



Cha Cha's loving life, and kicking goals in Australia

By *VINNIE RODI*

MILDURA'S Cha Cha Riam is simply loving life at the moment, and it's all thanks to her new love affair with the world's most popular sport.

A prominent member of the Mildura United women's soccer team, Cha Cha has taken the Football Federation Sunraysia competition by storm, with her silky skills and fast feet dazzling local players.

Not that Cha Cha likes to talk herself up.

"I don't know if I'm any good or not," she said. "It doesn't really matter to me, I just love to play soccer."

What's even more impressive than the 22-year-old's skills is her willingness to compete against the boys, with Cha Cha saying she liked spending training sessions learning a thing or two from "the lads."

"I've been playing since I was 14, and this is the first opportunity I've had to play in a proper league with other women," she said.

"I just want to learn as much as I can, and keep having as much fun as possible, which is why I like playing against the boys."

Originally from Sudan, Cha Cha has been living in Australia for the past six years, after spending the majority of her life in the war-torn country.

She said life was relatively stable compared to those around her, with her father's position as a doctor providing security, and a reasonable family income.

However all that changed when Cha Cha was 11, with her father passing away. His death meant that Cha

Cha's mother, sisters and brothers were reduced to a lower station within their society.

"While my father was alive things were good," she said. "After he died life got very hard for us. My mother did the best she could, and always took great care of us."

"But it was too hard in Sudan with the wars, so we moved to Kenya."

Joining a host of other refugees fleeing to the neighbouring country, life didn't prove any easier, with Kenya just as unstable as Cha Cha's previous home, with war again affecting the family's way of life.

It was while living in Kenya that Cha Cha started to fall in love with soccer, spending the majority of her time playing with her siblings, and other children residing in the camp.

The family was eventually offered a chance at a fresh start, with Cha Cha's aunty, who was living in Australia at the time, tracking them down to Kenya.

"She helped us come to Australia and start our new life here," Cha Cha said. "And we've all been extremely happy since."

Cha Cha's family spent the first four years in Australia living in Dandenong, before spending four months in Melbourne, with Cha Cha only just making the move to Mildura.

"There is no war, no violence, and no racism here," she said. "I feel safe and happy."

"I feel very comfortable now, I'm an Australian citizen, and I'd do anything for my new country."

Cha Cha said at first she had

found it difficult to adjust to her new life, with soccer providing the perfect escape, while also helping her connect with her new community.

Since moving to Mildura, Cha Cha has continued to develop in the sport, and is also a participant of Mildura's Community Street Soccer program, which aims to help the region's homeless and refugee citizens form links in society.

"I love Street Soccer," she said. "It has helped improve my skills, and I've made a lot of friends as well."

It is through that program, and participating in the local competition, that Cha Cha said she'd come to form close friendships, and further appreciate the game.

"I feel healthy when I play soccer," she said. "When I'm on the field and running, trying to kick goals, it makes me feel good."

And while Cha Cha said her main goal in life was to become a nurse, a way to honour her late father, she said she wouldn't dismiss the notion of one day playing soccer professionally.

"It's my dream to play in the national Women's League," she said. "And there's no reason why I can't do that."

"I will never give up on my dream, and who knows what the future will hold for me."

"The best part about living in Australia is I can do anything now, and whether that's playing soccer, or becoming a nurse doesn't really matter, because I'm happy."



• **SKILLS FOR LIFE:**
Cha Cha Riam demonstrates some of the skills that have made her one of the stars of the Football Federation Sunraysia competition.



• **HEADING FOR GLORY:**
Former Sundanese resident Cha Cha Riam is loving her new life in Australia, which has involved falling in love with the world game. She's made an impact in the local Football Federation Sunraysia competition, dazzling opposition with her silky skills.