SATURDAY afternoons mean one thing to these girls.

No, it's not sleeping in. Neither is it shopping. It's football, thank you very much.

And that's where they're quite the divas, strutting their stuff on a pitch instead of Orchard Road.

Last weekend's amateur tournament for female weekend warriors here - Diva La Futbol - was the perfect platform for them to show off their assets...in socks and boots, no less.

The event at Fico Sports Hub welcomed 400 ardent football players from 56 teams all over the island.

Organised by the Singapore Management University's Women Soccer Club, the event is in its fifth year running.

"We started Diva to encourage more female participation in such a male-dominated sport," explained Fiona Gao, a 20-year-old student and president of the tournament's organising committee.

From the beginning, the atmosphere was distinctively female, with audible screams and gasps heard amid the pop music blaring in the background.

"Have fun" - But nothing marred the action at all eight indoor pitches, although each match lasted a mere 15 minutes.

"Football is yet another avenue for girls to have fun," explained Hema Malini, 31, a History and English teacher.

"Many people perceive women's football to be a strictly tomboy thing, but the fact is, there are many Singaporean girls who enjoy it as well."

Hema plays for Faber, a team that was formed slightly more than a year ago and plays every weekend. It has 12 players and regularly takes part in tournaments.

An ardent Manchester United fan "since the days of Mark Hughes in the 1980s", the attacking midfielder first took part in Diva La Futbol when it started five years ago.

"We don't mind waking up early just to play some football with my friends. The anticipation and feel of running down a field or pitch to pass the ball for it to roll into the net is pretty euphoric," she declared.

Faber's team captain, Joie Lee, 24, a business development executive, also told The New Paper that the girls have even played with male counterparts for a challenge.

"But it's less taxing to be playing with girls. We (Faber) tried playing with guys before but obviously, they are more physically adept than us. They've got better stamina and passing capabilities," said Lee. Nevertheless, she maintained that playing against men is still a good test of the team's skills.

Club Mad, a self-declared "deranged group of girls" who turned up in hard-to-miss lime green and yellow outfits, have a motto - "One Mad, AU Mad, All Glad, No Sad."

LONG-TIME FRIENDS

It's proudly emblazoned on the team's crest, emphasising the team's ultimate goal of remaining positive together.

Having been long-time friends, Club Mad comprise of 25 fervent players who are actively take part in sporting competitions, including that of netball, frisbee and volleyball.

Team captain Ann Moey, 24, a student who came up with the motto, said: "Most of us are friends of friends and we correspond regularly through e-mail. "We use football as a chance to bond and de-stress from work and school."

ANZACs, another young team with players from Australia, New Zealand and Chile, featured children of expatriates, the only such team to feature in the tournament.

Stephanie Dunn, 15, a student from the Australian International school, used to play for a team back in her hometown, Canberra.

Called Tuggernong, she recalled how they used to play even through the winter season.

"I definitely think it's different here in Singapore as compared to Canberra. There are lesser competitions for girls to join all year round."

Her team-mate, Pascale Dalbadie, 16, a student from Santiago, Chile, agreed.
I don't mind waking up early just to play some football with my friends. The anticipation and feel of running down a field or pitch to pass the ball for it to roll into the net is pretty euphoric.

— Football diva Hema Malini

She said: "There is very little publicity being done to promote girls' football in Singapore. We were only approached and notified about this tournament after taking part in one a few weeks ago."

But Singaporean Suyin Anand, 27, a lawyer, was happy to note the rise in women-only tournaments being held here in football-mad Singapore, as opposed to "four, five years ago, when we didn't know where to go to play a competitive round of football".

Along with her nutty Club Mad team-mates, she did complain about a lack of one big motivational boost to make show off more.

"We were treated to 'eye candy' in the form of hot rugby players at last year's tournament in Turf City. There were none this year," she complained.

No apologies, guys. That's what you get from divas.