

Are you game for sepak takraw?

National player says it's fun and popular; sport has many health benefits too

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You probably would not think that sepak takraw, with its gravity-defying kicks and acrobatic moves, was suitable for you.

But national sepak takraw player Mohmed Elhazeeq Ul Haq said it is actually not that difficult to be a ball-kicking acrobat.

"It is a fun sport which I would recommend every one to try," said Mohmed Elhazeeq, 27, who is studying criminology and security at the Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT).

In fact, sepak takraw has such a following here and in Asia that finding teammates would not be too difficult.

The game is like playing volleyball with every part of your body, except the arms and hands.

"The players are allowed to use their feet, knees, chest and head to touch the rattan ball," he said.

It is played on a hard court similar to a badminton court.

Each team consists of three players – the tekong (server), the feeder (the one who sets the ball for the striker) and the striker (the one who does the acrobatic flips and tricks to spike the ball for the point), said Mohmed Elhazeeq. Each team aims to score by kicking the ball into the opponent's court.

Currently, Thailand is ranked first in the world, followed by South Korea. The Singapore team won a silver and seven bronze medals in the latest SEA Games. Thailand won two gold medals.

As with any sport, playing sepak takraw is beneficial for health too.

It is an invigorating aerobic exercise that helps to improve players' cardiovascular fitness and physical coordination, said Assistant Professor Benjamin Soon, a physiotherapist at SIT.

The health benefits also include an increase in strength, stamina and endurance.

"Playing sepak takraw allows players to acquire acrobatic skills and lower limb flexibility – somewhat similar to martial arts," said Prof Soon.

Players learn to perform somersaults and overhead kicks with precision and power to deliver the rattan ball to the opponents' court.

These movements also require powerful muscular action, especially from muscles that control the back, hip, knee and ankle joints, the professor added.

Grace is also involved.

The player serving the ball must perform a split and twisting motion of the supporting hip to bring the leg down for the serve, said Prof Soon. These actions require sub-



National sepak takraw player Mohmed Elhazeeq Ul Haq playing the role of the tekong, or server. The sport has such a following here and in Asia that finding teammates would not be too difficult. PHOTOS: MIKE LEE FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

stantial lower limb flexibility, body coordination and balance.

The strikers in sepak takraw also often jump and land on their backs and buttocks.

GETTING HURT

Because of the sport's acrobatic nature, injuries are very common, said Mohmed Elhazeeq. It is quite normal for him to get hamstring pulls, back pain, sprained ankles and knee injuries as a result of jumping, kicking and landing.

Prof Soon said that these actions expose the players to the risk of muscular strain in their hamstrings, as well as wrist, ankle or knee injuries if improper landing techniques are used.

If you are prone to ankle sprains from jumping and landing, you should consider sports taping for the ankle joint to improve proprioceptive (the ability to sense joint po-

sition) feedback and joint control.

Similarly, taping of the wrist can improve the stability of the joint from the impact of landing.

The constant stretching and powerful kicking required in sepak takraw can easily strain the hamstring muscles if they are stretched beyond their normal limits.

Maintaining flexibility of the legs is therefore essential to reduce risk of muscle injuries, said Prof Soon.

To improve flexibility, consider a daily stretching routine using both dynamic and static stretching.

PREPPING THE MUSCLES

The body needs to be primed for such exertions.

A typical warm-up session for sepak takraw can start with general static stretching of the neck, shoulders, back, hips, knees and ankles, with an eight-second hold for each muscle, said Prof Soon.

Following that, light jogging or ball juggling and passing the ball to players for five minutes can be used to get the body moving.

Dynamic stretching exercises can be used to improve flexibility as well as to push the warm-up intensity up a notch.

Dynamic stretching involves using momentum to bring the muscles into a stretch. Unlike static stretches, dynamic stretches do not include holding time.

Some examples include high knee jogging – a running action with exaggerated knee lifts and high kicks, while keeping the knee straight and kicking the leg upwards.

The benefit of dynamic stretching is that it can better mimic the actions required during the game, and it helps to improve flexibility in the muscles, said Prof Soon.

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Try these moves



1 FORWARD KICK WITH RESISTANCE BAND

Tie one end of a resistive rubber band to a stationary spot. Put the other end around one foot.

Kick forward with the rubber band tubing holding the foot. Hold the position for eight seconds. Switch to the other leg and do the same.

This stretches the hamstrings and buttock muscles, and strengthens the hip flexors (which allow you to lift your knees to your chest and bend forward from the hips) and hip adductors (which pull the hip towards the body's midline).

2 BACK EXTENSION

Lie on your front. Lift your body up using your arms and stretch your back as much as possible. Hold the position for eight seconds.

This back-extension exercise helps to stretch the abdominal muscles and hip flexors.

3 SIDE BEND

Start in a sitting position with legs extended in front. Bend your body to the left. Touch your left ankle with your right hand.

Tuck your left hand under and touch your right thigh. Hold the position for eight seconds. Switch to the other side and do the same. This stretches the shoulders, back muscle, torso, hip muscles and hamstrings.

4 CROSSOVER STRETCH

Sit on the floor with legs stretched out in front of you. Bend one leg with the knee at a 90-degree angle. Cross the bent leg over the straight leg and place the foot on the ground.

Twist your body towards the leg that is bent and use the opposite arm to press the bent leg towards your chest. You will feel a slight stretch. Maintain good posture by keeping your back straight. Hold the position for eight seconds. Switch legs and repeat.

This stretches the torso and buttock muscles.

5 SITTING GROIN STRETCH

Sit on the floor and gently bend your knees. Bring the soles of your feet together and let your knees drop to the sides.

Clasp your feet together with your hands and pull your heels as close to your body as you comfortably can.

Hold the position for eight seconds. This stretches the hip adductor muscles.