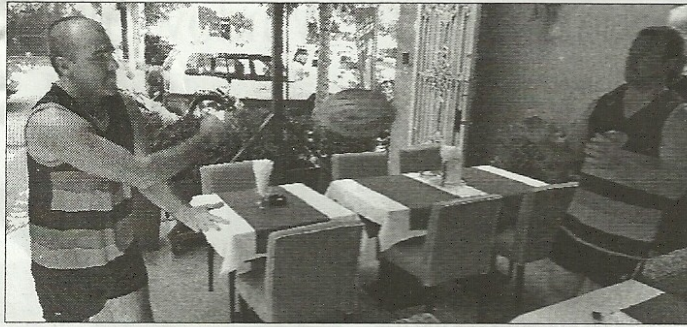


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Cambodian Cobras coach David Murphy, left, practices his handpasses with team captain Jhie Gough. The Australian rules football team plays the Vietnam Swans in Phnom Penh on Saturday.

Aussie Rules Football Club Aiming To Score in Cambodia

BY MARK WORLEY
THE CAMBODIA DAILY

The leather game ball is the shape of a giant stretched egg, bounces at odd angles when it lands on the ground and is chased around a field by players who often knock each other unconscious in their pursuit of kicking goals. There is no doubt that Australians play a very different brand of football.

Australian rules football, however, looks like it may finally gain a toehold in Cambodia's fickle sporting market, thanks to the Cambodian Cobras—a team hell-bent on developing the sport in a country bereft of junior sporting programs for schoolchildren.

For nearly a decade, Australian rules football teams—consisting mainly of expat Aussies living in Cambodia—have been formed for one-off games against other teams from the region, only for players to hang up their boots at the end of the contest.

Cambodian Cobras playing coach David Murphy says the newest version of the team, which will play its first match against the Vietnam Swans in Phnom Penh this Saturday, has bigger goals in mind.

"We are hoping to get an Auskick [junior football] program up and running in local schools by the end of the year," Mr Murphy said in an interview on Tuesday.

"Ideally, we would like to develop the game and maybe start a junior league in the next three to five years."

The professional Australian Football League is also keen to promote the game outside of its island home and is pushing hard into Asia and providing support for teams in the region.

AFL Media Manager Patrick Keane said in an e-mail yesterday that the AFL would hold an official game between professional Australian teams in China later this year, as the league continued its push

into Asia.

"The AFL has moved towards Asia in recent years as an obvious growth opportunity, with the close proximity to our country and the numbers of people in the immediate region," he said.

The Cobras have had several hiccups since forming earlier this year, including serious trouble finding a suitable playing venue in Phnom Penh. Australian football is played on an oval-shaped ground that measures about 150-meters-long and about 110-meters-wide at its broadest point. Those measurements rule out the capital's Olympic Stadium and most other fields where traditional football is played.

Cobras president Murray Heath says that because the cost of hiring a suitable sports ground for official games is almost prohibitive for the fledgling club, they will be looking to develop a specific venue in the future.

"But, we can't get ahead of ourselves—the main goal is to get this first game out of the way," he said.

Mr Heath said that one of the most important aspects of the club's formation was to attract Cambodians to the uniquely Australian game. There are three Khmer players on the Cobra's playing list, but the club would push to attract more local recruits, Mr Heath added.

Mr Heath said Saturday's game against the Vietnam Swans would be played at 3 pm at the North-bridge International School.

Vietnam Swans President Phil Johns said yesterday that his team had established the game successfully in Vietnam and had been running a junior Auskick program in Hanoi schools for more than two years.

"For the [development of the] Cambodian Cobras, I would [suggest they] build up alliances and relationships, and continually market and use Aussie rules as a vehicle to support good causes in the Cambodian community," Mr Johns said.