

Aussie Rules football keeps expats connected

By Clint Lambert

When the first whistle blew at the Mỹ Đình Stadium training ground before a crowd of 200 screaming fans on November 26, it was the culmination of months of training, organisation and emails between two Australian Rules Football clubs' based in Hà Nội and Bangkok.

A peculiar game to the uninitiated, Australian Rules has struggled to make an impact outside its founding country, however, a core group of members of the club are ensuring that the game is slowly making its mark in Việt Nam against other popular sports such as rugby or soccer.

Although the Hà Nội Swans Committee members including Club President Daryl Taber, a UNIS primary school teacher; Michael Johnson, General Manager of Handspan Adventure Tours; Phil Johns a marketing guru based in Hà Nội; Michael Francis, an entrepreneur involved in the hotel and bar industry; and Josh Magennis, an international property lawyer, all come from very different walks of life and different parts of Australia they all share a common passion — Football.

For many ex-pats, moving overseas means a finish to all pretensions of exercise, especially those moving to a city that goes from steaming tropical weather in the summer, to freezing bone chilling conditions in the winter. But Aussie rules football players seem to be a breed apart. Former club president Mick Francis said that the organisation brings together different parts of Hà Nội society from school teachers and embassy staff to construction workers and Vietnamese players.

"Some players have not kicked a ball in over a decade, but want to exercise and have some link to Australia," said Mick. "It gives us the opportunity to run around and train once a week, as well as introduce the game to other people."

Aussie Rules has been described by pundits of the game as a fast, skilful, agile game that is full of hard knocks. However, detractors have also labelled it as aerial Ping-Pong due to the high leaping catches and the number of times the ball is knocked around the field by hand or foot.

For Hà Nội's Aussie expats, there's nothing like getting together with a bunch of mates and giving each other a wallop.



Colin Steely (right) tackles a Tiger.

For the 20-odd members of the Hà Nội Swans, or the Bloods as they are known, it was initially a way of keeping the beer bellies' trimmed down and socialising with other teams in the region, but the club is slowly growing in size and responsibility.

The Hà Nội Swans have only been training and playing games for three years, but in that time the team has developed a number of players and die-hard supporters that would put bigger clubs back in Australia to shame, including Phi Nguyễn Quang a tenacious Vietnamese UNIS physical education teacher who is forging a trail into Aussie Rules for his countrymen to follow.

Unlike rugby, in Aussie Rules size does not count as much as speed, co-ordination, fitness and tenacity, and certain positions would be ideally suited to slighter, faster Vietnamese players. A number of the visiting Thailand Tigers were surprised to find a Vietnamese man playing as there were no Thais in their team, but they found out that Phi could tackle as hard as any of the other players as well as take a few hard knocks.

With nicknames like Snags, Thumper, Bar Fly, Red Bull, Smooth, Gus Stop and

Dasher being yelled around the ground, many spectators may have thought that Santa's reindeer had arrived early for Christmas. But the names are seen as all part of the fun, and most cannot remember how they got tagged with one, though the story is sure to have been embellished by team-mates.

On match days the team is generally bulked up by a revolving door of backpackers, travellers, English teachers and Australian, American, Irish, or English men looking for a bit of fun and physical training.

Supporters include the Australian Ambassador to Việt Nam, who presented a trophy to the winning team on the day, embassy staff, backpackers, Vietnamese and ex-pats keen to show some support to friends, or others just curious to see how the game was played, and why 20 grown men would run around a field on a Saturday afternoon chasing a red leather ball.

The answer was given during the match when all supporters were treated to a good game during the clash with the Thailand Tigers. The Hà Nội Swans showed their potential against a much taller, more experienced team, and clawed



Team shot of the Hà Nội Swans and Thailand Tigers.

their way back into the match only to lose by one goal when the final siren blew.

Team spokesman Phil Johns, said the team did an awesome job. "This was our first home game of the season and we put on a good show. It was awesome."

"The weather was clear, the supporters enjoyed the game, the visiting Tigers and their wives had a great weekend, and the club showed what it can do in the future," added the visibly excited marketing guru.

Player-president Daryl Taber said the club is developing into more than just a sporting team. "We are really acting as ambassadors for Australia and for our style of football," said the UNIS primary school teacher adding that the team also represents Việt Nam on its trips to other

countries in the region, such as Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, and Hong Kong.

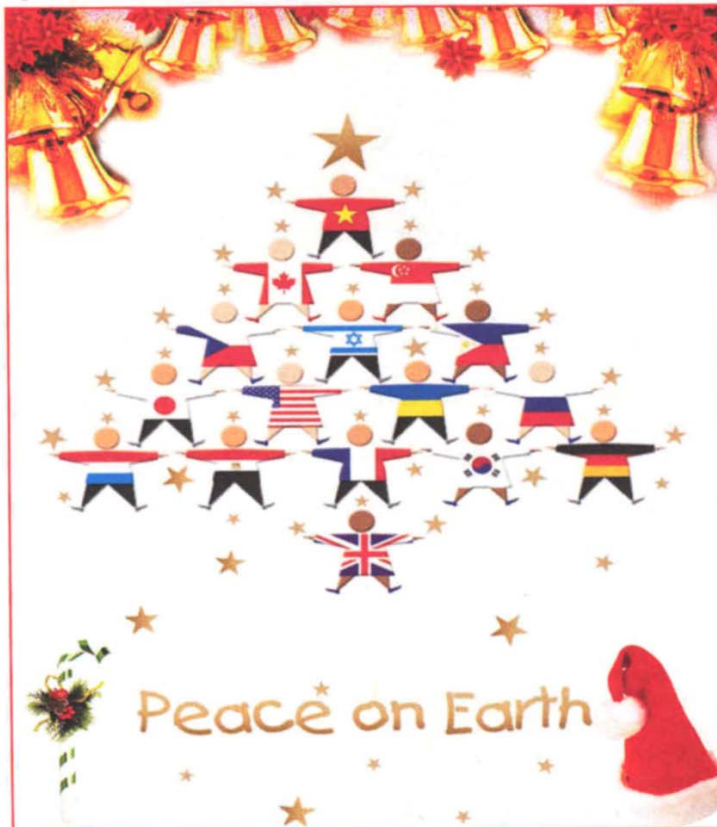
The team is evolving from a social outlet to a social force by involving itself in a number of projects, with the support of its AFL (Australian Football League) parent club — the Sydney Swans, and local sponsors including RMIT, Bar Barracuda, Veggys, Fosters, Jacc's. The team has started holding football clinics at RMIT campus for male and female students, as well as the AusKick programme for nine to 12-year-olds to introduce the game to the younger generation, with the aim that they will play in the international competition as well.

The AFL Grand Final, which this year was hosted by Jacc's Bar in the Hà Nội

Towers, and the after-party at Bar Barracuda in Phúc Tân, is quickly becoming an event that many ex-pats are marking in their diaries — even those who have no interest in football. And the home game weekend is an opportunity to meet and make contact with 40 new people from other cities in the region.

The club has pencilled in three away games next year, and are hoping for a match against the southern Sài Gòn side. Training is held 6.30pm every Thursday at the Đống Đa Stadium — rain, hail or rare sunshine, and the Bloods are always looking for new players to boost the numbers and inject some fresh talent into the mix.

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