

Asians in American sports • Asian Americans in world sports

# Where are those million dollar arms now?

By Mike Street  
Special to The Asian Reporter

American baseball teams looking for new talent have increasingly looked east, finding players in Japan, Korea, and China. India, with a population of more than a billion, has remained an untapped resource, however. *Million Dollar Arm*, released last month, tells the true story of the discovery of two promising Indian baseball talents, with a predictable Disney happy ending. The actual ending to the story remains unwritten, as one player has left the American game, while the other still hopes to continue his quest to pitch in the major leagues.

The film shares its name with an Indian reality show that offered \$100,000 to anyone who could throw the most strikes over 85 miles per hour (MPH) in a 20-pitch sequence, with the winner given a chance at a prize of a million dollars if he could throw three consecutive strikes at 90 MPH or higher. The idea was to tap the Indian market and prove the baseball adage that a pitching coach needs only a player with a good arm — even if that player has never played, or even seen, the game.

The reality show featured 28 finalists, and the \$100,000 winner was Rinku Singh, a lefty who topped out at 89 MPH, with second prize going to Dinesh Patel, a righty whose fastball registered at 87. Singh didn't win the million dollars, but both players travelled to the United States for coaching and a 2008 tryout that is the climax of the film. Both were signed by the Pittsburgh Pirates and began their careers with the rookie-league GCL Pirates in 2009. Here, their stories diverged.

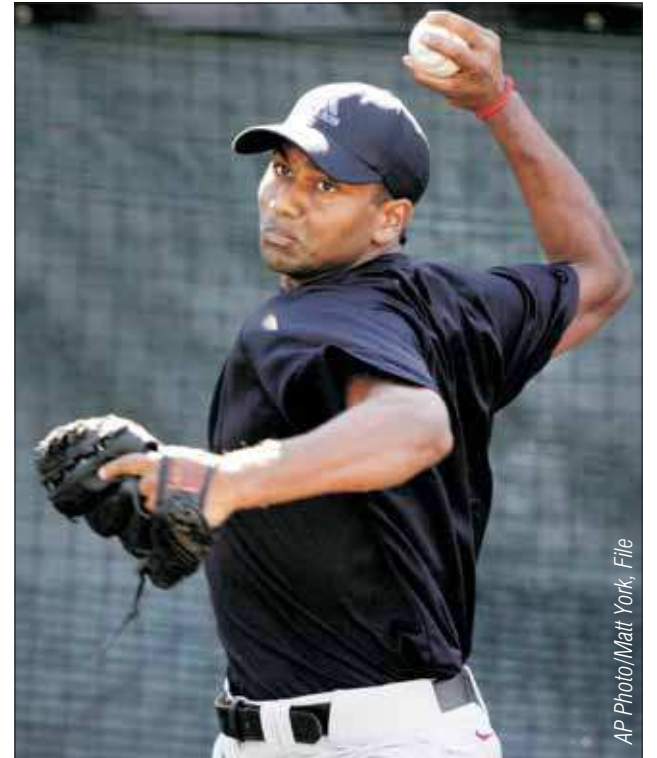
Patel had a good first year, notching a 1.42 Earned Run Average (ERA) and a 0.79 Walks plus Hits per Innings Pitched (WHIP), taking the mound for just 6 1/3 innings. Many players start out in the rookie leagues, but those with a promising future typically advance to the next level in their second season. Patel failed to do so.

In his second year in the rookie leagues, he still threw just 7 1/3 innings, with much poorer results. His ERA and WHIP ballooned to 8.59 and 2.32, respectively, and he was getting hit hard, despite a good fastball. Pittsburgh did not offer him a contract for his third season. Down but not out, Patel returned home, determined to continue his baseball career as the sport's greatest Indian ambassador by teaching the sport to young Indian boys.

Singh, on the other hand, has fared much better. He had weaker numbers than Patel his first year with the GCL Pirates, with a 5.84 ERA and 1.46 WHIP. But Singh logged 12 1/3 innings, almost twice as much mound time as Patel, and improved the following season, nearly



Mike James/Four Seam Images via AP Images



AP Photo/Matt York, File

**MILLION DOLLAR ARM.** *Million Dollar Arm*, a film released last month, tells the true story of the discovery of two promising Indian baseball talents: Rinku Singh (left) and Dinesh Patel. The film shares its name with an Indian reality show that offered \$100,000 to anyone who could throw the most strikes over 85 miles per hour (MPH) in a 20-pitch sequence, with the winner given a chance at a prize of a million dollars if he could throw three consecutive strikes at 90 MPH or higher. The film culminates with the two players earning contracts with the Pittsburgh Pirates. The actual ending of the story remains unwritten, as one player has left the American game, while the other still hopes to continue his quest to pitch in the major leagues.

doubling his workload to 22 2/3 innings while dropping his ERA and WHIP to a much stronger 2.38 and 1.28, respectively. His development was further highlighted by his promotion to the low-A State College Spikes.

In 2011, Singh played with four different minor-league teams: the GCL Pirates and the Spikes, as well as the Pirates' Dominican Summer League affiliate and the A-league West Virginia Power. Across those four leagues, the Indian lefty threw 40 1/3 innings, maintaining a good 2.45 ERA and very strong 1.19 WHIP.

Singh returned to the Power in 2012, throwing 72 innings, almost as many as he had the previous three seasons combined. He again showed a very good 3.00 ERA and 1.25 WHIP to go along with 65 strikeouts and 18 walks, but his heavy workload was about to take its toll.

In addition to his work in the American minors, Singh spent three winters in the Australian Baseball League, logging another 45 innings between 2010 and 2012, in addition to many workouts and training sessions. Still

new to the unique rigors of pitching in baseball, Singh's arm couldn't handle the strain.

Last year, Singh underwent Tommy John surgery, the ligament-replacement procedure, followed by a second surgery to remove a bone chip in his elbow, and he is not expected to return to the field until 2015. Recovery from any surgery is a challenge for a professional athlete, particularly arm surgery for a major-league pitcher, but Singh has several factors in his favor.

First, recovery from Tommy John surgery has become so common that he has a well-established path to health, and many pitchers throw as well, or even better, when they return. Second, Singh is a hard-throwing lefty (he now reaches 92 MPH), a scarce commodity that teams are always hungry for.

Third, Singh is determined to make good on the expectations created by representing a country of 1.2 billion people, setting an example for Indian children and every child worldwide.

Speaking about the movie recently, he said, "This story isn't done yet. There's more to do to keep this story alive and keep inspiring more young kids."

Whether Singh ever makes it to the American major leagues, he will remain a trailblazer and inspirational figure, and he and Patel could bring even more Indian talent to the increasingly international American pastime.

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