

From Wicket to Web to Print

By MATT NIPPERT

It probably escaped the attention of the American media, but in January a rare transformation took place. An online brand not only survived the gut-wrenching dot-com roller coaster, but came out the other side to publish a magazine.

A 124-page glossy monthly run out of Mumbai, India, had an initial print run of 80,000 that included about 10,000 copies distributed in England, Australia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, the United Arab Emirates and the United States. Still in the dark? I'm not surprised. The magazine's all about cricket: *Cricinfo Magazine*.

Yes, cricket, that quintessentially English pastime considered arcane and impenetrable by outsiders. Whether or not you understand the spin of a googly, the placement of silly mid off or how to play a reverse sweep, fear not. The lessons to be learned from cricinfo.com, which has channeled a large and disjointed community into a range of traditional media—most recently, magazines—may be applicable to everyone.

From humble beginnings, Cricinfo has become an Internet powerhouse, the self-proclaimed largest single-sport website in the world. Founded in 1993 by Simon King, an English scientist studying in Minnesota, the website was originally a mere bulletin board listing cricket scores sporadically updated by amateurs. The big break came in 1997 via a brush with rock 'n' roll. Rolling Stone Mick Jagger, missing television coverage of matches involving his beloved England team, supplied a cash injection to buy broadcast rights to an international tournament to allow Cricinfo to provide live streaming video.

Although Jagger has since sold his stake, Cricinfo has branched into radio broadcasts delivered online and via cell phone, and now employs a staff of 70 in five countries. The relatively young brand has also encroached on long-lived print rivals. Wisden Group, a 140-year-old English cricket publishing company, found itself unable to make any headway online, and in 2003 Wisden Online merged with Cricinfo.com. In January, *Cricinfo Magazine*—the replacement for *Wisden Asia Cricket* magazine—marked the first foray of that venture into print.

The key to moving successfully from the Internet to magazines is differentiating content, says Editor Sambit Bal by telephone from Mumbai. The website, concentrating on instant updates and short news articles, posts only one of the magazine's longer, more leisurely features each week. "It adds to the website, but it also adds a promotional tool," says Bal, noting that there are prominent advertisements and links to a subscription service surrounding the online magazine articles.

Online readers are global and legion. Eight million people check into cricinfo.com each month, a volume of traffic comparable to American Internet ventures such as NBA.com, NFL.com and MLB.com. In November, nearly two million site users came from the United States and Canada, around a million each from Australia and the United Kingdom, and—crucially—nearly two million from India.

Bal talked with *The New York Review of Magazines* the day after the Indian team lost at home to England for the first time in 21 years. During this historic match the home team's star player, Sachin Tendulkar, was booed after failing with the bat. "He is al-

most like God," says Bal. "That's something that [happened] for the first time." Given India's polytheistic religious traditions, the comparison to God is apt: Even movie stars struggle to compete with the allure of cricketers in India. A study last year, reported in the *Hindu Business Line* newspaper, ranked the popularity of celebrities and found that the Indian sportsmen bested their Bollywood counterparts, filling four of the top seven places. Tendulkar was ranked second, behind screen legend Amitabh Bachchan, who has starred in 163 films since 1969.

Combining this passion for the sport with broadening Internet penetration and a substantial diaspora—the number of American residents claiming Indian heritage more than doubled to 1.68 million from 1990 to 2000—India was a natural home base for *Cricinfo Magazine*. With a cover price of

50 rupees (\$1.12 in US dollars, less than "what people spend for a cup of coffee," says Bal of the burgeoning Indian middle class), foreign subscribers can sign up for a year for \$65.

Circulation, after the launch splash in January, has now settled to a steady 50,000, but so far only 600 foreigners have subscribed. While there are plans to push *Cricinfo Magazine* globally, the current readership of the magazine is 99 percent Indian. As for making the move in the United States, taking cricket to the home of the brave will, like putting a man on the moon, be an epic undertaking.

Asked to explain the game to an American audience, Bal warns that his answer may be considered "politically incorrect" by those who love North America's great summer pastime, baseball. Citing cricket's option for bowlers (pitchers) to bounce the ball at batsmen (batters), who can hit in a full 360-degree arc, Bal says, "It's a far more evolved game than baseball. It's a game with far more possibility ... It's baseball plus plus."

Translating Cricket for Baseball Fans

- BOWLER** Pitcher
- BEAMER** A high ball
- GOOGLY** A pitch that bounces
- SWINGING DELIVERY** Curve ball
- PITCH** Diamond
- REVERSE SWEEP** Switch-hitter
- SILLY MID OFF** Shortstop near the batter
- SIX** Home run
- WICKET** An out

February 28, 2006 The New Republic promotes Franklin Foer, au-



thor of "How Soccer Explains the World: An Unlikely Theory of Globalization" and a senior

editor at the magazine since 2000, to its top editorial position. March 1, 2006 The Atlantic Monthly names New York

Times reporter James Bennet as its new editor. The position had been vacant since Michael Kelly resigned to write a book in 2002 and

subsequently was killed while on assignment in Iraq. March 20, 2006 Cullen Murphy, former managing editor of The Atlantic Month-

ly, and William Langewiesche, The Atlantic's star reporter, surprise more than a few people by joining Vanity Fair.