

SPORT BICYCLE POLO

The swingers' scene



On their bikes: Bicycle polo enthusiasts indulge in a spot of forecourt play at the Royal Exhibition Building in Melbourne's Carlton Gardens.

PICTURE: MICHELE FERGUSON

Bicycle polo is turning heads (and wheels) in Melbourne, as Vanessa Murray reports.

FOR the past six months or so, the forecourt of the Royal Exhibition Building in the Carlton Gardens has been the venue for one of Melbourne's newest sports — bicycle polo.

On Sunday afternoons, passers-by have scratched their heads as a bunch of enthusiasts known as the Melbourne Bicycle Polo Club have gone head-to-head with chicken runs and shoulder charges in their take on hard-court bicycle polo.

It's hard to work out exactly who's in charge on the day Metropolis visits, but Alex Thompson and Mardy Lay seem to know what's going on.

"We're informal, but safety is the No. 1 priority," says Lay. "We tailor our playing to suit the skill level of the people involved, so if you're a beginner we'll take it easy. It's a great way to meet people and make new friends."

Bicycle polo isn't exactly new. In fact, it's been wheeling its way around the world since an enterprising Irishman by the name of Mecredy invented it in 1890.

Not long after, it was being played by the British Army and the maharajahs in Imperial India, and England was losing the first international to Ireland 5-10 at the Crystal Palace in London.

Played this way, on grass and in uniforms, it's similar to horse polo, and it's an internationally competitive sport. Two teams of between three and six players are pitted against each other in a 90-minute game consisting of six 15-minute periods (chukkas).

Play restarts after each goal, and penalties are awarded in the form of free hits, or a compulsory 360-degree turn if a player's mallet or foot is on the ground. All players must play right-handed.

Hard-court (or urban, as it's also known) bike polo is a different story. "We're a lot more relaxed than in grass polo. We don't have as many rules," says Thompson. "It's probably more akin to hockey than anything else."

Conceived during the leisure time of bicycle couriers in the streets of North American cities such as Vancouver, Chicago and

New York, hard-court bike polo has been around for about five years.

With its come-one, come-all attitude and the motto "one less horse", it's clear that the Melbourne Bicycle Polo Club doesn't take itself too seriously.

The right-handed rule is out the window, and teams are of mixed gender. Improvisation is on the menu when it comes to equipment — traffic cones for goal posts, ski poles and plastic tubing for mallets — and bikes.

"I just put this bike together yesterday," says Kyle Gagliardi. "This is my fourth time playing, and I'm getting better. Now that I've got a bike that I'm not afraid to crash or wreck I'm looking forward to it."

Damon Rao comes off court for a rest after stacking his bike. He's just gone from vertical to airborne to horizontal in less than five seconds, but seems unfazed.

"Bike polo has done great things for my cycling skills and confidence," he says.

"I can fall off now and not be too fussed. It gets people together, it's great for teamwork, and it involves bikes. I discovered it in East Vancouver last American summer.

"They play three or more times a week over there. It's about re-using public spaces, making them multifunctional. So, for example, a car park is no longer just for parking cars on."

Bethany Keats is one of just a handful of women playing today, and recently scored her first goal.

"I was stoked," she says. "It's mostly guys playing, but that's not a problem at all. It's a really supportive environment."

"The people with customised polo bikes rough it up a little more, but people are very respectful of your bike, they know it might be your only means of transport. The experienced players go pretty hard at each other, but as soon as someone new steps in they'll pull back."

According to Thompson, "Most weeks we get 20 or so people playing. We're the only group in Melbourne, but there's a group in Sydney, and a couple starting up in Brisbane and Adelaide. We're talking about having a tournament soon, but essentially we want to keep it fun. We don't want it to get too serious."

You can find the Melbourne Bicycle Polo Club on Facebook, or email them at melbourne.bicycle.polo.club@gmail.com

HAVE MALLET, WILL INNOVATE

Bicycle polo is not the only variant of the traditional horseback game.

■ SEGWAY POLO (right)

This team sport replaces horses with Segways (two-wheeled, self-balancing electric vehicles). The Segway polo world championship, or Woz Challenge Cup, was established in 2006 when the Silicon Valley Aftershocks played the New Zealand Pole Blacks in Auckland, New Zealand. The result, a 2-2 tie.



■ ELEPHANT POLO

Played in Nepal, Sri Lanka, Rajasthan and Thailand. Equipment consists of a standard polo ball and two- to three-metre cane sticks with a polo mallet head on the end. The pitch is three-quarters the length of a standard polo pitch, due to the slower speed of the elephants. Two people ride each elephant; the elephants are steered by mahouts, while the player tells the mahout which way to go and hits the ball.

score goals in a net suspended above the water, the ball being thrown by hand, or flicked with the paddle. Two weeks ago, Australia defeated New Zealand in the final of the world championships in Canada.

■ YAK POLO

Also called "sarlagan polo", this is the Mongolian variant of the sport. It began earlier this decade as a tourist attraction but is now a booming sport, according to the Mongolian Association of Sarlagan Polo, with four games a week being played in summer. In Pakistan, yak polo is played in the Himalayas at Boroghil in July each year.

■ CANOE POLO

Played on pitches set up in swimming pools or on flat stretches of water. Teams of five paddlers try to