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Baltimore County's first cricket field: A sign of immigrants' growing influence and fertile ground for friendship

Alissa Zhu 8/4/22 6:00 a.m. EDT



Vice Captain Sumir Shrestha watches as the ball flies behind him after swinging the bat July 27. (Taneen Momeni)

As a teenager in Nepal, Sumir Shrestha got up at 4 a.m. every weekend. Shouldering a heavy bag filled with gloves, a bat, a first-aid kit, and snacks, he and his friends walked five miles to a fairground so they could start playing cricket in the glow of daybreak. After six hours of running, hitting and catching, they walked back home, still weighed down by their cricket kits but buoyed by their love of the game.

"Nepalis are crazy about cricket," Shrestha said.

After moving to the United States, Shrestha found far fewer opportunities to play. Last year, the 29-year-old Parkville resident joined the newly formed Saathi Baltimore Cricket Club and

helped with the group's campaign to make cricket more accessible in Baltimore County. The county has a growing immigrant population, including many residents with roots in South Asia, where cricket reigns supreme.



Saathi Baltimore Cricket Club members unpack materials — bats, wickets, balls and gloves — ahead of practice on July 27. (Taneen Momeni)

The club's lobbying efforts have proved successful, as Baltimore County will soon be getting its first designed and designated cricket ground. The county included $250,000 for the planning and design phase of the project in its fiscal year 2023 budget. That work is expected to start in November, said Roslyn Johnson, Baltimore County's director of recreation and parks. Construction of the field at Cloverland Park, near Loch Raven Reservoir, would begin in 2024.



Team Captain Rupesh Thapa bowls the ball at cricket practice July 27. Two team members alternate bowling to the batter. (Taneen Momeni)

The activity comes 15 years after the county announced plans to build its first cricket field at Cloverland Park, where Saathi Baltimore Cricket Club practices today. But little investment seems to have been made there since then. Without parking, paved roads, seating, lights, or a scoreboard, the field today resembles a spartan pasture more than an athletic field.

Johnson, who joined the county's recreation and parks department in 2020, said she doesn't know why the county didn't do more 15 years ago, but guesses it was probably because of limited capital funds. Her department is prepared to do it right this time by hiring a consultant and designing a regulation cricket field.

"We're very excited," said Shrestha, whose teammates currently have to drive 45 minutes or more to play games and tournaments every weekend at the nearest cricket facilities in Howard County. "I know the plan might take about two years from now. But still, if we don't play, at least the … future generation can play."

Cricket is not just a sport to Shrestha and his teammates, he said. "It's a way to bond with each other. ... I never knew these guys before [a year ago]. Now we're like kinda best friends."

Immigrants' rising power

The sport dates back to the 1600s and, in many ways, resembles baseball. Players use a bat to hit a ball lobbed at them by a bowler (pitcher) as far as they can into a field to score points. It's generally played on an oval-shaped field with a diameter measuring 137-150 meters.

Cricket has billions of fans worldwide and is the second-most popular sport after soccer. Cricket's popularity has been on the rise in the U.S., which is slated to host the 2024 ICC Men's T20 World Cup alongside the West Indies. Howard County broke ground earlier this year on its sixth cricket pitch to meet a growing interest in the sport.

For Ramesh Bhatta, founder and president of Saathi Inc., a community nonprofit that organized the cricket club and aims to serve Nepali residents in and around Baltimore County, the project is a sign of immigrants' growing political power.



Team Captain Rupesh Thapa directs players during practice July 27. Team members all help each other and provide direction as well. (Taneen Momeni)



Utsav Sigdel, cricket director for Saathi Baltimore Cricket Club, shows off a signed ball. Sigdel got this ball at a professional match after it was hit out of bounds. (Taneen Momeni)

"Saathi" means friend in Nepali, Bhatta said. He started the organization in 2019 "to be a friend to the community."

"Sometimes we don't understand our own strength," Bhatta said. "We've been paying our taxes, we've been residing in the county for a long time. The [feeling] is that we are nobodies, we are nothing. Incidents like this prove that if we unite and ask for something, we are going to get it. We are becoming more powerful in elections, too."

Bhatta estimated that Nepali residents in Baltimore County number several thousand. In the Saathi Inc. network alone, he said, there are 3,700 Nepali immigrants. Across the state there are about 30,000 residents with roots in Nepal, he said.

Alongside Spanish, Korean, Russian and Yoruba, Nepali is one of the most commonly spoken languages outside of English in Baltimore County, said Giuliana Valencia-Banks, who was hired last November to be Baltimore County's first immigrant affairs outreach coordinator.

At least 13% of the county's population is made up of people who were born in other countries, based on 2020 census figures, she said, adding that the actual percentage is likely even higher because immigrants were undercounted during the census.



Suman Chhetri, manager, warms up for practice by bowling a few balls on July 27. (Taneen Momeni)



Samyog Parajuli attempts to catch the ball during cricket practice July 27. (Taneen Momeni)

Dreams of a better field

One or two nights a week, Saathi Baltimore Cricket Club members gather at the bare-bones cricket field in Cloverland Park, where the ground slopes and undulates.

There are few physical signs this is the home field of a dedicated team. A strip of dirt, where grass has been worn away, serves as the cricket pitch, where the bowler and batsman face off. Small white flags planted in an uneven oval mark the boundaries of of the county-maintained field. Thorny vines, decaying hay bales, tall prairie grass and a dense copse of bamboo serve as the fence. The sun provides the only light the team can play by. Without any bathrooms nearby, players must wait for the duration of their hours-long practices or otherwise answer nature's call behind a tree.



A cricket player delicately places a bail on the stumps during practice July 27. (Taneen Momeni)



A cricket player takes his turn at the bat during practice July 27. Players switch positions so most members can train in different roles. (Taneen Momeni)

On a breezy Wednesday evening in July, 35-year-old team captain Rupesh Thapa called out encouragement to other players during practice. One was a teenager who had never played cricket prior to joining the club. Another was a seasoned former professional who once represented Nepal on the national team. Several members wore Saathi Baltimore team jerseys in the red, white and blue of the Nepali flag and adorned with an outline of Mount Everest, Nepal's (and Tibet's) most famous landmark.

I love playing with them," said Thapa, a Perry Hall resident who works as a systems engineer for the National Institutes of Health. "Everyone supports each other personally. Makes my job a lot more easier. Yeah, so it's challenging, but at the same time it's fun to play with these guys."

His wish list for the new cricket facilities is basic: parking spaces, bathrooms, a pavilion to house dressing rooms, and seating for spectators.

The county is looking at adding restrooms, a scoreboard, benches and possibly lights to the field. Officials will seek community input and weigh budget constraints before they finalize the design, said Johnson, the parks director. With supply chain issues, inflation and increased construction costs, the entire project will likely cost more than a million dollars, she said.

While there are a few other fields in Baltimore County being used for cricket, the Cloverland Park site will be the only one designed for the sport. Fields at Villa Maria School, Woodmoor Elementary School and Western Hills Community Park are multi-use, and cricket must compete with soccer, football and baseball for the space, she said.

When members of Saathi Baltimore Cricket Club presented their pitch for a proper cricket ground, they were "preaching to the choir," Johnson said. She already saw the need.

"When talking to our Nepali population, it's something that reminds them of home. They're happy to be here, but they also want the connection to home. As a recreation and parks Department, equity, diversity and inclusion is in everything that we do. ... So why wouldn't we support cricket? It is a sport played worldwide. It's huge and there's a demand for it in this county and in other counties," Johnson said.

Investing in a cricket field isn't just about serving the needs of a fan base. Johnson said there are vital and consequential outcomes to communities having equitable access to recreation. Spending time outdoors and physically moving can improve health by regulating blood pressure, exposing people to fresh air and redirecting negative behaviors into positive ones, she said. "Simply put, we help save lives."

The department has also replaced the word "citizens" with "residents and visitors" in their mission statement, Johnson said.

"Citizens is a code word," Johnson said. "It's an old, outdated word, and it says if you're undocumented, then the space doesn't belong to you. And that's not true. We don't care if you're documented or not. We don't check citizenship. We just want you to come and use a park and meet new people and have fun and learn something new. See some new wildlife, see new flowers, see new insects and just be part of the ecosystem here in Baltimore County."

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