

# SWINGING YEARS

Though his IPL team, Deccan Chargers, is having a bad run this season, captain Kumar Sangakkara has been quietly working his way up the cricket awards ladder. He is the first cricketer to have won the Wisden award for outstanding player as well as one of the top five players of the year. With his family being his first priority and his mission to save the world, one charity at a time, he is clearly on the right track. By Shefali Rao



**H**IS team lost the World Cup to India last year, but his eloquent speech as the gracious loser won hearts all over. His well-crafted MCC (Marylebone Cricket Club) Spirit of Cricket Cowdrey Lecture at Lord's, with its strong overtones of defiance against the cricket board in Sri Lanka, won a standing ovation at the venue and created ripples back in his home country. But Kumar Sangakkara, Sri Lankan cricketer and captain of IPL team Deccan Chargers, is not just an articulate speaker. He is firmly grounded, and takes his family and social responsibilities very seriously when he's not relaxing at home, watching TV, or just chilling out with his close friends.

### It's all in the family

Perhaps this value system comes from his upbringing. "I have two sisters and a brother. Growing up as the youngest in a large family was really interesting — we're all very close, even now. My parents were very broadminded, but were strict when they had to be. And they always insisted, either in academics or playing sports, that I did well," says the former Sri Lankan skipper from Matale, adding,

My kids (twins, a boy and girl) recognise me on TV and a lot of the other Sri Lankan players as well. They look at the screen and call out, 'uncle!'

They're only three, so I haven't introduced them to a bat yet



"it was just a case of growing up in a very secure, stable environment." Family means everything to this left-handed batsman and wicket keeper, who says, "They keep me grounded along with my close friends, some of whom I've known for the last 25 years."

At 17, while he was studying law at Sri Lanka Law College, Sangakkara met his future wife Yehali. While he never completed his law degree (though he tells us he intends to eventually), their relationship lasted, and they got married eight years later in 2007. In 2009, they became proud parents of twins.

"I have a boy and a girl. They'll be three in June, and they're just fantastic. It's been a kind of a life-changing experience for me," Sangakkara tells us, smiling. "My family travels with me as much as they can and I spend as much time at home as possible. Missing out on family time is probably the worst thing about being a professional sportsman," he adds.

### personality



And how do the toddlers deal with their dad's fame? "They recognise me on TV and a lot of the other Sri Lankan players as well, as they know most of my team. They look at the screen and call out, 'uncle!' They're only three, so I haven't introduced them to a bat yet," he discloses.

### The sporting side

Cricket was not always on Sangakkara's agenda. His parents placed heavy emphasis on academics (his father is a prominent lawyer in Kandy), but his elder sister Saranga, a national-level tennis player, was the first one to take a step in the direction of sport. "She was a national tennis champion in Sri Lanka when she was 15. She even went to study in the US on a tennis scholarship," he recalls.

While a shoulder injury hampered his sister's game, Sangakkara found himself interested in tennis as well — but only at first. "I started to play cricket seriously only after I was 16 while a lot of



my peers began really young. I was into tennis, badminton and swimming before I settled on cricket. In hindsight, it was the right decision," he tells us. "I played cricket for my school, and then I got into a couple of age-group national teams, and it was just a case of making a decision from there onwards, of what I would take more seriously. Cricket seemed like the best option, it's a team sport, whereas in tennis, you're on your own. That was one of the main reasons I chose it, though never did I think I'd play for the national team," he adds. He's never once looked back, and still says he's only "lucky that (he) managed to do well."

Last year, he was embroiled in a controversy after giving the MCC Spirit of Cricket Cowdrey Lecture. Sangakkara, the first Sri Lankan player to give the annual lecture, discussed several of the issues plaguing cricket in his country, citing government interference as one. It allegedly caused a furor among officials in Sri Lanka. However, he also talked poignantly of other things, like about playing the game against the backdrop of a civil war: "When I was six, I didn't understand what was happening. I would just be happy that school was shut, because it meant I could play cricket," he says. "It's only when you play for the national side that you understand what an amazing role you have. It's so much more than a sport and we've all realised that we're more than just cricketers, and accepted our roles really well. The cricket team has always been a great example of how ideal Sri Lankan society should be. Irrespective of caste, creed or religion, or race, we play as one family," he observes.

On a lighter note, we ask him what it feels like to be the only player to have been named as the leading cricketer and one of the top five players of the year simultaneously, by the *Wisden Cricketers' Almanack*, sometimes also referred to as the Bible of the game. He smiles, telling us that he's heard this question more times now than he can count, but "it's a great honour, and a very humbling experience."

### In a nutshell

**Favourite getaway:** Home, really

**Cricket inspiration:** My father. Also, Vivian Richards and Brian Lara

**Best read:** *Midnight's Children*

**Music:** Rock, especially from the 60s and 70s. I love *Paint it Black* by the Rolling Stones, and listen to U2 and Led Zeppelin as well

**Unwind:** Watch TV, read, spend time at home

**TV show:** *Fawcay Towers*

**Films:** *The Usual Suspects*, *Shawshank Redemption* and *Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy*, which is a great comedy

**Around India:** Bangalore is a great city, so are Jaipur and Delhi. Hyderabad is also a place that I'm really growing to like. It has a rich heritage, and the food's great as well. Dharamshala was magnificent. Everywhere I've gone in India, I've found a lot to enjoy

**Pet peeve:** I don't like pretentious people

**This IPL season:** Is possibly the most interesting one so far



We are a happy people who love to enjoy life, so deep down, I'm that person. And it's great to be part of a nation that prides itself on that



### The Lahore attacks

The 2009 attack by gunmen against our team in Lahore really put things in perspective. It showed us that we didn't own the sport, that bad things do happen — you're still a mortal — and it sent this message home very strongly. And we also realised that what we experienced on that day, is what some people in my country have experienced every day of their lives for a long period. It was a case that made us take stock of things, and it was something else that brought us together



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### Off the field

When he's not playing for his country, his 'other' passions take over — like social responsibility. "Along with Murali (Muttiah Muralitharan), we run the Foundation of Goodness, where we take care of about 20,000 people around the island every year. We have a centre in southern Sri Lanka, with free medicine, free vocational training, like computer studies, and a swimming pool for the children of the area, and we're about to start work on an empowerment and learning centre in the Northern war-torn areas of Sri Lanka. The government has generously given us 50 acres of land," he explains.

"I also have a Bikes for Life campaign, where we've donated about 1,200 bicycles to children in the North because it makes a difference between a child going to school or not, or a parent going to work or not. What we use just for fun, actually impacts their life in a much bigger way," he adds.

With such a packed agenda, does he get any time to just kick back, relax and have a good time? "Of course," he says, laughing. "I spend as much time with friends and family as I can. We have an open house, with friends walking in and out, sometimes even when I'm not at home and travelling, they use it when they want to. We laugh and chat throughout the day."

He is also a self-proclaimed TV junkie, but books come first. "I watch probably an excessive amount of television. But I love reading, though, that would be my number one hobby. Oscar Wilde and Salman Rushdie are on my list of top authors," says Sangakkara. Surprisingly enough, he doesn't collect cricket memorabilia. "Only have three to four T-shirts of Murali's, and none of my own memorabilia," he reveals.

In the Cowdrey speech he mentioned that Sri Lankans are a happy-go-lucky live-in-the-moment sort of people, so we ask if it holds true for him as well. "Once you have a family, and responsibilities, I think it changes a bit. But we are a happy people who love to enjoy life, so deep down, I'm that person. And it's great to be part of a nation that prides itself on that," he signs off.

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