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Sports

Subbuteo makes a comeback

Popular English soccer game gains cult following in Conejo Valley

By Thomas Gase tgase@theacorn.com



IRIS SMOOT/Acorn Newspapers ACTION PACKED- Kevin Nieman of Newbury Park uses one of his men to kick the ball through enemy territory as Steve Tucker, a Simi Valley resident, looks on during a game

Twelve-year-old Simi Valley resident Dominic Hutchinson is hoping that a certain Hasbro product will become all the rage in the near future.

No, it's not the Transformers. Instead, Dominic has picked up on Subbuteo, a table-soccer game that's played on a felt pitch slightly larger than the average dinner table.

The game is played between two players, each of whom has 10 miniature soccer figures that are flicked around the pitch while trying to score a goal. The goalkeeper is on a movable rod and like the other miniature figures also tries to prevent the opponent from scoring.

"It's like chess on caffeine," Newbury Park resident Kevin Nieman said. "There's a lot of finesse involved, and you always have to think several moves ahead."

Subbuteo was invented in 1946 by Peter Adolph, who originally wanted to patent the game as "The Hobby." Being an ornithologist, he instead named the game after a type of bird, the Eurasian Hobby, which has a Latin name of Falco Subbuteo.

Although mostly unknown in the U.S. at the time, Subbuteo became very popular in England during the 1970s. According to Hasbro's

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of Subbuteo.

website, during that period in the U.K., 90 percent of fathers 30 and older owned the game.

"I remember all my friends had it in England, so of course I wanted it," Dominic's father, Simon, said. "I remember getting the game as a Christmas present and being so excited to play it.

"The next day my family moved overseas to Northern California, and nobody had even heard of the game here. It wasn't until I moved back to England that I started really getting into it."

With the dawn of video games in the 1980s, interest in Subbuteo started to fade. Simon Hutchinson put the game back on the shelf and didn't play it again until years later, after a conversation two years ago with his New Hampshire Ball Bearings co-worker, Steve Tucker.

"I had known Simon for a couple years, and I knew that he liked the game of soccer just like me. One day I asked him if he had ever heard of Subbuteo," said Tucker, a Simi Valley resident.

"He told me he grew up playing it just like me, and one of the next days at lunch he brought it in to play. After that, my interest in the game started to pick up again."

At the same time Tucker and Hutchinson were being reacquainted with the game they used to play as kids, Nieman was first learning about Subbuteo.

"I had never played the sport as a kid; I grew up in the San Fernando Valley. But I did grow up loving soccer and guys like Pele," Nieman said. "I learned a little about it on the Internet, and in 2004 my obsession with the game started to really take off.

"I started looking at figures on eBay, and I started asking around about whom I should contact about playing the sport locally. The guy everyone was telling me to contact was Wayne Smith."

Smith, who founded the Southern California Subbuteo Club in 1985, began to teach Nieman how to play.

"He was beating me pretty bad, and he kept asking me, in a worried way, if I was having fun," Nieman said. "And even though I didn't score against him, I told him that I was having fun and that this was something I liked to do. It fit all my interests of liking sports, playing soccer and playing board games."

These days Simon and Dominic Hutchinson, along with Nieman and Tucker, organize Subbuteo tournaments, including the upcoming Posh Spice Open Saturday in Northridge.

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Although the Southern California Subbuteo Club is the only club in California recognized by the American Subbuteo Association, Simon Hutchinson said the league is always looking for new players.

"This league is a little harder to get into than regular soccer, where all you need to have is two legs and a soccer ball," he said.

"In Subbuteo, you need to ask your parents to shell out around \$100 before you even start playing, and that can turn some people away from the sport. However, I would love to see this sport get out of obscurity in this country, and I would love for people to get a chance to play it and love it."

Simon Hutchinson may be getting his wish sooner than expected.

"At first, in our old house, I didn't like (Subbuteo) that much," Dominic said. "The room where the game was in was smaller and darker. Now we have a bigger room, and there's more space to move around the board while playing. I also started winning a couple games, so that helped me like it more."

Simon Hutchinson said his son had a recent sleepover and some of the kids seemed intrigued by Subbuteo.

"His friend, Adam, came over and we all played Subbuteo that night," Simon Hutchinson said. "The next morning all (Adam) wanted to do was play 'that tablesoccer game.'"

For more information about joining the local league or learning its rules, visit www.socalSubbuteo.googlepages.com.