

Sports

Rugby meets red rover: India is kabaddi-crazy

MUMBAI, INDIA

Contact sport with roots in ancient Hindu poetry gains millions of viewers

BY PERRY GARFINKEL

For the uninitiated, kabaddi, the ancient Indian game that is taking the world's second-most populous country by storm, looks far too simple to be a professional sport.

A hybrid of rugby, touch football and the playground game known in England as British bulldog and in the United States as red rover (“Red rover, red rover, let Tommy come over . . .”), kabaddi (pronounced kuh-bud-DEE) uses no balls, pucks, nets, goal posts, hoops, holes, rackets, clubs, sticks or bats. It is so unknown in the West that in 2017 an ESPN channel showcased what it termed “the finest in seldom seen sports,” including the 2016 Kabaddi World Cup Final. An exhibition match was played at the 1936 Berlin Olympics, but the sport did not catch on internationally.

But those who take the time to examine India's homegrown game begin to recognize a highly strategic endeavor that demands speed, strength, timing, an understanding of geometric angles and the kind of fancy footwork that would have impressed Muhammad Ali and Fred Astaire.

Indians like that it's the only competition in the wide world of sports to require the player on offense to chant a word — “kabaddi,” derived from “kai-pidi,” meaning “to hold hands” in the Tamil language — in one uninterrupted breath for the 30 seconds of his run at the defense. The sport takes its play-book from the Mahabharata, the Hindu epic poem that dates from as early as the ninth century B.C., where it's mentioned as a military formation called the Chakravyuha. It has been enjoyed for hundreds of years as a rural game played on India's muddy fields.

Now, with the establishment in 2014 of the Pro Kabaddi League (P.K.L.) and television coverage, the sport has captured Indians' hearts, souls and TV remotes, and the league's sixth season is



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set to begin on Sunday. Its popularity as a spectator sport is now second only to cricket, a British import that Indians worship with near religious fervor. Last year 313 million people watched P.K.L. matches on TV, according to surveys.

Given kabaddi's recent gains, it should continue to penetrate the Indian market and may eventually even garner attention in the West.

“Kabaddi is a compelling, gladiator-like sport — one man heroically pit

against seven — with such old associations in India that I was immediately taken in,” said Ronnie Screwvala, the Indian multimedia entrepreneur who was the first person to acquire a team, U Mumba, when the league began in 2014. “Indians have needed something they can claim as only theirs.”

The rules of the game and scoring are not intuitive to a Western sports fan watching it for the first several times.

The basics: two teams of seven play-

ers each line up on either side of a 13-by-10 meter (42.6-by-32.8 feet) hard rubber mat, separated by a midline. There is something called a balk line behind that, and a bonus line behind the balk line.

To earn a point, one team sends out a solo “raider,” who must cross the center line, tag an opposing player on the defense within 30 seconds, then cross back over the center line to his side before being tackled. Players tackle each other

with no holds barred, almost literally. The other team then sends out a player, and on and on it goes for two fast-paced 20-minute halves.

Scoring gets complicated for the kabaddi neophyte.

The game got a dressing up since its rural mud-field days when Star TV India, an Asian television service owned by 21st Century Fox, teamed up with the league, which is owned by Mashal Sports, an Indian sports management

company. Last year Star sold a five-year sponsorship to Vivo, a Chinese technology company, for \$47 million — the league's first corporate tie-in.

The challenge for Star TV India “was unique in the history of televised sports,” said Uday Shankar, the broadcaster's chief executive. “For a spectator sport in its embryonic stages, we've had to invent vocabulary for commentators, find directors who've had parallel experience, mostly from rugby, tweak some rules to make it TV-friendly and even figure out what stats fans would want to track.”

Cumulative viewership for P.K.L. matches rose from 217 million for the fourth season to 313 million the following season, according to Partho Dasgupta, chief executive of the Broadcast Audience Research Council India. The 2017 season finale was the best-rated noncricket event on Indian TV, with 26.2 million kabaddi viewers versus 55.6 million cricket fans, Dasgupta said.

Shankar conceded that it will take several years before kabaddi begins to be profitable programming.

In May, though, as owners bid on players for the sixth season, Screwvala was ahead of the curve again, shelling out about \$140,000 for the 26-year-old Fazel Atrachali, the Iranian defender who led the gold-winning Iranian team that beat India at the Asian Games in August. It's the highest amount ever paid for a non-Indian player.

This may not seem like a lot compared to what cricketers and other major professional athletes earn in most countries, but it's a steep fee considering the average annual per capita income in India is about \$1,700.

U Mumba also acquired Iran's successful Asian Games coach, Gholamreza Mazandarani, the first foreign coach in the P.K.L.

Of the 239 players selected to play for P.K.L.'s 12 teams — each team consisting of 18 to 24 players — 26 players come from outside India, including places like South Korea, Iran, Bangladesh, Taiwan, Kenya, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Japan, Oman, Nepal, Thailand, Mauritius and Malaysia.

“This much foreign involvement in an India-born sport bodes very well for the sport here at home,” Screwvala said. “In business, open competition always makes the good even better.”