



Harsha Bhogle

All over the world, and therefore in India too, there are two kinds of sports lovers; those that play and those that watch. Given the nature of urban societies around the world, it is inevitable that those that watch greatly outnumber those that play. But in urban India, with our congestion and consequent absence of open spaces, and the extraordinary importance attached to school-leaving marks, I would fear that the proportion of watchers outnumbers the proportion of players more significantly than in other parts of the world. It has implications for the style industry, for the number of those that want to look like sportspersons will also be larger than those that want to play!

But the relatively smaller number of urban sportspeople is something that fills me with disappointment for there is no better way to understand team work, or some might say its absence, than to have played a team sport. I see a little flicker of change occasionally as people young at heart become parents but very soon they get sucked into the cycle of classes and marks that is still the sole determinant of success in India. And so sport remains a spectacle to be seen from afar rather than an activity to be enjoyed more intimately.

There are two major limitations to sport in urban India. The absence of time and the absence of space. To play sport you need to fail, to learn and to succeed; to be neglected, to fight and to seize the opportunity. You need time. Urban India with its traffic jams and poor travel infrastructure makes playing sport far too time-consuming; it gives people an opportunity to leave sport. And of course there is no space left. In Mumbai we joke about the fact that if there were 22 yards available, let alone space for a football ground, a politician and a builder would build on it. It would suggest that the smaller towns, where space and time are not as cruelly dealt with, would allow sport to

thrive. And it comes as no surprise that the next generation of Indian sportsmen are coming from there. It wouldn't surprise me if the next generation of leaders emerges from there too.



Urban sport is reeling too from the onslaught of two traditional enemies: the 10th standard syndrome and the coaching class on one hand, and social media on the other. It is my hypothesis that our society, as represented by parents and school teachers, is fine with kids playing sport till they are twelve or thirteen (indeed they will spend fairly heavily on “coaching” and equipment) but not in the school leaving year. Then they must go to school by day and to the coaching class by dusk. I wonder sometimes that if schools taught, as they are meant to, they might free up the evenings that are increasingly spent in studying what schools don't teach. So, caught up in these two mandatory marks generating activities, there is sadly no time for sport. Indeed some schools seem to announce proudly that in the year ahead, children will have no time for anything else-- a kind of pedagogic jail? And so dreams die young in urban India, those that continue to pursue sport are condemned to lead a life of ‘low’ marks (and ‘low’ by itself is relative in a system where marks are like Diwali gifts). If exams were less eat-and-spit, or to use more socially acceptable nomenclature, read- and-reproduce, things might be different.

Hand in hand with that is the revolution in social media. Your friend is now a click away and the click is now available twenty four hours. Physical activity probably means transferring weight from one elbow to the other as young men and women sprawl in front of their laptops. Far easier then, to watch and talk about Tendulkar and Messi rather than sweat like them. Peculiarly though, with increasing social interaction and the need to look good, one activity is gaining ground. More young men and women are being seen in gyms and I do hope vanity, and the consequent need to look a certain way, is not the only reason!

It is however possible to be different if young men and women learn to compartmentalise their lives; to give a 100% to everything they do and not let one activity impinge into another. The really organised will not think of lessons when they are playing sport but equally will not think of sport when they are learning. Where time is at a premium, wasting it is a crime.

The school can play a part in promoting sport and indeed some do. Often the driver of adolescent minds is the teacher and that is a resource that schools must search to use better. If teachers understand the power of sport in developing young minds, they could inspire their wards to play. Sport can be wonderfully inventive and good teachers can either find space or learn to use what exists. Table tennis tables for example don't need much space and volleyball eliminates the need for expensive equipment too. It is a wonderful, exhilarating sport to play. Basketball is another requiring high levels of athleticism and team work. But they must be encouraged; maybe the star athlete and the maths whiz form a team; one gets the other to run and jump, the other helps him with trigonometry!

Developing a love for a team early in life is critical because it shapes the way you do everything else.

You pass one day and you score one day and both times you are the hero; or on another day you only make 5 not out but allow the better batsman to score a 50. Doing things for each other, becoming a team player, is something all of India is concerned about but our schools and the marking and "tuition" system promote selfishness. You hire a tuition teacher and tell nobody, find an interesting new text book and tell nobody, we rank everything and so the rush to be number one individually.

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All over the world it is the community that sows the seed for sport first. Public courts, tables and fields are the starting point and while it might be expecting too much to expect the state to do anything about it (the sports ministry is often seen as a punishment posting!) I am sure corporate houses can be tapped to contribute. We are seeing the first few examples of such grass roots involvement from corporate houses now and hopefully more will follow the IMG-Reliance model where the onus of marketing and seeding a sport rests with a corporate house rather than a department of the government. It might lead to a different form of governance, hopefully make it more inclusive.

But till such time as urban societies continue to deny its citizens time and space, till the obsession with marks as the sole determinant of ability continues, sport will remain a spectacle to be watched rather than an activity to be enjoyed. Playing sport opens a world of limitless riches and the school is the best time to be exposed to that.

*Known as 'the voice of Indian cricket' Harsha is an alumnus of IIM-Ahmadabad and an Engineering graduate from Hyderabad. He is India's leading cricket commentator and columnist, loved for his insightful comments on the game. Besides writing for news papers and magazines, he has a few books to his credit as well. He now also undertakes corporate lectures, applying the wisdom of the game for developing business strategies.*