

So it's Hanoi, but Aussies rule, OK

With the footy season under way, Hanoi-based journalist **CHRIS CANTY** looks at a little-known side in Vietnam where anyone can get a game

WHILE Hanoi is considered one of South-East Asia's most exciting destinations, for a group of slightly balding, chubby but extremely passionate men, it's their home ground.

For the Hanoi Swans Aussie Rules team, the game is a chance to hold on to something uniquely Australian in a town only a small number of their compatriots call home.

It's also probably the easiest place in the world a visitor can "get a guernsey" in the starting 18, since the team usually only has a dozen players.

They train at what is commonly called "dead cat stadium", named after a cat found dead in the centre of the ground and, as the players begin their drills sporadic levels of skills, courage and fake asthma attacks can be seen

On the sidelines, Swans rover Michael Johnson, manager of a local tour company, says: "The team has provided me with the opportunity to rediscover how short and slow I am in a jovial family atmosphere with the occasional soft-tissue injury thrown in."

From a distance, the boys gliding through Hanoi's hazy smog look like any other team.

A PE teacher at the international school stabs a Sherrin (the single most important object in Vietnam) to the local Italian restaurant manager, who handballs it to the diplomat, who then hits the engineer on the chest.

Anyone is welcome to come and play. A sign at the local hostel advertising training times has brought down the occasional backpacker, some of whom have sworn to return to Vietnam and "play for the Bloods".



THEY'RE GAME: The mighty Swans line up for a photo shoot and show they can mix it with the best on-field

The Lowdown

GETTING THERE: Vietnam Airlines flies to Hanoi from Sydney and Melbourne. See travel agents.

SWANNING AROUND: Hanoi Swans train all year, except June, July and August, when they can't be bothered.

DETAILS: For information on sponsoring, training and match times, email club president Daryl Taber at dtaber@unishanoi.org. Everyone welcome.



Club president, primary school teacher and winger Daryl Taber, says: "With the newcomers you never know who will turn up and what part of the world they'll be from. It's just great there's a place in Hanoi to play and talk about the greatest game on earth."

The Swans started a few years ago and are sponsored by current AFL premier Sydney.

While the players like to think of themselves as a type of ageing

draft camp for the Swans, they have yet to share the same success. A defeat away from home by the Kuala Lumpur Warriors last year could not be helped after their tactic of staying up and drinking the night before backfired - tiredness and dehydration hit them at the exact moment the opening siren sounded.

This month a home-ground advantage was still not enough to defeat the Warriors.

And they went down by a kick against the Bangkok Tigers at home but won a whole new legion of Vietnamese fans.

Despite losing, the Swans continue to sing their theme song at the end of each game, and proceed to go to bed far later than any opposition.

When training ends it's obligatory for the boys to head down the road, sit in a gutter, and have a Bia Hoi (draft beer) that's brewed daily in Hanoi and costs only 10c a dirty glass.

Daryl says training is just a place to run off the beer for 60 minutes... "then put more back on over the following three, four or five hours".

Stories of past glory, near misses, and how bad Carlton are continue for a while before the boys head to the Swans' clubhouse, which outsiders call the Barracuda Bar.

After the plate full of barbecued snags has disappeared, the boys start to head home mumbling "the next win is just around the corner".

Things to see and do around town when not cheering the Swans

- STROLL through The Old Quarter**
Amid the hyper activity, families continue professions handed down for generations. The Old Quarter is world-renowned for its labyrinth of lanes with tiny food stalls and markets where delicacies such as the Hanoi spring roll are incredibly cheap - and delicious.
- SIP a coffee in the French District**
Its series of tree-lined avenues and elegant French buildings have given Hanoi the title of "The Paris of Asia". It's home to the majestic Opera House (1911), where hundreds of newlyweds pose.
- VISIT an icon at the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum**
The mausoleum holds the embalmed body of Vietnam's greatest and most beloved

- hero - Uncle Ho - making it the most visited site in the country for the Vietnamese.
- PADDLE the plastic swans on the lakes**
It's a place of serenity in contrast to the chaos of people and traffic. Hoan Kiem Lake is said to be home to giant turtles, and an early morning sanctuary for the many practising Tai Chi. Truc Bac Lake is lined with coconut juice stalls and a series of floating restaurants popular with the dating locals.
- SIT in the gutter at a Bia Hoi Bar**
Try the thirst-quenching taste of the daily brew and enjoy the welcoming simplicity of the surroundings where locals are always happy to sit and share a bowl of rice noodle soup.



RULES OF THE BAR: The Swans enjoy a post-match "inquest"

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