
Personal Best: SF pair trying to raise the profile of netball

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SAN FRANCISCO — Netball, a game that originated in the United States, is played by millions worldwide yet remains virtually unknown in this country. Minette Viljoen and Cindy Muscio of the San Francisco Stars are committed to do their part to increase exposure and awareness of their beloved sport in their adopted homeland.

Viljoen, originally from South Africa and current team president, joined the Stars a few years after a group of “Commonwealth expatriates” formed the club in 2000. In 2005, the Stars were successful in having a netball facility constructed on Treasure Island. Prior to building the only netball site in Northern California, the players were vagabonds, driving in caravans searching for locations to draw the court lines and set up their hoops.



Minette Viljoen and Cindy Muscio are trying to spread the word about netball. (Mike Koozmin/Special to The Examiner)

Originally created in 1895 by a Louisiana physical-education instructor, the sport was first played the same year in England before spreading to other British Commonwealth countries. Only two of the seven position players may shoot a goal in the backboard-less hoop, players may not run with or dribble the ball, and players are restricted to certain areas of the court. Each player wears a jersey that identifies his-her position.

“The team element is the most important factor in my opinion,” Viljoen said. “Since players can only be in certain thirds of the court, you have to rely on your teammates.”

Six men are on the Stars’ roster of 30, four of which are American-born players. A number of physical-education instructors are on the roster. Viljoen and Muscio are excited that these teachers are introducing the game to the next generation of netball players.

Muscio was one of six on the team to have had babies in the past year.

“I’m doing my part to launch the next generation,” she said while chasing her toddler Brennan.

Both women began playing at the age of 7.

Muscio, 34, was raised in a small Australian farming community.

“On weekends, we’d meet up with a neighboring town; the men would play Australian rules football, the women would play netball, and it’d be a big social,” said Muscio, a Cow Hollow resident.

The Stars fielded two teams in their annual tournament that was played at their home court on Treasure Island on Halloween. San Diego, Silicon Valley, Fremont and Los Angeles were represented in the round-robin tournament that the L.A. Waves won.

The Stars team that featured Viljoen and Muscio captured second place.

As 2009 winds down, the Stars prepare for the 2010 season that starts in February. Viljoen, 30, who lives with her husband in The City’s West Portal district, compares the task of promoting netball to her work with a high-tech start-up company.

“It’s going to take a lot of passion, commitment and energy to get it to grow and catch on in the States,” Viljoen said. “We are well on our way, though, slowly and surely. It’s kind of like soccer 10 years ago.”

Muscio welcomes the day when she’ll jump in her minivan to be a “netball mom.”

Sport info

What: Netball, played in 20 countries (and 15 U.S. states)

About the game: Players can only hold the ball for three seconds before passing

Recent U.S. exposure: An exhibition was held during halftime of an WNBA game at the Staples Center in Los Angeles on Sept. 11

The S.F. Stars: 2008 Pacific Coast League champions

Info: www.starsnetball.com

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