

Rinku & Dine



From throwing javelins in India to pitching baseballs in America, Rinku Singh and Dinesh Patel have come a long way. **Joanne Flynn Black** traces their exciting journey to their debut for the Gulf Coast League Pirates, an affiliate of the Pittsburgh Pirates

Fresh Play Ball



IN POSITION: Rinku Singh gets ready to pitch against the Gulf Coast League Yankees during a July 4 game in Bradenton, Fla.

Singh had never played baseball. Not even cricket. He is a javelin thrower from Bhadohi. Patel, also a javelin thrower, grew up approximately 30 miles from Singh in Varanasi.

CAN YOU LIVE a dream you never knew existed? In Bradenton, Fla., two young men from small towns in Uttar Pradesh, India, are doing exactly that. Rinku Singh and Dinesh Patel were two of over 30,000 who tried out for a reality TV series called “The Million Dollar Arm.”

Imagine the TV show “American Idol” but without Simon Cowell’s scathing remarks, and you might get an idea of the format of “The Million Dollar Arm.” Here, the winner is not judged on stage presence or the originality of a song selection; these contestants are judged on how fast they can throw baseballs.

The contest’s rules are straightforward with no room for interpretation. Throw the fastest baseball and win the first-place prize: \$100,000 and a chance to win \$1 million if you throw three consecutive balls at 90 mph. The runner-up receives \$2,500. Plus, winners get a trip to America to learn baseball and get a chance to try out for major league teams.

“The Million Dollar Arm” visionaries are Will Chang, chairman of Westlake International Group; sports agent J.B. Bernstein; and Ash Vasudevan, founder of Edge Holdings.

Chang is on the executive committee of the San Francisco Giants ownership group and the owner of the Major League Soccer team D.C. United. He is also deeply integrated with India due to multiple investments in businesses there.

“We thought that with India’s huge population and its love of cricket, we would be able to

PROUD PIRATES: Singh, left, and Dinesh Patel proudly show off their Pirates caps. The two were signed on by the Pittsburgh Pirates in November 2008 and recently made their pitching debut for the rookie-level Gulf Coast League Pirates.



ROGER ROTH

find some talent,” says Vasudevan, who is originally from Kerala.

“We were looking for the Yao Ming of baseball,” he says, referring to the 7-foot-6-inch basketball player from China.

Singh, 20, had never played baseball. Not even cricket. He is a javelin thrower from Bhadohi. Encouraged by his coach to enter the contest because of his strength, he threw a baseball for the first time in his life and registered 89 mph, fast enough to take first place and \$100,000, though he just missed winning the million.

Patel, 19, also a javelin thrower, grew up approximately 30 miles from Singh in Varanasi. He came in second at 87 mph to win the \$2,500 prize.

These achievements brought them to America in May 2008. Their first stop was the Rod Dedeaux Research and Baseball Institute, a baseball training camp in Los Angeles. They trained with University of Southern California coach Tom House, who is famous for his years as a major league pitcher and for training well-

known players such as Randy Johnson and Nolan Ryan.

“This is a proud moment for the RDRBI and for me. It’s like I am sending my kids off to college,” House says. “When they came to me, they were a coach’s dream, just raw talent and they had to learn everything from the ground up. I am proud of how far they’ve come and look forward to following their futures.”

After months of training, Singh and Patel tried out for the major leagues in Tempe, Ariz. In an environment different from their training camp, they were both nervous and unsettled. Neither was able to throw a 90 mph pitch. The scouts were not impressed. Singh and Patel felt that their time playing baseball was over and planned to return to India to enlist in the army.

A second chance was given to them on the home field at USC. This time, they were able to reach speeds to impress the scouts, up to 91 mph. Their performance caught the attention of the Pittsburgh Pirates, and both were signed in November 2008. ▶

Singh, a southpaw, and Patel, each did an inning of relief pitching during the game against the Yankees affiliate, Gulf Coast League Yankees, according to the Pittsburgh Pirates' Web site.



READY TO STRIKE: Patel, above and right, pitches during the game against the Gulf Coast League Yankees. He pitched a scoreless inning with a strikeout.

◆ Now Singh and Patel spend their days playing baseball in Tampa, being interviewed for news stories and getting familiar with life in America.

They made history of sorts July 4, when they pitched for the rookie-level Gulf Coast League Pirates, a minor league affiliate of the Pittsburgh Pirates. Both struck out a player each during the game in Bradenton.

Singh, a southpaw, and Patel, each did an inning of relief pitching during the game against the Yankees affiliate, Gulf Coast League Yankees, according to the Pittsburgh Pirates' Web site, Pittsburgh.pirates.mlb.com.

Their team lost 4-2, but the young men held their own. Patel pitched a scoreless inning with a strikeout, and needed just nine pitches, seven of which were strikes, the

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette reported.

And Singh allowed a run on two hits with a strikeout and wild pitch, the paper said.

Since then, they have continued to pitch at various games, including against the Phillies A team and the Toronto Blue Jays. The duo has a blog and a Twitter account. Many people around the world are following their journey via the Internet.

Here are a couple of posts:

Patel's blog:

"Rinku and me getting first money Pirates paycheck. We not knowing who FICA is. JB sir explain not man named FICA taking money. ... This is for the taxes. Rinku and me both getting number social security and Visa. We think America very great country. We never getting opportunity in India liking this. We

only paying little but we happy we paying the taxes. We very grateful this country giving us many more already."

Singh's blog:

"I pitching Sunday one inning simulated game. I getting one strikeout, 1 walk, 2 ground out balls. I thinking i doing good. I hoping Coach Bonilla happy. I working very hard here, and i missing home, but only caring good pitching. I only having this once chance.

Dinesh and me watching many games Pirate City. We watching some Pirates game on TV. We thinking someday maybe boys sitting Pirate City watching us on TV winning game for Pirates."

In an interview with *The Indian American*, Singh and Patel talk about their lives and their first year in America. Since they've recently



learned to speak English, many of their responses were brief. However, even in their few words their respectful and polite nature came through. The more complex answers came via Vasudevan acting as interpreter:

What's your earliest childhood memory?

Singh: When I young my parents worry about me because I not get best grades in school. I guess it because I hardly studied. And I got into lots of fights. But I wanted to be athlete. I always on

the sports grounds watch athletes practicing javelin.

Patel: Growing up we lived with uncle. Worked with family in the farm. Then I started throwing javelin.

When you tried out for the show, did you think that you would win?

Singh: I want to try. And try real hard. If I do I might win.

Did you know each other in India?

Patel: Yes, for two years through javelin.

Did you compete against each other? Who is better?

Patel: Yes we compete, madam.

Singh: Dinesh. He is better.

What do you miss most about India?

Singh: Family and friends, madam.

Patel: Food, too.

Have you had Indian food here?

Patel: Yes, but not as good as India. I also try Chinese food. I like fried rice. And I love pizza.

Every food is good here. Even McDonald's. Many times.

Since javelin is an individual sport, are you enjoying team play?

Singh: It's very different. Everyone very friendly.

Patel: Playing on team is wonderful experience. Great people from different cultures. Everyone focused on game. Everyone nice.

Is anyone on your team jealous because you are getting so much attention?

Singh: No, madam. No one ♠

Tryouts for the second season of “The Million Dollar Arm” are due to start in India in November. With the success of the original program, the turnout for season two is expected to at least double to



TALENT SCOUT: Singh, left, and Patel with Will Chang, chairman of Westlake International Group and one of the brains behind “The Million Dollar Arm” contest, which discovered the two Indian pitchers.

◆ jealous. Everyone loves me.

What else do you do for entertainment?

Patel: We’ve learned to play pool, we enjoy watching TV and going to American movies.

Singh: We’ve seen ‘Ironman’ and ‘Death Race’ two times. Liked them both times.

Are there other cities that you would like to visit?

Patel: New York. I want to see the Statue of Liberty. I don’t know about other places. America is good life. Everything is new. Everything is different for me.

Has anything surprised you?

Patel: Yes, the Halloween parade in Los Angeles.

Singh: Yes, Halloween crazy. There was even a man naked.

Did you dress up?

Singh: No. We not dress up. Vasudevan adds that he tried to get Singh and Patel to dress up for Halloween but they were too embarrassed.

I heard you were learning to speak Spanish. How is that going?

Singh: Yes, madam, I learning.

Patel: I not learning so much. But Rinku writes down many Spanish words every day.

Will your family be able to come to the United States?

Singh: I think not.

What does your family think about what you are doing here?

Patel: They’ve never seen baseball. But they proud of me.

Singh: They do not know what I do. I explain sometimes. They proud.

Are you in touch with your families? How do you stay connected with India?

Vasudevan commented the two prizewinners have not been home to visit their families but stay connected by regular phone calls and, they say, by watching Bollywood movies. They also worship at a shrine they have set up in their hotel room.

Who misses you the most?

Patel: My grandmother. When I gone, she crying. She never seen baseball. But she happy for me.

Singh: My parents miss me most.

What advice would you give to someone who has a dream of playing baseball?

Through Vasudevan, Patel is first unsure what advice he can give since they are so new at playing the game. But upon reflection he says, “Work hard. Try hard.”

Singh: “Keep your eye on the target and you will succeed.”

In addition to the fastball are there any other kinds of pitches that you’ve learned?

Singh: Yes, slider and change out.

Are there any girls that like you?

Singh: No, madam. We not having girls that like us.

Do you enjoy having a blog?

Patel: Yes, we explain what is going on mostly every day.

Singh: We enjoy. Especially when people comment.

Are there any teams that you like?

Singh: My team. Pirates.

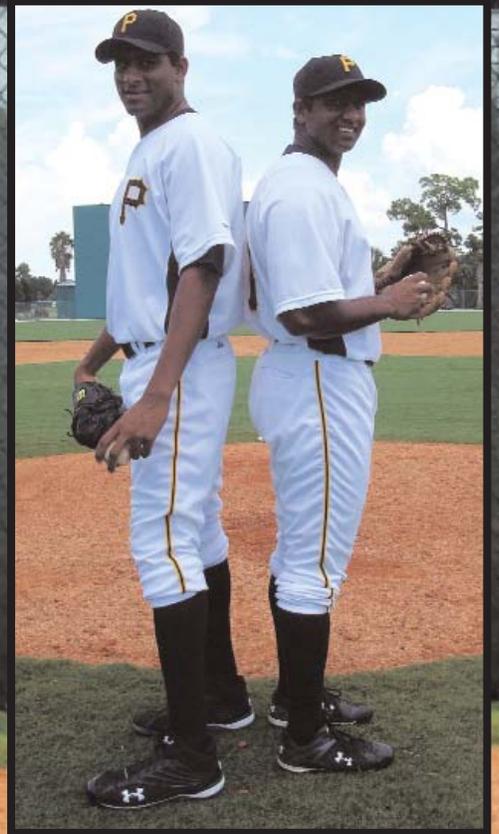
I notice that you get compared to “Slumdog Millionaire,” how do you feel about the comparisons?

Patel: I am not from slum. Our families work on a farm. We saw movie. Very good. But we not the movie.

Tryouts for the second season of “The Million Dollar Arm” are due to start in India in November. With the success of the original program, the turnout for season two is expected to at least double to 60,000 participants.

While a new group of recruits will try their skill at pitching, Singh and Patel will continue to set the example of what is possible.

In fact, in a letter to potential contestants on their blog, Singh and Patel say: “Before we enter contest of Million Dollar Arm, we not even knowing what the baseball is. After our training in America we have come to love the game and know many Indian boys would be liking this game as well if they playing it. ... Baseball is great game, and in America having job as athlete is best kind of work. We are hoping you all keep training hard, and all of you do well in second contest so more Indian boys coming America to join us pitching here.”



PITCH PERFECT: Patel gets ready to pitch. Top, Pirates jerseys are arranged in Singh's locker. Above, Singh, left, and Patel say in addition to baseball, they've also learned to play pool.

JOSHUA NADREAU PHOTOS