

ULTIMATE FRISBEE FEVER IN CAMBODIA

Teaching leadership to Khmer women through the “spirit of the game”

By Vicki Chan

On occasion when biking through the plaza of the Provincial Teacher Training College (PTTC) where I work, a soccer ball would whiz across my path. And every time I looked up, there was a young male teacher trainee racing to retrieve it. In fact, men dominated both the soccer field and the volleyball court at the PTTC, even though the school is comprised of 75% women. I wondered where the women played sports.

It didn't take long to discover, though, that few Cambodian women take part in any kind of public sport. As I set about observing local sports culture, I found that many of the women trainees used the 30 minutes of free time at the end of physical education class to sit in the shade of a tree and chat with one another. Meanwhile, the young men used the time to exercise and get better at volleyball and soccer. In addition, there are no female teachers who play sports at the PTTC, and though the sporty men were open to having women join in their games, they were not particularly encouraging or welcoming. Thinking I might encourage more female participation, I invited a few women to play volleyball and soccer with me for several sessions. After many balls flying out of bounds and messy foot handling scrapes, it was clear to everyone that something else was needed.

So I turned to the sport I knew best: Ultimate Frisbee. Before joining the Peace Corps in 2012, I had been an avid Ultimate Frisbee player for 7 years, with additional experience as a team captain,

board member, and volunteer coordinator for the Ann Arbor Ultimate League in Michigan. To those unfamiliar with the sport, Ultimate Frisbee is known for its “spirit of the game” values and self-refereeing system. Ultimate players play to develop their skills and try to embody the ideal of welcoming all newcomers wholeheartedly with good camaraderie, no matter their ability or gender. Playing to play well, exercise, have fun, teach, and learn is how I define the “spirit of the game.” While Ultimate had the right values for promoting participation among both genders, it was also a foreign game. Could it catch on in this soccer-and-volleyball town?

I began to bring Frisbees to school. Contrary to my expectations, the Frisbee gained momentum very quickly. My

excitement started to build as my trainees got hooked on the plastic disc, learning how to flick their wrists and lean into the throw. It was easy to learn for them, and more importantly, it was a sport that didn't come with any previous gender connotations. Its novelty, rather than being a liability, was turning into a great asset. But for now it was just recreation, not serious sport, and it was time to display to the school and the community—and the women participants themselves—just what these athletes were capable of.

Having played in the international Cambodian Ultimate Frisbee two-day tournament in Phnom Penh in 2013, I knew the organizers at the Phnom Penh Ultimate Association (PPUA) firsthand. They were excited to get more



The first all-Cambodian national Ultimate Frisbee team at the Mekong Cup in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.



CHANCA CHENG

Sonita, first year PTTC trainee, catches the disc thrown to her at an Ultimate Frisbee workshop in Phnom Penh.

Cambodians playing Ultimate, so together we arranged for a one-day workshop and tournament for my trainees. Before loading everyone into the bus for a 3.5 hour bus ride to the capital city, my co-teachers and I organized weekly practices with any trainees who were interested. We did conditioning drills (unheard of for many), learned how to catch and throw properly, and played scrimmages against one another. I saw two of my women trainees start to gain confidence in their skills, and I asked them to teach the newcomers, both men and women, what they knew.

On May 5th, 2013, the day of the workshop, I had 15 trainees attend the tournament—more than half of them women. This was beyond my expectations, and beyond many of the trainees' as well. Some of them had never been to the capital city before, and most had never met any other foreigner, yet they thrived at the workshop. The PPUA community was the perfect model to set the tone for the "spirit of the game" by including everyone, regardless of experience. Seeing young Khmer women sprint and play and lead others had been a rare but extremely gratifying sight in Cambodian athletics. The bus ride back to our provincial town was buzzing with positive energy. Though the workshop exhausted them, my trainees came back with a self-confidence and excitement that I'd never seen in them before.

Their success didn't end there. Eight

of the local women players were invited to play on the all-Cambodian Ultimate Frisbee team in an international tournament, the Mekong Cup. Appropriately, their team won the Spirit of the Game award. Additionally, the sport and the women were featured in Cambodian Sports (CamSports) magazine, April 2014 edition. As young teacher trainees, they are already breaking barriers by proudly chasing that plastic disc in clear view of the current

and future teachers of Cambodia, and people have taken notice. They even have a following of grade school students that they train both to play and to pass on the "spirit of the game."

In the early months of my service, I'd

have to beg and cajole my trainees to come out and play. I often sat alone on the small, grassy plot of land that served as our field, waiting for players. These days, though, my trainees are often the ones badgering me to play in the plaza after class. So I do what most Cambodian women teachers don't—I untuck my button down shirt, take off my shoes, hitch up my long traditional teaching skirt and join my students running downfield to score. Of course, when we do, the soccer players smile back at us and make way. **WV**

Vicki Chan and her husband, Michael Haak, just completed their Peace Corps service in Cambodia (2012-2014). Vicki played for the Yale University Women's Ultimate Frisbee Club team and was a key member of the Ann Arbor Ultimate Frisbee League community in Michigan.

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