



## INSIDE

- Destination weddings boost photography market > p28
- Freshwater fish a popular 'superfood' > p29

By PAN MENGQI

panmengqi@chinadaily.com.cn

When Australian Darrell Egan first came to China in 2010 as an English teacher, little did he know that in a few short years he would have created the first competitive Australian Rules football team in China.

Australian Rules football, often called "Aussie rules" or just "footy" by its fans, has the highest spectator attendance and television viewership of all sports in its country of origin. But for the Chinese — who include American football, rugby and Aussie rules under one name, "olive ball" — the sport from Oceania is still a novelty.

The 51-year-old said he was 15 when he started to play district footy — "just like most of the teenage boys did in Australia".

When he arrived at a middle school in the city of Dongguan, in South China's Guangdong province, Egan observed that most of the students dabbled in playing basketball, soccer and table tennis.

"There is no one central team ball sport in China, as per gridiron in the US or soccer in Europe," he said.

The students Egan taught were 12- to 16-year-olds — still at an age when they can enjoy extracurricular activities before becoming heavily consumed in their studies, he said.

Egan wanted to promote Australian Rules football among these teenagers, not only because the sport is his personal favorite, but also because some history rarely known by either Chinese or Australians has motivated him to make the sport a cultural exchange program that links China and Australia and fosters good relations between the two.

It is reported that the sport of Aussie rules was first being played sporadically in Australia around the year 1858. Just decades later, Chinese immigrants became the first non-Anglo people to play the game invented in the island nation.

Word of significant gold discoveries had transformed Victoria, in southeastern Australia. By the early 1860s, the gold rush had brought close to 25,000 Chinese men and a handful of women to Victoria, which was then still a British crown colony. And as the end of the 19th century neared, there remained large Chinese populations in towns such as Ballarat and Bendigo.

On Aug 25, 1892, a lively parade through the streets of Ballarat preceded the moment that two Chinese football teams — "the miners" and "the gardeners" — stepped out onto the Eastern Oval in football stockings and red sashes to play in a charity match.

The day after the match, local newspaper the *Evening Star* described it as a "brilliant success"

# 'Aussie rules' sets China goals

Efforts are underway to engage Chinese in Australian football, a sport with historical ties between both nations



Members of the Chinese community in Victoria, southeastern Australia, played Australian Rules football as part of a St Vincent's Hospital Easter Fair in Melbourne in 1899. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY ASIA WEEKLY



The Dongguan Blues team was founded by Darrell Egan in 2011 as an early grassroots Australian Rules football team in China.

with about 5,000 spectators.

"After a splendidly contested game, in which the spectators were treated to much fun, the gardeners won by two goals, the scores at the close being — gardeners, four goals, one behind; miners, two goals, five behinds," the *Evening Star's* article read.

Another newspaper reported that in the lead-up to the game, local young men learned Chinese phrases so that they could barrack for the teams.

Fireworks were set off during the match, and a band of Chinese musical performers who had led the preceding parade continued to play throughout the game.

The event that August afternoon, well documented in historical records, was the first in a series of matches played between 1892 and 1896 that would become known as the Chinese football premierships.

More than 120 years after those Chinese teams, in front of a crowd

of thousands in regional Ballarat, became the first foreign players to stage an Australian football match, there is a push to harness that history to help navigate a cultural exchange between the two countries.

"It was a time of difficulty for Chinese people to be accepted by the Anglo Australian community, but the effort by the Chinese community to put on this event is remarkable," Egan said.

Rob Hess, an associate professor in sport history at Victoria University, said more people should know about this exceptional moment, particularly given the recent push by the Australian Football League (AFL) to grow its presence in China.

"It's an inconspicuous, hidden part of Australian Rules history," he said.

Egan found this history because his granduncle, Alex Barningham, who started training with professional Australian football club the Carlton Blues in 1908, had a special teammate.

Wally Koochew, also a Carlton footballer, was the first player of Chinese background in the all Anglo

Australian Carlton Blues team. The man's father had come to Australia from Guangzhou, Guangdong province, and was one of the players in the 1892 Ballarat game, on the winning "gardeners" team.

In 2011, Egan founded an Australian football team at a middle school in Dongguan, naming it the "Dongguan Blues" after the Carlton Blues. He said the team has been advocating cultural adaptation and empowerment of the sport in China.

The team is also known in Australia as the China Blues. It comprises mainly 15- to 18-year-old student players, with some a little older, up to the age of 20.

One Dongguan Blues team member, Lu Tuwang, who is now the coach, said the sport requires teamwork, emotional strength, communication skills and all-round fitness and agility, which he thinks meets the criteria for a good team sport.

Lu said the game appeals to Chinese middle school students as a contact sport. They also enjoy its social side, "and carry the identity of being a footballer into all aspects of their studies, art and life," he said.

As an individual promoter of the sport, Egan believes the secret to making it work in China lies at the grassroots level. To make the game more suitable for Chinese teenagers, he has created 46 pages of adapted playing rules and competition structure rules.

But still, there are very few players of Australian football in China. To be successful in the country, major challenges are how to increase participation and venue facilities.

Long-term plans among AFL clubs to develop the sport in China have started with a focus on making it easier to promote the sport on campuses and training coaches.

In 2016, Port Adelaide Football Club announced its initial deal to run AFL games in China for three years, hosting training camps as well as partnering with 14 middle and primary schools, 10 of them located in Shanghai.

The AFL started promoting the sport in China as early as 2012 in Guangdong province, when it opened an academy in Guangzhou with the aim of developing a small group of Chinese players.

Keith Thomas, Port Adelaide Football Club CEO, said he believes China has the potential to cultivate huge stars.

"Australian football is a sport that demands devotion and physical performance. We believe the Chinese are likely to develop huge stars amid the improvement of their physical fitness," he said.

"And more importantly, the Chinese government, the education system, as well as local schools, are supportive of the development of the sport. We are quite optimistic and confident about it," Thomas added.