

FRONT COVER AND BELOW: EVAN HURD

# Field of dreams

The journey for the boys from the hood in LA to the citadels of cricket in Australia is little short of miraculous. **Lucy Broadbent** reveals how the game is saving young Americans from gang life

**A**mericans have as much understanding of cricket as Inuits have of beachwear. Those who have heard of the game joke that it's baseball on Valium. So when a team of former gangsters from Los Angeles, began hitting runs in a parking lot 13 years ago, using trash cans as wickets, no one could have predicted the side would endure, let alone make world tours.

But next month 12 of the world's most unlikely cricket players from Compton, in Los Angeles County, will strut their way to Australia for a series of games in Melbourne and Sydney. With their du-rag hair caps, knotted dreadlocks, tattoos and assortment of whites, they scarcely conform to cricketing propriety, but neither appearance nor winning potential is what matters here. This is a team that has found salvation from gang violence by playing cricket.

"I guess you could say we switched our guns for bats," says Sergio Pinales, 30, a mechanic who wears the shaved head of Latino gang culture. "I mean, shit, what

would I be doing if I wasn't playing cricket? I probably woulda ended up in jail if I didn't play cricket. Or worse. But now we're makin' cricket history. Man, I'm looking forward to Australia so bad."

The Compton Cricket Club, known as The Homies and The Popz, have already toured England three times (the last was in 2001), met Prince Edward, played at Windsor Castle and crossed paths with the Australian cricket legend Shane Warne at Lord's. There's even talk of a movie being made about them.

But this is their first trip to Australia and there is excitement in the air as they meet on a scrappy piece of parkland in the San Fernando Valley, 20 miles from Compton, to play a game against a group of Indian expats. The park is not Lord's, but enthusiasm counts for more here than crease markings. And it's better than parking lots.

On the field Pinales hits a four and the team whoop encouragement. In the shade, Katy Haber, a British producer and club co-founder, is barking down her mobile phone because one of her players, Steve, not long out of prison, has not turned up. "I am team mother, chief chivvier and scorer," she says. "Sometimes it's not easy." She settles in a fold-up chair and produces a score card on which she keeps the game's statistics.

In 1995 Haber was secretary for the British Academy of Film and Television

Arts in Los Angeles cricket team (she remains on Bafta/LA's board). She got a call from the captain of the Beverly Hills Cricket Club (consisting largely of British expats), who was looking for an 11th man. She asked her friend Ted Hayes, a social campaigner and homeless activist. "Ted said 'What's cricket?' I replied it's the same as baseball, but instead of running in circles you run up and down."

Hayes developed a passion for the game. "He loved that it was so ethical, honest and civilised," Haber says. "He said, 'Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could start a cricket team in Compton?' I said 'You've got to be kidding.'"

But together they did, recruiting expat cricketers to help with training. Their vision is that the gunfire in Compton is replaced by the sound of leather on willow. "If the British never did anything right, they did right when they invented cricket," says Hayes, 59.

Hayes's exploits on behalf of the poor have made him a local celebrity, but here he is known for his fast bowling. "When I played that first game of cricket I saw the difference between soccer, basketball, baseball, tennis, which all have sportsmanship rules, but they don't have an etiquette like cricket. In cricket, you don't argue with the umpire, you don't show dissent, you don't ridicule your opponents, or your team-mates if

they make a mistake. Cricket teaches you to play the game in a respectful manner. It teaches you discipline. And I believe that when the players go beyond the boundary, they live a better life with their family, their siblings, the police."

Whether the game has that effect, or it has simply provided a distraction to keep teenagers out of trouble, doesn't really matter. The players, now grown men, credit the game with their redemption from gang life. And having proved the theory works, Haber and Hayes want to raise funds to go on recruiting teenagers. They hope their trip to Australia will increase awareness, promote it as a sport for more US kids and ultimately fund a cricket field in Compton.

"In Compton, there is nothing for young people to do," Hayes says. "It's an economic wasteland. So the youth sit around and go crazy. With nothing to do and nothing to lose, violence comes easy. So you got stealing, prostitution, gangbanging, or you got sports, which is your way out. That's where we come in."

Over the years, many of the team members have come and gone. Pinales's brother was in the team but was killed in a motorcycle accident seven years ago aged 20. Another died in a car crash, others dropped out. Jesse Cazarez, 20, was showing promise as an outstanding batsman when he was killed last year in a drive-by shooting. His older brother

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Emidio, 28, is still in the team. He had brought Jesse to practise because he saw how the game had turned his own life around. "At first Jesse hadn't wanted to get involved," he says. "I told him, 'Just stay with it, man.' And he got it. He thought cricket was fun. What makes me mad is he was just calming down from being a knucklehead when he was killed. I don't know how many bullets they shot. I still don't believe it sometimes. But that's how it is in Compton — Compton's real crazy."

Emidio pauses and stares straight ahead, pain embedded in the silence. He is a plumber and still lives in Compton, but it has been several years since he dodged bullets himself. Cricket was responsible for that. As a youth he was in and out of "Juvie" (Juvenile Hall, or youth detention centre) for fighting. He even cautiously admits that when he first started playing cricket he used his bat to beat someone up. But he soon got the hang of its real purpose.

"At first I wasn't so sure about cricket," he says. "I remember thinking it sucks that you've got to give all authority to the umpire, because what if he messes up? Especially with my attitude back then. I was like, 'Oh yeah, you think I'm gonna bow down to him and do whatever he says? Yeah right.' But after a while you think about it. And it helps to use those rules in real life, because in

real life you go through so many things. You can't go arguing and fighting about every bad decision that's made. You gotta learn to live with it sometimes."

On the field, in harsh Los Angeles sunlight, play is a mixture of antique gentlemen's cricket, punctuated by plenty of polite clapping, with occasional baseball-style bat swipes and high fives. The team meet most Sundays — the most dangerous day of the week in Compton, according to the LA police. They are part of a small league, called the Los Angeles Social Cricket Alliance, which plays one-day games against Indian, Pakistani and British expat teams. The Australian team they'll come up against on tour promise to put them through their paces.

The tour Down Under was organised by an Australian sports promoter, Hugh Snelgrove, who heard about the team on the internet, loved what they were doing and got enough corporate sponsorship to make it happen. But the team, when not on tour, survives on little. It costs \$800 (£500) a year to be a member of the league and that is scratched together by team members. "Their story is one of the most inspiring in cricket," says Paul Smith, a former professional cricketer from South Africa who came to Compton in the Nineties to help them to train and has been supporting the team ever since. "This is not about play and

how many innings, it's about turning out rounded people who can help the police, help their community, help others. It's about sport being used in a very positive way. And it's important that the global community should embrace them."

"There is a lot of sadness in these guys' lives. They have seen and lived through things that most people couldn't even imagine. But they've found a way out of gang warfare by being positive about a sport. That needs as much support as we can give them."

Sergio Pinales recalls the first time he toured England. "My friends laughed at me when I started playing cricket," he says. "Cricket doesn't come up in their vocabulary. They know about baseball. But when they saw me go to England, man, they were like, 'What?'"

"I mean that's the thing about cricket, it's taken me lots of places I never would have bin. I mean, damn, it's a one-in-a-million chance to have a person from the ghetto goin' to England and meeting royalty. Man, that's special. And now Australia? My friends ain't laughing at me no more."

As the shadows lengthen at the end of the day, the game draws to a close. The Homies are all out, 20 runs short of victory. But no one minds. "It doesn't matter," Hayes says. "This is a gentlemen's game." And gentlemen is what they have all become.

## A short history of cricket in the US

- Cricket was played in the British colonies of America from the early 18th century and became most popular in Philadelphia.
  - An international cricket match was held between the US and Canada in 1844 at the St George's Cricket Club (long since closed) on Staten Island.
  - After the Civil War, baseball, another import from Britain, overtook cricket in popularity. One theory is that baseball was easier for armies to play on rough ground.
  - W. G. Grace, the greatest Victorian cricketer, toured America with an All-England XI in 1868, nine years before the first recognised Test match between England and Australia.
  - America's greatest player was probably Bart King, who on tour in England with the Philadelphians in 1908 was top of the bowling figures.
  - The Hollywood Cricket Club was founded in 1932 by C Aubrey Smith, actor and former England cricketer. David Niven and Boris Karloff played for the team.
  - More than 15 million people have been estimated to follow cricket in the US today, but the American game has been bedevilled by organisational problems. In 2007 the United States of America Cricket Association was suspended by the International Cricket Council over administrative issues. It has now been reinstated and there are plans for a Twenty20 league starting next year.
  - Last year Sri Lanka played New Zealand in two Twenty20 internationals at a purpose-built cricket ground at Lauderhill in South Florida. As part of this jamboree the US team played Jamaica, but were soundly beaten.
- Damian Whitworth

The gang's all here: Katy Haber with the Compton Cricket Club team from Los Angeles

