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Madras Week | A coastal city's tryst with sports

Fuelled by historical association, Chennai's sports scene is as vibrant as it is varied

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Sports and Chennai have a special bond which only seems to grow stronger with the passage of time.

The city's tryst with sports has been a lengthy one, fuelled by historical association and supported by a legion of fans, often referred to as the 'knowledgeable Chennai crowd.'

Cricket began finding its feet after the Britishers set up the Madras Cricket Club for their recreation, but the sport owes its growth to the efforts of Buchi Babu Naidu, who went about setting up the Madras United Club (MUC), which would later lead to famous matches during the Pongal festival.

The MUC also became a pioneer for sports promotion and football found its roots there as well, according to Ravikumar David, former general secretary, Tamil Nadu Football Association.

Apart from cricket, hockey and football enjoyed a great fan following during the 1940's. "Chennai has been home to all sports — cricket, football, volleyball, hockey, basketball, you name them, the city has them," said V. Baskaran, former India Hockey team captain and national coach.

"The football league here is the oldest league in India. We had very strong teams such as Wimco, SBI, Railways and ICF. Each team had their own fan following as well even in those days," Mr. David said. Mr. Baskaran pointed out that hockey was quite famous in various pockets of the city, including Triplicane, Mylapore, Mir Sahib Pet, Nungambakkam lake area, and boasted a number of strong clubs such as the City Police, Binny Mills, Spencers and the Railways. A number of players from the city went on to play for the national team.

A place of pride

The city also holds a place of pride on the world chess map, boasting stalwarts such as Manuel Aaron, who became India's first International Master, and five-time World Chess Champion Viswanathan Anand. A list of Grandmasters also populate Chennai's vibrant chess scene, including Rameshbabu Praggnanandhaa, the fourth youngest to become a GM behind a Russian, a Uzbek and the city's own D. Gukesh.

If the Krishnans and Amritraj brothers took Indian tennis to the global stage, the Chennai Open brought the best of international tennis to the city.

The crowds' thunderous roar as players like Rafael Nadal, Boris Becker and Carlos Moya took the court punctuated the marquee sports event. While fans can only hold on to the nostalgia of the tournament, which has since been moved to Pune, tennis clubs around the city continue to thrive and hone talent.

Chennai's table tennis circuit, which has produced international players, has been seeing clubs mushrooming over the years. The city has also become the headquarters for squash in the country, while carrom flourishes in North Chennai, which is home to former two-time World Champion in carrom, A. Maria Irudayam. Motorsports, Golf and Horse Racing are also sought after by some.

The city also has produced sportswomen of repute such as Chess GMs S. Vijayalakshmi and Aarthie Ramaswamy, world-class players ranked in the top 10 in squash like Dipika Pallikal and Joshna Chinappa, national champions in table tennis M.S. Mythili, N.R. Indu and K. Shamini and mid-fielder Indumathi Kathiresan, who represented India in football.

Former India Test cricketer Shantha Ramaswamy; India's top fencer Bhavani Devi; Alisha Abdullah, a trailblazer in bike racing; Woman Grandmaster K. Vaishali; former international hurdler and triple jumper G. Gayathry; tennis stars J. Jayalakshmi and Rushmi Chakravarthi; and Karun Chandhok, the second Indian to have competed in Formula 1, also hail from the city.

Spirit of sportsmanship

From giving a standing ovation to a victorious Team Pakistan after a heartbreaking test match loss in 1999, to the loud cheers at the Chennai Open, and other tournaments, or the collective dejection of Dhoni's retirement from international cricket and the subsequent wait for the Chennai Super Kings to take the field again, the spirit of sports continues to live on in the city's traditions of sportsmanship.

With the advent of professional leagues, Chennai has made sure it has a place in almost all the leagues — the IPL, ISL, Pro Kabaddi League, Ultimate Table Tennis — each having its own fan bases. While these leagues have grown and provided opportunities for youngsters to take up sports as a career, the growing trend of playgrounds in the city being lost to construction of buildings is a big cause for concern, Mr. Baskaran and Mr. David said.

(With inputs from K. Keerthivasan)