

SUBBUTEO

An Aussie soccer champ is off to take on the superstars in the World Cup — playing on a table and using his fingers.

The players took to the pitch, the emerald green field in immaculate condition. Each player went to his position, the whistle blew and the game began. The red team kicked off and steadily worked the ball up the field, as the defensive side hustled back with great urgency. Suddenly, in a blurring mass of finger flicks, the ball was in the back of the net.

A blurring mass of finger flicks? Yes, this is table soccer, or Subbuteo as it's more commonly known, and the man with the dextrous digit is none other than **Gary Hosie**, the Australian champion.

While most of us felt saddened at the elimination of the Socceroos from this year's World Cup, the Subbuteo boys were rejoicing in the selection of Hosie to take on the best in the *other* World Cup — the Subbuteo version.

The name Subbuteo comes from the Latin *falco subbuteo*, meaning hobby hawk — a type of bird. The guy who invented the game was an ornithologist; he figured the game would be a great hobby; the hobby hawk was his favourite bird; it's as good a way as any of naming a game!

Subbuteo is played on a green cotton or nylon pitch about 1.5m x 1m. The players are about two centimetres tall and are mounted on a half-spherical base, which allows them to be flicked around the table with the middle or index finger. The attacking and defending teams take turns to flick their player either to the ball or to a defensive position, and shooting to the 5cm x 15cm goal can only be done from inside the penalty area. Other rules involve the repositioning

of players at set plays, fouls and assorted other infringements.

At its best, Subbuteo is a very fast game that involves a very high level of skill. For those who've dabbled with the game in their childhood, working the players and the ball around the field with slow deliberation, top-class games are an eye-opening experience.

As a novice player, I grabbed the chance to have a game against a couple of Australia's best players, **Steve Dettre** and **Rob Green**. They were very accommodating — taking things very slowly, given my ability. After an early moment of glory when I scored a goal, I asked them to switch into "top-class" mode. Seconds later the ball was in the back of my net. It was a *very* different game indeed.

The 1990 Subbuteo World Cup will be held in Rome in early June (a week before the life-size figures take to the field). There will be at least 24 countries present — at this stage, no one knows if the Panamanian champ will make it.

The European countries are the strongest, although countries like Australia and Argentina are starting to make an impression. Of the 30 or so nations that are playing the game in an organised way, Australia is ranked about 15th overall. Mind you, Hosie is one of the top players in the world. Indeed, our top six or seven players would be able to play against the European champs without being embarrassed.

The world champion and World Cup title holder is **Willy Hofmann** of Switzerland. From all accounts, the man is a freak — the **Pele** of Subbuteo. He recently visited



Tony Nolan

Australia and played Hosie in a number of exhibition games. While he won all their encounters, he later said that Hosie was one of the best players he'd faced. Hosie plays down the compliment, saying it was more that Hofmann wasn't used to the "Australian" style of play.

As for the players of Subbuteo in Australia, there is a very strong English flavour. Most have been brought up on the game back "home". It is also interesting to note that most of the players are in their late twenties and early thirties. Almost without exception, they had played the game as kids, lost interest in their teens, and then rediscovered the game as they hit their mid-twenties.

Surprisingly, given the strength of the game in Europe, Australian Europeans are not found at the top level — either here or overseas. Australian Subbuteo Association

president Steve Dettre has tried to encourage the local "European" clubs to get involved in national competitions but finds they prefer to stick to themselves.

Establishing accurate details on the number of people playing the game in Australia is practically impossible. The vast majority just play at home — something the clubs would like to see change. The Sydney Falcons are the strongest club in the country but find the lack of new blood joining their ranks frustrating and are always looking for more players.

(If you want to get in touch with your local club, contact the Australian Subbuteo Association through PO Box 634, Leichhardt, NSW 2040.)

At any rate, come June, remember that we'll be in there fighting it out for the World Cup — the Subbuteo version, that is.

— CHUCK SMEETON