

Calendar

Yankee Footy

Australian Rules Football

They aren't all guys with mashed noses, the Aussies who play this sport as amateurs on weekends will tell you. Australian Rules Football players are different from those crazy, brutish rugby players.

"Rugby is all tackling, whereas in Aussie Rules, if you're fast enough and dispose of the ball correctly when you get it, you're not going to get hit at all."

So says 36-year-old Wayne Calliss of University Towne Centre, one of the acknowledged forces behind footy (as the game is called) in San Diego.

It's the lousy players who get hit, then?

"If you're going to hang on to the ball, yes," says Calliss, who came here from Adelaide, capital of South Australia, bringing his home country's sport with him seven years ago. "But they're not

really 'hit,' anyway. It's not like a rugby hit. You can't charge a player. That's one of

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the unwritten rules."

Bill Dusting, an Aussie who cofounded San Diego's first footy team in 1998, says that ESPN showed television audiences "hit after hit after hit" when they aired the sport at all. "That's what attracted people." It was a time when Aussie Rules was as bad as rugby. "And they just highlighted that aspect."

The network doesn't show the sport at all anymore, and one has to wonder if it's because footy has evolved into a game built upon avoiding being tackled.

"Now the worst hits are usually performed by Americans who put their heads down, American-football style, and ram," says Dusting, a 43-year-old mail carrier. The better way to tackle is "to strip your opponent of the ball rather than having a good old-fashioned punch-up, like in the old days."

Calliss agrees with Dusting, adding, "The Americans are very physical with the ball. And they're very physical with other players a lot of the time. So they tend to get a lot of penalties called against them."

One thing Americans also tend to do is throw the ball. Only it's not allowed. Instead, a player must "hand pass" it, a move similar to an underhanded volleyball serve. "But the pressure's on, and if you're getting tackled, you want to get rid of that ball," says Calliss. "The game is a little bit of hot potato like that."

Why do these guys love the sport? For one thing, unlike those who play



rugby or American football, all footy players on the field have a nearly equal chance to pass, catch, kick, and tackle. Another thing is, play is continuous. The clock isn't regularly stopped so that everybody can get all lined up again.

In the early years of footy in San Diego, Dusting and Calliss had trouble getting recruits. What didn't people like about it? It's a new game with a new ball. The guys were inevitably awkward, even ones who had played American sports all their lives; those who got frustrated easily didn't come back.

This weekend, the San Diego Cougars — part of the San Diego Lions team, which is made up of Australians and Americans with a few Irishmen thrown into the mix — will play the Mojave Greens of Fort Irwin, California, in Anaheim.

The Greens derived their name from the venomous Mojave green rattlesnake. They are "green" in another way, too. The team was founded only last

June by David Payne, a U.S. Army lieutenant stationed at the base out there. Payne says it's a team of U.S. Army soldiers. ("No Aussies at all, ma'am.")

Payne, who is 36, learned the game from Aussies in college at the University of Tampa. "Hardly anyone else at Fort Irwin knew about footy," he says. "We started with four guys. We currently have 36 people, including one woman." She doesn't actually compete. "But she goes through the drills."

Payne doesn't play, either. He's the coach. He hasn't played since last season, when he suffered a concussion while competing on an L.A. team. "I tried to tackle a guy," he says. "It was stupid," he admits.

A 20-year-old Irvine native, Kerry Bonas, will play for the Greens on Saturday. Bonas embodies another reason why some American athletes are frustrated by footy. "It favors the quick and the agile," says Bonas, who is "on the smaller side" at 5'5" and 145 pounds, and played volleyball and wrestled in

high school. "I wouldn't have done too well on the football field."

Bonas isn't even the smallest of the Greens. "The guy on our team who makes the most goals is the same height as I am and 20 pounds lighter."

Still, a team without any Australians is at a big disadvantage. "This sport to them, when they were growing up, is like what Little League is to us," says Bonas. "Or what the basketball camps are." He describes the level of footy play the Greens have achieved so far as "the equivalent of playing catch."

— Jeanne Schinto

**Australian Rules Football practice
Thursday, March 11 (and every
Thursday through early August)
6:00-7:30 p.m.**

**North Clairemont Community Park
4421 Bannock Street, Clairemont
Spectators free; potential players
consult www.sandiegolions.com
or call 858-558-2239,
858-829-9596**

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