



THE GOOD PUNCH

Matthew Pflaum tackles the sport of Aussie Rules in Vietnam. Photos by **Charles Barnes**

The sun has reached its pinnacle over the RMIT sports complex. On the groomed pitch, sturdy leather oval-shaped balls litter the northern edge of the ground, waiting to be handled. It's a sweltering day, but a crowd gathers on the periphery of the field.

The subtle breeze and the shaded park benches provide respite from the prodigious heat. Girlfriends, wives, friends, fans, children and a few spectators occupy the benches. The players apply

sunscreen, put on their kits and start to warm-up. Swatches of red and black dot the fields — the colours of the Vietnam Swans.

"About half the people who attend training are members, who pay annual dues and receive full kits, bags and other benefits," says Sam Conroy, the Saigon chapter president for the Vietnam Swans. "The rest are typically friends of the members, people passing through on holiday or new people who

are interested in joining."

There are two Australian students studying abroad at RMIT in Saigon. Another man is visiting Vietnam for three months to take care of his children and family while his wife does research on speech pathology.

However, Aussie Rules still has a dearth of local followers.

"Widespread sports like tennis and football dominate people's attention, and perhaps Vietnamese aren't big enough or



strong enough to play sports like rugby or Aussie Rules," say Duyen, who works at Pacharan and is somewhat familiar with the game.

Playing to Remember

Aussie Rules has been played in the country at least since the American War, with Australian soldiers playing two seasons per year in Vung Tau where their logistics base was located. For the past two years, the Vietnam Swans have played an ANZAC Friendship match in Vung Tau to commemorate veterans of the war, promote the continued amicable relationship between Vietnam and Australia and encourage Australian veterans to revisit the country. Phil Johns is positive about the relationship between Australia and Vietnam, and says there are many beneficial outcomes of the event.

Running the show for Aussie Rules in Vietnam, Phil Johns is the national president for the Vietnam Swans, which now has clubs in Hanoi, Hoi An, Danang, Ho Chi Minh City, Binh Duong and Vung Tau, having started off as the

Hanoi Swans back in 2003. Rather than always going to other countries to play matches, they wanted to host their own tournaments. So The Swans expanded south to other cities in Vietnam.

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The Vietnam Swans have done a remarkable job with Aussie Rules in this country. It certainly isn't easy to introduce a peculiar or quixotic custom into a new country. They assist with various events and foster relationships with community leaders. They play international friendly matches in neighbouring Cambodia and other countries and also have fundraising and charity events to support significant

causes in Vietnam, particularly drowning prevention. Their annual Vung Tau charity match commemorates veterans of the war and works toward reconciliation and harmony between Australia and Vietnam.

This year, the ANZAC Friendship Match will be held at the Vung Tau Dog Track between Apr. 23 and 25. The squad will also face the China Reds on Apr. 21, followed by the Legends and All Stars matches later that day. The following two days will feature tours of the former war sites and memorial services.

And as for the future development of Aussie Rules Football in Vietnam, things are gradually changing. A Vietnamese-Australian recently made the reserve squad of the most famous footy club in Australia. And, as Phil says, "People are very curious about [the sport], they like its free-flowing, fast nature. The Vietnamese think it's hysterical the way we punch and bounce an oval-shaped ball. They giggle their heads off."

For those interested in joining the Vietnam Swans or watching a game, visit www.vietnamswans.com. 

