

Rugby Union in Hong Kong

Long-held dream comes true for battling Laos player

Sunday, 18 March, 2012, 12:00am

Alvin Sallay alvin.sallay@scmp.com

For the past six months, Phonpasith 'Ollo' Sansayya, has been doing odd jobs in Vientiane so he can raise money to realise a dream - to come to Hong Kong to watch the Cathay Pacific/HSBC Hong Kong Sevens.

That dream will become a reality next weekend for the Laos flanker after he plays in the Altus Kowloon RugbyFest.

'I have worked hard for the past six months to contribute to this trip,' says Ollo, part of a representative side of senior and under-20 national team players from Laos.

They will follow in the path of a team from Rwanda, who were also fostered by the Kowloon 10s in 2010, continuing the role of good samaritans played by Hong Kong's rugby community in helping lesser privileged countries develop their game.

And it doesn't get any poorer than Laos, one of the least developed nations in the world where close to one-third of the population lives on under US\$1 a day and where 50 per cent of rural children under the age of five are severely malnourished.

A country still recovering from the grim legacy of the second Indochina war in which more than two million tonnes of ordnance was dropped - a recent study showed nearly 30 per cent of the bombs remain live under the ground - the children of Laos face extreme risks on a day-to-day basis while engaged in normal life, including play.

Ollo, 19, is one such youngster. He comes from a village 20 kilometres from the capital of Vientiane, where people live in basic wooden and bamboo houses. In recent years, his village has seen some

development with a bank, several restaurants and a large market sprouting. But the most fundamental needs like clean running water are still a long way away.

Ollo's mum is a teacher and his dad is in the military. He has seven brothers and sisters.

Maggie Dillon, operations manager for the Laos Rugby Federation, relates Ollo's story. 'His normal day begins at 6am, when he helps his mother cook breakfast. He does another hour of chores and then heads to school. After a full day at school, Ollo coaches primary and secondary school rugby players in Tha Ngon and a neighbouring village.

'When rugby is over at 4.30pm, he heads home to do more housework. At 7.15pm, he begins the long motorbike drive into Vientiane, fighting bad traffic, damaged roads and poor visibility before making it to the city for rugby training.

'After training, he has to make the long drive back to his village, finally returning home at 11pm. Ollo makes this drive five times a week. It is exhausting. It is dangerous. But he does it because he loves rugby,' Dillon said.

In addition to his daily routine, Ollo has been making an extra effort to raise funds to contribute towards the trip of a lifetime, one which is mostly funded by Silver Heritage, a company headquartered in Hong Kong.

'Apart from coaching rugby in schools four times during the week and also on weekends, I help out at the Laos Rugby Federation. In addition, I have taken on odd jobs in and around Vientiane, helping people move house, renovate their homes, garden and paint to raise the money. I am proud to have worked so hard for this and to be able to experience such an exciting rugby event,' Ollo said.

He began playing rugby 2 1/2 years ago at school, where the LRF runs rugby development activities. He got more involved in the sport through weekly community rugby sessions, sponsored by Silver Heritage, and joined the Vientiane Wild Hogs Rugby Club, from where he worked his way into the Lao under-20 national side in 2009 and 2010.

Ollo earned his first full cap last year in the HSBC Asian Five Nations Division Five series between Laos and Cambodia, which Laos won. He was also a member of the Lao national sevens team who captured the Bowl championship at the Thailand Sevens last month.

Rugby was originally introduced to Laos when it was part of French Indochina. After independence in 1953, the game suffered due to many outside forces - from famine to the Indochina war, and it was only in recent years that the game was revived. In 2004, Laos became a member of the Asian Rugby Football Union and it has won the Division Five A5N tournament for the past three years.

'But we only have about 500 players,' says Dillon. 'We want to expand into the provinces, but we are limited by lack of resources and funding.'

A lot of hope is pinned on Ollo and his teammates this week when the Nagas, as the touring side are known, make a rare foray into the outside world.

'This is a very important opportunity for Laotian rugby to be seen by the world. I am very happy fans will see there is rugby in my country and we can play the sport well,' Ollo said.

'I hope we can learn new skills and gather new ideas to bring back to Laos to help develop rugby. More and more people are learning about rugby in Laos every year. Last year, our test match versus Cambodia was broadcast live throughout the country, and this year, people saw us win the Bowl at the Thailand Sevens. More people know about the sport and understand the rules and the interest is growing.'

With the help of the Hong Kong Rugby Football Union, which will host the team at the Sevens, Silver Heritage vice-president of business development Andy Dennis, and members of Kowloon Rugby Club, including Kevin McBarron, Steve Baynes and Clive Hammond, Ollo and his teammates will live the dream this week.