

International Employees Bring Love of Netball to MS

A handful of Microsoft employees, vendors, and spouses play for the Emerald City Netball Club in Seattle. The sport, played mostly in Commonwealth countries, reminds many of home.

By Jennifer Warnick

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Microsoft vendor Anna Tuke makes a play in the 2009 netball nationals.

Richard Horsfield didn't think he'd ever be a national champion of anything. One tournament and one trophy later, Horsfield and his netball team are the United States of America Netball Association (USANA) 2009 champions. Netball is a cousin of basketball in that it is played on a similarly sized court with a basket, but instead of dribbling, teams rely on passing to move the ball around the court.

Horsfield plays for the Emerald City Netball Club, a Seattle group that includes a handful of Microsoft employees and vendors, as well as their spouses. "In typical Microsoft fashion, I sit behind a desk for far too many hours in the day," said Horsfield, a business development manager. "[Netball] gets me fit. I get out into fresh air, and I like playing team sports."

The 2009 national championships were hosted by the Emerald City Netball Club in June, drawing teams from all over the country as well as some Canadian teams who came to play exhibition games.

Horsfield spent 12 years in the United Kingdom before relocating to the Redmond campus. In Washington State, his wife Karen became president of the netball club, which has weekly training and scrimmages during spring and fall seasons. The fall netball season begins in September, he said. "And I kind of got dragged, pulled, coaxed into playing netball here," Horsfield said, chuckling. He hadn't played much netball—squash, rugby and basketball were his sports. He has become a netball club regular, along with about 50 other men, women, and children.

Along with Horsfield's national championship team, the club had two women's teams competing in the nationals; they won second and third place. Microsoft project management vendor Anna Tuke played on the second-place team. "I moved to Redmond a couple of years ago and joined the netball club. It was a good way to find something from home that I was familiar with," said Tuke, a New Zealand native. "We're the only netball club in Washington State, so we don't have other clubs to play against on a regular basis, but we do play within our club every week, and against Canadian teams every so often."



The Emerald City Netball Club men's team was the 2009 United States of America national champion.

"Certainly, there's a huge ex-pat population of Microsoft folks from places like Australia, New Zealand, Canada, South Africa who may have played it when they were younger, and women who definitely played it in school," Horsfield said. "It's a great opportunity to get some fresh air and have some fun."

Though the game originated in the United States in the late 1800s as a variation of basketball, today it is most popular in Commonwealth countries such as Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and the United Kingdom. According to the USA Netball Association, netball is the most popular women's team sport in the world based on participation.

Netball has a growing presence in the Puget Sound area, joining the ranks of sports such as soccer and cricket that enjoy widespread, worldwide popularity yet have been slower to catch on in the United States.



Teams compete around the hoop at the USANA 2009 championship, held this spring in Seattle.

Tuke describes netball as a "combination of basketball and ultimate Frisbee." Unlike basketball, it's noncontact, and players can't dribble or move with the ball. Two teams of seven players pass a ball similar to a volleyball around the court. Playing specific positions on areas of the court, teammates try to move the ball into a goal circle, where two "shooters" work against two defenders to try to place it through a 10-foot hoop with no backboard. A typical game is four 15-minute periods, and each basket scored is one point.

"The good thing about netball is there's a position for all shapes and sizes, while you still get the aspects of 'teammanship,' ball control, ball handling, and all of that fun stuff," Horsfield said.

The Emerald City Netball Club trains Thursdays in the Ballard neighborhood of Seattle and plays Saturday mornings at Marymoor Park in Redmond. Tuke said it's a sport

Thanks to the international draw of Microsoft and other large corporations in the Puget Sound area, there is a loyal population of netball-loving regulars who grew up playing the sport. Most of the club is made up of people from Australia, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, South Africa, Fiji, and other countries where netball is played widely. "We do have some Americans as well, but they're the minority, and we'd certainly like to get some more," said Tuke. "I feel like I've played it forever. I grew up playing it."

Tuke encouraged people, new and experienced players alike, to come out and play with the club. Horsfield agreed.

that's relatively easy to learn and safe for all ages because it's a noncontact sport. "There is no experience necessary. It's a real social thing. We do a lot of socializing off the court as well," Tuke said. "We have a lot of different skill levels, and people play for different reasons, whether it's to be competitive, to come along and keep fit, or to learn something new. It's a good way to meet new friends. There's something for everyone."

Find more information on the [Emerald City Netball Club](#).

For more information on netball, visit the [United States of America Netball Association](#).