needs his bowler to perform.

"It's like a family here," Abdul says. "We come once a week and remind ourselves of happy times back home playing in the streets."

After three years at the centre, Amit is the main man, the one new arrivals look to. He's now fluent in English, is doing a BTEC in

applied science, and has become a Cricket for Change coach. Danny hopes that he'll run the project eventually. He's also doing work experience with a local osteopath, and wants to study medicine.

"Where I came from, it's difficult to be a doctor," Amit says. "You have to pay money, or be the child of a minister."

He worries that his asylum application will fail, and he'll be forced to return to Afghanistan. "If I go back, they'll catch me," he says—afraid, even 3,500 miles away, to mention the Taliban by name. "They disappeared my brother and father, so they might think I want revenge."

But, for now, Amit is safe. He has a future—as a cricket coach or maybe a doctor, but certainly as a leader. He can dream like any other 18-year-old. ■

"WE USE THE GAMES TO SHOW YOUNGSTERS THE CONSEQUENCES OF THEIR ACTIONS"

READER SPOT: POLYMATH HUNT

During a recent holiday in Thailand, I was surprised to come across this advert in a local newspaper. It seemed a rather tall order!

Submitted by Clare Pollard, Shropshire

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