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Abhinav Ramnarayan



Chennai: The sports ground at the Anjuman-E-Himayath-E-Islam orphanage in the heart of Chennai is a scramble of running feet, flaying arms and flying objects. There are six-year-olds playing an amateur game of cricket on one side, intruding into the space of a slightly older bunch of soccer players who seem to be kicking at everything in sight, including, occasionally, the ball.

In the far corner of the ground, a group of skinny lads are tussling over a rugby ball, instead of the ubiquitous cricket ball, with a burly Armenian overseeing the proceedings, barking out orders and instructions at intervals.

Sometimes, a player falls, ball in hand, on the hard grassless ground, the rest throng around him, and a cloud of dust envelops them.

This is life for the under-19 team of the Chennai Cheetahs.

The senior team, not on the ground on the day, are one of India's top teams and were the champions of the All India Rugby 7's in 2004 and in 2006.

The senior team has earned Chennai a spot on India's emerging rugby map, topping the list of 29 teams, across all the divisions. In the first division (of which Chennai Cheetahs is the champion), there are twelve teams.

The rest are in the second division, which is called The Callaghan Cup. The Cheetahs lost the 2005 championship for the first division title to a team from England that participated on a special invitation.

Standing on the sidelines of the practice session, Mohan Krishna, president of the Tamil Nadu Rugby Football Union (TNRFU), one of the people responsible for the rugby renaissance in Chennai in 1997, explains the trials and tribulations of the club.

"In '97, I was working in NIIT, and some of us used to play rugby informally," he says. "At that time, there was not much rugby in Chennai—but there was a decent rugby-playing population in Bangalore—mostly expats—and a group of Frenchmen in Pondicherry who had a team, so we used to travel to these two cities and play against them." This was the seed of the rugby union, which was funded by the first rugby players in the city themselves. "I put five thousand (rupees) someone put three thousand, here and there, that sort of thing," says Krishna.

The revival was sparked by American businessman Patrick Davenport, who played for University of Detroit, and brought his passion for the game with him when he settled in Chennai.

He, along with Mohan Krishna, decided that for the game to sustain itself, it had to attract people who wished to take up the game—that meant going to city schools and selling the sport—and getting instructors to help with the game. The Chennai Cheetahs, Krishna says, usually went to the national tournament every year, lost, drowned their sorrow in a few beers and came back.

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