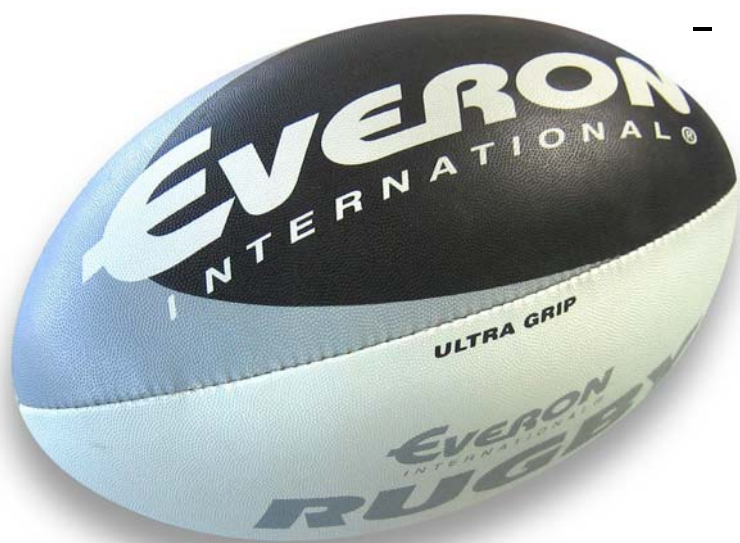


Vagabonds, Viagrabonds and a whole lot more

- The Phuket Rugby Scene

By James Goyder



The popularity of rugby as a sport is by no means global. While fans in Britain, Australasia and South Africa in particular are passionate about the sport many corners of the globe still remain indifferent to its appeal.

So it might come as a surprise to learn that rugby is one of the fastest growing sports in Phuket, with hundreds of players flocking to the island every year for the massively successful Phuket Rugby 10s and an increasing number of schools embracing the game.

This growth of rugby in Phuket is largely down to the efforts of Pat Cotter (who moved here in 1991) and the Phuket Vagabonds, Phuket's only rugby club. "There was no rugby

at all in Phuket at that time. I used to play for the British Club when I lived in Bangkok," Pat recalls. "After moving to Phuket, I ran into a couple of friends who I had played with up there, Ben Hennessy and Steve Wainwright. As there was no opportunity for games here we started playing a bit of touch rugby on the beach."

Phuket's attraction as a destination for touring teams is obvious and it was not long before Pat was contacted by a team from Sri Lanka who were looking for opposition in Phuket, "The Sri Lankan Champions Kandy wanted to come over to Phuket for an end-of-season tour and were looking for a game, so we got a few like-minded people together and put up a side, which was totally outclassed and



we lost by a score of 52-5 but the Phuket Vagabonds were born. A few of the originals are still playing now, notably Steve 'Hotdog' Hatchett, who is our oldest playing member at 54," says Pat.

The Phuket Vagabonds would start playing regularly against visiting Navy ships but Pat saw the huge potential for rugby on the island and wanted to start doing more to exploit it, "We needed something to give teams an excuse to visit. Our first attempt was a 15 a side tournament between four teams, Phuket, Abu Dhabi, Aussie Air force and the Singapore Bucks. Abu Dhabi won that one but it was decided that the 15s wouldn't grow and as 7s was being played all over the place and most of

the Phuket team being long in the tooth we decided to try out the 10 a side format," he says.

The first ever Phuket rugby 10s took place at Sapanhin Stadium in Phuket Town in July 1999. Six teams participated: the Phuket Vagabonds, who were then known as the Phuket Gazettes, the Pot Bellied Pigs from Hong Kong, the Vientiane Buffaloes from Laos and Panaga RFC from Brunei with the Pot Bellied Pigs defeating the Kuala Lumpur Dogs to win the inaugural Phuket Rugby 10s.

The Vagabonds are firmly committed to introducing rugby to youngsters in Phuket and one of the highlights of the recent Phuket Rugby 10s was a 15 a side match between the British International School and the Sainamyen school in Patong.



The New Zealand Rugby Union is considering setting up a Rugby Academy here and the Thai Rugby Union is also looking at Phuket as a venue to host visiting international teams and to host international events like the 80'80's rugby and regional Rugby 7s tournaments.

It is a testament to how the competition has grown that the 2009 Rugby 10s attracted 35 teams from all over the globe despite being held during the peak of the off season and with the tourist industry still reeling from the airport closures and recession.

It is not just the Phuket tourist industry, which has benefitted from the unprecedented success of the Phuket Rugby 10s. Every year, money is raised for the Asia Centre Foundation, an NGO helping disadvantaged children, and children-at-risk by providing care, training and

education. The 2008 Rugby 10s raised close to 700,000

baht and Pat was subsequently invited to London to receive the prestigious Spirit of Rugby Award from the IRB, in conjunction with Roelein Muller of the Asia Centre Foundation.

The Rugby 10s consists of two sections, the open and the imaginatively named "Coffin Codgers", which is open to players aged 35 and over and regularly features Phuket's very own veterans team, the even more imaginatively named Phuket Viagrabonds. However, it is not just aging ex pats with their best sporting years well behind them who are benefiting from the growth of rugby in Phuket.

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in Patong. BIS won the game by a solitary try to gain revenge for the dramatic loss they had suffered to Sainamyen in a 7 a side match earlier in the year.

Originally a football team, the Sainamyen boys have taken to rugby like the proverbial duck to water. They traveled to Songkhla to take part in their first ever fully fledged rugby 7s tournament in July. Despite playing against teams whose players were often two years older the Sainamyen under 13s side still put in a credible performance, winning one match and losing another by the narrowest of margins.

Pat's ambition is to have a youth league up and running in Phuket by the end of the year, "We are developing a youth program and the hope is to get more schools involved with the aim to start a junior league by the end of the year. There is a new sports club being built at the Phuket International Academy who want to help develop the sport on the island and will give us a permanent base to run the rugby operation. The Thai Rugby Union is also talking about making Phuket its base," he says.

Phuket is currently one of very few provinces in Thailand which does not enter a team into the national rugby competition and this is a situation that Pat and the Phuket Vagabonds are anxious to address.

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