



Geelong Advertiser

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Kicking goals in Mumbai

BODEY DITTLUFF

WHEN Geelong-born Lincoln Harris and 16-year-old Sumesh Sawant met in Mumbai six years ago, little did they know that they would find common ground in Australian rules football.

Now, the pair — who have gone on to co-found the rising Mumbai Football League — are helping to change young lives in densely populated India through sport, with the egg-shaped Sherrin their weapon of choice.

Moving to Mumbai in 2010 with his wife for work, Mr Harris met then tea-salesman Sumesh by chance and was invited to join in on one of the country's most-loved sporting traditions: cricket.

What began as a kick-to-kick with the footy in between cricket sessions snowballed into regular training and games, with eight teams based in different parts of the city now coming together for a tournament held annually.

"They get around something like that, especially his peer group; it was just the right time for them to discover something like footy," Mr Harris said.

"The guys play all year round, but they don't necessarily play in their teams. As the tournament gets closer, they

train together and they separate off into their teams."

The league is supported by Mr Harris' travel company, India Unbound, and not-for-profit organisation Reclink Australia, which provides sporting and recreational opportunities for people experiencing disadvantage.

After returning to Australia from Mumbai in 2013, Mr Harris said the continuation of the concept was a testament to Sumesh's attitude and work ethic, adding that Australian

rules football would only continue to grow as more people discovered it.

"I feel like we haven't even scratched the surface — they could respond to it really well over there," Mr Harris said of the sport in India.

Both Mr Harris and Sumesh, along with Indian national team player Saurabh Bhandekar, travelled to Simonds Stadium recently to get up close and personal to the Cats' home base; the ultimate pilgrimage for Sumesh, a Geelong FC convert.

"It's a big experience for us, for me especially because I've always been the speaker to my team, so I can share how difficult (acclimatising) is," Sumesh said of his first time overseas.

"The people in Mumbai are all from different backgrounds and when they come to play footy, there's no barriers."

For more information, follow Australian rules football in Mumbai on Facebook or visit www.indiaunbound.com.au/aboutus/community-engagement/.



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GAME ON: Sumesh Sawant (left), Lincoln Harris and Saurabh Bhandekar at Simonds Stadium.

Picture: PETER RISTEVSKI