

Uber Drivers, Techies Score Wins for Team USA at ICC T20 World Cup 2024

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June 24, 2024



With Just \$10,000 in Pay, Team USA Cricketers Taste Sporting Glory

A motley crew of techies, restaurant workers and Uber drivers are capturing wins and raising the popularity of their game among Americans.

Saurabh Netravalkar celebrates with Steven Taylor after dismissing India's Virat Kohli during a ICC men's Twenty20 World Cup 2024 cricket match.

Photographer: TIMOTHY A. CLARY/AFP

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June 14, 2024 at 1:41 PM UTC

Updated on

June 14, 2024 at 6:08 PM UTC

It's one of the oldest and richest sports in the world, with billionaire team owners, superstars worshipped as gods and viewership that leaves the World Series and even the Super Bowl in the dust.

Thanks to Saurabh Netravalkar, many Americans heard about it for the first time ever last week.

That's when the 32-year-old helped Team USA pull off one of the biggest upsets in the history of the game of cricket, by beating Pakistan at a Dallas stadium in a World Cup tournament. Americans may yet thrill in more of his exploits after he and his teammates advanced to the next stage of the ICC T20 World Cup when their game against Ireland on Friday in Lauderhill, Florida, was abandoned due to the weather.

The team's achievement is all the more remarkable for an eclectic band of players pulled out of their jobs as techies, restaurant workers and Uber drivers — who will make about \$10,000 for participating in the four-week tournament being played in New York, Florida, Texas and the Caribbean. The players get \$250 a day and a \$100 daily allowance for the duration of the series, in addition to a \$2,500 one-time payment, according to Venu Pisike, the chairman of USA Cricket.

Netravalkar's day job? An engineer at Oracle Corp.

"It's my bread and butter right now," he said of his role as a software developer after a match against India on Wednesday in Long Island. "My day-to-day job is implementing features I code in C and SQL."

Netravalkar said he's been inundated with congratulatory messages after the nail-biting win against the Pakistan team and questions from people wanting to learn about the sport. He said he tries to explain cricket in baseball terms, equating a bowler to a pitcher and a wicket with a strike.

"I think it's a big untapped market," he said. "Americans love their sports, they just need to connect with it."

If Netravalkar had his way years earlier, he could have very well been representing another nation — India — at the tournament. But after the plug on that dream was pulled, he received a Masters in Computer Science from Cornell University in 2016 and, soon after, a job at Oracle as a principal member of technical staff in the San Francisco Bay Area.

He spells out what awaits him at work when he returns after the high of the World Cup. "Right now, I think the most hot topic is vector-based searching, that's what we are working on," he said. "Using AI for enhancing searchability within the Oracle database."

The cricketer already holds a patent in so-called wildcard searching, and is awaiting approval on another, both of which he developed while at the company.

But the performances this month have thrust him into a sporting spotlight far brighter than he could have imagined when he first arrived in this country, where the world's second-most popular game is [finding rich backers](#).

Influential India-born business personalities have been trying to draw US audiences to the game. With Major League Cricket, executives like Microsoft Corp. Chief Executive Officer Satya Nadella and Adobe Inc. CEO Shantanu Narayen have helped bankroll the league tailored to the local audience.

The sport has been steadily growing in popularity in the US for years, especially in places with large South Asian populations, including Dallas, Houston, New York and Los Angeles.

Like baseball, cricket is a bat-and-ball sport characterized by long games, arcane terminology and a near-mystical reverence for statistics by hardcore followers. Purists venerate a version that can go on for five days and end in a draw, with no winner. The version being pitched to American sports fans is a shorter format that typically lasts three to four hours and has underpinned various cricket leagues around the world in recent years.

“You need to tap into the expat community who already know about the game and at least you can see that they are now exponentially more excited and they’ll willingly come to a USA game at least for sure after these two performances that we've had,” Netravalkar said. “I’m sure it’ll grow into the local community as well.”

Now he and his teammates face another daunting challenge: facing South Africa on June 19 in Antigua.

(Updates third paragraph to show Team USA advanced to next stage.)