

Dr Arash Riazi juggles his love of football with a career as an orthopaedic surgeon.

HUNGARY FOR SUCCESS

Can the Docceros overcome their injury woes to triumph at the World Medical Football Championships in Budapest?

WORDS AND PHOTOS DAVID BRILL

TODAY has not gone to plan for Dr Paddy Begley. He has just flown in on the red-eye from Perth, hoping to impress in a day of football (the round ball variety) he's been looking forward to for months. If he plays well, he could secure his spot in the Docceros squad for the World Medical Football Championships in Budapest later this year.

But Dr Begley, an anaesthetics registrar at Fremantle Hospital, gets no further than the warm-up before a hamstring injury strikes, adding insult to the broken ankle that ruled him out of last year's finals in Sweden.

"I'm picking up injuries all over the place now. It's a bit annoying," he says glumly from the sidelines.

It proves a familiar theme in *Australian Doctor's* day with the Docceros, a team comprised entirely of football-mad doctors. For a bunch of medical professionals, they sure seem to get injured a lot.

Already out of action is the team's captain and all-time leading goalscorer Dr Nick Rendina, a Sydney psychiatrist and combative midfielder who snapped his Achilles in last year's quarter final.

Remarkably, in fact, not one of the Doc-

'The standard is very good. There are ex-professional players throughout.'

— Dr Nick Rendina, the Docceros' all-time leading goalscorer

ceros' four most prolific marksmen will be available for the Budapest trip in June: Dr Chris Lilley ruptured his ACL, also at last year's tournament; Dr Brendan Dougherty has been ruled out as a result of work commitments and Dr Andrew Phillips has a newborn daughter who needs him at home.

No one says it, but everyone is wondering: where are the goals going to come from in Budapest?

Fair play, but no trophies

Dr Begley is one of about 50 doctors who
cont'd next page



from previous page

have shown up at the David Phillips Sports Field in Sydney on a sunny Saturday in March.

They've come from all over Australia and all walks of medicine to play in a State of Origin charity fundraiser — an event that also serves as a trial for the Docceros squad in June. The trip to Budapest will be their 11th appearance at the world championships, an annual doctors-only version of the World Cup that began in Spain in 1995 and has been rotating host countries since 2005.

The Aussies have picked up a smattering of awards since their debut in 2003: best goalkeeper in 2011 (Dr Neil Janes, a GP), best midfielder in 2007 (Dr Rendina, a psychiatrist), top goalscorer (Dr Dougherty, a psychiatry registrar) and even the team 'fair play' award in 2010. But they've never made it past the semi-finals, not even when they had home advantage on the Gold Coast in 2007.

Dr Rendina, whose injury hasn't stopped him organising, running and publicising today's event, admits the competition is pretty fierce.

"There's between eight and 12 teams and the standard is very good. There are ex-professional players throughout; there are guys playing for the Brazilian team who have played for Sao Paulo, and some of the Austrians and Hungarians have played for their national teams," he says.

With last year's injury crisis still fresh in

mind, the Docceros are aiming to take a squad of 20-22 players this year instead of the usual 16-17. With six games in seven days to be played in Budapest, Dr Rendina says they've learned the hard way that the tournament can decimate a small squad.

Education and escapism

There is a palpable buzz among the doctors who have shown up today. The facilities are top class, everyone is on time (except *Australian Doctor*), their strips are pristine and everyone seems in high spirits.

Those from interstate have arranged time off and paid for their own flights and accommodation, as well the \$30 fee to take part. All of which begs the question: what is it that drives these guys to sink their time, money and health into the Docceros?

For Dr Alan Jones it's all about escapism. A GP at the busy Chermiside Medical Centre in Brisbane, he founded the Docceros in 2003 and has played in every world championship since — not to mention high-profile exhibition match victories over the Australian Defence Force and Australian Federal Police on home soil.

Dr Jones says football provides a welcome break from seeing up to 30 patients a day and allows him to indulge his frustrated inner sportsman.

It also gives him a great excuse to travel: the World Medical Football Championship has long been his main annual holiday, having taken him to Korea, Brazil and all

'Doctors are ambitious. We want to at least make the final.'

— Dr Bruce Ager, Sydney anaesthetist and Docceros player

around Europe.

This year, he's taking his family (fortunately, his wife is a huge football fan), and hopes to do the same again in 2014. It's a truly exciting prospect for football fans: the medical championship is being held in Rio de Janeiro at the same time as Brazil hosts the actual FIFA World Cup.

"A lot of us love sport but chose medicine, for obvious reasons. This gives us an opportunity to keep playing the game," says Dr Jones, during a brief spell on Queensland's substitutes bench.

Camaraderie, banter and bonding are other themes that emerge when players discuss what drives them to play with the Docceros. These are clearly important factors for Dr Bruce Ager, a cheery Sydney anaesthetist who revels in telling *Australian Doctor* about the team's initiation ceremonies and legendary nights on the town (think 18 grown men dressed in Morph suits, or as ABBA for a night out in Sweden).

Dr Ager has been a stalwart of the team since 2005, playing every tournament except the 2008 trip to Klaipeda, Lithuania, which he missed with a broken leg.

"It's fantastic. I've made lifelong friends — not just among the Australians but also the overseas guys," says Dr Ager. "Sure, there are a few competitive players and there's always disagreement about philosophies among doctors, no matter what you do. But everyone gets along with each other and there are no egos out there."

He adds: "The other thing is the tournament's combined with a medical conference, so you actually learn something as well. There's a strong emphasis on sports medicine but people talk on all topics, from psychiatry to orthopaedics."

Dr Ager is one of several Docceros who have given presentations at the conference, and he plans to do so again this year. He also sees the trips as a great way to develop "teacher-student bonds", with more senior doctors taking the opportunity to mentor their juniors.

What goal drought?

Pitchside in Sydney, the plan to take a bigger squad to Budapest appears to be paying off. A concerted publicity campaign has seen an unprecedented turnout for a Docceros trial and there is some exciting new talent on display.

Victoria has brought its largest-ever contingent, thanks to a recruitment drive by Dr Arash Riazi, a Melbourne orthopaedic surgeon who made his Docceros debut in Sweden last year. Indeed it's Victoria who emerge winners of the State of Origin competition, giving Docceros coach Dean Ugrinich (pictured above in white cap) plenty to think about when he picks the squad.

Crucially for Australia's hopes, fears of a goal drought are swiftly banished; it takes just five minutes for NSW to open the scoring, with Dr Miguel Talina bending a sweet strike into the top corner from the edge of the area.

The goals continue to flow — there are 10 in all across the three games, which are played at a good standard throughout. Inevitably, perhaps, there are also two more injuries, both for Victoria (including Dr Alex Handrinos, pictured top left), prompting NSW captain Dr Ager to switch jerseys to keep the numbers fair.

Victoria's captain, Dr Riazi, catches the eye with three assists, but his nomination for best player of the day goes to Dr Kenji Takasaki, a skilful midfielder who bags two goals.

Another debutant who gets tongues wagging is Dr Richard Barry, an ophthalmology registrar at Sydney's Prince of Wales hospital. He scores the undisputed goal of the day, chipping Queensland's goalkeeper from the halfway line, David Beckham-style.

Dr Ager, for one, seems pleased with what he has seen. He remains hopeful the injection of fresh blood will serve the squad well in Budapest, despite the ever-growing injury list.

"Doctors are ambitious. We want to at least make the final — that's our aim," he says.

The Docceros also have a wildcard in the



Victoria holds aloft the doctors' State of Origin Cup, won in the team's competition debut.



Check out the Docceroots' website: docceroots.com.au or on Facebook: www.facebook.com/pages/The-Docceroots/143105446910

The 19th World Medical Football Championship runs from 29 June to 7 July in Budapest, Hungary. See: www.worldmedicalfootballfederation.com



Dr Alan Jones (above, second from right), of Queensland, watches on as NSW's goalkeeper turns a shot over the bar.

form of Dr Begley, if he can stay fit.

Although no one here has seen him play yet, he's got something none of the others do: a winner's medal, having lifted the 2009 trophy for Great Britain before he moved to Australia. The final was played in the Olympic stadium in the South Korean capital

Seoul — a once-in-a-lifetime experience Dr Begley will never forget.

"I'll have to get into the squad on reputation alone," he says. "And then it's hoping I don't get lynched by Team GB when I turn up in a Docceroots shirt. They don't even know I'm here yet."

Since the time of writing, the Docceroots have announced their squad for the trip to Budapest. Drs Begley, Jones, Ager, Riazi and Takasaki are all included. However Dr Barry, scorer of that spectacular chip, has his final ophthalmology exams in June and will not make the tournament. ●

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