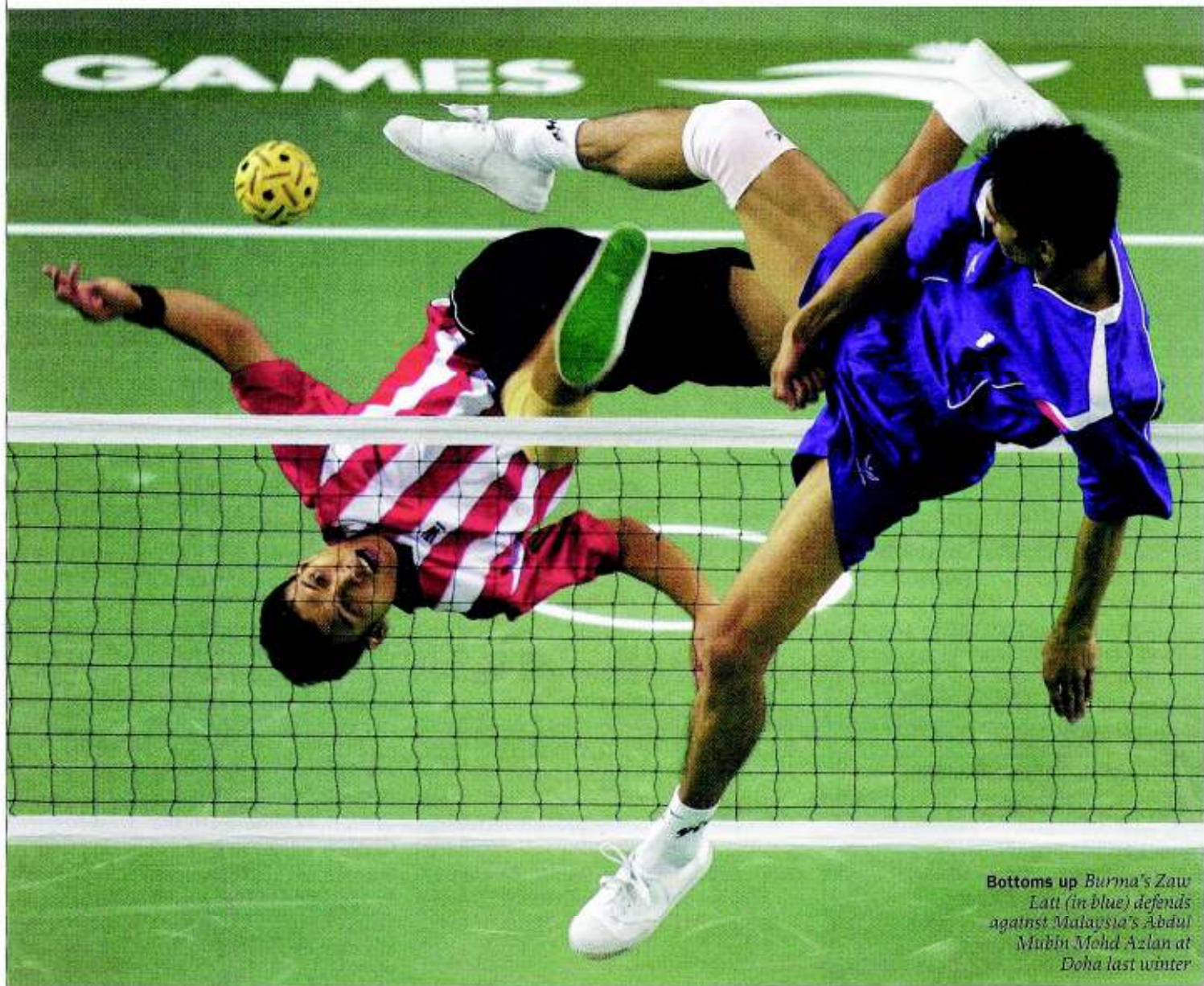


'I had no idea brides were so ready to bare it.'

AMSALE ABERRA, WEDDING-DRESS DESIGNER

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Bottoms up Burma's Zaw Latt (in blue) defends against Malaysia's Abdul Mubin Mohd Azlan at Doha last winter

SPORT

By Leaps and Bounds. The bruising yet balletic Asian game of *sepak takraw* is proving to be a global play

BY STEVE MOLLMAN

IF THERE WAS ONE LESSON LEARNED FROM the Asian Games held in Doha last December, it was this: the thousand seats allocated to matches of *sepak takraw* could have been doubled—maybe even tripled—and the crowds would have still filled them.

Imagine the speed and precision of volleyball cut with the aerial kicks of soccer at its showiest—set in the intensely combative, close-quarters environment of an indoor court—and you have some idea why this Southeast Asian sport is so visually addictive. *Sepak takraw* looks like it was devised to a global broadcaster's order. But it originated in the palace yards of Malaysia and Thailand in the 15th century—and after 600 years, it is becoming an overnight sensation.

"*Sepak takraw* is one of the most exciting spectator sports in the world," says Rick Engel, a Canadian who fell in love with the game while traveling through Southeast Asia and now promotes it in his homeland, where he calculates he has helped introduce

ball over the net. If the ball hits the ground on the opponent's side, or if the return is hit out of bounds, a point is scored. There are three players per side, though variations exist. But the game's telegenic oomph (and there's plenty) comes from sustained volleys, deadly serves—the hard plastic ball reaches speeds up to 100 km/h—and the cartwheel spike, a power move of agility and aggression where a player backflips into the air to strike the ball with his foot (the court is only covered with thin matting, so landing without injury requires practice). A defender usually leaps up to block a spike, resulting in a dramatic acrobatic showdown—on nearly every play. Some rallies include many spikes and blocks, ratcheting

The Thais and Malays are historic rivals and dominate international competitions (at Doha, the Thai team took home four golds and a silver; Malaysia left with two silvers and a bronze); both claim the game as their own, and even split the sport's name between them, with *sepak* meaning kick in Malay and *takraw* meaning ball in Thai.

The burgeoning international interest in *sepak takraw* won't catapult their players into the stratospheric income brackets of a Thierry Henry or Kobe Bryant, but it could turn them into decently paid professionals. At present, a top player in the Thai league, the sport's most developed, will earn a rough maximum of \$15,000 for a four-month season. A true god of the game like Thai veteran Suebsak Phunsueb—considered *sepak takraw*'s top player for the past several years—might be able to supplement that with advertisements and media work, but he's still no Beckham. At the humbler end of the scale, semiprofessionals like Susumu Teramoto, a 31-year-old from Japan, will accept salaries of approximately \$200 a month, plus food and lodging, for the privilege of competing against the best in the business.

Right now, there isn't a nation able to regularly defeat the Thai or Malaysian juggernauts, but they're certainly hoping to. Teams like Burma, where the traditional sport of *chinline* requires much of the same skills as *sepak takraw*, and Indonesia, which has brought in top Thai coach Somkiet Sungsatitanon, will need to be taken seriously in coming years (Burma won three bronzes and a silver at Doha; Indonesia came out with three bronzes). And yet Sungsatitanon is under no illusions about the scale of the challenge before him. "If he were to play Thailand now, he'd be too intimidated," he says at the courtside, pointing to 16-year-old server Dani Slamet, one of Indonesia's promising juniors, as the youngster goes through his paces. "We have to make his heart strong, step by step."

Among Western nations, Germany is in front. Last year, it became the first Western team to reach the quarter-finals in the prestigious King's Cup, an annual tournament held in Bangkok. The players' football skills helped, says Angerhausen: "There's a technical part of football you really can use if you play *sepak takraw*, and vice versa."

Canadian promoter Engel reckons that "in 50 years *sepak takraw* can be like the NBA." Of course, it's impossible to say whether that's a realistic possibility or a devotee's daydream. But we can say this much: the next time *sepak takraw* features in the lineup of a major international sports event like the Asian Games, there'd better be a lot more than a thousand seats on offer. ■



Eye on the ball Members of the Philippines' national team focus on mastering *sepak takraw*'s finer moves

tens of thousands of schoolchildren to it through classes, books and videos. South of the border, Engel estimates up to a quarter-million students may have tried it in gym class, and the Sepak Takraw U.S. Open is expected to attract over 30 adult teams to a tournament held June 30 and July 1—up from just over 20 last year. But North Americans are not the only ones interested: many European countries have national sides, and fans, too (interest rose after the Doha matches were broadcast on the Eurosport satellite and cable network). There are Brazilian, Sudanese, Chinese, Iranian and Nepalese teams. A professional league has emerged in South Korea. In Japan, more than 50 teams compete in a national championship (up from the original six in 1989). And earlier this month, the Sepak Takraw Swiss Open in Basel drew five European nations and five Malaysian squads.

So what's the fuss about? *Sepak takraw* looks and scores like volleyball, except players use anything but their hands to get the

up the suspense until the crowd is collectively gasping. "If you see a bicycle kick in soccer, it's a really rare occasion and everybody's applauding, but in *sepak takraw* you see it almost in every volley," says Daniel Angerhausen, secretary-general of Germany's *sepak takraw* association.

The game's expansion is considered good news in Malaysia and Thailand where, two years ago, the government-funded International Takraw Academy was set up in Bangkok to train both local and overseas players, coaches and administrators.

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—DANIEL ANGERHAUSEN, SECRETARY-GENERAL, GERMAN *SEPAK TAKRAW* ASSOCIATION