

## **From Colonies to Clubs: The Growth of Ultimate in Southern Asia**

We were early in the game, three points into the opener of Mekong Cup, this year being held in Ho Chi Minh City, also known as Saigon, Vietnam. The speed of our young Cambodian players was already giving our Thai opponents trouble. After a turnover in our zone, Sophat was told to go through. Another handler would pick up the disc. He didn't react well, it seemed, to his teammate's instruction. It was soon clear, though, that this was not a disagreement about strategy. He went down onto the ground, forehead pushed into the grass, arms shaking on either side. This was obviously not about starting our offensive possession. The medics were called and Sophat was carted off the field, the seizure passing and the body now not moving. I joined the medical staff, partially as Sophat's coach and friend, but partially because I thought my reasonable Khmer (Cambodian) speaking abilities and bearable Vietnamese would be helpful in communications between patient and medics. It wasn't needed. These days, most tournaments are run by local players whose language skills far surpass mine. I stood aside. Sophat was treated and regained the smile that he is known for. Though physically he felt better quickly, he lost his smile when I told him that he would not be getting back on the field that day. His epilepsy, stigmatized in Asia more so than in the west, was no longer a secret.

These days in Southern Asia, the expatriate player, even the multilingual one, is not as important to the sport as he used to be. Local players have not only learned to love ultimate, they've made it their own. Teams from southern Asia are already making serious dents internationally, with styles that have come a long way from when the sport was just introduced to the region. At Worlds in Lecco, many saw the "Dink-and-Dunk" or "Grinding" style (to use the terms the TV announcers used) of Singapore's Shiok in the opening matchup that pitted them against the home team, Croccali. Their skills were not enough to overcome their nerves (or the Italians) in that game, but Shiok continued on to beat every non-American team they faced, finishing 10<sup>th</sup> overall. Meanwhile, every other Asian team aside from the Japanese, who came in ranked \_\_\_\_\_, beat their seed. On the sands of Dubai at Beach Worlds, the Philippines' Boracay Dragons' horizontal game more than leveled the playing field against physically larger teams. Two out of the three teams that the Philippines sent took bronze medals at WCBU, while teams from India and Singapore also played very competitively.

## **From Disc to Di~a: Translating a Foreign Sport**

Of course, there was a time that the level of play in Asia wasn't as high, and local players had not yet found the game. In the early 2000s, when I had just moved to Hanoi, Vietnam, ultimate in Asia (excluding Japan) was almost exclusively run by expatriates. Foreigners brought the sport and created active, fairly large ultimate scenes in Beijing, Shanghai, Hanoi, Bangkok, Singapore, Jakarta and a few other big cities. These expatriates traveled the sparse tournament circuit of Shanghai, Hong Kong, Singapore, Bangkok, and Bali and competed in small events that often more resembled family reunions than serious athletic competitions. These were also the first ambassadors of the sport who began to introduce the game to local populations.

The mid-to-late 2000s brought a massive growth in local players in Southeast Asia. In many cases this was fueled by the combined efforts of expatriates and a new group of locals who had discovered the game through connections with the foreign community or just happenstance. In some places, the growth came through universities. In Singapore in 2006-2008, players began to actively introduce the game to colleges such as the National University of Singapore, Singapore Institute of Management, Singapore Management University, and Nanyang Technological University. In southern Vietnam, the game grew around Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. In these university settings, the sport gained more recognition as it became part of university recreational programs. Ultimate also began to find its way into universities and schools in countries like Malaysia during this time.

In the Philippines, growth proceeded along both mainstream and non-mainstream routes. Critical for the growing acceptance and popularity of the sport in the country was the participation of film and TV star Derek Ramsay. One of the Philippines' biggest celebrities, Ramsay is also one of the country's best players. His love for the game has been a major factor in increasing the sport's visibility and attracting new players to it. At the same time, the sport also brought in new players as a counter-cultural activity. Skaters, climbers, surfers and others who were very fit, but had never been interested in the country's more mainstream team sports such as basketball, saw ultimate as an alternative.

Also crucial to ultimate spreading in Asia was the minimal amount of equipment necessary to play. Outside of the cities, there are a lot of open spaces. Only needing a disc to add to that space made ultimate a very attractive athletic option in a country with a population of limited financial means. One rather famous story of "just add disc" comes from the island of Boracay, which is outlined by beautiful beaches. A group of dragon boat racers on the island found the sport, and realized all they needed was a disc to add to the beaches they had in abundance. They trained hard and have raised their game to the level where last year were one point away from beating the United States to head to the finals of the Beach Worlds in Dubai.

The teams from Southern Asia that have begun to have impacts internationally, such as Singapore, the Philippines, and India, have had two things in common: an abundance of players and motivated, hard-working leaders. In Singapore, the development of the sport in universities has created a fertile ground for individual clubs to recruit new athletes. In some cases, certain universities have become de facto farm teams for the top clubs. Players from the club will coach the university program, calling the players with potential up to join at the higher levels. Leaders like Ben Ho and Clive Mying Soe have been able to take these young talented players and make them into strong contributing members of clubs like Chuckies and Shiok, respectively.

For the Philippines and India, their most recent showcase was the Under-23 World Championships in London. As well as both teams played, it was a victory already for both countries to be represented there at all. The Philippines held tryouts in both Manila and Dumaguette, on the southern Island of Negros to draw players from other islands. In the end,

the costs ended up being prohibitive for most of the provincial players and the country sent a squad mostly made up of players from Manila. Coach Pinggoy Bautista and others put in a lot of their own time and money to make sure that the Philippines would be represented and would put up a strong effort in London.

In India, the team faced similar financial difficulties. The organizational team, including Vivek Pandya and Abhinav Shankar, were able to scrape up a couple large sponsors and send a diverse team to U23s that they claimed represented India as a truly national team. Only four had ever traveled abroad before, and for many, it was their first time traveling by plane. They spoke five different languages as their native tongues (English and a few multilingual players made communication smoother) and represented a variety of areas of India. Tryouts were held in Ahmedabad, in the north of the country, and in Chennai, in the south, to give players from different regions of the country opportunities to show their skills. After the team was selected, they toured the country, scrimmaging local teams to prepare. The organizers brought in coaches, and, perhaps more importantly, cleats, from Australia. Dan Rule helped lead the team, while the Sydney and Melbourne ultimate communities donated a significant portion of the footwear worn by the Indian squad. In the end, the team played very hard, and brought home hardware in the form of the U23 World Championships Spirit Award, about which the national community was quite proud.

### **Costs, Culture and Coups: Obstacles to Growth in Southern Asia**

Ultimate will continue to grow in Southern Asia, but the community is still up against a number of challenges. These issues, though common to ultimate programs throughout the world, take on particular forms in Southern Asia. First, as mentioned earlier, is money. While it's common for teams all over the world to have trouble finding capital for fields, equipment, and travel, it's particularly challenging in our region, where some of the countries are the poorest on earth. For example, to take Cambodian players to Vietnam, it converts to \$10 US each way on the bus, \$5 per night lodging, and about \$15 per day of added expenses (tourney fees were waived). These costs may sound small, but very few of our players could afford to go if asked to pay themselves. Every trip takes fundraising. Meanwhile, even to play within the country, trips across a city can challenge families for whom a couple dollars a day is a significant expense.

Gender is always an issue as well, but more so in Southern Asia than many other places in the world. In many areas of Asia such as Cambodia, Vietnam, and India, lighter skin is valued, especially for women. The potential for one's skin getting darker from being outdoors creates a fear that makes getting more women on the field difficult. In a similar light, scars and scrapes-- part of what makes ultimate players so attractive elsewhere-- are looked upon very negatively, especially for women. In addition to the physical effects of outdoor sports, cultural issues and expectations of what are appropriate female behaviours also hinder the growth of ultimate among women. In places like Cambodia, playing team sports is very uncommon for females at all. This means that it is less likely that females even have athletic clothing, that they would be

permitted to stay out after dark for practice, and that they would prioritize a sport above the work that is expected of them around their homes.

National and local ultimate organizations have put a lot of effort into making the sport more accessible to everyone, especially attempting to battle restrictions based on finance and gender. Two notable programs are Bridging the Gaps in India and the Youth Ultimate Project in Cambodia. Bridging the Gaps is an annual camp held in different locations in India that combines ultimate and arts instruction. They bring campers and counselors from all over India together. In India, this means a diverse group of participants speaking different languages, practicing different religions and hailing from a range of economic situations coming together for ultimate. The Youth Ultimate Project in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, started with a group of Seattle high school students coming for two weeks every summer to teach ultimate to boys and girls from some of Phnom Penh's poorer neighborhoods. The campers have now become the teachers and now bring their own combination of ultimate-teaching and life-coaching to share the love of ultimate and all the positivity the sport can bring to new groups of Phnom Penh youth.

Finally, some of the issues that we have to deal with in Southern Asia have fewer parallels in the west, such as religious conflict and political instability. At the Malaysia Open 2014, field availability issues led the unfortunate scheduling of the event during Ramadan, the Islamic month of prayer and fasting. The timing the country's largest tournament during the holy month drew a lot of criticism from Muslim players who were not supposed to eat or drink from dawn to dusk. Nonetheless, AUR, an almost entirely Muslim team participated, and put together one of the best performances I have ever watched. On one of the hottest weekends of the year, with temperatures well above 90 degrees, they took 5<sup>th</sup> place in a very strong field of teams. This was without eating or drinking anything (including water) during the day both Saturday and Sunday.

Sometimes, ultimate in Asia is affected by national and global political events. The Bangkok Hat, Thailand's oldest and largest tournament, was put in jeopardy a couple years ago due to a coup d'etat in which the military replaced the elected government. The most important aspect of this for the ultimate community was that the fields that had hosted the tournament since it began in the early 2000's were made unavailable. The fields, located on a military base, were being used for training, and other unreported uses. Luckily, new fields were found and one of Asia's longest running tournaments did not take a year off, even though the government did not fare as well.

Southern Asian ultimate continues to grow. We will continue to expand our player base while reaching ever further into the top of international ultimate events. With the people who are currently leading ultimate communities and the young players who will soon be able to step into leadership roles themselves, the future looks bright. Soon it will be not only Singapore and the

Philippines, but also India, Vietnam, and maybe even Cambodia you begin to see rise the world rankings.