

Getting Your Kicks With The Vietnam Swans

Australian football is now played in Vietnam, and the footballers are members of the Vietnam Swans

By Harry Hodge

I never realized how much I miss running on grass.

That thought kept playing on repeat in my mind as I kicked around footballs with some Australians on the RMIT campus on a muggy Saturday. Mind you, these were no ordinary footballs; they were Australian footballs. And the lads in question were members of the Vietnam Swans.

With elements including accurate kicking, making an acrobatic catch to mark the ball, and fairly frequent contact with the opposition, Australian Rules Football combines a number of elements for any athlete. Having played before in Beijing, I figured I'd hook up with the Vietnam Swans for an afternoon in District 7 and learn about their club.

Although teams have existed in Vietnam before, the Hanoi Swans started playing games in 2003, with a doubleheader against the Thailand Tigers and the Hong Kong Dragons. By 2007, the Swans had become a nationwide squad with members drawn from player pools in Hanoi and HCM City.

VIETNAM SWANS

The Swans are always working on our skills and fitness every Saturday at RMIT and have started to introduce mid-week practices. This year the Swans have organized tours in Malaysia in mid-June and Indonesia in late July. For more information about the club and memberships, visit vietnamswans.com.



The Vietnam Swans' recent ANZAC Day Friendship match pitted them against the Hong Kong Dragons in Vung Tau. Pictured is Canadian Spencer Fowler kicking the ball and Irishman Timmy Riordan blocking for him in the background.

ADAM MARTIN

Every year the Vietnam Swans participate in the Asia Championships & the Indochina Cup. Excluding these events, the Swans organize tours with other teams and play hosts to other teams. The club boasts many non-Australian players with players from England, Ireland, Canada and the U.S.

"The characteristics of a good footballer are always going to be linked to fitness and skill," said Vietnam Swans national president Phil Johns. "For people who have a background in Gaelic football, basketball, rugby and even soccer mean you will have an advantage in participating for the first time. Endurance is one of the best skills an Australian footballer can have. The ability to run all day on a big ground is such an advantage

when everyone else around you is starting to tire.

"The team is made up of players from areas in Australia where Aussie Rules isn't played, international players who are foreign to the game as well as people who never played when they were younger.

"We held a legend match in Vung Tau and we had a Vietnamese player take part in the match. Mr. Lam has trained with the team before and we are hoping he puts on the boots and plays in up and coming games."

It certainly was a good workout, fielding kicks, firing them back at teammates, and then playing a short scratch match on a humid Saturday. The camaraderie was evident among the players.

But as I mentioned, running on

grass is something you don't miss until you no longer have the option. In Canada, I could just go to any park and run on grass, lie on it under a tree, and no one would give you a hard time about it. In Vietnam, grass spaces are limited, and I'm often shooed away any time I set foot on the green stuff. But there is more to playing "footy" as it's known than just the chance to run on something other than a treadmill.

"The benefits are massive for anyone wanting to join the Vietnam Swans," Johns said. "Fitness is the biggest key because Australian Rules is a great way to get into shape, especially in the heat of Vietnam! There is also the mateship that Aussie Rules brings to the table and after trainings, after games, on tours, playing host to touring teams, at events around the city or just meeting other players around Vietnam, the Swans are open and always up for a beer or two."

The Swans also are proud of their charity efforts, with their signature cause being the Hoi An Children's Swimming Program, for which the club helped co-host a "Swing to Swim Charity Golf Day" at Montgomery Links in Hoi An.

Aussie expat Stewart Davies, a 34-year-old Melbourne native, has been with the club for more than a year, and enjoys both the fitness and social aspects of playing with the Swans.

"I never played competitively, but I could always kick a footy," Davies said. "It's a physical, hard game."

Teammate Nick Shiells, 27, agreed. The fellow Melbourne native has been with the Swans for a few years, and reckons the highlights have been the game tours he's taken with his teammates. The Swans have hit the road all over Asia in recent years.

"I look forward to the tours for weeks," Shiells confirmed. "It's a great way to visit places. I'd never been to Laos before."

"There's no better way to visit a place than with a footy team."