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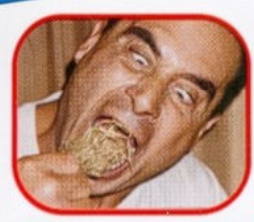
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CRAZY KICKS: These players have mad hops.

Kung Football

Sepak takraw makes you think on your feet | JACOB KALISH

Anyone who has seen soccer great Pele execute one of his patented bicycle kicks — leaping in midair and directing the ball behind him, leg over head — knows it's one of the most exciting moves in sports. Now imagine seeing one every few *minutes* and you get an idea of what it's like to watch *sepak takraw*, the national sport of Malaysia.

Essentially a net game played with feet, the sport incorporates the skills of soccer, volleyball, and

badminton with a little gymnastics and kung fu thrown in for kicks.

Play starts when the server, or *tekong*, is tossed the grapefruit-sized ball — traditionally made from hand-woven rattan (a type of wood) or hard plastic — by a teammate while he has one foot in a small “serving circle.” He then must kick the ball over the net with the other foot. After that, volleyball rules pretty much apply, except the ball can't be touched by the hands or arms.

Wildly popular in most of

Asia, and commonly called simply takraw, the game is played three-on-three in a badminton-sized court (20-by-44 feet) with a five-foot-high net. While all its elements require impressive skill, the spike gives takraw its bling. “The acrobatic spiking catches spectators’ eyes at first sight,” admits Pheng Vang, the U.S.’s best takraw player.

Top takraw players must combine great foot-eye coordination with quickness, anticipation, power, flexibility, and acrobatic skills. Watching the sport's two powerhouses — Malaysia and Thailand — allows you to see the game at its most intense. Thailand's biggest superstar, Suebsak Phunsueb, is known for his lightning-fast and accurate “horse kick” serve.

In Southeast Asia, takraw courts are as common in the backyards of homes as basketball hoops are in the USA, but takraw is catching on in the rest of the world, too. “There are now just as many European and North American countries playing sepak takraw as Asian countries,” says Rick Engel, a Canadian who formed the Sepak Takraw Association of Canada in 1998 and runs takrawcanada.com.

Maybe one day mastering the roll spike (jumping up and spiking the ball with the same foot you jumped off) will be as common as the slam-dunk. Pheng, for one, thinks that takraw has unlimited potential in the States. “Kids will love this sport,” he says, “once they get their feet into it.”

Talking Takraw

Be the first on your block to get the lowdown on this high-kicking sport

TAKRAW GLOSSARY

Sepak: Malay for “kick.”

Takraw: Thai for “ball.”

Regu: Malay for “team.”

Each *regu* comprises three starters and one sub.

Sunback Spike: An impressive offensive move in which a player jumps with his back to the net and kicks the ball over his shoulder while flipping.

ISTAF: The International Sepak Takraw Federation, takraw's governing body. They won't reinstate Pete Rose, either.

FACTS TO IMPRESS SPORTS-BAR BABES

■ “A version of takraw was being played in Malaysia in the 15th century, as noted in the famous Malaysian text the *Sejarah Melayu*.”



■ “There is a good chance takraw will be among the new sports introduced at the 2012 Olympics. Some changes might be made, however, like using softer material for the ball.”

■ “The father of modern takraw is Hamid Maidin of Malaysia, who introduced the net and volleyball-style rules in 1945. Speaking of which, my place or yours?” —JK