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Sailen Tudu's trip from India to Gloucester



Four years ago Sailen Tudu was running across a vast playing field in Calcutta when he saw a group of expatriates and street children throwing a strangely shaped ball around. As a country boy from the hills, Tudu did not have a clue about the game of rugby.

Intrigued, he stopped, watched and was fascinated. He could not speak a word of English but nevertheless was invited to join in. It was the serendipitous meeting that changed the course of his life and one that has led the determined teenager with only hope in his back pocket across the world, to Hartpury College, near Gloucester. There he has been granted a full scholarship because of the efforts of Phil Vickery, England's World Cup-winning prop, and his business partner.

It was the start of an inspiring journey with the Jungle Crows — so called because they were the city’s best scavengers — that has led Tudu, capped twice, to become one of his country’s most promising players. He also now speaks English fluently. Next year’s Commonwealth Games in Delhi is his target. Thereafter he wants to spread the rugby gospel by coaching in India.

“I have never looked back since that day,” said Tudu, a full back or fly half who, as with Jason Robinson, his idol, is small, fast and possesses a fine sidestep. “My family background is from India’s indigenous tribal community, who are some of the most disadvantaged. I am the only Indian student on the course. They call me ‘the Bollywood Star’ or ‘the Beast from the East’. I am lucky to have this chance.”

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Tudu, 20, was born in an impoverished village 200 miles from Calcutta. If not the archetypal “slumdog”, then he is not far short of it. Many of his friends at the club who have become one of the best in India have come from the streets and, like him, have found salvation in rugby. His father is a retired police constable, who is now a subsistence farmer selling rice. Everything Tudu has, and it is not much, has come via charity or the support of friends and wellwishers.

Opportunity knocked for Tudu when he bumped into the players from the Crows, a team founded by Paul Walsh, a former diplomat at the British High Commission. Walsh quickly realised his potential.

By chance, Walsh later met Chris Yorke, who was taking part in a cross- India rickshaw challenge. Yorke’s father, Richard, helps Vickery to run Raging Bull, the sport and leisurewear company that in turn sponsors Hartpury College, who have been the British Universities & Colleges Sport champions for the past three years. There, Tudu is studying for a sporting diploma, focusing on rugby. He could not be in better hands.

“I chanced my arm by asking Chris if he could see if there was a place available for an Indian student in England,” Walsh said. “A couple of e-mails later, Raging Bull had sorted things out. I am delighted for him.”

Malcolm Wharton, the principal, said: “We felt it would be good to support a player who showed promise from a country not traditionally known for playing the game.”

Tudu lives on campus and spends the weekends with the Yorke family.

“He is like a son to me now,” Richard Yorke said. “He is a great person. It is a pleasure to have him.”

Vickery said: “I have been fortunate to achieve some awesome things in rugby but what Tudu has achieved is incredible. I am passionate about grassroots rugby and his story takes you back to the roots of the game.”

The last word belongs to Tudu. “Rugby has given me everything,” he said. “I owe so much to many people. I am very keen to coach rugby and take it out into the local community so that other young people can enjoy the fun, camaraderie and opportunities that it has given me.”

Whole new ball game

- India are ranked No 83 in the world.
- There are 17,200 registered rugby players in the country.
- They were admitted to the IRB in 2001, but it took three years before India managed to win a match — beating Pakistan 56-3.