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HEADLINE: Oooh, aaah, beach soccer!

SUBHEADLINE: Beach soccer is gathering momentum worldwide and in the first pro event in Thailand, Eric Cantona kicks up some sand

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With much effort, the cumbersome player runs after the ball sending up a cloud of dust. Targeting the best he can with a stiff kick, he sends the ball rolling a few metres away from the goal.

The people on the terraces are some of the biggest names in French soccer, from Pascal Olmeta to Joel Cantona, and they cheer the players enthusiastically. ``Wow! A few contracts are going to waste!" commented Senegalese beach soccer player Mamadou Faye with a smile.

At first sight, you can hardly believe it. But looking more closely, everything becomes clear. The scene is Thailand, in the compound of Jomtien's Nong Nooch Tropical Garden, where the unusual players in question are none other than three-tonne elephants, meticulously trained to play football and demonstrate their skills in front of enamoured audiences.

In Thailand to take part in the Tipco Pro Beach Soccer Tournament Bangkok 2001 _ happening at the Impact Arena Muang Thong Thani tonight _ the French ``Beach League" athletes are making the most of their time, at least for this portion of the trip where friendly drills, dives in the pool, go-karting and strolls through tropical gardens complete each day.

Sport and fun are two ingredients high on the menu of the players, and these two elements match the definition of pro beach soccer. Born in the late '80s in America thanks to an Italian living there, the sport's main objective is indeed precisely to have fun, on the beach if possible or failing that, on a soft sandy surface.

It is an intense physical workout, despite the pitch (28 by 37 metres) being less than half the size of the traditional grass. Five players per side are complimented by five substitutes, the players freely coming on and off the pitch at will. The surface resistance gives beach soccer a different edge but the goal average is 10 per game.

``Beach soccer is just awesome. The atmosphere is fantastic as there are no financial interests at stake. All of us play purely for the love of sport," said Faye, who joined the French pro beach soccer team last year.

``Beach soccer is the sport of the 21st century as it combines sport and fun, " said Paul Dominique Vacharasingthu, co-founder and chief executive officer of the brand new Pro Beach Soccer (Thailand) Co, Ltd.

Rapidly gaining in popularity, beach soccer is expected to become an Olympic discipline by 2008. This is the first beach soccer event in Thailand and the star quality is evident from the beginning. There was undiluted frenzy at the appearance of Eric Cantona, the Marseilles-born mega-star, formerly known the world over as Manchester United's ``Eric the Red". From Bangkok airport to training sessions on the beach of Koh Lan, Cantona was constantly shadowed by hoardes of adoring Thai fans.

Converted to beach soccer in 1997 following a friendly match in Monaco one month after departing from England, Cantona has played a leading role in the French team's rise to the rank of No.1 in the world earned in April 2000 at the Pro Beach Soccer World Championship held in Dubai.

``Beach soccer is pretty different from soccer. The only similarity is that it is played with a ball and the feet. But a good soccer player is not necessarily a talented beach soccer player," explained Cantona, in a visibly cheerful mood during a press interview at the Oriental Hotel.

``This sport is still new but for sure it will keep on evolving at great speed. We are eager to see young players becoming members of beach soccer federations to get this sport fully recognised," he added.

Let loose among a pack of journalists, the discussion with the lively soccer star soon drifted away from sport to the player's alternative career, projects and opinions. ``Sport is like a drug, it is addictive and exciting. The good thing about it also is that there is no need for any other drug; it provides all the excitement you need. For me, it is the most exciting thing in life and I want to be involved as long as possible. I have no other goal but this very one.

``In a game you find all the ingredients you find in real life, in greater proportions even; confrontation, need for generosity and self-control, anticipation ... It is the best school of life. That is why it is so important for children to do sport."

Even his newly found hobby for acting in movies doesn't find the same favour with him: ``So far I didn't really enjoy my experience in making films. The process is too slow, one has to wait for the light and for so many conditions before being able to shoot. To me it is too long, it requires too much patience compared to the amount of pleasure it brings," Cantona said.

Asked if he regretted anything in his past career, Cantona replied: ``I don't regret anything. All of us do good things as well as bad things at times, and who judges good and bad anyway? Bad things are good in the sense that they show us how we can improve ourselves."

Die-hard Manchester United fans, who literally hero worshipped him during his five year stint with the world's most successful club, will be rather disappointed by the star's pretty determined answer concerning his future career: ``Although I don't completely dismiss the idea [of coming back as a coach], weighing up the pros and the cons there are too many cons _ looking after a team of 30 players and dealing with each player's agent, etc ... The business side is too important; for the time being I don't want to face it."

But what Cantona and his energetic team will face tonight is a Thai national team who have been training hard for the past three weeks and are described by Piyapong Piew-on, their coach, as ``not so strong but not at all frightened". The soccer-crazy Thais, children of takraw, surely have more than one trick up their sleeves.