

SPORTS



Jolly good fellows

CRICKET Fresh from an incentive tour of England, the Jolly Rovers team talks about how such international exposures benefit players, forge friendships, open new avenues, and serve as morale boosters

In the notoriously ruthless oven that can be the Chennai weather, small mercies are more than welcome. Like, for instance, an unrepressed coat of greenery, gusts of wind and spitting rain. As we enter the IIT-Madras campus one afternoon, we are in luck as the aforesaid elements work their magic, creating a comforting ambience.

The Jolly Rovers team, holder of the TNCA first division cricket league title and the BCCI Raj Singh Dungarpur Corporate Trophy, is limbering up for one of its pre-season practice sessions. Fresh from an 'incentive' tour of England between May 28 and June 14, the players seem happy with similarly dank weather — never mind that a sunny spell isn't too far away — at home.

The England tour

We are welcomed into the dressing room by Rovers veteran Ajay Kudua, who has been with the side since 1996 and is "transitioning into a management role." The England tour, he tells us, was a reward for winning both the league and the Corporate Trophy. "We have toured England in 2004 and 2007 as well; they were both exposure trips. We have had such tours for a while now. The first one that I can remember was in 2002 when we went to Malaysia and Singapore. Our management (Sanmar Group) believes such tours shouldn't be mere excursions; so we play matches against local sides there," says the 37-year-old.

The Rovers, with a squad of 17 players and five support staff, played eight matches (of which they won six and lost one, while the other game was unfinished) against club teams in Stoke-on-Trent, North East Lincolnshire, and East London. According to coach G. Jayakumar, it is the exposure to such alien conditions



UPBEAT Jolly Rovers at a training session at IIT-Madras PHOTO: V. GANESAN

that matters more than the quality of opponents. "The wickets there were soft and had spongy bounce, so it was difficult to play strokes. Moreover, the biting cold weather was a unique challenge."

Jayakumar feels such tours help achieve the Rovers' twin aims of developing players and winning championships. R. Nilesh Subramanian, M. Prabhu, and Ashwin Venkataraman — each of whom was on his first tour with Jolly Rovers — agree with their coach's observation. Cricketing duties notwithstanding, there was plenty of time for sightseeing. "It was a huge thrill to visit Lord's, Wimbledon, and the Old Trafford Stadium, the home of Manchester United. We also explored the countryside," said Prabhu.

Camaraderie

Some of the senior members, J. Syed Mohammad, R. Jesuraj, and J. Kaushik, are just as glad. "It was an opportunity to see the personal side of our teammates. Some of us brought our families along. In fact, my little daughter after coming back keeps pestering me to take her to meet the boys," laughs Mohammad.

Kaushik immediately asks Mohammad if he should tell us about the latter's dance

performances. Even as Mohammad, offering a shy smile, pleads him not to, Kaushik recalls some of the tour's best moments. "While waiting for the cab, we would play a game of touch footie. Staying in serviced apartments helped us become more independent. We discovered some great cooks among us, such as Jesuraj. Ajay (Kudua) bhai's wife is also an amazing cook." Kaushik also highlights how such bonding has created greater empathy. "There's better understanding of what my teammate would be going through during his highs and lows."

Former India 'keeper Bharath Reddy, executive vice-president with Chemplast and a 'mentor' of the Rovers, acknowledges the support of N. Sankar, chairman, Sanmar Group. "Four years ago, we won the first division league with a depleted side, and then, went on to win it the following year too. Twice, we wanted to organise a tour, but it didn't materialise. These are educational trips and when the cricketers go on to play at a higher level such experience comes in handy. There are professional cricketers playing in England and our boys could receive offers from teams there. These tours boost the morale of players and support staff," concludes Reddy.

ARUN VENUGOPAL