

# PEACE ARCH NEWS SPORTS & RECREATION

## Just for kicks

Malaysia's national sport introduced to White Rock

by Tracy Holmes  
Staff Reporter

**B**rydon Blacklaws gets a kick out of playing Malaysia's national sport, sepak takraw.

"When I play, I can't put it down," the 16-year-old White Rock resident said during a clinic on the spectacular sport Saturday.

"It's the addiction with the ball."

Blacklaws was introduced to the game—which is similar to volleyball, but played entirely without hands and arms—during a recent five-month trip to Thailand.

Its popularity there, and throughout Asia, compares with that of hockey in North America.

"It's just everywhere on the street," Blacklaws said.

"Within a kilometre of our house, there were six courts."

The game's history goes back hundreds of years. It has been played traditionally by the indigenous Malays of the Malaysian Peninsula as far back as the 15th Century.

Back then it was called sepak raga and was played in a circle, usually by a group of men or boys. They tried to keep the ball in the air as long as possible, using only their heads or feet.

A net and formal rules were introduced in 1945.

In 1998, sepak takraw was launched as a demonstration sport in the Commonwealth Games. It is now played in more than 20 countries worldwide.

Seeing the interest both his sons took in the game, upon their return to White Rock, Rick Blacklaws organized regular practices at Ray Shepherd Elementary.

Via e-mail, he found out about members of the Canadian national sepak takraw team needing a place to stay for one night, March 18, en route to the world championships in Kuantam, Malaysia this week.

He opened up his home and the group took advantage of the opportunity to raise awareness of the sport by hosting a special clinic at the school Saturday afternoon.

Led by the team members, it drew a number of interested young adults and kids, and a group of players from Surrey.

Rick Engel, president of the Regina-based Sepak Takraw Association of Canada, said the game is part of the Laotian culture, intro-



Chung Chow photo

Canadian sepak takraw national team member Vatsone Phonsavady was in town last week putting his best foot forward.

duced to Canada by immigrants from the southeast Asia country. He believes it has a real future here.

Requiring a good warm up to prevent injury, the game is extremely high-energy, good for developing leg strength, flexibility and eye-foot coordination.

"Once you get playing, you're sweatin' in five minutes," he said.

The game can be played both indoors and out, incorporating skills used to play hacky sack and soccer.

Played over a five-foot net on a badminton-sized court, it has rules similar to volleyball. The main difference is players can use any part of their body except their hands and arms.

It involves one *regu* of three people—an alternate makes four; three *regus* equals one team—on each side of the net. The object is to volley the woven ball into the opponents' court.

After the ball has been served, each *regu* is allowed three hits to get it over the net. Unlike volleyball, one player can make more

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than one consecutive contact with the ball, as long as the total number of hits per side does not exceed three.

A match features three sets, with the winner of two out of three taking victory. To win, a *regu* must score 15 points. If a third set is necessary, it is

only scored to six.

To begin a game, order of play is determined by a coin toss. The serve consists of a forward (back to the net) tossing the ball to the server, who must kick it over the net in one shot with the inside of his foot.

The game ball is woven plastic, ranging in weight from 140 to 200 grams. The tightness of the weave determines the spring, bounce and speed of the ball—the harder the ball, the more bounce.

Younger players begin with the lighter balls, moving up as their skill level increases.

Engel, who worked with the manufacturer to produce balls suitable for western countries new to the sport, said it is an easy game to introduce in schools. The only additional equipment needed is the ball, which can be purchased for approximately \$20.

The national association can assist schools in contacting the supplier.

Despite some of the moves—the most advanced, the Roll or Sunback Spike, involves the player jumping with his back to the net, rotating in mid-air and kicking the ball over the opposite shoulder from the kicking foot with a flip-like motion—the injury rate is no higher than most other sports.

"I haven't seen anybody get hurt," said Engel, who has played for two years and has competed twice in the world championships.

But Rick Blacklaws insists it's a sport geared at the younger generation.

"I'm 45, so it hurts me to look," he joked. He, too, believes it will catch on in Canada. "Once you play it in the street, it becomes popular. That's when it becomes entrenched," he said.

"Give it 20 years."

Blacklaws hopes to help raise enough interest in sepak takraw to put together a local foursome to take to the national championships this summer as a demonstration team.

Anyone interested in more information can call him at 536-8220.