

The global game

Charlie Inglefield reports on how **Switzerland** – expelled from the ICC for six years – are fighting to keep cricket alive



Swiss out in the cold

Until recently, Swiss cricket was best known for David Gower driving an Opel Vectra hire car onto a frozen lake near St Moritz, and seeing it sink to the bottom.

St Moritz came crashing into the cricket consciousness in February, though, when the 29th Cricket on Ice tournament attracted star players like never before – including Shahid Afridi, Jacques Kallis, Lasith Malinga, Graeme Smith, Mike Hussey, Virender Sehwag and Mahela Jayawardene – and was live streamed. But the lustre of the tournament masked a turbulent few years in Swiss cricket.

Out in the cold

In 2012, Switzerland lost ICC status because of the existence of two competing cricket bodies in the country. In a land where the insect is better known than the sport it would have been understandable if cricket went back to being a gentle Saturday-afternoon exercise for expats working in Geneva.

However in 2014, the Swiss Cricket Association rebranded itself in name, attitude and direction to create Cricket Switzerland. Results have improved considerably; Switzerland is unearthing some genuine talent. They are also consistently and convincingly beating other European teams in the ICC fold.

One of their proudest achievements since being exiled from the ICC was for the Swiss Olympic Association to officially recognise cricket as a sport. “In a country where cricket is barely known it is

an incredible achievement,” says Cricket Switzerland president Alex Mackay.

In June, the national team – at less than full strength – went out to Prague to play in the Central European Development 50-over tournament. On three successive days, Switzerland beat Czech Republic A and B teams and Luxembourg by eight wickets to win the trophy.

Sacrifice and commitment

Chris Lodge, manager of the national team, has only admiration for the way each individual commits to the cause: “They move mountains, they really do. Each player has to fund his way and take time off from both work and family.

“We predominately play on astroturf tracks. If we do play on grass, the boundaries are much shorter than in other countries. The sixes we hit in Switzerland would be a definite chance on an outfield in say, Prague or Warsaw.”

It would have been understandable if Mackay and the Cricket Switzerland committee packed it in after the 2012 expulsion. Both cricket bodies (the other being Schweizerischer Cricket Verband) remain at loggerheads, and the commitment of running Cricket Switzerland takes at least four hours a day.

Mackay reflected: “It’s like being at the circus balancing the plates, you have to keep them all going at the same time.

“We started a new association away from the SCV. Out of the 18 clubs in Switzerland, there is one team with the SCV and that is the SCV themselves.”

Cricket Switzerland, though, is going from strength to strength, with juniors, ladies and seniors’ cricket all under their umbrella. This structure is totally different to when Mackay took over six years ago. There was little or no thought to moving Swiss cricket forward.

“I was part of a generation of people that played cricket in this country who then never introduced the sport to their children,” he ruefully admits.

The Swiss answer to the Currans

Investing time into grassroots cricket and nurturing talent is now top of the Cricket Switzerland agenda. The Mahmoods, originally from Pakistan, are Switzerland’s equivalent to the Curran brothers.

Osama and his older brother Asad are

totally self-taught. Their tuition came from watching the likes of Ian Botham and David Lloyd’s analysis on Sky Sports. It was their mother Rizwana who got them hooked on cricket.

Osama said: “My first memory was in 2002 when Pakistan were in Australia for a one-day series. At 2am, my mother would wake us up so we could watch Shahid Afridi bat.”

The brothers were part of a close-knit Asian community who started playing tennis-ball cricket around the parks in Winterthur.

Challenged by some of the older players from the Power Winterthur club to play in a red-ball game, the Mahmood brothers readily accepted. Osama remembers that day well: “Our tennis-ball team chased down their total of 300-odd easily”.

Osama and Asad continued their rise to international honours via the Zurich Crickets and St Gallen. It has not come easy. Osama, like every other player, works full-time and has to fund his own way: equipment, training, flights, and accommodation. The love of cricket, the desire to improve and the pride of playing for Switzerland burns fiercely.

Asad said: “On the odd occasions I play against Osama, there are two games. One against the opponent and one against Osama.”

Spreading cricket’s name

There are still huge hurdles to overcome. Attracting sponsors remains a huge barrier in a winter sports-dominated country. Mackay said: “We tried pitching cricket to Swiss companies and it did not work. We need to continue targeting expat-run organisations where cricket is recognised.”

Everything still boils down to getting ICC membership back. Judging by the complete lack of flexibility from the SCV, this is unlikely to happen soon.

Mackay said: “The SCV are bringing nothing to the table and the ICC insist we work with them. We have been trying to work with the ICC by showing them our progress.

“We have 1,200 cricketers and that number is growing. We have 70 umpires and 60 recognised coaches. We are continuing to move forward”.

To the ICC, over to you. Cricket Switzerland will keep knocking on your door. **A**

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