

## Asian Age - Age Sport

# Going the Oz way: India's new love is pace

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NEW DELHI

**July 21:** Watching him slip in a perfect yorker that crashed into the base of leg-stump, finding the gap between Adam Gilchrist's bat and boot, experts were quick to label Irfan Pathan as the future of India's fast bowling. Pakistan pace great Imran Khan likened him to Wasim Akram, "but wiser" while India's own Javagal Srinath had marked him out for the 300-Test-wicket club.

They could be forgiven in jumping the gun, for Pathan, 19 at that time, had completed the journey from Under-19 to Test spearhead in six months flat. Yet, five years later, Irfan has lost his speed

and swing and along with them a regular place in the Indian XI.

Loss of venom and skill in bowling isn't uncommon for fast bowlers and Pathan's is not a one-off case.

Zaheer Khan has been through his share of problems and the latest entrant to the club, it seems, is the lanky Ishant Sharma who has been carved all over the park by batsmen off late.

T.A. Sekar, a fast bowling bio-mechanics expert working with the MRF Pace Foundation till recently, has been witness to it all. "With the amount of cricket taking place, it is not unexpected that pacers lose their edge. They stop working on their bowling, develop bad habits

and sometimes forget their hand positions and run-up.

"Unlike batting where you can be forgiven for having chinks in your technique, in fast bowling proper action is crucial. A bad technique will render a pacer useless and injury-prone," says Delhi Daredevils' vice president Sekar.

This is where pace academies step in and halt the damage before it becomes irreversible. The Chennai-based MRF Foundation was a pioneer over the last 20 years under the tutelage of Dennis Lillee. Fourteen MRF products have played for India and the country is slowly warming up to the Aussie model — where fast bowlers are produced en



A pace prospect at the Gatorade Pace Academy in New Delhi on Tuesday.

masse in 'pace factories'.

The number of fast bowling academies have swelled over the last few years.

Along the same lines now comes the recently-launched Gatorade Centre for Pace Excellence in the capital that

has Sekar and Akram as their chief coaches.

The Gatorade Academy has chosen a dozen-odd youngsters from 1,600 schools and colleges from across the country which Sekar feels could form India's next line of pacers. Each one of them has been provided with accommodation, a customised fitness program and diet chart to follow.

The day starts with a five-mile trek, a 400 metre sprint followed by a video-analysis classroom session where their action is scrutinised point-by-point by Sekar. The session is followed by an hour of drills and four hours of gruelling bowling practice.

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“Each of them is a special talent... the great thing is they are so young, belonging to the age group of 16-20, so the mistakes they make while bowling can be easily changed. We are trying to inculcate good habits — a nice, clean run-up that is both error and injury free,” Sekar

The youngsters complain of the punishing regime, but know it's for their own good. The results have already started to show for many of the fast-bowling prospects here.

Vikas Tomar, son a bus driver in Delhi, has been selected to the Railways Ranji team; Samad Fallah is playing for Maharashtra and took more wickets than

Mumbai pacer Dhawal Kulkarni in the previous Ranji season and two Bangalore lads, Magizhendhan and David Mathias, are among the probables for Rajasthan Royals.

Borrowing facilities from a city school, there is scope for improvement for the Academy, but the beginning is sound.

“Our motive is not to correct senior bowlers, but to seek out those who are young. Their muscles are still developing — just three years of proper guidance at their age will be enough for them to achieve their best.”

“If there's talent like Irfan here somewhere, I'll make sure he doesn't disappear,” Sekar promises.