Women here get a kick out of soccer

The men do not get it at Arion Football Club. They cannot apply to join Singapore's first all-women's football side.

Set up last November, it comprises accountants, teachers, students and insurance agents, and is one of six teams in Singapore's Women's Premier League.

Women's football has seen steady growth since the Football Association of Singapore (FAS) took over running it from the now-defunct Women's Football Association of Singapore in 2000.

From only 400 players then, there are about 2,300 now — both Singaporeans and expatriates, from schoolgirls to women in their 30s.

“We love the game. Grass and dirt are no barriers to us,” says national under-17 midfielder Jasmine Low, 16, captain of Deyi Secondary School’s team. “It was raining throughout one of our matches a few months ago and the pitch was all muddy, but we carried on and had fun.”

As head of Singapore's women's football, he said: “The scoreline — 75: 'I have seen, medical equipment and play football, we can 15, said: ‘We get a kick out of soccer.

THE Straits Times

We began with 30 teams, then we had 33 in 2004, 43 last year and 48 this year. We're very happy with the growth,” said SMU women's soccer chief LydiaGovinder.

The 20-year-old winger is a third-year accounting and business student who picked up football only when she joined SMU two years ago.

On the field, the women can be every bit as skilled as the men, but not as rough — the most common foul among women footballers is a soft chill from a fellow player.

And, unlike the men, who can kick up a ruckus when fouled, the women generally pick themselves up and get on with the game.

The result: fewer yellow and red cards.

“I have yet to see any girl do a Zidane,” quipped Mr Justin Fernandez, head of physical education at Queenstown Secondary, referring to World Cup 2006's infamous head-butting foul.

Mr Kasthuriraman Zainal Abidin, the teacher in charge of soccer at Deyi Secondary, gives the girls full marks for commitment. “More girls turn up for training than boys. They also stay back longer for their own practical sessions,” he said.

Teachers and players note that few parents object to their daughters taking up soccer. Queenstown Secondary right-back Delia Goh, 15, said: “There is still a minority who feel it is too rough a sport for their daughters to play.”

While women's soccer is gaining popularity, what many do not remember is that it had a following in the 1970s and 1980s.

Singapore's women won the Puan Sharifah Rodjah Cup — the women's equivalent of the Malaysia Cup — from 1976 to 1983, came fourth in the Asian Women's Football Championship in 1983, and bagged a silver at the 1983 South-East Asia Games.

Then the sport slipped into decline. Recent years have seen Singapore's women competing internationally again, although with embarrassing results sometimes.

The national side has been whiped by Asian powers like Korea and China 20 times in three Asian Football Confederation Women's Championship tournaments.

The scores were 0-24 in 2001, 0-14 in 2003 and 0-8 last year, but the FAS' Ms Neo is upbeat.

She said: “The scoreline might still be embarrassing, but it's a proud achievement for the girls.”

Last year, the Lionesses clinched the bronze medal at an Asia Pacific tournament held in Darwin, Australia, but the accomplishment was not enough to secure selection to Singapore's SEA Games squad.

An unhappy Mrs Jeanette Sim, then chairman of the FAS women's football committee, suggested hosting an Asian women's football tournament in Singapore — it will happen in November.

Said Mrs Sim, 75: “I have seen the girls training hard over the past few years, and I am confident they can hold their own within South-east Asia. Of course, we are nowhere near Olympic standards, but we should continue playing against Asian countries and clubs to allow the girls to make the next step up.”

The most recent Fifa rankings put Vietnam and Myanmar at the top in South-east Asia, with Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia in the second tier.

Those who want the sport to develop say women's soccer faces two difficulties.

First is a lack of funds and willing sponsors.

Ariam FC players sold T-shirts last year to raise money to set up their club, and dip into their own pockets to buy their boots, jerseys, medical equipment and drinks for matches.

“We train every Tuesday evening at a field along Hougang Street 21, since it's free. A stadium pitch would cost money, and we do not have much cash,” said coach-playe.

Mr Ong, 31, who is also on the national team.

Girls' football is also not an official co-curricular activity in schools.

Teachers coaching the girls hope to persuade the Education Ministry's co-curricular activities branch to give it recognition, which will boost participation.

FAS president Ho Peng Koe told The Straits Times that overall, much progress has been made since 2000.

He added that kindergarten is not too early to start nurturing girls' interest in soccer.

“If we put our hearts to it and attract more women to play football, we can turn out champions too,” he said.