

A sporting life

FOOTY FEVER reaches saigon

It might not be as well-known as rugby or as popular as football, but Australian Rules Football has started its kick about in Saigon again, much to the delight of true fans. Words by **Thin Lei Win**. Photos by **Fred Wissink**.

IT'S A BLINDINGLY HOT Saturday morning and the Saigon Geckos have just beaten the Hanoi Swans roundly. The score line was grim – 99-54. Yet Phil Johns, President of the Hanoi Swans, is upbeat, calling the event 'a success.' What gives?

"Today is all about getting footy going in Ho Chi Minh City, and that was successful. Yes, Hanoi was weak, but now with the Saigon team on side, we can combine to form a much stronger force for the Asian Championship in Bangkok this July."

Alluding to the Swans' illustrious history of losing more often than it wins, Phil adds with a flourish, "Yes, the mighty Hanoi Swans cop another loss but it's all for the bigger picture."

Just minutes before, the sports green at RMIT was a sea of red on red, with the Hanoi Swans in their signature Sydney Swans jerseys and the Saigon team in the Geckos' rugby attire. The adrenalin-rushing 12-a-side game started with Hanoi scoring the initial points within the first few minutes of the game, only for Saigon to retaliate. Repeatedly.

Still, it didn't matter that the teams were playing on a football ground rather than the oval-shaped field (usually the cricket grounds), or that the visiting Hanoi team had to call for help from anyone willing to play, including a Californian and an Irishman who'd never played footy before, and several others who hadn't played in a number of years.

And forget about having 18 players on each team with four on the bench – everyone's happy to have 12 each, with two subs.

After all, this is perhaps one of the first Aussie Rules games to be held in Saigon in a few years. That all changed when Phil moved from Hanoi to Saigon temporarily for work (his day job is with CBRE) at the end of January.

The Hanoi Swans themselves have been through "numerous re-incarnations", according

to Phil. Starting as the Hanoi Hawks in 1998 before being re-born as the Swans in 2003, they practice every Thursday night at the Hoang Cau Stadium.

Phil admits it was "a major undertaking" to organize a side in Hanoi where expat numbers are smaller and their stay shorter. So he's brought his passion to Saigon and now a crew of Aussies, Koreans and Vietnamese meet every Saturday afternoon at 2.30pm on the green at RMIT.

■ RUGBY, FOOTY OR TEA?

For the uninitiated, at first glance the game looks like a fast-paced version of normal Rugby or the Rugby 7s. But there are quite a few differences. For one, players cannot run with the ball unless they bounce it every 15 metres (considering the ball is oval-shaped, this is no easy task). Passing can be done through kicking or holding the ball with one hand and hitting it with a fist. Throwing isn't allowed.

There are no offside rules, and players can roam the field freely. Goals must come off the boot, so there's no such thing as touchdowns, and there are four goal posts at each end without any bars. So as long as you can kick between the posts you score points – six for big posts and one for those at the side.

It's a fantastic game to watch live, with short, sharp bursts of running interspersed with high kicking and high flying. Phil has plans to make Aussie Rules more popular here and wants to bring the fun spirit of the Grand Final – held every September in Australia – to Vietnam, organizing a series of events centered around one of the biggest days in Australia's sporting calendar.

For a game that originated as a way to keep cricketers fit, Aussie Rules has come a long way, with numerous amateur leagues in countries ranging from Thailand and Kenya to Papua New Guinea and Norway.

Phil, who sees Aussie Rules



as a great friendship-building tool between locals and expats, is looking forward to the Vietnam Aussie Rules team's inaugural international game in Thailand, where the Asian Championships will be played in July 2007.

He is confident that with the combined talents of Saigon and Hanoi the team has a good chance, and welcomes anyone who wants to play, assuring you

needn't be a regular gym-goer to participate.

"The quality that we like about being Australian is to give everyone a fair deal, and that's what the game is – we're very welcoming."

Those interested in playing can contact Phil Johns at hanoiswans@gmail.com (for those in Hanoi) or phil.johns@cbre.com (for those in Ho Chi Minh City). 📧