

HEAD OVER HEELS FOR THEIR SPORT



CANDACE ELLIOTT, THE JOURNAL

Ben Cochrane kicks the ball over the net while Jared Clark tries to block, as they demonstrate takraw at Hawrelak Park.

Takraw puts best feet forward

Beyond hacky-sack, it's like volleyball without hands

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Shawn Daniels thought the high-flying kicks of takraw looked easy — until he tried it. “When I checked out this game, I was amazed,” said the 233-pound fullback, who plays with the Edmonton Eskimos.

In fact, Daniels was so intrigued by the sport that he became a board member of the Sepak Takraw Association of Canada.

“Sure, everyone plays hacky-sack, but I’ve never seen anything quite like this. With takraw, there’s no fooling around.”

That’s because the game demands a high level of agility that’s capable of putting top acrobats and gymnasts to shame. The three-a-side game, which originated in Malaysia, requires players to launch a guava-sized wicker ball over a net using their feet, legs, chest and head. The volleyball-style rules allow the best in the game to spike the ball via 360-degree cartwheel kicks.

Such players hail from countries like Thailand, Malaysia, Japan and Korea. They use the same foot to jump, kick and land

on when they make a walloping spike. The ball can reach blistering speeds of close to 100 km/h.

While Daniels has been in tune with the game for about four years, Eskimo linebacker Charles Assmann looked puzzled when Daniels tossed him the ball on the field at Commonwealth Stadium. “What is this again?” he asked in bewilderment. The ball sprang off his foot, sending it rolling onto the track. The pair erupted in laughter.

But not every Edmontonian is unfamiliar with takraw. The sport received an enthusiastic reception from spectators at this year’s Heritage Festival, when Edmonton Exile finished fourth in the

Canadian all-comers category during the 2001 Canadian Open Sepak Takraw Championships. Team U.S.A. defeated Japan in a tie-breaker, capturing first place in the tournament.

Ben Cochrane, a member of Exile, saw the sport as a natural progression from similar games such as foot-bag net. This kick-oriented game transformed the ever-popular hacky-sack circle into a team sport.

The 21-year-old and a few of his friends recently made the switch from foot-bag net to takraw and haven’t looked back.

“Takraw is definitely a faster game,” he says.

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Esks' Daniels a takraw enthusiast

TAKRAW

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"You really have to be on your toes so you can predict the moves of your opponents."

While Cochrane says he and his teammates have been playing for about six months, some in the Laotian community have been playing in Edmonton for years.

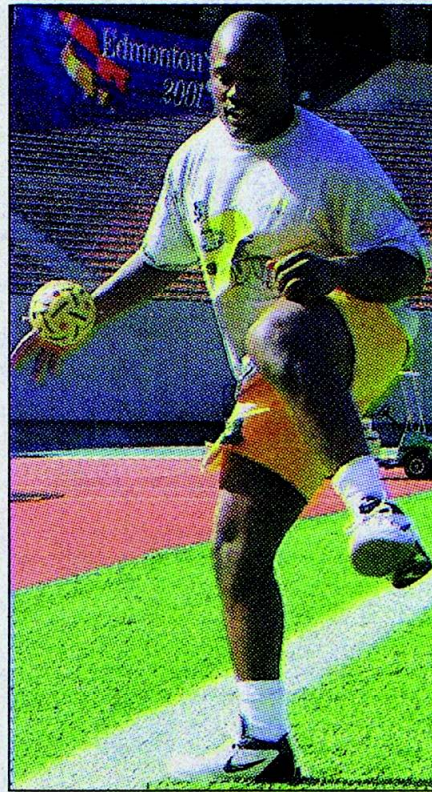
Laotians were believed to have brought the game to Canada in the late 1970s. That's when thousands of Laotian refugees immigrated to Canadian cities after the country's civil war ended in 1975.

The sport really took off in Canada after takraw fanatic Rick Engel of Regina returned from teaching English in China in 1989.

During his stay, he came across the game during jaunts to Malaysia and Thailand.

"When I saw it, my first thought was 'Wow!' and my second was 'We Canadians can do this, too,'" he said.

He began introducing it to schoolchildren in and around Regina as part of a program coordinated by a non-profit organization called Asian Sport, Edu-



SHAUGHN BUTTS, THE JOURNAL

Shawn Daniels tries takraw at Commonwealth Stadium.

cation and Culture International. Engel formed the Sepak Takraw Association of Canada in 1998. He says the sport will be featured at the 2005 Canada Games to be held in Regina.

"This is one step closer to official Olympic status. We're really excited."

AN ANCIENT GAME

■ "Sepak raga" was the name of an ancient game played in the Malaysian states and in the neighbouring countries of Singapore and Brunei. "Sepak" is Malay for "kick" and "raga" is the rattan ball used in the game. Variations of the game were played in Thailand where it was called "takraw," in the Philippines "sepa sepa," in Myanmar "ching loong," in Indonesia

"rago," and in Laos "kator."

■ It was only when the South East Asia Peninsular Games were inaugurated in 1959 that the participants agreed on an international name for the sport, calling it "sepak takraw." It is, however, most commonly referred to as takraw.

Source:

www.takrawcanada.com