

CARROM MUSINGS

Random thoughts about carrom and my perspective of the first ever US Open Carrom Grand Slam 2016

Dr. Neeraj Kumar Sampathy



An Introduction to Carrom

Carrom, we all know, is a traditional Indian household game. Every one of us would have had a brush with the game during our early days. A common sight as summer vacation approaches is a carrom board held firmly by a pillion rider on a two-wheeler as it whizzes past you. You can almost sense their eagerness to unpack and start playing immediately on reaching home. Family members or friends would already be lined up arguing about who gets the first game.

Along with a host of other activities during the vacation, carrom is an indispensable activity. This is the place where you challenge one another, pull each other's legs and usually discuss everything from movies to politics as you keep playing. A perfect instrument to bond family and friends!

Those of us, who realize that we can play better than others around us, start looking for competition. With friends, at school or if you are lucky to be in a place where a "carrom club" is accessible to you, your initiation into the world of competitive carrom takes place and a fascinating journey begins. Once you start watching good players in action and you get a taste of competitive carrom, you are hooked for life. From there it is a matter of time before you start gaining new skills and look to play at district and later state level events. After a few years at this stage, you might progress to become a national player. The luckier ones are those who are spotted by talent hunters in the administration and are picked for coaching at the cadet, sub

junior or junior level. Generally, it is this group which goes on to play at the youth and senior level. The countless hours spent on carrom fascinate you; while at the same time frustrate your parents who wish you spent more time studying. There is some solace when you actually make it to the district team, but it is only when you get to play the nationals and there is a hope for you to make carrom a career, will your parents grudgingly allow you to pursue your passion.

This is pretty much what happens in most Indian families.

Carrom in USA

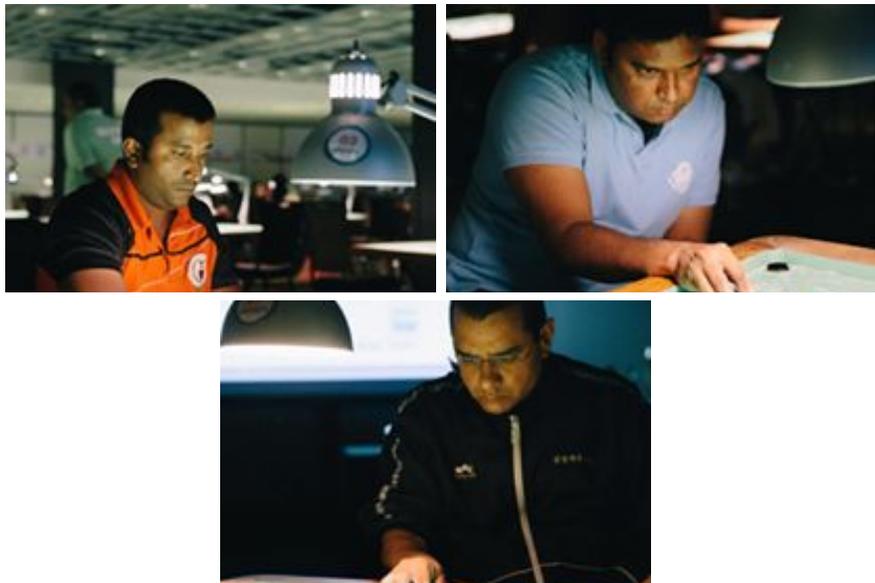
In the US, members of the Indian diaspora are the ones who predominantly play this game. Though there are a few Americans who appreciate and are curious about the game, it will be some time before they embrace this game which Indians are so good at. With the advent of social media and availability of videos and resources to watch and learn the game, it is possible to fall in love with the game and for carrom to make inroads into the Native American families.

A group of enthusiastic carrom players from India who have settled down in US are keeping their passion for the game alive by playing regularly and taking part in competitions, though they are few and far between as compared to India. The good news is that the number is growing and with the tremendous amount of work being done by the USCA, the fever is catching up. Regular National and Zonal tournaments are being conducted and the present body is taking unprecedented steps to take the game to families there. A US Carrom National is an event with lots of bonhomie among players, sportsmanship and camaraderie while at the same time the serious contenders compete fiercely to win the trophies. Mark my words; it is only a matter of time before the best US players give their Indian counterparts a run for their money. The standard of their game has improved dramatically in recent times.

If you look at how difficult it is for them to make time to practice and more importantly to find partners with whom to play, you will realize how passionate they are about carrom. Some of them don't get to practice with good players at all and it is only during the tournaments that they meet them. Against this backdrop, playing the game as well as they do is nothing short of being sensational. To take part in the tournament itself is a big challenge for them, with the players working around their extremely busy work schedules and family commitments to even make it to the event. Not to talk of the expenses incurred to fly down to the tournament venue and staying in hotels during the course of the event. Some of them miss out on a day's action as they cannot make it on time and some of them are in a mad rush to fly back home on Sunday evening even before the tournament concludes. But, ask them if the 2-3 days spent playing carrom is worth the hassle and you will get a unanimous "yes" from them. It is the charm of the game and the pleasure you derive from it which makes it irresistible and whether you are an average or an outstanding player, you enjoy it all the same.

The present USCA office bearers are all from one place – Dallas, Texas. On the job front, the President and Secretary fly out on Sunday evenings to work and return late on Thursday evening. They work from home on Fridays. A day with the family and then it is time to rush back to work on Sunday evening. Others have equally demanding jobs though they work in Dallas. How, in god’s name do they find time to play carrom and go beyond that to administer the USCA and conduct the gigantic national tournaments is difficult to fathom. I have the highest respect for this body that tries hard to promote the game not only amongst players but also among families. Their vision to take it to the next generation while encouraging and motivating the present generation of players is praiseworthy. It is not easy to get kids and families there to take up this game, if you know what I mean. But the USCA is trying hard and is successful to an extent by involving kids through skill camps and exposure to carrom tournaments. The brilliant idea of getting families together along with the sponsors and their families too by arranging a banquet during the carrom night is unique! Talk about spreading the game – this is a great way to do it. If you look back at the number of people who purchased carrom boards after attending the banquet, and the number of new entrants to carrom, you will

“Player from India playing during the tournament”



appreciate the idea better. More players, more families having fun playing carrom – that is where they are heading.

Coming back to what I wanted to portray, let’s have a look at how things unfolded during the US Open Carrom Grand Slam 2016.

An event of this magnitude requires lots of courage even before we talk about other issues. The idea of a tournament of the highest quality with a huge budget (it was a \$1,00,000 event, mind you) which not only motivates players to come up with their best but also helps to reach out to people to spread the game was a bold one. Months of planning and hard work by the USCA made this a reality.

It is not an easy task to organize a carrom tournament in the US. I have seen their President confronted with an emergency at his work place, which meant that he could only make it to Dallas the night before the tournament started. The Secretary had to convince his employers to allow him to work from home that week and he was juggling his work with tournament arrangements admirably. The Treasurer and other members were coordinating things in such a way, where their work got done and also the tournament did not suffer. Getting the boards, renting a storage area, hiring trucks and finding volunteers to drive them as you first take the boards to the storage area and later, to and from the venue is a time consuming job. Without enough volunteers and proper coordination, you are asking for big trouble. These amazing guys do it all while juggling office calls and responding to “urgent mails” along the way! Doing all this while coordinating and reporting to a President (who likes to play hardball all the time) is no mean task, believe me. To top it all, they are all itching to go back and have a practice session, if they can convince their families to give them enough time.

“The most noticeable change in this tournament was the improved standard of the game displayed by the top US players”



I enjoyed comments like “I have to ask at home” or the more candid “I have to take permission” or better still “I have to concoct a story” for the boss or the wife (which in many cases turned out to be the same) before they gleefully headed out for the practice session at Aditya’s house. All the support from the wives of the organizing committee members out there has a major role in the growth of carrom in USA. Thank you all. We respect the fact that you endure hardships to let the USCA committee do what it is doing.

Most of them have sacrificed their weekends for months during the lead up to the tournament. That is gutsy.

The First Ever Carrom Grand Slam

The concept itself is so grand. A tournament with unprecedented cash prizes (in this case \$17,000) should ideally be complemented by at least 2 more similar events in other countries to make it a true Grand Slam event for carrom. If this idea becomes a reality we will see carrom players having the biggest platform to exhibit their skills and also make a career out of it. I know there are some fantastic players out there who don't take part in regular tournaments but would throw their hat in the ring for a competitive event like this. What a feast it would be for carrom lovers to see the topmost players in action and giving it their all to be the Grand Slam winner.... and walk away with fantastic cash prizes in addition to the title!

The venue for this grand slam was, to say the least, a fitting one. The Hyatt Regency set inside Dallas Fort worth International Airport, impressed all participants. The huge hall where 70 carrom boards were set up was the cynosure of all eyes. A spacious hall where meals were served was attached to the playing hall making it very convenient for all participants.

The buzzword was "quality" right from the word go. The marvelous green boards, which were a result of the USCA's drive for quality, took centre stage. When I tell you that a pre-delivery quality inspection was undertaken by me at the expense of USCA, you would realize how conscious USCA was about providing the best equipment for the event. To ensure that the best carrommen were available, two variants of the carrommen were ordered. After their committee tried both, the best alternative was made available to the players. All this took place months before the scheduled event. Some planning that!

The Chief Referee and Technical Director came up with a modified format and new rules for the SRR and the first ever Sponsors League. So smoothly were the new rules integrated with the existing format, that the players hardly noticed the change. The unity and cooperation of players in the US is to be seen, to believe. In true sportsmanship spirit, players got down to compete in the SRR with the 6-board format in place. With all the expected players making it to the knockout stage, the new format was proved successful.

It also meant that the good players were not exhausted after the end of the day, as was the case earlier. The other big advantage of the new format was that the organizers could complete the 8 rounds of SRR well in time.

The most noticeable change in this tournament was the improved standard of the game displayed by the top US players. Having participated in many us tournaments, I could see the visible improvement in pocketing, strategy and match temperament of most players. My personal opinion is that the players like Sarvanan Babu and Louis Fernandes can hold their

own against the best carrom players in the world. That is saying a lot for them when they can hardly get to practice with good opponents and need a great effort to just take time out to practice by themselves at home. Compare that to the amount of carrom we play in countries like India and Sri Lanka and you will appreciate their achievement better.

The first day was reserved for Doubles and concluded with the Doubles semi finals. The 2nd day saw players competing for the coveted Singles title. 8 rounds of SRR were completed by evening.

The most anticipated event of the evening – the carrom night kicked off to thunderous applause around 6:00 p.m. on 17th September 2016.

Let us step back for a moment to understand what the banquet on the carrom night was all about. The idea was conceived to have a platform to connect families and newbies to the game through this event. More importantly this was the platform for the sponsors to interact with the organizers and participants and also a fitting place for the sponsors to be recognized. With the families involved, it was no surprise to me that the game spread way beyond the regular circles. The number of carrom boards purchased and the growing number of entries from newcomers is a sure sign that the game is spreading. It will only be a matter of time before USCA has to come up with some procedure to limit entries or have a selection process for their Nationals! The banquet is also a platform for talented carrom players and their family members to perform and entertain.

A 10,000 sft banquet hall with popular singers flown in from India to entertain the crowd was also the place for players to let their hair down and enjoy the evening with friends and family. In spite of an Ilayaraja show in Dallas on the same day, more than 400 people turned up for this grand banquet! And boy, did they have a gala time. Astonished guests wanted to know more about the game, which was arousing their curiosity. The meticulous organizers came up with a short film about the game, which was made by an upcoming film director in India (they spent a hefty sum to get it done, mind you). The well-made film gave a fine introduction of the game and the role of USCA in present times in promoting carrom. Another brilliant idea executed to perfection!

On the 3rd day, the knockout matches were conducted both for Doubles as well as for Singles. So riveting were the matches, that one player mentioned that he even forgot to give a single call to his wife throughout the day. He was so engrossed in watching the matches. Here again, another wonderful initiative helped the spectators enjoy the game thoroughly. Bleachers were set up so that spectators can watch the proceedings without disturbing the players. It was so much fun.

The other notable event of the evening was the auction of players for the Sponsors League scheduled for Day 4, 19th September. A semi formal event where different rounds of selection were conducted with each team represented by their advisor took place in the evening. The

icon players were chosen first who carried a base price of \$300 each followed by the next two rounds with base prices of \$200 and \$100 respectively. T-shirts of the respective teams were handed out after the auction. Just so that you can appreciate the effort, I would like to mention here that t-shirts and banners were designed and printed in India. I think it was in Hyderabad. The fine planning by the organizers ensured that all the printed material was received well in advance of the event. The details were so well worked out.

The First Ever Sponsors League for Carrom

This was a unique event, which generated a lot of buzz amongst all present. This was also a sort of dry run for the Pro - Carrom League which is due to be launched in India later on.

- ✓ An interesting format was woven which had to cater to the following requirements:
- ✓ It should be a fast paced game with non-stop action and drama throughout.
- ✓ It should encourage fluent and attractive style of play to appeal to viewers.
- ✓ It should be a shorter version to suit TV telecast and be media friendly.
- ✓ It should be a team event with lots of scope for experimentation and bonding between team members.
- ✓ Attractive cash prizes
- ✓ Most importantly it should be completed in 7 hours of playing time.

Being a member of the committee, which finalized the format, I joined the others in trying to design a format that would meet all the above-mentioned criteria.

A 4-board format with 8-second time limit for each stroke was proposed. 4 teams, each owned by a platinum sponsor and represented by a team advisor set about selecting their respective teams.

The main features of the format were this:

- ✓ Each team had to play the other 3 teams.
- ✓ Three members from each team played a single game of 4 boards with their opponents.
- ✓ One reserve player was to be nominated from each team for each round. The reserve player could be used to substitute one of his teammates after the completion of 2 boards, during the side change.
- ✓ Each member of a team had to play with all 3 members of the opponent's team.
- ✓ In case of a tie, shoot out would be implemented to declare the winner. After the completion of all rounds, if there was a tie between teams for either the 1st or 2nd place, a team shoot out would be implemented. Each member of each team gets 3 chances and the score out of 9 would be considered to declare the winner.

Interestingly, the shootout allowed the Dallas team, which was not doing too well till that stage, to make it to the Finals. Team Dallas went on to become the winners of the Sponsors League ultimately after overcoming the strong New Jersey team in the finals.

To recognize individual performance, an award titled “most valuable player” was introduced. After the finals concluded, Anil Kumar and Louis Fernandes had secured equal points for their teams. A shoot out ensued to select the MVP of the Sponsors League. Anil held his nerve to get the better of Louis in the shoot out and bagged the award, which also carried a handsome amount as prize money. The dramatic shoot out had the spectators biting their nails and cheering for their favorite player.

All in all, it was a thoroughly entertaining event and everyone carried wonderful memories of the league.

It was such a satisfying experience being a part of this wonderful event. It also left me wondering if it was possible for other Federations to serve the game in the spirit it was being done by USCA. The rapport between the organizers and players and unity in the association augurs well for the future of carrom in the US. Touchwood.

Congratulations USCA for a great event. My best wishes to every member out there and please continue promoting the game in your own unique style.