



Hainan village volleyball league games are held on local sports courts. — Photos by IC

Grassroots volleyball gets national attention, aids rural revitalization

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Hainan Island, sometimes called the “Hawaii of China,” is attracting attention of late for more than its tourist attractions and native coconuts.

The province’s unique brand of village volleyball has become something of an online sensation. A short video of one game, filmed by China Central TV and aired on the social media platform Weibo, has been viewed more than 60,000 times.

What’s so special about the grassroots volleyball matches? Expect to see a barefoot player or one using a stool in a serve. And look at fans climbing up trees to watch the game.

“We Hainanese like rural games where we can find a seat anywhere and watch for free,” 24-year-old Chen Guan, who used to be a player with the Hainan University volleyball team, told Shanghai Daily.

After graduation, he returned home to the township of Jinshan in the city of Wenchang to play for the village team.

“Wenchang has a population of 500,000, and there are more than 6,000 volleyball courts,” Chen said. “Almost every village has a court and everyone knows how to play. Our team has people from all walks of life: students, teachers, deliverymen. There is no set time for training. We do that anytime we are free.”

Indeed, it’s not uncommon to find the team practicing in the

wee hours of the morning.

Township games are often held on basic courts. For instance, in some villages, games are played under coconut groves or on the beach, across a fishing net supported by two bamboo poles. In one local volleyball league, 20 township men’s teams are competing in a nine-a-side volleyball tournament which runs until next month. The amateur players include local farmers, fishermen and students, ranging in ages from 15 to 59.

Wang Guangping, a sports influencer on the short-video platform Douyin, has been livestreaming Hainan’s township volleyball matches for more than half a year.

“Many Hainanese first play volleyball in primary school,”

he told Shanghai Daily. “I have been playing volleyball since I was a pupil.”

Wang said such grassroots matches are popular, friendly and down-to-earth.

In the past half a year, he said he has recorded many touching scenes with his camera.

“I saw people who played so hard that they collapsed to the ground,” he said. “I’ve filmed players who get up after injuries and play on for the glory of their teams. Fans are passionate.”

The popularity of rural volleyball in Hainan rests on a history of more than a century, since the sport was first introduced to Wenchang in the early 20th century.

Different from the six-a-side volleyball in international

competitions, Hainan mainly plays nine-a-side volleyball. Due to the increase in the number of players, the game has developed its own style and tactics.

Matches often take place in the evening, after people have finished a day’s work, and can extend late into the night.

Volleyball also features prominently in local festivals. Fans sometimes bicycle more than 10 kilometers to watch a match. Finding a seat is never a problem. If necessary, people improvise, sometimes resorting to trees or shed roofs to get a good view of the action.

Shen Qiong, head coach of the Shanghai Men’s Volleyball Team, arrived in Hainan to watch the games.

“Here, the general public