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**Middle School: 1st place
winner**



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Cricket

And here comes another SIKER! Wooooo!!! What an excitement this word brings wherever it is heard! And there are many other such announcements which control your heartbeat during the game. I didn't understand the importance of cricket until last time when I visited India. My cousins in India taught me all about it, and I love it now. Truly, Cricket is the most popular game in India that captures the mind and spirit of almost every Indian.

To fully appreciate the game, let's see what this game is all about. The game of Cricket is somewhat like Baseball, except that the game of cricket is played in an oval-shaped arena. The action is in the center of the arena on a thin rectangular strip known as *pitch* whose ends are marked by sets of three vertical round sticks driven firm into the ground with a horizontal piece on top, also known as *wickets*.

The game is played between two teams of eleven players each, though at any time, it's two players of one team playing against the opposite team. These two players are the *Batsman* and the *Runner*, depending upon who's facing the ball at the time. Like in Baseball, the *Batsman* holds a bat, though the bat is made of willow wood, it's flat in front and slightly bulged in the middle section at its backside. Unlike Baseball, the *Batsman* holds the bat to the ground in front of one set of *wickets* within an area known as the *crease* and the *Runner* waits at the opposite end in his *crease*. The *Bowler* from the other team comes running from the opposite end, and throws the ball overhead, with a fully stretched arm swinging in a smooth manner before the ball is released. While the goal of the *Bowler* is to hit the *wickets* with the ball, the *Batsman* aims to protect the *wicket* and hit the ball away with the full force of the bat. The other team is strategically spread on the ground to immediately capture the ball when it's hit by the *Batsman*. Various locations on the ground are given a specific name; the most important position, is of the *Wicket Keeper* who is right behind the *wicket* of the *Batsman*. The

Bowler often decides the placement of his team members in consultation with the captain.

When the ball is served, most likely the batsman is able to hit it away from any player of the opposite team. While the opposite team players run after the ball to grab it, the batsman and the runner are able to steal a run by running toward the opposite ends of the pitch. The other team grabs the ball and throws it at the wicket before either the batsman or the runner land in their respected crease areas. In this scenario, the player closer to the wicket being hit is given a *run out*. It's quite possible that the ball is hit with enough force that it rolls over the boundary line to score four runs. It may also be hit with even a bigger force that the ball flies over the boundary line to score a *sixer*. In another scenario, the ball may be caught by the player before it hits the ground. In this condition, the batsman is declared *catch out*. It's possible that the batsman misses the ball and the ball hits the wicket. In that case, the player is declared *clean bowled*. Until a player is declared out, he can play all the way to the end of his team's inning.

It will be worthwhile to mention that a bowler throws a ball six times in a row, and those six throws are known as an *over*. Each team plays a limited number of *overs*, and to have both teams play once is known as playing an *inning*. Usually, one *inning* match, over 50 *overs*, lasts one day. The team that scores more runs is the *winner*. Of course, there are more rules to the game than mentioned above, and these add to the excitement of the game. There are two independent referees: one at each wicket, known as *umpires*, who judge and declare various events of the game.

Historically, the word *cricket* is thought to be derived from the Middle French word *criquet*, meaning *goal stake*. It is believed that the game of *Cricket* began during the Saxon or Norman times by children in *Wessex*, southeast England. It was mostly a game for children, until the game was taken up by adults in the 17th century. The earliest record of a *cricket* match was in the year 1725, though the first set of rules for the game were written in 1744.

Wherever England ruled, she took the *cricket* with it. Though, *Cricket* started in India in 18th century, the official match started only in 1932 when Indian team went to England. Ever since, its popularity has grown in India.

Many countries have now adopted this sport to play. Just like *Football* has the *Super Bowl*, *cricket* has the *World Series*. There are *cricket* teams at every level: privately in the housing communities or offices, but the training starts rather early at the elementary school level and continues all the way to colleges. The school team play-off

against each other just like in any other sport. There are state-wide competitions and the winners of those go against other countries. The final match, which declares a country the winner, is called the World Cup.

The first match after India's independence was played in 1948, and it was captained by Lala Amarnath. Some of the most famous players in Indian history are Sachin Tendulkar, Kapil Dev, Zaheer Khan, Harbajan Singh, Yuvraj Singh and Sunil Gavaskar. Players like Sunil Gavaskar are known worldwide. But even these well-loved players get screamed at when they are not able to save the wickets, score runs or don't get the other team out within limited 'over's. Indians get very competitive when they are up against Pakistan, England, and Sri Lanka. But the fiercest fight is between India and Pakistan, which brings the life to a halt in both countries. For Indians, the winnings may be celebrated with firecrackers in the way they'd do on the day of Diwali, while losing to Pakistan is the biggest disappointment. The national pride rides on the outcome of the game.

Most Indians start playing at a very young age. Kids as small as 2-year-olds get plastic bats as gifts. A wooden mallet and a rubber ball are a good starter for young kids. If affordability is an issue, kids find a flat wood piece of appropriate size for bat, and a pile of bricks or a tree stump for wicket to play among themselves in the streets and alleys, if not on the proper playground. Based on the physical space and available time, the team can make their own rules. They play from the time they get home from school until it gets dark out.

When international cricket matches are being played, people become so obsessed that they'd skip school or their jobs just to watch them. Sometimes the schools themselves take the decision to drop a few classes to let the kids go home early to watch the game. It may be the same with some offices which let the workers go home early. Generally, people get together at each other's houses or other places so that they can watch the match together. People discuss their opinions about players' performances in the barber shops, paan shops, offices, sweet shops, etc. This analysis of the game continues days after the games are over. Cricket enthusiasts use every opportunity, be it their TV or the radio, to stay current with score. Sometimes, bike riders may stop along the way at a shop just to watch or listen if it is a critical moment of the match. There is hardly anyone who is not aware of the current status of the game being played.

No matter where you go in India you will see people playing everywhere - in parks and streets. It doesn't matter if you are rich or poor, old or young, anyone can play. Like a religion, the game of cricket relieves you of your personal worries for the

time being, and lets you fully live the moment. While a religion may belong to the followers of that particular religion, Cricket binds whole India together. The people in India wait in anticipation for the next match as they would for a religious festival, like Diwali, Christmas, Eid, or Gurdurab. The people are very religious in the way they view cricket and cricket players. By that I don't mean that they pray to the famous cricket players every day, though some probably do. Certainly, the people in India try to know as much statistics about various players as they can. They want to know what is going on in their cricket idols' lives. Perhaps for that reason, among all the other games, cricket players are best financially accommodated. So next time you go to India you will never be alone as long as you have an interest in cricket!