



Cricket

(the game, not the insect or the phone company)

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Fort Collins Cricket Club
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Continuation of a Grassroots Cricket Development Program in the United States

Michael B. Riley

Graham Doust

Wendy Doust

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Executive Summary

A grassroots program to introduce cricket in Colorado was started in 2013, and continued in 2014. This program included classroom visits to local schools, multiple coaching sessions in two northern Colorado Boys & Girls Clubs and a concentrated three-week program for local children in the summer through a program organized by the City of Fort Collins.

There was some overlap in attendance by children from last year's program, but most of this year's attendees were new to the game. Lessons learned from 2013 helped to improve the delivery and more rapidly develop basic cricket skills with the participants.

Overall this year some 320 children were introduced to cricket. Of those just under half of the participants were girls.

A number of local schools will continue teaching cricket in their PE classes, and we will continue to provide support for them.



Background

The introductory program started in 2013 with funding help from USACA, the Colorado Cricket League and the Fort Collins Cricket Club was continued in a concentrated effort in July, 2014. In 2013 children between the ages of 7 and 14 were introduced to the game. This age range might have been a little too broad, so this year the age group range was tightened a little to 8 – 14. As a follow-on from the 2013 program Mike Riley provided coaching lessons in several Poudre School District schools, plus the two Larimer County Boys & Girls Clubs in both late 2013 and in 2014 before the start of the concentrated program in July.

The 2013 program took the game to the children through sessions at the Boys & Girls Clubs situated in Fort Collins and Loveland, and through the Larimer County Recreator program which provides holiday activities for youth in Fort Collins. The Boys & Girls Club program proved to be successful in introducing the game to many children and was continued by staff at Loveland as part of their rotating program. Staff changes after the program was completed made this unsustainable at the Fort Collins Boys & Girls Club for a period this year. The 2013 Recreator program ran over five weeks with two one and a half hour sessions held late in the afternoon each week. This was successful in providing a more in-depth look at the game and the development of some basic cricket skills. In 2014 the Recreator program was more concentrated, with intense coaching over a three week period. As they did last year, Graham and Wendy Doust volunteered their time again, running the program in Fort Collins and Loveland in July.

The 2013 program achieved a great deal in promoting the sport in the district. It became apparent this year that many more children knew that the sport existed and gave the opportunity to carry the sport into schools on an informal basis. The 2014 program reached over 300 children in all the venues, with almost as many girls playing the sport as boys.

Program Design in 2014

Recreator

The program ran for two weeks with the following format:

- One three-hour session each weekday from 9:00 am to noon
- Children could register for either week or both weeks of the program
- Each day would be designed to develop specific skills leading to a play situation
- Sessions were broken into 50 minutes periods with breaks for drinks.

Boys & Girls Clubs

The focused Boys & Girls Clubs program ran for three weeks with the following format:

- Each club would have a minimum of two sessions per week with options of more where the timetable allowed
- Focus would be on lead up and limited over games
- The program would be inclusive and flexible to fit with the day-to-day running of the clubs.

Poudre School District

Numerous requests were made by teachers from a number of PSD schools. Learn-to-play kits were acquired through the ICC Let's Play Cricket USA program, and provided to those schools that were not provided with kits last year. Activities included:

- Two or three 50 minute sessions each day at a given school with multiple classes
- Two consecutive weeks of coaching with the same groups
- Instructing teachers in the basics of the game
- Leaving contact information and encouraging teachers to reach out to us if they needed further assistance.

Activities within Each Program

Many of the children who participated in the program had played little competitive sport, so activities had to be very skills based, and the introductory games played a significant role.

Batting Skills Development

Almost all American children are familiar with baseball or softball. The consequence of this knowledge is that all (or almost all) of them attempt to hit a cricket ball with a baseball-style swing – that is, with a horizontal bat. The development of a vertical swing is key to their rapid improvement and enjoyment of the game. Consequently the introduction of batting drills using tees is extremely useful. These skills were taught in the Recreator program and the Boys & Girls Clubs, where more time was available to focus on them.

These drills included hitting balls off batting tees in small groups or pairs with the accent on correct grip and a vertical swing. The tee was placed in various areas so that footwork was also introduced. This activity led to a short game of T-ball cricket where the ball had to be hit into areas designated by cones to introduce the concept that the ball can be placed anywhere on the field to score runs.



A second useful drill involved throwdown balls being hit back to a partner with the batter using a straight bat. The drill is intended to develop the swing arc only, so no power is used.

A third drill involved balls “popped up” by the coach with batters stepping forward to hit the ball as far as possible with the rest of the group fielding and trying for catches. (To do this the coach kneels and pops the ball up at the same time calling to the batter when to step and hit the ball. The auditory clues are important in developing footwork.)

A fourth drill has batters practicing moving the back foot across and the ball being thrown on leg stump with the batter hitting to the leg side (coach calls step then throws the ball in a hitting area). The practice was then developed into a game of “leg side cricket” where batters had to score runs (hitting and running) off five deliveries. One run had to be attempted on every hit and two runs deducted for each out....run out or caught.

The aim of activities such as these is to develop footwork, hitting skills, ability to hit the ball hard and ability to hit the ball to different areas of the field. Many variations of these were used throughout the program.

Throwing and Catching Development

Drills for throwing and catching included:

- Throwing and catching underarm in pairs
- Throwing and catching overarm in pairs
- Throwing at a target (stumps).

Developing strong throws involving practice and correction. Coaching points focused on having the throwing arm high, stepping with the opposite foot and then having the leading arm high to drag the body through.

Throughout games all of these points were constantly reinforced.

Correct catching techniques were demonstrated and practiced. Games such as catching soccer and pepper hitting were used to reinforce learning.

Wicketkeeping skills were lightly touched on with each participant having an opportunity to experience the position.

Ground Fielding Development

Drills for ground fielding included exercises emphasizing hand position, foot position and movement to the ball. Games such as fielding soccer were used to further skill development.

One of the greatest barriers to developing these skills outdoors in Colorado proved to be the grass surfaces. The dry climate and limited water resources mean that the local school and city districts maintain grass surfaces with grass heights of 2½" to 3". This makes ground fielding drills much less predictable, and therefore difficult to teach.

Bowling

Bowling is a difficult skill to teach in a short time frame. In addition conceptually it is difficult for American children to grasp the straight arm action. This may be partly due to having very little, if any, exposure to the action through peer or media experience. While the bowling action was always encouraged, in the interest of game continuity, "throwing" was accepted. Group drills, correction and encouragement led to a great improvement in bowling actions. *It was noted that in the final game extraordinary progress had been made!*

Time was spent in each session developing bowling skills at a basic level.

Participants and Accomplishments

Recreator

The Recreator groups over the two week period were small, consisting of 14 children in all. These small groups allowed for more intensive training. The participants were aged from 8 to 14 years which meant that there was quite a range of physical ability and development in each group. The sessions were conducted at Lincoln Junior High School where the Fort Collins Cricket Club has a cricket pitch with an artificial surface. There were plenty of opportunities to focus on individual skill development and correction. This was particularly important for the children who had little sporting experience. There were, in each group, children who returned to the program after participating in 2013.

Outcomes included:

- All participants developing greatly in batting
- A very good understanding of most of the simple elements of the game, including:
 - Running between wickets
 - Calling to run
 - Fielding in positions to defend well
 - Understanding the role of the wicketkeeper
 - Backing up a throw

All participants developed bowling skills with some individuals mastering the action well over the time of the program. This was a great improvement on the progress made last year and may be attributed to daily training in the concentrated format this year.

Presentations of participation certificates and a small “signing” bat were made to each of the players. The bats had been donated by Harry Solomons of Kingsgrove Sports Centre in Sydney, Australia.

Boys & Girls Clubs

Sessions were held twice a week at the Loveland Boys & Girls Club and were scheduled for three times a week at Fort Collins. The Fort Collins program proceeded with some difficulty due to staff changes and club timetable adjustments. Again the children presented with a range of sporting experience and a range of ages.

Follow-up from last year’s program and continued sessions in both Boys & Girls Clubs presented from time to time over the last twelve months by Mike Riley saw quite a good group of players emerging who had a much firmer grasp on the skills and game knowledge. The staffing continuity in Loveland did show improved development of the game, demonstrating the need for continuation.

Skill sessions teaching batting, bowling and fielding were held to commence sessions and these were followed by two games, continuous cricket and cricket based on Indoor Cricket and T20 Blast (a game used in Australia for beginning cricketers). The continuous cricket engaged all children and was played very enthusiastically. The T20 Blast was played well by the end of the program.

Outcomes included:

- Development of batting, bowling and fielding skills
- A clearer understanding of the game
- The introduction of the game to a wider audience
- Positive feedback from the club supervisors.

Poudre School District

Class groups ranged from grade four through to grade 12. The athletic abilities of the students varied widely, but there was always encouragement for those students who picked the basics up quickly to assist their fellow students. By the second session in every class the majority of students had picked up the basics, and were starting to become competitive in the quickfire pickup games. In two sessions there was insufficient time to have most students learn to bowl properly, although some did achieve an impressive level of capability.

Batting was equally challenging in a two week period, although the introduction of the technique to swing the bat vertically in the second session proved much more effective than early introduction when most students were still trying to understand the fundamentals of how to score a run, and how not to get out.

Outcomes included:

- Sufficient level of instruction of teachers to continue the game in their PE classes
- Providing all schools attended with practice cricket kits
- A rudimentary understanding of the game by most students
- Initial development of batting, bowling and fielding skills.

Program Wrap-Up: Fort Collins vs. Loveland Boys & Girls Clubs Match

This was played on the pitch at Lincoln Junior High School. The teams from Loveland travelled by bus to the game. Graham organized and umpired with assistance of the two club supervisors. It was most gratifying to see both teams display a good knowledge of the game and demonstration of the skills that had been developed. The field was set up with boundaries marked so that the children could experience the feel of a properly organized cricket match. The players batted in pairs for four overs with care taken to revolve the strike. Two runs were deducted for an out. It was pleasing to see that a high percentage of the players were bowling rather than throwing the ball – some with a good deal of accuracy. The running between wickets and calling was of a much higher standard than in 2013.

Parents from Loveland who attended were very impressed and the question was asked, “Where do I sign my child up to play?”

Recommendations

The following recommendations are provided as a result of our experiences with both the ongoing coaching activities within the local school district and the Boys & Girls Clubs, and the concentrated programs during the summer:

- Activities within the schools show the best return with the following points:
 - Coaching is done initially in PE lessons in an indoor gym
 - PE teachers are asked to restrict group size to 15 – 18 students
 - A minimum of two sessions are coached
 - The first class is to introduce the rudiments
 - The second (and subsequent) class starts to introduce competitive aspects
 - Subsequent classes can concentrate on techniques if desired.
 - Activities should be moved outside as weather permits
 - Follow-up coaching clinics should be held, as has already happened this year.

The Boys & Girls Clubs are very receptive environments for team-based sports. With that in mind, the following recommendations are made:

- It is important to continue input into the Boys & Girls Clubs on a regular basis
- Afternoon “pickup” game opportunities should be organized on a regular basis
- Parents should be encouraged to attend afternoon pickup games and be encouraged to umpire/learn about the game.

Pickup games would attract more participation with two simple actions:

- Advertise the afternoon games through the schools and local press
- Encourage children to bring their friends along to the games.

At this stage there is a significant number of children that have taken their first steps with cricket. A concerted program in the spring of 2015, including both the local schools and Boys & Girls Clubs has a high probability of attracting enough of these kids to a program of early summer pickup games. A recommendation for this next step will be made in the next few months.

Parent participation is key to enhancing the acceptance and success of cricket.

Parents should be invited to one or more early season meetings to draw up a strategy to continue the game in summer 2015. Having parents take on the organization of the sport with guidance from players will allow the sport to progress.

Summary

The 2014 follow-on program with Graham and Wendy Doust met with a great deal of success. The legacy of the 2013 program and follow-up by Mike Riley was very evident. The Recreator program enabled much more intensive teaching and coaching to take place and the everyday experience enabled the children to develop skills far more thoroughly. The work that has continued in the Boys & Girls Clubs has seen a real improvement in the skills and game knowledge of the children.

The foundation on which to build junior cricket in the Fort Collins area is now in place. The organization of a small competition should be the next move forward. The recommendations above should assist in formulating the future of junior cricket in Fort Collins and may serve as a model to introduce cricket in other areas.

Acknowledgements

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