

Soccer big kick in Austin

By LINDA ANTHONY
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The game began auspiciously enough just a scant 3,000 years ago on the fields surrounding the palace of China's famed Yellow Emperor. Cork and human hair provided the stuffing for the oddly-shaped leather ball that was kicked, tossed and butted about the fields in the game of *tsu-chu*.

Still another version of the story of soccer's beginning places the responsibility with the Greeks. Even Caesar, according to the sport's historians, is said to have stalked the field in search of a goal.

Soccer never made much of an impact in China, but it was a hit with the Romans. So popular in fact was soccer that they took it across the waters to England during the Empire's golden years.

And like most occupied countries, England absorbed some of its conqueror's ways. Soccer, or football, (as the game is known to the rest of the world) happened to be one of them.

The game was nurtured, refined, codified and transported to various countries within the Commonwealth.

It's probably safe to say that more people play soccer than any other team sport. And, perhaps more importantly, the game has never been at a loss for devoted fans during crucial games.

Riots erupt — and are almost guaranteed — during World Cup matches.

That soccer is a non-contact sport certainly accounts for some of its appeal, particularly when the incidence of football injuries, and their severity, is soaring.

Add that to a game that relies on running, kicking, and tossing and it's small wonder that interest in soccer is taking off.

And should you doubt it, take a look at Zilker Park on any fall weekend. Or any soccer field for that matter. You'll find them tucked away on high school playing fields, on civic club grounds, in parks — any place where there's enough room to accommodate 22 players and 2 goal areas.

Each weekend those grassy fields play host to some 5,000 men, women, boys and girls, all huffing for 90-minute competitive soccer games.

Austin has soccer leagues of every sort, except professional, and the number of teams in each is skyrocketing.

"It's the action that makes the game so appealing," said Curtis Ratliff, soccer referee and owner of a soccer sporting goods store.

"You're constantly moving and con-

stantly an integral part of the game. You can make things happen. It's not like baseball or football where you're waiting for someone else to do something.

"It all depends on how much energy you want to expend and how much you want to be involved in the game," said Ratliff.

At 5-feet-8-inches, Ratliff was too small to play football on a competitive scale that he found appealing, or equal to his athletic abilities.

Soccer was a natural choice.

"I really don't enjoy going out there and knocking it out anymore," he said. "And I'm sure most parents would rather see their kids play a sport where they don't have to go head on head with someone."

His words probably sum up what's happened in Jollyville better than anything else.

In the suburb north of Austin, more than 900 kids are expected to register for the town's third full soccer season.

Last year, the league had 43 teams. This year, they may have as 60.

Austin leagues are experiencing similar growing pains.

What started out as a pick-up game Sunday afternoons in Zilker Park has mushroomed into a league with nearly 40 men's teams, playing two full seasons and a more informal summer session each year.

Tired of watching from the sidelines, women formed a league of their own five years ago and follow a season of similar intensity to the men's.

Teams in both leagues fall in one of three divisions based on players' skill.

Youth leagues are still another success story. The Central YMCA, which organized the league four years ago, now has offshoots in north and south Austin and reaches nearly 2,000 youngsters. Civic groups, jumping on the bandwagon, pull another 1,000 kids onto the playing fields when soccer season rolls around.

If there's any barrier to soccer's continued phenomenal growth, it's the relative lack of eye-foot coordination in most of America's adult population.

"Most Americans learn to develop eye-to-hand coordination. But rarely do we

learn eye-to-foot coordination," said Ratliff. "There was never any extensively played sport that demanded such a skill. And that's a technique basic to soccer.

"It's incredibly frustrating to get out there and know what you want to do with the ball, and where you want it to go, but find yourself physically incapable of doing it. It's like discovering that you're a mid-life klutz."

As a remedy, Ratliff recommends that soccer enthusiasts spend a lot of time just getting the feel of the ball. That means kicking it, dribbling it, rolling it off the top of your foot, or butting it with your head.

But now that soccer is making inroads in the high school sports scene, Ratliff's worries of mid-life klutzdom may be unfounded.

Soccer's been played on an extramural basis in most Austin high schools in the last several years, but last December, the Austin Independent School District decided to flesh out the sport's barren coffers.