

Sports

Cleaning up: Domestic workers take Hong Kong cricket by storm

SCC Divas shaking up Hong Kong's sleepy cricket scene

HONG KONG: After a long week cooking and cleaning in the cramped households of Hong Kong, a group of Filipino domestic helpers are using their Sunday off for an unlikely hobby: cricket. And they're proving rather good at it. Despite no background in the game, scant coaching and very little time, the SCC Divas have made a startling impact, winning Hong Kong's development league twice in their first two seasons and going unbeaten since stepping up to the main divisions this year.

Along the way, they've inspired the Philippines' first national women's cricket team, providing seven of its players, while shaking up Hong Kong's sleepy cricket scene, a remnant of British colonialism. "We are all domestic helpers. Some are new players, having their first time holding a cricket ball," said Josie Arimas, 52, captain and founder of the SCC Divas. The satisfying clunk of bat on ball, at the scenic Po Kong Village Cricket Ground overlooked by green hills and tower blocks, is a world away from daily life for the Divas. Many of them work from 6am till midnight, six days a week, scrubbing, shopping and looking after kids, to support their own children and families left behind in the Philippines. They get "no rest. They're tough", said Arimas.

Six hours off a month

Tales of abuse and exploitation abound among Hong Kong's 400,000 foreign domestic workers, most of them from the Philippines or Indonesia. One domestic worker watching the Divas said that rather than the government-mandated rest day every week, her employer gives her just six hours off a month, and makes her sleep in the living room. For Divas player Liza Avelino, cricket is a chance to escape the difficulties of everyday life. "It's very relaxing, it makes my day worthwhile," she said. "It's good to be active and you forget all stress and the troubles and everything." During this month's 45-run win over the Cavaliers, a team from the venerable and well-heeled Hong Kong Cricket Club, the Divas' skills honed in baseball, a popular sport in the Philippines, were in evidence.

Positive hitting helped set a challenging total of

167-6, before the Divas restricted the Cavaliers to 122-4 with some energetic fielding including two side-on, direct hits on the stumps. The team was cheered on throughout by a vocal band of team-mates and supporters, who picnicked by the boundary rope and operated the scoreboard. "They're so passionate about it. They all come here and they all watch and they make a day of it," said Cavaliers captain Tracy Walker, an independent board member of Cricket Hong Kong. "They get one day off a week, and what do they do? They come and sit and watch, cheer along, train whenever they can. It's pretty impressive."

'Very empowering'

Just three years after their founding in 2017, the Divas have already formed a development team, SCC Pinay, and aim to be a lasting force in Hong Kong cricket. Team manager Amimesh Kulkarni, who founded the team with Arimas and raises sponsorship to pay for dues, equipment and other expenses, says the aim is to provide a positive pastime for domestic workers on their day off. "The Filipinos have that gathering culture.

So if one comes, a few come. One player started spending time here, and now we have 32," Kulkarni said. "My aim is finally about 200. It is going to happen in the next couple of years." Alvina Tam, Cricket Hong Kong's director of development and a Cavaliers player, said the Divas had added a new element to the sport in the city, which is dominated by the expat and South Asian community. "What they brought into women's cricket in Hong Kong was their sense of unity, the sense of teamwork and working together," said Tam.

"And at the same time they can still maintain a very friendly attitude towards the opposition as well. I think that's a very good show of sportsmanship." For the Divas players, separated from their families and living far from home, the team also serves as a support network, according to Avelino. "It's not just about sport, it's also about having a family to meet up with. It's a very close kinship, a sisterhood," she said. "Being away from home, to have a group of people doing the same thing is very empowering. We love it and we look forward to doing it on Sunday." —AFP



HONG KONG: The SCC Divas cricket team, made up of domestic helpers from the Philippines, pose for a team photo ahead of their game against the Hong Kong Cricket Club Cavaliers in Hong Kong.



HONG KONG: Photo shows a member of the SCC Divas cricket team (left) batting against the Hong Kong Cricket Club Cavaliers in Hong Kong. —AFP photos

Seattle Sounders roll on; Nashville and New England record upsets

LOS ANGELES: Defending champion Seattle Sounders continued their impressive march through another postseason on Tuesday, while Nashville SC and the New England Revolution scored upsets in a pair of Eastern Conference playoff clashes. Raul Ruidiaz delivered a goal and two assists as the Sounders advanced with a 3-1 victory against the shorthanded Los Angeles FC on a rainy evening in the Pacific Northwest.

Ruidiaz, of Peru, has eight goals and six assists in seven career North American Major League Soccer postseason games. Nicolas Lodeiro and Jordan Morris each added a goal and an assist as the second-seeded Sounders reached the Western Conference semi-finals where they will face FC Dallas. Seattle goalkeeper Stefan Frei stopped a penalty shot by Carlos Vela who returned Tuesday from an injury.

LAFc were missing four starters, including Diego Rossi, of Uruguay. The MLS Golden Boot winner and MVP finalist Rossi, Brian Rodriguez (Uruguay), Jose Cifuentes (Ecuador) and Diego Palacios (Ecuador) travelled to South America for World Cup qualifying earlier this month and all four tested positive for the coronavirus. Because of their depleted roster, LAFc were forced to give a bigger role to 16-year-old rookie Christian Torres, who spent last season in the club's academy program.

Eduard Atuesta scored the only goal for LAFC in the loss.

Meanwhile, Tajon Buchanan scored a first half goal and Carles Gil delivered two assists as visiting New England Revolution shocked top seeded Philadelphia Union 2-0. Adam Buksa also scored for the Revolution who beat Philadelphia for the first time in six tries this season to reach the league quarter-finals where they will face fourth seeded Orlando City on Sunday. "We knew we had a fighting chance to beat them. We are happy to do that," said Canadian Buchanan.

He scored in the 30th minute to give the Revolution a 2-0 lead. The ninth overall pick in the 2019 draft dribbled in alone and beat goalkeeper Andre Blake with a right-footed shot. "I just wanted to go at him one on one," said Buchanan. "I am happy it went in the back of the net. I try to bring fight and energy to these games." This was also the first loss of the season at home for Philadelphia who captured the Supporters' Shield as the league's top regular-season team for the first time in franchise history. Blake, the MLS goalkeeper of the year, was playing his first game since suffering a broken hand.

The eighth seeded Revolution have now won two straight playoff games after beating the Montreal Impact 2-1 on Friday. Also, Daniel Rios' goal in extra time gave seventh seeded Nashville SC a 1-0 victory over host Toronto FC in East Hartford, Connecticut. In the 108th minute of play, Hany Mukhtar made a nice move to get open in a crowd and to blast a shot. Goalkeeper Quentin Westberg made the save, but Rios was there for the easy tap-in goal. Nashville, who are in their first season of existence, advance to visit the third-seeded Columbus Crew in the next round on Sunday. —AFP



SEATTLE: Nicolas Lodeiro #10 of Seattle Sounders and Latif Blessing #7 of Los Angeles FC battle for possession in the second half during Round One of the MLS Cup Playoffs on November 24, 2020. —AFP

Holders Lyon draw Juventus in last 32 of women League

LAUSANNE: Record seven-time winners Lyon will begin the defense of their women's Champions League title against Juventus in the last 32 while last season's runners-up Wolfsburg were drawn Tuesday against Serbian club ZFK Spartak. Lyon defeated twice former champions Wolfsburg 3-1 in the final in August to capture the trophy for a fifth successive year.

However, the team that has dominated women's football in France and in Europe in recent years was brought back down to earth last week as a 1-0 loss away to Paris Saint-Germain ended a run of 73 matches without defeat. PSG, beaten by Lyon in the semi-finals of the 2019-20 competition, have been paired with Gornik Leczna of Poland and Barcelona were pitted against Dutch outfit PSV Eindhoven. Two English clubs, Chelsea and Manchester City, also enter the competition next month for the ties played over December 9-10 and 15-16.

Chelsea, who reached the last four of the tournament in 2018 and 2019, will meet Benfica while City play Swedish club Gothenburg. Chelsea were awarded the 2019/20 Women's Super League title on a points-per-game basis ahead of City after the season was curtailed due to the coronavirus pandemic. Glasgow City, quarter-finalists last term, will take on Slavia Prague after winning both of their qualifying rounds on penalties. This season's edition will be the last to use to a two-legged knockout format, with the 2021-22 competition adopting a 16-team group stage similar to the men's format. —AFP

Ibrahimovic drops Sweden return hint ahead of Euros

STOCKHOLM: AC Milan striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic said yesterday that he missed playing for Sweden and hinted that he may be open to a return to the national side for next year's Euros. The 39-year-old, who retired from international football after the World Cup in 2016, opened the door for a return after being awarded Sweden's Footballer of the Year award for an astonishing 12th time. "If you ask me I'll be honest: yes, I miss the national team," he told Swedish daily Aftonbladet. "It's no secret."

"The one who does not miss it, he has already finished his career. And I have not finished my career." Ibra, who scored 62 goals in 116 internationals, has been in impressive form for AC Milan since his summer move, heading the Serie A scoring charts with 10 goals already this season. He was more opaque, however, when asked directly how would he respond if coach Janne Andersson called him. "Give me time, I have to think about it," said Ibrahimovic.

Without him, Sweden qualified directly for the Euros where they will face Spain, Poland and Slovakia there. But a poor Nations League campaign

which produced one win and five losses, and resulted in relegation from the A Group has rekindled thoughts of an Ibrahimovic return. In November, he posted an old photo of himself on social media, wearing a Sweden shirt and the captain's armband with the phrase "Long time no see". Andersson appeared less enamored of the idea when he was also cornered by Aftonbladet. "I'm pretty annoyed," said Andersson. "He told me in 2016 that he wanted to retire and I respected his choice. So now it's up to him."

"If he wants to be involved in the national team again, to change his mind, he must say it clearly. In this case, it will be up to me to decide. "I would be lying if I said I was surprised. I'm impressed and struck by how he continues to have that hunger on the pitch, that quality in everything he does. "He's a great athlete, by far the best Swedish player of all time. What he does is amazing, I can only congratulate him." Ibrahimovic is currently injured after scoring twice in Naples at the weekend but he insists he will not be out of action for long. "It's nothing serious," he said. "Just one or two weeks." —AFP



AC Milan's Swedish forward Zlatan Ibrahimovic

English Football League chief hails 'lifeline' for coronavirus-hit clubs

LONDON: English Football League chairman Rick Parry says the government's decision to allow fans back into grounds is a "lifeline" for lower-league clubs who have struggled to survive during the coronavirus pandemic. Up to 4,000 people can return to outdoor sports stadiums in parts of England classified as at low risk from Covid-19 from December 2, a decision that affects football, rugby, horse racing and other sports.

Parry told the BBC he was looking forward to getting fans back in more substantial numbers but it was a "welcome start". "At League One and League Two level (third and fourth tiers) it could be very significant," he said. "It's not just the money, it's a very welcome return to an atmosphere, and if we get 4,000 at League Two level it would be very welcome. It can be a very welcome lifeline."

The EFL is considering moving some of its fixtures scheduled for December 1 to the following day in order to get fans in. Parry admits that clubs face some logistical hurdles. —AFP