

Afghans' fondness for cricket bowls over French town

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Cricket has never aroused much interest in France, where it is generally viewed as a strange game played by eccentric foreigners.

But a club in the small town of Saint-Omer, half an hour's drive from Calais, is capturing the imagination of the country.

Most of France may struggle to comprehend the rules of what *Le Monde* called an “obscure sport that resembles American baseball”, but many have been bowled over by the enthusiasm of a triumphant team of migrants that was set up late last year. The Saint-Omer Cricket Club Stars won their inaugural tournament, providing the French media with a rare opportunity to talk about migration without reference to racist incidents or violence. It led *Le Monde* to conclude that the cricketers were “writing their own history”.

The club was founded by Afghans who had left their country in the hope of reaching Britain, only to make their home in France after realising how difficult it would be to cross the Channel.

They began playing cricket with a tennis ball covered in sticky tape on a public park's concrete volleyball court. Some are adults with refugee status; others are unaccompanied

children brought to Saint-Omer — where there is an asylum centre — when the makeshift “Jungle” camp in Calais was dismantled.

Their matches in the park were a curiosity for local residents, most of whom had never seen a game of cricket before.

Christophe Silvie, 37, a businessman, was so intrigued that he decided to help the migrants by establishing a proper club. He drew up the statutes, pulled strings, got authorisation for the players to practise in the town’s sports hall on Saturdays, bought them their kit and obtained a modest grant from the Red Cross.

Javed Ahmadzai, 30, the captain, was delighted. A passionate cricketer, he had left his native Logar province in eastern Afghanistan a decade ago, determined to reach Britain, the cradle of the game.

“Cricket is my big dream. I wanted to go to England and to show my courage and to play for a club,” he said.

However, a charity worker persuaded him to claim asylum in France, where he has worked as a builder, and he is now planning to become an ambulance driver.

Mr Ahmadzai said that he was grateful for the welcome he has received and wants to give the town something back. What better way than to establish it as a cricket outpost?

Or rather to re-establish it, since the locals claim that the first game of cricket in the world was played in nearby Liettes in 1478.

Mr Ahmadzai’s enthusiasm is shared by his team-mates. Although some had never played with a leather ball before, they defeated teams from Lille and Valenciennes — made up of players from India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh — during their first tournament this autumn.

The cricketers said that they needed more equipment such as nets with which to hone their skills before taking on other teams next year.

“Sport brings people together,” Zabihullah Huzarboz, 19, an all-rounder from Jalalabad, east Afghanistan, said. “It refreshes the minds of people who think that fighting is the only way.”