



Vietnamese children kicking the ball around with top Aussie Rules Football players at the Children's Palace in Quảng Ninh Province. — VNS Photo Hồng Minh

## Australian footballers shun stigma to play games with AIDS victims

Hồng Minh

**QUẢNG NINH** — When 10-year-old Nguyễn Anh Vũ, who is just 1.2 metres in height, was pitted against 2-metre-high Australian footballer Mark McGough, all indicators were that this would be an uneven game of touch football.

But in last Friday's game of Australian football in the northern province of Quảng Ninh's Hạ Long City, the disparity in height and difference in language didn't trouble players from both sides.

To the little Vũ (not his real name) and other children with HIV/AIDS in the city, it is uncommon to play freely with other children due to stigma associated with the disease. Playing with a dozen huge Australians, with an average height of 1.9 metres, in a new and strange game with an oval-shaped ball is even more uncommon.

### Ending prejudice

The team of Australian Football League (AFL) players came to Việt Nam with the hope of teaching kids their sport and helping to end

prejudice against people who are HIV positive, and especially innocent AIDS victims such as young children.

Vũ's experiences with people who do not know much about AIDS are common for HIV positive people.

"At school, my friends stopped playing with me when they found out I have AIDS, transmitted from my parents," Vũ said.

"But I can play happily with these foreign men, even though I can not understand what they are talking about."

Australian football player Mark said he wasn't afraid of playing with the children at all and that there was nothing to be afraid of since they all knew the facts about HIV/AIDS transmission and prevention.

Mark's team, which included players from famous football teams in Sydney and Melbourne including St Kilda and Carlton, came to Việt Nam as part of international non-governmental organisation Care's Mekong Challenge project. Care Việt Nam also organised the

trip as part of its Walk and Talk project in Quảng Ninh, which focuses on human rights for HIV positive people.

During the training session, the AFL players helped Vietnamese children, both healthy kids and those with HIV/AIDS, to learn the basics of the game.

As part of their trip, the Australian players also met and talked with representatives from provincial groups and clubs who do work related to HIV/AIDS issues.

"It's very nice of the Australian players to come here to play with local children and share stories with people who are living with HIV/AIDS here," said Trương Thị Yến, chairwoman of the provincial union.

"Such an exchange can help eradicate discrimination towards people with HIV/AIDS in the province."

The chairwoman said that when locals saw foreigners from a far away country come and play with AIDS victims, they could understand that normal contact with HIV positive people could not harm them.

Yến said there were 600

children in Hạ Long City who had parents with HIV/AIDS, among those about 70 had tested positive for HIV. Most of them were discriminated against by other people.

"I hope more of these types of exchanges will be held in the future to help people understand more about HIV/AIDS and encourage the children themselves to integrate into society," she said.

Health programme officer of Care Việt Nam, Megan Tucker, said that the trip provided the opportunity for both hosts and guests to learn something.

"We arranged the trip so that the players can learn more about Việt Nam and the situation of HIV/AIDS in Việt Nam," she said.

"And when they come back to Australia, they can inform people in public about raising awareness about the disease among the community."

Those who are interested in Australian football can come to a training session between the AFL team and the Hà Nội Swans at Hoàng Cầu Stadium at 7.15pm this Thursday. — VNS