

Rome burns for a game of cricket

Italy

James Bone Rome

The first cricket game played in Italy took place in Naples in 1793 between two teams from Lord Nelson's fleet. Two centuries later, the sport is enjoying an unlikely boom in a country better known for motor-racing, cycling and, above all, football.

Its success is a symbol of the changing demographics of Italy, with an

influx of immigrants from cricket-mad countries. The national team is composed half of immigrants and half of the sons and grandsons of Italian emigrants.

"There is certainly a boom," said Simone Gambino, the president of the Italian Cricket Federation. "There is a growth in terms of the federation but there is above all a constant presence of cricket in local parks."

The story of cricket's rise in the melting-pot of today's Italy is told in a new book entitled *Italian Cricket Club*. "It's a sport of integration because it's a sport of fair play. It's a sport in which the 'other' may be an adversary but is always treated with respect," Ilario Lombardo, a co-author, said.

For a football-obsessed country, it often comes as a shock to learn that one of the oldest Italian football clubs

was founded as a cricket club. The Genoa Cricket & Football Club was established by the British consul Sir Charles Alfred Payton and other expatriates in 1893 after the port took on strategic importance for the Empire.

One of the stars of the Italian cricket team is Gayashan Munasinghe, 27, who came to Italy from Sri Lanka at 16. He said that most Italian cricketers were second-generation immigrants from Asia. "It's the young people who come to Italy because their parents are here. They are 100 per cent Italian."

The Vatican is to announce next week that it is setting up its own cricket club, to be known as St Peter's Cricket Club. The team's colours will be presented by the Pontifical Council for Culture. Australia's ambassador to the Holy See, John McCarthy, will be one of the participants.



CHRIS WARDE-JONES



Players such as Gayashan Munasinghe, a first-generation immigrant from Sri Lanka, have fuelled interest in the sport

