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GANGSTER'S PARADISE

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Life is cheap in Compton, an inner-city LA suburb where gangs prowl the streets and drive-by shootings are a frequent occurrence. So who would have thought that the way out of gang life could be the very genteel sport of cricket? Meet The Compton Homies and the Popz, the most unusual cricket club in the world

Sergeo Pinales pulls on a white vest, leaving bare the tattoos, which indelibly coat swathes of his skin. He throws a baseball hat over his shaved head, grabs his pit-bull's lead and slams his front door behind him. He is a well-built man. Tough. Formidable. Perhaps a little scary.

Today is Sunday – the most dangerous day of the week in Compton, the drive-by capital of the world, according to the Los Angeles Police Department. But Sergeo has a look of purpose about him as he climbs into his father's car, loaned to him for the day. There is only one thing on his mind today – cricket. 'I guess you could say I switched my gun for a bat,' says Sergeo, breaking into a smile that transforms the 30-year-old from thug to teddy bear. 'I mean, what would I be doing with my time if I wasn't playing cricket? I probably woulda ended up in jail if I didn't play cricket. Cricket turned things round for me, 360º.'

For 13 years, Sergeo has been making runs for the world's most unlikely cricket club. The Compton Cricket Club (CCC), known locally as 'The Compton Homies and the Popz', is a team of former gangsters from the hood, who happen to play cricket in a country that has barely heard of the sport. They've toured England three times, met Prince Edward at Buckingham Palace, played at Windsor Castle, and even crossed paths with cricket legend Shane Warne at Lords. In February this year, they travelled to Australia for a series of games in Melbourne, Sydney, and an appearance at the Imparja Cup – the annual Indigenous tournament in Alice Springs.

Sergeo pulls his car up in a park in the San Fernando Valley, some 20-odd miles from Compton. And one by one, the other players on his team arrive, all swagger, strut and wearing a ragtag assortment of whites. There's Theo Hayes in his do-rag hair cap, Isaac Hayes with his knotted dreads and the brothers Emideo

and Ricardo Cazarez, whose younger brother was killed in a drive-by shooting last year. Arranging a fold-out chair in a shady spot is Katy Haber, a Hollywood film producer, who has been the team's co-founder, manager, van driver, score-keeper, motivator and mum since 1996 when she began touring Compton schools, recruiting kids to a game that none of them had ever heard of.

The petite brunette, who is in her 60s, barks into her mobile phone. One of her players, Steve, not long out of jail, has not turned up and she is cross with him. 'I quite often have to ring round for subs,' she explains, now settling herself with a scorecard. 'It's not always easy getting a full team together every time.' Today's game is against a group of Indian and Bangladeshi expats, who are easy to pick out by the neatness of their whites compared to those of the Homies. Both teams are part of a small league called the Los Angeles Social Cricket Alliance, that plays one-day matches. The field is by no means perfect, with its scrappy grass and trees on the perimeter, but it's better than the concrete parking lot, using a trash can as a wicket, which is what the team started out with.

Katy's involvement in the CCC has become part of Hollywood history. There is even talk of a movie about it. Back in 1995, she was secretary for the British Academy of Film and Television Arts in Los Angeles (BAFTA/LA) cricket team. She received a call from the captain of the Beverly Hills Cricket Club (another club, consisting largely of British expats) looking for an 11th man. Unable to find anyone, she asked her friend Ted Hayes, a social campaigner and homeless activist.

‘Ted said to me: “What’s cricket?”,’ she explains. ‘I told him it’s the same as baseball, except instead of running around in circles, you run up and down. The first ball they bowled to him, he hit, but dropped his bat and ran, just like in baseball. But he fell in love with the game. He loved that it was so ethical, so honest, so well behaved and civilised. He said: “Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we could start a cricket team among the homeless?” I said: “You’ve got to be kidding”.’

But together they did just that, recruiting expat cricketers to help train a team. In many ways Katy and Ted were too successful. When a film company bought the rights to their story, the money was shared out among the team, and suddenly their team of homeless wasn’t homeless any more. So Ted and Katy morphed the team into one made up of the gang youth of Compton – and that has stood the test of time. Their vision remains that the gunfire in Compton is replaced with the sound of leather on willow.
Earlier, Ted, a flamboyant character, whose exploits on behalf of the poor have made him a local celebrity, had offered to show me around the area. We climb into a Range Rover Sport and drive through Compton. Contrary to its wild reputation, this area in South Central Los Angeles, looks remarkably normal at first sight. With its rows of suburban bungalows, it could be a downbeat version of any number of middle-class districts in the city. ‘As you see, it looks like a nice suburban street – trees, individual homes,’ says Ted. ‘When you think of Compton, you might think ghetto, high-rises, apartments – but that’s not the story here.

‘Compton doesn’t look like a ghetto. But it is. It’s an economic wasteland. There used to be several big industries here, but all that’s been moved out and long gone.’ We pass a couple of Latino youths, hanging out idly by a spiked iron fence. In Compton, it’s not the aesthetics of the neighbourhood that mark it out, but rather the aimlessness of youth. ‘There is nothing for young people to do here,’ says Ted. ‘So they sit around and go crazy. For people with little to do and nothing to lose, violence can become a way of life. So you got stealing and prostitution… or you got sport, which is your way out. And that’s where we come in.’

We pass the high school where Ted and Katy started recruiting teenagers to play cricket. ‘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 if they lose, or your teammates if they make a mistake. Cricket teaches you to play the game in a humanly respectful manner. It teaches you discipline. ‘And I believe that when the players go beyond the boundary of the oval, they live a better life with their family, their siblings, the police. And when someone mad dogs them, or has an attitude towards them, instead of mad dogging back, which ends in violence and death, they have the discipline in their soul to say: “Nah, I’m walking”.’

Whether the game truly 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 salvation. And having proved the theory works, Katy and Ted want to raise funds to go back to recruiting teenagers. They hope their trip to Australia will increase awareness, promote it as a sport for more American kids, and ultimately fund a cricket field in Compton.

Back out on the field, play is a mixture of old-fashioned gentlemen’s cricket, punctuated by plenty of polite clapping, occasional baseball-style bat swipes and high fives. Sergeo bowls a mean off cutter and takes five wickets before lunch (sandwiches from Subway, courtesy of Katy). ‘My friends laughed at me when I started playing cricket,’ he says, taking a break in the shade. ‘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 loved it there. I mean that’s the thing about cricket, it’s taken me lots of places I never would have been. It was a life-changing experience. I came back and thought: “I’m special”. It’s a one-in-a-million chance to have a person from the ghetto going to England and meeting royalty. And then there are

the fans. I mean we're just average people, but all the girls were going crazy in England. They were screaming at us. I was like: "This is nice".'

Sergeo works as a mechanic and credits cricket for this. 'I was an angry young man. All of us were gang-affiliated one way or another. It's hard to find anyone who is not gang-affiliated growing up in Compton because that's the way it is. Did I carry a gun? Of course I carried a gun,' he laughs a deep belly laugh. 'Everybody has a gun in Compton. And I used to beat people up all the time. That's what we used to do. We'd say: "Let's go do something. Let's go break some windows, steal some cars". We'd always be acting the fool. 'But cricket helped me become more of a gentleman, made me grow up the right way around other people. It's hard to explain. But I love the way everyone carries themselves in cricket. For a person like me who'd never seen people behave that way, it was special. I try to imitate it. I try to act in a sociable way.'

Over the years, many of the team members have come and gone. Sergeo's brother was in the team but was killed in a motorcycle accident seven years ago, age 20. Another died in a car accident, others dropped out, one did some time in jail. Twenty-year-old Jesse Cazarez was showing promise as a first-class batsman when he was killed last year.

Jesse's older brother Emideo, a tall Latino with the signature shaved head and pencil-thin moustache that is popular with the gangs, still mourns him. Emideo had brought Jesse to practice because he saw how it 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. Trust me." 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.' Jesse was killed in front of his neighbour's house in a drive-by shooting. 'He was talking to our neighbours about the Superbowl, and these guys drive by,' says Emideo. 'I don't know how many bullets they shot. But they weren't meant for him. They were meant for my neighbours. I still don't believe it. Sometimes I come home, and I forget and I think: "Where is he?" But that's how it is in Compton. Compton's real crazy.' Emideo pauses, pain embedded in the silence. He is a plumber now, and still lives in Compton, but it's been several years since he dodged bullets. 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. 'It took me a while to calm down. A lot of things came into play, like seeing my family worry about me all the time – at a certain age a lot of kids grow out of gangs too – but cricket played a big part in it for me.

‘At first I wasn’t sure. 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 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 many things. You can’t go arguing and fighting about every bad decision. Sometimes you gotta learn to live with it.’ Isaac Hayes, Ted’s 27-year-old son, nods. He also credits cricket as his life changer. ‘It’s not just a sport, and it’s not just a game… it’s like chess. It makes you think. It makes you focus,’ explains Isaac, who was raised by his mother (separated from Ted) among the gangs of Riverside (another LA suburb), and sent to join the team when he became a handful.

‘I was into things I shouldn’t have been doing,’ he says. ‘Let’s just say at 17, the police knew my first, middle and last name. I was on a path to nowhere. And then my father took me on. He taught me cricket, took me to England, showed me something different, and I’ve been playing ever since. ‘Now if I say to anyone I play cricket, it shuts the whole room up. Everyone will say: “What?” People are in awe that we’re American cricket players. But we’re not just playing cricket. We’re guys from the inner city, trying to get other kids to learn the sport, and hopefully take it mainstream.’

To that end, he and his brother Theo, who is the captain of the team, are writing rap songs about cricket, one of which has already been played on Australian MTV. ‘It’s about putting down the Gat, and picking up the bat’, [Gats are Gatling guns] says Theo, who works in building maintenance. ‘We are all choosing not to be gangsters. But for a lot of kids, they’re just born into it. It’s the only way they see. Kids like us go into gangs for confidence, for protection, for loyalty, kinship. It’s not the principles, it’s the practices that messes kids up. And cricket is an alternative. We’re trying to show kids with our songs and with our cricket that there’s other things they can do in life.’ And that message is important for all of them. Appreciation of international cricket is minimal – most struggle to even name a famous player. The standard of play is varied too, although they did win the league two years ago. But that isn’t really what the CCC is all about. Having played together for more than 12 years, the team has come to regard each other as family, and they have seen what can be achieved. They are, in a sense, a gang of their own.