

# Why cricket's fun for Chinese, Malay boys

By V. K. SANTOSH KUMAR

CRICKET does not come naturally to Chinese and Malay boys because it is not steeped in their cultures.

So, it was refreshing to see a host of Chinese and Malay boys on the field when neighbourhood schools Ping Yi Secondary played Unity Secondary in a B Division league match at the Singapore Cricket Association's (SCA) ground in Kallang recently.

Choa Chu Kang-based Unity, who had five Chinese boys in their ranks, were beaten by 135 runs. But what stood out was their enthusiasm for the sport.

"Some of them have been playing cricket for the past three years," said K.P. Mahesh Kumar, 47, an SCA coach who introduced the sport to Unity's students in 2004. "They are keen. But they get limited training time because the school has other activities."

Chai Chee-located Ping Yi, with eight Malay, five Indian and two Chinese boys in their squad, on the other hand have shown a marked improvement in the past three years.

They finished among the top four teams in the B Division in the past two years and will be facing Raffles Institution (RI) in the semi-final on March 23, after beating St Andrew's Secondary by 100 runs and losing to Anglo-Chinese School (Independent) by 50 runs.

"The Malay and Chinese boys have a lot of interest and enthusiasm," said Shoib Razak, 32, a national player and an SCA coach who has been coaching the Ping Yi boys for the past four years. "They take time to pick up the skills but are as competitive as the Indian boys. Because cricket is not in their culture, it takes time for them to develop."

The Chinese and Malay boys in both schools selected cricket after trying it out at the co-curricular activity (CCA) open

house or after being influenced by their friends.

"I found it fun batting during the CCA open house," said Ernest Tan, a Unity Secondary 4 student. There are 10 Chinese boys in Unity's B Division squad.

For Ping Yi's Syaiful Bahari, a Sec 1 student, it was a case of peer influence.

"I found cricket interesting because you could play it in different ways - batting, bowling and fielding," he said. "It is a unique sport in Singapore, and I like it."

The sport is primarily fun for these boys. They did not express interest in playing it seriously, trying to get into the national age-group squads or pursuing it after leaving school. "They need to spend more time on their studies," noted Kumar.

According to Shoib, they lose interest when they keep losing to elite schools such as RI, ACS (I) and Victoria School. "Also their parents don't support them," he said. "The parents want them to concentrate on their studies."

Another factor is they find it difficult to compete with highly skilled foreign talent from India, Sri Lanka and Pakistan for places in the national age-group squads.

"The Chinese and Malay boys have the talent," said Goh Swee Heng, 54, a former Singapore cricket and football international who coaches the RI and St Patrick's School teams.

"But their interest wanes after a while because they don't get the proper encouragement.

"When they don't get selected to the national team, they switch to sports like football, rugby or basketball. They know there is no future for them in cricket."

Take Zeng Renchun. He picked up cricket at RI at age 13. The wicket-keeper-batsman then played for the national Under-15, U-17, U-19, U-23 and senior teams. He even went on to captain the national senior team in 2001. But then he stopped playing the sport in 2003 after en-



Chinese boys form a large number of the players in Unity Secondary School's B division cricket squad. The school took up the sport in 2004. ST PHOTO: CHEW SENG KIM

Chai Chee-based Ping Yi Secondary School have eight Malay, five Indian and two Chinese boys in their B Division cricket team, who are in the semis. ST PHOTO: CHEW SENG KIM

rolling in a management associate programme.

"I left the sport because I had personal commitments," said the 27-year-old corporate relations manager with Citibank. "I like the game and did well enough but I

could not find the time to play it after a while. Moreover, I felt the local boys were not getting fair representation. So, I decided this was not the game for me."

Goh has urged the SCA to do more to develop local talent. "It must come up

with a better development plan," he said. "There were more Chinese boys playing cricket in the '70s and '80s. Their numbers have now fallen because they know it is difficult to compete with semi-pros for a place in the national team."