

MORE THAN A GAME

By Phil Johns



Phil Johns is an Australian who has a passion for Australian Rules Football. So much so, that when he came to Vietnam three years ago and learnt about the Hanoi Swans Football team, an outfit that despite its efforts has yet to win a game, he decided to become the Marketing Director. He tells his story.

It's Saturday 27 September 2003 and I'm at the Melbourne Cricket Ground watching the Australian Rules Football ("footy") Grand Final with 90,000 other screaming fans. Despite only being seriously played in Australia, footy is probably the best code in the world.

Two months later, I find myself stuck in Hanoi's traffic even though I'm a pedestrian on the footpath. Vietnam has just won a soccer (football) match in the 22nd South East Asia Games and a mass of motorbikes with celebrating riders and pillions, like a liquid, fill every space between the building lines. The Vietnamese seem to think their football code is probably even better than mine.

As it turns out, I end up with a job marketing Vietnam football. TNS's survey says 97 per cent of local viewers who watched the SEA Games on TV saw at least one Vietnamese match. My job is probably the easiest in the world. I put a sign on the front door of our office that simply says, "Vietnam playing tomorrow. Buy tickets here". Pure genius.

To maintain my interest while living in Vietnam, I buy a motorcycle. But it isn't enough. So, I join an organization that attracts a loyal following of 0.000000097 per cent of the population; the Hanoi Swans Australian Rules Football Club. My Vietnamese colleagues are dismissive of my "foo-ty" encouraging me to "forget about it".

But we Swans are an enthusiastic lot arguing that our marketing weakness is our marketing strength. According to us, it is our footy code rather than the kangaroo which is Australia's thumb print. In a crowded market place, that's a point of differentiation which, if nothing else, potentially gives us more airtime than if we were just another soccer team.

And we have had airtime: in the press, radio and, coming soon says VTV3, television. This has attracted increasing support from sponsors which is so critical for us in hosting international matches. Thailand and Malaysia, long established teams in the region, quietly doffed their hats to the Hanoi Swans' ability to host such matches and draw crowds of 150 - 200 people.

Back in Australia, the Hanoi Swans have met with the CEO and Marketing Manager of our "mother club", the Sydney Swans. Not only has Sydney supplied us with our playing kit, but they also won last year's AFL Grand Final.

What? You weren't distracted by the red & white herring about the Grand Final? By the way, did I mention we also met with Sydney Swans Legend, Bobby Skilton who signed a piece of memorabilia for us?

(Message from Pathfinder Editor: Phil gets overly excited at this point and we had to edit out his ramblings)

Well, the Hanoi Swans are in a building phase with our on field team. The number of young, fit, energetic Aussies with silky footy skills who happen to live in Hanoi are nearly as scarce as plastic stools at Pho Bo time. In our match against



Malaysia in early March, we supplemented the Aussie contingent with two Irishmen, one American, one Englishman and a Vietnamese. While we didn't win the match, our player list indicates we are at least winning broader support in the international community.

Our next opportunity to win on-field happens at 2.30pm on 25 March against the Jakarta Bintangs. The match will be held at Hanoi's UN International School, Ciputra and is free of charge. Pleasingly, the official whisper on the streets of Hanoi is that, in a close one, the Hanoi Swans will get up by a goal. Imagine. How good would it be??

Promoting the Hanoi Swans in a swirling, sea of soccer is a challenge - probably the best fun challenge in Asian Football today.

For more information on the Hanoi Swans visit www.hanoiswans.com

Anyone is welcome to train, play or just support the club.

