

Wheels of Change

As the capital gears up for the start of the National Volleyball League, **Mark Jackson** talks with CNVLD Secretary General **Chris Minko** about the future of disability sports in the kingdom.



Gunning for Gold: the national team will compete in the World Cup in Bangalore in November

IN THESE TROUBLED times it's not often you come across an organisation genuinely looking forward to the future. Businesses are failing, banks are running out of money and many NGOs are looking forlornly at donors begging bowl in hand. Not so CNVLD (Cambodian National Volleyball League (Disabled)), the National Volleyball League starts once more on Jul. 24 with the organisation behind it looking towards expansion rather than retrenchment.

"Last year we cut operational cost, by 50 percent, but at the same time we increased local staff," explains Chris Minko, CNVLD's Secretary General. "In other words we've localised." Chris stresses the importance of "local sponsors, local staff and local volunteers." The latter, with

more than 100 volunteers helping the organisation, is an interesting development for a country not noted for local volunteerism. Thus CNVLD has ensured that 80 percent of its funds go to the athletes with only 20 percent on administration. Many NGOs achieve the reverse.

■ PROFESSIONAL APPROACH

It is not volunteerism but professionalism that the Australian stresses most when talking of the development of what is arguably the country's most successful and highest profile organisation.

"We are moving the organisation into a new level of professionalism," he says. CNVLD has passed due diligence tests in both the U.S. and Australia, and has been noted by the U.N. for its best practices. All this has been achieved without it

ever owning a four-wheel drive. "The athletes take the public bus," explains Chris.

One of the organisation's strength is its strong commitment to CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility), according to Chris. This is something he feels passionately about. It is not just about funding programmes.

All CNVLD's athletes have bank accounts with ANZ Royal, which sponsors the volleyball league. "It gives them control over their money," stresses Chris, something especially important in rural Cambodia, where loan sharks are still the predominant 'banking' institution. ANZ Royal now has its own disability programme, which states all the company's future banks will have disability access. Chris sees this as a catalyst for change,

with other banks following ANZ Royal's lead.

It's not just banks that are changing. Ever since the country held the 2007 WOVD Cambodia Standing Volleyball World Cup in Phnom Penh – coming third – there has been a shift in the public's attitude to disability. "They won the hearts of the nation as they played before capacity crowds never seen before or since at indoor sports events at the Olympic Stadium," he says.

The team go to Bangalore in November for the next world cup. Chris is not-so-quietly confident that the team will bring back another medal, but this time gold.

Recently Cellcard, who sponsor the Wheelie League, commissioned director Darren Campbell to shoot two com-



PHOTO BY JEAN LONCKLE

Van Vun: already preparing for Stratford 2012

mercials featuring the volleyball team. They show the athletes as part of the general panorama of Cambodian life. "It doesn't show them as disabled people it shows them as the country's true sporting heroes," he mentions as evidence of how the country has moved on.

■ TOWARDS STRATFORD

With advertising agency Brand Solutions having designed CNVLD's new logo and tops for the teams, Chris feels the sport has most definitely gone mainstream. He is very confident about the professional future of disabled sport within the country. "We aim to establish Cambodia as the ASEAN centre for disability sports," he says. With extra funding from Nike, as part of the company's 'Nike Changemakers' scheme due to kick in next year, who knows this aim might not be that over-ambitious.

As more funding is secured, the programme will expand into new provinces and hopefully a third sport to accompany volleyball and wheelchair racing. Powerlifting is the current preferred option. The greater the sponsorship, the more the people CNVLD can reach. "We've only

touched the tip of the iceberg," Chris says. "We could open a club in every province." In return sponsors such as ANZ Royal and Cellcard, "get an association with the rebuilding of Cambodia, through disability," he claims.

The future will not lead to Stratford 2012, at least for the volleyball players, as standing volleyball is not an event in the Paralympic Games. Instead CNVLD is throwing its weight behind Van Vun, a polio sufferer who competes in the wheelchair half-marathon. Already Vun is perilously close to reaching the Olympic qualifying time, something no Cambodian athlete (either able-bodied or disabled) has done previously, and this achieved with a local wheelchair. His preparation for Stratford starts next January when Vun will enter the Sydney Marathon. There he'll receive a new wheelchair of international standard that might one day take him on the road to becoming the kingdom's first Olympic medallist.

The ANZ Royal National Volleyball League starts at the Olympic Stadium on Jul. 24 with a Cellcard Rock 'n' Roll Concert and the first round of matches. It concludes in October. 📺

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