

## Football Anyone?

I've always had bad luck playing football. I have no problem watching a game at a football field, but get me out there near a ball and anything can happen.

Back in the 1980's Thailand caught football fever and nothing has ever been the same again.

Almost every Thai you talk to these days follows football in some fashion. The guys down at my local pub, the women at work, the taxi driver who ferries you around the city, the Indian tailor...they all have their favorite team and favorite player. Strangely, though, they all barrack for the same team; Manchester United, and David Beckham is the only player they know.

This is a typical conversation you are likely to have with almost any Thai taxi driver.

"Where you come from?"

"I'm from England."

"Ah! Manchester United numbah one."

Or,

"Oh. You know Tony Beckham? He numbah one."

It's not like the taxi driver is even from sophisticated Bangkok. He's probably from a tiny village in Nakhon Nowhere Province, but he sure knows more about football and footballers than I ever will.

There is no getting away from it. Everywhere I go football often dominates the conversation.

Of course, you'll find football fever all over the world. No matter where you go football is the number one topic of conversation...at least, that's how it looks to me.

You could be five hundred kilometers up the Amazon River and an Indian will pop his head out of the jungle and ask, "You like Manchester United?"

If you say "No" he will probably shoot a poisoned dart at you. Beckham has a lot to answer for.

Despite this, you have to wonder how much some of these 'fans' really know about football. Nearly every one of them supports ManU, but I've never had anyone outside Australia ask me how I like the team from, say, Footscray.

Heck! Come to think of it, I've never had anyone outside Melbourne, the home of Australian Rules, ask me about Footscray, or Aussie Rules football either for that matter. (Ok, ok, there's no need to go all anal on me. Someone has since pointed out that Footscray FC is no more, and the game is now called AFL, or to give it the full name, Australian Football League...but hey, what do I know?!)

Aussie Rules football in Melbourne have never been just a game. It's an obsession. I was on a bus one day in Melbourne when two old gents of Italian heritage got on and sat behind me. Their conversation went like this. It really did.

"Hey Joe, you think-a St. Kilda will-a win-a da league this year?"

"Are you a-crazy? Footscray is-a gonna win for sure!"

"Mama Mia! Is not-a possible. You know the trouble with-a Footscray? There's-a too many a-bloody Australians playing on-a da team. If they had-a more Italians a-playing they would-a be in like-a da bloody Flynn!"

My relationship with football has been a disaster all my life. I mean, I've really tried hard to get into the game, but it just never worked out.

I begged my grandfather to buy me a pair of boots and a soccer ball when I was about five years old. We were living in Gibraltar at the time. That's a small British colony just south of Real Madrid.

One day my grandfather brought home the boots and ball I'd been clamoring for. You should have seen my excitement. I had visions of kicking that ball like a champion...and I didn't even know what a champion was back then!

Two seconds after I ripped the paper off the parcel I sat down, pulled on the boots and then had to call for help. The laces were twenty foot long!

What was I supposed to do with them?

Granddad helped. We threaded them through all the right holes and did the first tie. Then we had to wrap them around the arch of my foot a few times before we finally got the ends short enough so that I wouldn't go arse-over-tit as soon as I started walking. I got up and my granddad started laughing.

"What's wrong," I asked.

"Nothing son," he wheezed, "it's just that you look like you have a severe case of fallen arches."

But it got worse. As soon as I stood up on those beautiful studs and tried to walk – whoosh! I went flying backwards and landed with a crash on my back.

It took a while before I managed to get used to walking in those funny boots. But when I finally mastered them they sure felt good.

I was going to play football!

Walking gingerly at first, I went outside and managed to saunter casually down to where some of the local boys were kicking around a bunch of old rags they had fashioned into a ball.

A football was a luxury they could only dream about.

I didn't know it then, but I was about to become their hero. As soon as they saw my shiny new football I was inducted as an instant team member.

Big mistake!

That was when I found out that my hand, foot and eye coordination were severely impaired. Instead of kicking the ball back to my new friends it went everywhere but where it should.

Maybe it was just a problem with the geography of Gibraltar. If you can find a piece of flat ground bigger than a postage stamp on the Rock you have to fight the Barbary Apes for it. Humans live on the steep hillsides too.

Anyway, after a few false starts I kicked that ball up the hill past the opposing team. Well, when I say "team" I mean half a dozen urchins who were using the game as an excuse for some close contact sport. They were a rough mob.

The ball sailed over their heads in a beautiful arc to land far behind them.

With no one there to stop it the ball bounced up the hill a few times, stopped, and then started bouncing back down. It gathered momentum, bounding just a little higher as it went. By the time it reached us it was bouncing so high none of us could reach it. It continued hurtling past us at a great speed.

Luckily, someone on "my team" further down the hill stopped it and we continued playing.

We spent the afternoon chasing that damn thing up and down the hill, sometimes stopping it, but mostly not. Well, for a while anyway.

I had to hang up my boots after the boys kicked me out of the team.

I may not be too good at judging how to catch a ball, but I could kick like a master.

We had changed places when the disaster happened.

My team was at the top of the hill with the opposing team down below us.

One of them kicked the ball up directly at me. I watched it come, judging my moment perfectly. As soon as it bounced I swung my foot and gave it an almighty boot.

It was one of the best kicks I ever managed. The only trouble is, it sailed right over the heads of the boys below and continued on all the way down to the harbor. It landed in the water, ploughing up a bow wave as it bounced far out to sea. It was last seen headed for North Africa.

They tell me soccer is very big in Morocco today. It's probably all my fault. I bet the first ball to reach that country was mine.

My next serious encounter with football was in my early teens. It was a sports day at my high school in Penang, Malaysia (I had a real international upbringing). I had just got over my desire to play cricket after watching one of my schoolmates catch a ball with his two front teeth. The ball won.

Later, I was tempted to join the soccer team, but my last encounter with that game still rankled. I wasn't sure I wanted to go chasing a ball I accidentally kicked into the snake infested jungle half a mile away.

So, I wandered around the school playing field and happened to spot a bunch of proto-Tarzans flying up into the sky after a skinny oval football.

"What game is that you are playing?" I asked.

"We're playing Australian Rules football, the game for real Australians, mate," they replied. "Not like that poofy soccer game they're playing over there. Can you kick?"

What a silly question. I nodded eagerly.

"Come on and join us then."

Well, I was intrigued and after watching them do a few flying catches, a "mark" they called it, I knew I wanted to play Aussie Rules too. I particularly liked the fact that you could hang onto the ball and run with it as long as you bounced it as you went. Then you could "drop kick" the ball to someone further down the field, as long as they weren't "off-side", whatever that was. I could never figure that rule out, so I earned plenty of penalties during each game.

Not long after I started playing my starring moment came. I was in the direct path of an approaching long ball arcing out of a cloudless blue sky.

I took a quick run towards it, jumped up on one of my teammate's shoulders, as you do, leaped over him onto the shoulders of yet another team mate, and held my hands up to catch, er...mark, the ball.

Crunch! The ball landed on the tips of my fingers and broke one of them at the joint.

I spent the next few months in plaster and physical therapy.

That was the end of Aussie Rules for me.

But football wasn't finished with me yet.

A few years later I was in Melbourne. It was soon after I arrived in that venerable old city that I heard the conversation between the two Italians I mentioned earlier.

Melbourne was a boring place in those days. It probably still is. There weren't a lot of places where a young bloke could pick up girls, but there was one place that was a Mecca for me.

There was an entertainment center at Saint Kilda beach that always attracted heaps of girls.

This particular day I had planned to go out to the St Kilda ice-skating rink. It was a great place to pick up girls. Us young fellas would skate around the rink, pick out a pretty girl and then home in on our poor victim. The accepted strategy to meet a girl was to 'accidentally' bump into her gently, giving the young man an excuse to catch her before she fell to the ice – well, that was the theory.

Being the clumsy oaf I was, sometimes I missed and we both ended up on our bums. But it didn't matter. I had achieved my goal. We were in contact and talking. I managed to warm up many a feminine behind that way, both during and after a skating session.

On the night in question I was unaware that football was about to intrude into my life once again.

As I neared St. Kilda I became engulfed in a huge crowd of people partying in the street. It was just like the New Orleans Mardi Gras. I got out of the cab to join the party, aiming to make my way towards the skating rink.

As I went I asked the revelers what the fun was all about. A huge bear of a man shoved a bottle of beer in my face, gripped me in a fierce hug that lifted me off my feet and said, "St. Kilda won! We won! We won!"

He finally let me go to rejoin his mates as they went bounding down the street, clutching each other like long lost lovers.

I made a mental note to watch out for those hugger buggers.

I quickly learned that the St. Kilda Aussie Rules Football team had finally won the championship after twenty-five years or something of straight losses. I've never seen a party like that at any other time before or since. It lasted all night.

Naturally, I never made it to the ice skating rink. I was waylaid by the girls, the beer, and the festivities. We all had a wonderful night...I think.

The cops were mopping up drunks well into the next day.

Sometime during the night I must have figured I'd had enough. I had the good sense to stagger down onto St Kilda beach where I woke up the next morning clutching a football.

I tried to throw it away in my drunken stupor. It took a few minutes to realize that I was actually clutching my head.

Such is the power of football for me. I get all the pain and no game.

Of course, there are many variations on the game of football.

Take the Yanks. They have invented a game they call football, but to the rest of the world it looks more like a bunch of brawling gorillas dressed in crash helmets and Victorian-style sexy swimming costumes. Who came up with that style to dress a bunch of brawny, hairy men in?

Apart from their funny clothes, they play with the dinkiest looking ball you ever saw. It's about half the size of a decent Aussie Rules football, but I guess that makes it much easier for them to throw it vast distances.

Watching them play is an experience in itself. The players charge into each other with all the fury of two express trains in a hurricane. How they survive those massive attacks is beyond me. The only other thing I've ever seen remotely like it is the bull fights in southern Thailand.

Two hulking bulls charge into each other over and over again until one of them drops dead, or falls down exhausted. The Yanks play football like that, but the bulls are much more polite about it.

For sheer tenacity, though, soccer is the game that truly amazes me. You can walk into a "sports" bar anywhere, any time of the day or night, and they will be showing what looks like the longest running football game in the history of the world.

At least, that's what it looks like to me.

The sound on the TV is almost always turned off, so you don't know who is playing, or where, or when. It might well be the same game every time. The players chase the ball all over what looks like exactly the same beautifully manicured green field. A player dribbles, passes the ball to another player, he shoots, and Bingo! It's a goal.

Then the crowd goes wild as they watch the guy who kicked the goal engulfed by a bunch of his teammates. They hug. They kiss. They dance together. They make obscene gestures at the crowd.

To this old Aussie, it looks like a bunch of poofters using the goal as an excuse for an orgy in public. Really!

But the bar patrons lap it up. It's an exciting moment every time a goal is scored. Everyone in the bar, except befuddled me of course, cheers or groans, depending on which team they are supporting.

That's all very well. It helps break up the monotony of weightlifting drinks all evening. But it's when some big, burly drunk heads my way after a goal to give me a huge hug and a kiss that I chug my beer quickly and get the hell out of there!