

Mixing it on the piste



An Indian, a Tatar and a Lebanese representing South Australia in a French sport played in New Zealand? Lance Campbell unravels the mystery.

Sukrit Vaswani was just 17 when he played pétanque for Australia in the junior world championships at Lons-le-Saunier, near Dijon in eastern France, in 2001. In his own words, "It was unbelievable. Beautiful French girls older than me were asking me for autographs."

The experience opened New Delhi-born Sukrit's eyes to the French game of boules played by millions around the world, and on the rise in Australia. At Lons-le-Saunier the pétanque team members from all 35 nations were treated like athletes, and star athletes at that.

At 15 Raja Jameledine was the youngest player in the Lebanon national soccer league, by nature a competitor who can't live without sport. Back home in Adelaide he injured his knee playing rugby. Now Raja plays competitive pétanque with Sukrit.

Iskender Maski is a son of Tatars from Tatarstan, a small republic of the Russian Federation. He played basketball at Charles Campbell High School, then his uni friend Sukrit introduced him to pétanque at the FAB piste in the East Parklands. The boules came out of the hand nicely straight away.

Now "Ken" plays competitively with Sukrit and Raja as a triples team. Together

the three young athletes are on a course to take Australian pétanque where it hasn't been before, starting with the prestige NZ International Open in Auckland late January.

There is a theory that the sport is a social activity played with a drink in one hand, and there is a small place for that. But at its higher and truer levels, pétanque is a fierce sporting contest based on varied throwing skills, alive with team and individual strategies and full of mind games. "You have to overcome barriers to play consistent pétanque, to achieve mental stability and control," says Ken.

Real pétanque is also for keeps. Two years ago the French sent out their world champion team to NZ to wrest the trophy. In the French-influenced South Pacific, in Tahiti, Vanuatu and New Caledonia where the sport is imbued in people like football and cricket is here, pétanque can be hustled like pool. It puts food on the table.

To prepare themselves for competition such as this, "the boys", as they are known in the game's growing local community, are in the midst of a training program unlike any seen before in SA, and probably Australian, pétanque.

Early most mornings Sukrit, Raja and Ken are at Eastern Suburbs Pétanque, in the Unley Park Bowling Club that the Cattle King himself, Sidney Kidman, built. In their drills over three stages totalling 60 hours, they throw thousands of the 700-gram metal boules. They point,

which is getting the boule as close as possible to the small wooden jack, or shoot, which is removing the opposition's boule and preferably replacing it with their own. Sounds simple but it's like chess, says Sukrit - except that it's action filled. Despite pétanque's reputation as a leisure activity, it's like any other sport: the fitter you are, the better you play. So the boys are undergoing core control and trunk stability with physiotherapist Mark Johnston, an ESP club member. A stable, strong body trunk allows effective force transfer from leg muscles through to the arms as in tennis, or for efficient movement through the water as in swimming. "In pétanque, the ability to throw a boule in a precise way requires a stable and consistent base to throw from," says Mark.

While this degree of dedication might be all in a day's work for elite sportspeople, in Australian pétanque it has not been the norm so far. The best Australians tend to do it either from a platform of natural flair or, in the case of many French-descended Australian players, from a lifetime of playing pétanque.

This is taking things a whole lot further, says the team's coach Tim Whelan. "Most people don't train in a constructive way," he adds. "They train just by playing. I think what we're doing is creating the best chance for an Australian team to win an international pétanque event."

As Raja says, "I am a competitive person. That means being able to deal with the pressure of big tournaments. We're not playing street boules."

Sukrit, the team captain, took up pétanque when he was 11. Since Lons-le-Saunier he has represented Australia as an adult, in the Asian championships in Hanoi in 2006.

"I played my best pétanque in Vietnam," Sukrit says. "With this new, intense training we believe we can do better. We can make the quarter finals... then anything could happen. We're all very proud South Australians looking to do something for this State."

To have our names on the same trophy as the French world champions would be great for pétanque here."

Photo L-R: - Raja, Sukrit and Ken