

A LITTLE BIT OF HISTORY

Mike Stanger recalls how cricket in the west of Scotland showed the way for the national youth squads today...

It's a truism that, to make further progress, you have to understand where you've already been. And the imminent tour to India by Cricket Scotland's National Academy squad is a good reason to revisit the pioneering tour of India by the Western Cricket Association (as it was then) with its U19 squad exactly 15 years ago.

The common factor is Craig Wright. The man who later became arguably Scotland's most successful international captain is now Cricket Scotland's performance development manager. Then, he was captain of the West District's U19s as they set out on an intrepid 22-day tour into what was then unknown territory for Scottish cricketers at any level.

The reason why the 1995 tour became possible was twofold. First inspiration came from Kailash Gattani, the former Aberdeenshire pro, who had been bringing his Star Club of India U19 squads to the UK - always including Scotland - for eight years. These tours gave a first taste of British conditions to youngsters such as Sachin Tendulkar (aged 14 when he visited in 1988-9) and Rahul Dravid in 1991 (later to be Scotland's pro in the National League against the English Counties in 2003).

On his visits to Scotland Gattani kept asking why, if he could organise such tours annually from poverty-stricken India to the expensive UK on a shoestring, it seemed so difficult to set up reciprocal tours to India.

This question troubled us. Since around 1989, with the help of the Foundation for Sport and the Arts, we had been developing existing cricket coaching during the winters in the west, and had organised a number of one-week July tours south of the Border to play good club and county youth teams. But we had not contemplated anything more ambitious.

Remember, this was before the internet, when international travel and communication was still relatively expensive and cumbersome.

But Kailash's question was still unanswered. And, as someone who between the ages of 17 and 21 had visited India four times (as my father worked in Bombay for five years) and had myself played good quality cricket there, it seemed that I was uniquely placed to understand the benefits of such a trip, as well as the logistical problems. And we were aware that we had the player talent to make a go of it.

So, at the end of the 1994 Star Club of India visit to Scotland (featuring future Test players Ajit Agarkar and Rohan Gavaskar), Kailash agreed to act as our organiser in India for a tour we would undertake in March-April of 1995. Kailash's local knowledge and contacts were central to the tour's success, arranging our fixtures and making travel arrangements that nowadays you can do by e-mail.

We started with a quartet of coach/managers - Alan Mills, the West of Scotland club junior convener and West District U19 manager; Colin Dawson, treasurer and junior convener at Glasgow Accies, and selector Tom Halpin of Prestwick and myself, who jointly ran the District U16 squad. Needing to keep costs to a minimum, we would travel without a physio, so we all attended a first-aid course!

The overall cost of the trip was estimated at around £20,000 - roughly £1,000 per person in the party. Fund-raising began the previous autumn, with £6,000 of 'starter funding' from the WCA.

Each player tasked with attracting low-level support from 'local' contacts towards a target of £7,000 of sponsorship and advertising. With the whisky market in India opening out to imported brands, Whyte & Mackay were our principal sponsors.

That left around £7,000 for the tourists themselves to fund - approximately £400 each, to be paid upfront in four equal instalments throughout the winter. It was a bargain, particularly as the tour would also encompass various tourism delights which I had experienced myself as a lad.

The 16 players were chosen in September, and were given a month to decide whether they would travel. Only one declined, but he was a spinner, and we were already short of spinners at the U19 age group. The replacement became our youngest tourist, 15-year-old Gregor Maiden. The other future international 'stars' in our squad were Craig Wright, Drew Parsons and Dougie Lockhart.

As the date of departure drew closer, Tom Halpin had to drop out, for business reasons, but we 'acquired' a serendipitous coach/player replacement, West of Scotland all-rounder Amrisha Agrawalla, who joined the tour while already in India on family business. We were also accompanied by umpire Gordon Mitchell of Clydesdale, Terry Brennan, editor of the Scottish Cricketer, and Donald MacLeod, Scotsman photographer, all of whom fancied the trip - and paid their way, of course!

So we were a party of 22 in the end, travelling by Air India to Bombay for a schedule of 13 matches. After a couple of days' acclimatisation, we played our first match, Justin Gayfer of Glasgow Accies scoring the first - and last - century of the tour as we posted 284 for five at the wonderful Gymkhana Club! We thought we were on a winner, but learned our first lesson as the local team easily passed our score: Indian cricketers can score at will!

That evening, while enjoying a splendid reception laid on by Kailash, he took me aside to give me grave news: the next stage of our tour was to be in Goa, and we were to travel down the coast by sea-going catamaran. The catamaran, said Kailash, had broken down - in Goa! But this gave us our second lesson: a local organiser's contacts are vital. Within 18 hours, Kailash had somehow managed to switch us to an internal flight to Goa.

We played four matches in Goa, one of them finishing as a tie, with some players suffering from 'Delhi belly', not least Scott Hamilton of Kelburne, who scored a 50, and literally ran off the ground! But we were thoroughly spoiled with our modest accommodation at a beach-side venue, agains thanks to Kailash's contacts. After each match, we sought out a fax machine to enable a report to be sent to Willie Dick and others back in Scotland.

From Goa, we returned to Bombay to start the main phase of our tour with matches at the Test venues of the amazing Art-Deco Brabourne Stadium and the concrete brutishness of the Wankhade Stadium, just a few hundred yards away - Kailash's contacts once again! Drew Parsons captained the latter game, Craig Wright taking four wickets in the Wankhade, the first time our squad managed to get the opposition all out. But we were beaten, by Bombay's U16s!

After two weeks away from home, and in blisteringly uncomfortable heat, the players were beginning to tire. But the three-match Delhi phase of our tour was still to happen. Another flight saw Alan Burgess's kit going AWOL (later found to have gone to Hong Kong!); our hotel was a poor, state-operated one; the coach in which we travelled wasn't air-conditioned; and we still couldn't force a victory as each team seemed to include players with Ranji Trophy experience.

But we came very close indeed to a famous victory in a great match beside the National Hockey Stadium in Delhi, when Alan Burgess, in borrowed kit, having reached his half-century, was the last wicket to fall, just three runs short of the target.

Nobody goes to India without visiting the Taj Mahal, which was next on our itinerary, with enough time to play two matches in nearby Jaipur before returning to Delhi for the flight home. Staying in a crumbling former Maharajah's palace, now a hotel, we had a great time seeing the world-famous jewel-encrusted mausoleum - and we finally won a game, the last of our tour, after Drew Parsons, who had scored over 500 runs but never been not out, hit the final-over boundary that brought us victory.

The sad thing is that only half of these players are still to be seen on the field of play in Scotland. But there will be very few who don't remember their experience in India with gratitude.

It was to be another seven years before the West District undertook another overseas tour - this time to Cape Town and Durban in South Africa, with Craig Wright as one of our coaches. That generation spawned Majid Haq, Ross Lyons, Qasim Sheikh, Ian Young and Omer Hussain as internationalists. Three years later, a tour to Australia was organised, from which Richie Berrington, Calum MacLeod and Zeeshan Bashir have pushed their way into Scotland's senior representative squads.

The wheel has turned full circle. And the West District led the way. We were privileged to have been part of it, and grateful for the support we attracted.