

The Original Amazing Indian Reality Show

By Bobby Ghosh

Rinku Singh and **Dinesh Patel** have had it up to here with *Slumdog Millionaire* analogies. Yes, O.K., they get it: They come from impoverished Indian families. Their path out of poverty began with a reality show called *The Million Dollar Arm*. If you must know, they've seen the Oscar-winning Bollywood-inspired blockbuster, and they loved it. *Loved* it. But the two youngsters wish the Americans they meet -- journalists, teammates, the kindly lady at the Walmart checkout line in Bradenton, Fla. -- would get over it already.

Trouble is, Singh and Patel can't explain this to those people. One reason is that they speak very little English and worry about being misunderstood.

The other is that they are culturally conditioned to treat their elders with a diffident deference, which explains why they say, "Yes, sir," more often than GIs at the officers' mess. When a CBS reporter recently asked them about the parallels between their lives and *Slumdog*, they smiled kindly and shook their heads. "No, sir," they replied. "Not like our life, sir." A few days later, when an NBC reporter asked the same question, they again smiled kindly and shook their heads. "No, sir. Not like our life, sir."

But speaking with me, a fellow Indian who speaks their native Hindi, they could be more candid. Minutes into our first conversation, Singh, the taller and, at age 20, the older of the two, preemptively asks, "You're not going to compare us to those kids in that movie, are you?" As I begin to answer, the 19-year-old Patel interrupts. "We're not from the slums, and we're not millionaires," he says, softly but firmly. "We are not characters from a film. We want to be taken seriously, as baseball players, as professional pitchers."

Singh finishes the thought: "Yes, sir. Nothing less, nothing more."

TEXT SIZE



Before 2008, Rinku Singh (left) and Dinesh Patel were javelin throwers who hoped to join India's army.

Al Tielemans/SI

After spending a couple of days with them, after they've told me their life stories, I better understand their aversion to *Slumdog* comparisons. Singh's father was a trucker who raised eight children on \$30 a month until a bad back cost him his job and forced him into sharecropping. Patel was raised by his uncle, a construction worker, because his dad, an intermittently employed tailor, didn't make enough to raise three kids. Both boys spent time working on farms in the punishing 110° summers of their native Uttar Pradesh state, located in the Indian north, to supplement their families' income. But as poor as they were, the Singh and Patel families were at least one step removed from panhandling -- and that is a matter of honor vital to their self-image. "We missed a meal now and again, but we always had a roof over our heads," says Singh, stiffening his back in pride. "We never had to steal or beg or forage in garbage dumps."

Baseball lore is littered with stories of kids who overcame seemingly insurmountable hurdles -- physical, cultural, linguistic -- to make it to the majors: the Dominican teens who used milk cartons for gloves or the Cuban youths who used broomsticks for bats. But Singh and Patel are attempting a whole new kind of leap. How many youngsters, after all, arrived in this country with dreams of baseball greatness without having ever played *a single game*?

Around this time last year neither Singh nor Patel had so much as laid eyes on a baseball. They were both training to be javelin throwers at a state-run institute in Uttar Pradesh for promising young athletes. Their game plan was simple enough: to win enough medals at national meets to draw the interest of recruiters from the Indian army. That would lead to a career in uniform, starting at the same relative economic level as a U.S. Army GI. That would bring job security -- or at least as much security as can be expected from a job that includes tours in insurgency-wracked Kashmir, where India and Pakistan have fought three wars since 1947. "If we were in India now," says Singh, holding his hands up as if wielding a machine gun, curling his left forefinger around an imaginary trigger, "we'd be fighting terrorists." (Two of his three older brothers are in the armed services.)

Last winter, however, a javelin coach told them about a reality TV show in which the winner could earn big bucks by throwing a ball, *hard*. With their powerful shoulders, the coach reasoned, Singh and Patel might have a chance. "We didn't know it had anything to do with baseball or America or anything like that," says Patel. "We agreed to compete because of the money."

The Million Dollar Arm was the brainchild of **J.B. Bernstein**, a sports agent based in Northern California who figured that, by the law of averages, a nation of 1.1 billion people -- most of them nuts about cricket -- must have plenty of young men capable of throwing 90 mph. More than 30,000 Indians signed up to compete across 30 cities. After three rounds of competition, Singh was declared the winner last March, with a top speed of 89 mph. That earned him \$100,000 (a king's ransom in his hometown of Bhadohi), a Gatorade shower ("I thought, Why are they pouring juice over me?") and a shot at another \$1 million if he could throw three consecutive strikes at 90 mph. (He could not.) Patel, who came in second with an 87-mph pitch, received \$2,500, and both entrants earned a trip to L.A., where they would live and train on the USC campus for the next six months before auditioning for major league scouts.

From footage of the two teens on the TV show it's hard to imagine how they generated that kind

of velocity. The lefthanded Singh, in particular, seems to have the worst possible delivery, his throwing hand too tight, his 6' 2" body too stiff and his windup almost cartoonish. He looks like, well, a javelin thrower. The righthanded Patel, at 5' 11", appears more comfortable, but only slightly. He giggles with embarrassment as we watch the video. "Nobody told us how to do it right," he says, defensively. "We needed lessons."

Which they would receive from one of the best teachers in the game. When the teens arrived in Southern California last May, Bernstein (now their manager) hooked them up with USC pitching coach Tom House, the guru known widely as the Professor for his cerebral approach. Over the next nine months they went through a demanding regimen of pitching drills and physical training. Off the field, they lived an isolated existence. "We didn't want distractions," Singh says. "We didn't come all this way to eat dhal and speak Hindi. We had to eat baseball and speak baseball."

A skeptic at first, House had one objective, he says: "to take those good arms and give the pitchers some skills to go with their genetic talent." The two spent hours and hours in the bullpen and the classroom, learning the mechanics of pitching. By the middle of last summer House concluded that their previous inexperience was actually an asset: It gave him the opportunity to work with a blank canvas. "Because they hadn't played before, they didn't have any bad habits," House says. "I came to realize that it was easier to teach a new skill to someone who doesn't know than to unteach someone who thinks they do know."

Before long, Singh had developed a decent breaking ball and was getting the hang of a changeup, a pitch that comes late to even the game's top prospects. Patel was consistently throwing around 90 mph. House sent them off to play a series of simulated games against high school kids at a baseball camp and against Vanguard University. "When they first faced real-life batters, they got a little anxious and wild," House says. "But they got better with every game."

By early November, Bernstein was confident enough in Singh and Patel to arrange a tryout in Tempe; scouts from every MLB team were invited. It was a disaster. Just a few of their pitches reached the high 80s, and they showed little control. They now blame the unfamiliar setting and the mound -- "too slippery," says Singh. The scouts were unimpressed, and the players shattered. "I thought, This is it. Now they'll send us back to India, and I'll go home empty-handed," Patel recalls. "At least Rinku had his \$100,000. Me, I'd have to go to the army after all."

Bernstein, however, was able to persuade several scouts to take a second look, this time at USC. On what was effectively their home turf, Singh and Patel hit 90 mph and displayed a serviceable array of curveballs and sliders. The scouts sat up and took notice -- and the [Pittsburgh Pirates](#) snapped them both up. "I was very cynical going in," says **Joe Ferrone**, one of the two Pirates scouts who recommended the signings. "I thought, If two kids can learn baseball in five or six months, then that minimizes what everybody else does, players who spend a lifetime learning the sport."

But when the Pirates saw them, "they didn't look like two kids just five to six months into their baseball careers," says **Sean Campbell**, the other Pittsburgh scout who attended the USC

workout. "They looked like they'd been doing it 10 to 12 years."

Even to an untrained eye, the sight of Singh and Patel hurling fastballs from the practice mound in Bradenton looks a lot more like the real thing than those javelin throwers from last year's TV show. A week into spring training, this is their first stint on the mound, and they're being watched intently by Pirates minor league pitching coach **Miguel Bonilla** and field coordinator **Jeff Banister**.

Bonilla's heavily accented English is a special challenge for Singh and Patel, but his body language is clear enough. In Singh's first few throws, his body flings too far forward, leaving him slightly off-balance; Bonilla steps in and mimics (with some exaggeration) his mistakes. "Like this, like *this*," he says, displaying a more compact windup and motion. Singh watches intently and says, "Yes, sir." Then he copies his coach, throwing with less velocity but more correctly -- and accurately. Banister, the day's catcher, shouts encouragement. Five or six throws in, Singh begins to turn up the heat. The ball thwacks into the glove of Banister, who nods approvingly. Bonilla arches his eyebrows. "He's ready to bring it, baby!" he exclaims. "Oh, yeah," Banister grins.

"Yes, sir," says Singh, politely. But there's triumph in his eyes.

It's Patel's turn. With his shorter, more muscular frame, he looks less like a natural pitcher. But his arm speed seems to compensate for any physical disadvantages. Having watched Bonilla direct Singh, he's better prepared than his countryman. *Thwack, thwack, thwack*. Banister grunts as each ball smacks the glove. Bonilla stands back, satisfied. "Goooooooooooood," he says. "Goooooooooooood."

Patel bumps fists with Singh. They're learning American hand gestures almost as fast as the language.

The next day Banister watches as a Pirates coach puts six young pitchers through running drills. Singh and Patel are constantly sprinting ahead of the pack, forcing the others to pick up their pace. During breaks between laps, Singh stands ramrod erect while the others collapse onto the turf. "Damn, you're a *ma-chine*," gasps **Michael Felix**, a minor leaguer who's in his third spring training with Pittsburgh. Singh, not understanding the reference, looks away, embarrassed.

Banister is satisfied with what he's seen so far. "The fact that they have to be first, even in [running drills], tells me these guys want to compete," he says. "They know they have a long way to catch up to the others, but they're not worried about that."

In the evening after the grueling running drills, Singh is showing off his pool skills in the Pirate City rec room. He's already hustled a member of the clubhouse staff into believing that he didn't know the game -- and promptly beat him. His thunderous break sends balls scattering. "Sometimes, I hit the white ball so hard, it flies off the table," he says, grinning. Clearly, he hasn't yet grasped all the objectives of this game.

With baseball, on the other hand, he and Patel are developing a firm command. In their hostel

room they spend hours watching the great pitchers on YouTube -- [Randy Johnson](#), a USC alum whom they met briefly in L.A., is a favorite. (They've met **Barry Bonds**, too, but know next to nothing about **A-Rod**, and I had to explain the whole sorry steroids scandal to them.) I help them find the video of that Johnson pitch that obliterated a dove during a 2001 spring training game. "That's amazing," Patel says. "Add it to my favorites. I want to learn from him to do that." What, kill a bird in mid-flight? "No, I want to pitch like that."

They also instruct and test each other from a well-thumbed copy of *Baseball for Dummies*. "Single to the right," Patel asks. "Runners on first and third. What do you do?"

"Back up third base," Singh replies.

"Single to the left, runner on first," says Patel.

"Follow flight of the ball, then decide ... usually [back up] third."

In any sport, there's only so much you can learn from books or videos. Even Bernstein concedes that his clients have "a 12- to 14-year deficit" relative to their peers. If they were hitters, House says, they'd stand no chance of closing that gap. "But a pitcher, if you have a good delivery, you can learn to strike people out pretty quickly," he says. The Pirates will likely keep Singh and Patel in extended spring training, get them into the Rookie Gulf Coast League and give them lots of short bursts as relief pitchers -- at this point, frequency is more important than duration. If the Pirates stick to this plan, House reckons, "there's a 75-25 chance they'll acquire the experience they need within a year."

Do Singh and Patel have a realistic shot at the majors? It's a long shot, and they're smart enough to set realistic goals -- for now. Patel says the low A squad may be within their reach this summer; Singh thinks high A is feasible. But that's still months away. For now, these two farm boys from Uttar Pradesh are content to push themselves harder and harder at Pirate City. "Learning, learning, learning...all the time," Singh says. "We don't want to go out, don't want to do anything else."

Before I leave, they ask me if I can help them learn a few phrases of Spanish, the better to communicate with Bonilla. The first phrase they want to learn?

Si, señor.