

It sounds like an old boys' club of war veterans. Only it is more like soccer veterans.

If you look on the surface, Essex Veterans does have members who are formerly from St Joseph's Institution and St Michael's School.

Look deeper and you will see women and girls along the sidelines of the soccer field, playing their typical supporting roles.

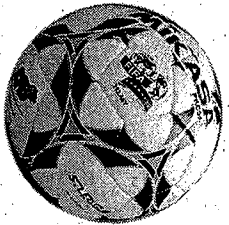
They play cheerleaders, rooting for their men and boys, preparing refreshments and food for everyone.

This close-knit community, which started with fewer than 10 people, has now grown so huge it even has its own administrative personnel.

And yes, to use the most cliched of terms, they are really one big family.

Essex Veterans is a group of about 20 professionals

from all walks of life who have come together with a common goal in mind — soccer.



# me big soccer

The men, mostly in their late 30s and 40s, are only half as dynamic without their younger counterparts — their sons.

Every Sunday, these father-son teams meet for their weekly soccer fix.

First they train and spar with each other, but when the real games begin, they play with their own peers.

Pilot Mark Joseph is one regular participant.

Together with his two sons, Shaun, 13, and Mitchell, 8, Mr Joseph makes it a point to attend the games when he is not flying.

He stumbled upon Essex Veterans after he became more involved as a parent volunteer when his eldest son was in Primary 4.

The 40-year-old started by helping at soccer camps, and gradually became the assistant soccer coach for the school team, which his son was in.

Mr Joseph, who also has two daughters, aged 8 (Mitchell's twin sister) and 9, said: "Playing soccer with the boys has definitely helped strengthen our relationship.

**"We spend more time together and learn more about one another."**

"Very often, we even discuss the soccer matches that we watch together and do an analysis of what went wrong, or what could have been done instead."

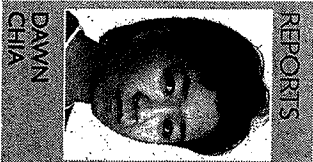
His son, Shaun, enjoys these soccer matches because he gets to "play with my friends and Dad".

"We learn more about the various techniques and have a great time," he said.

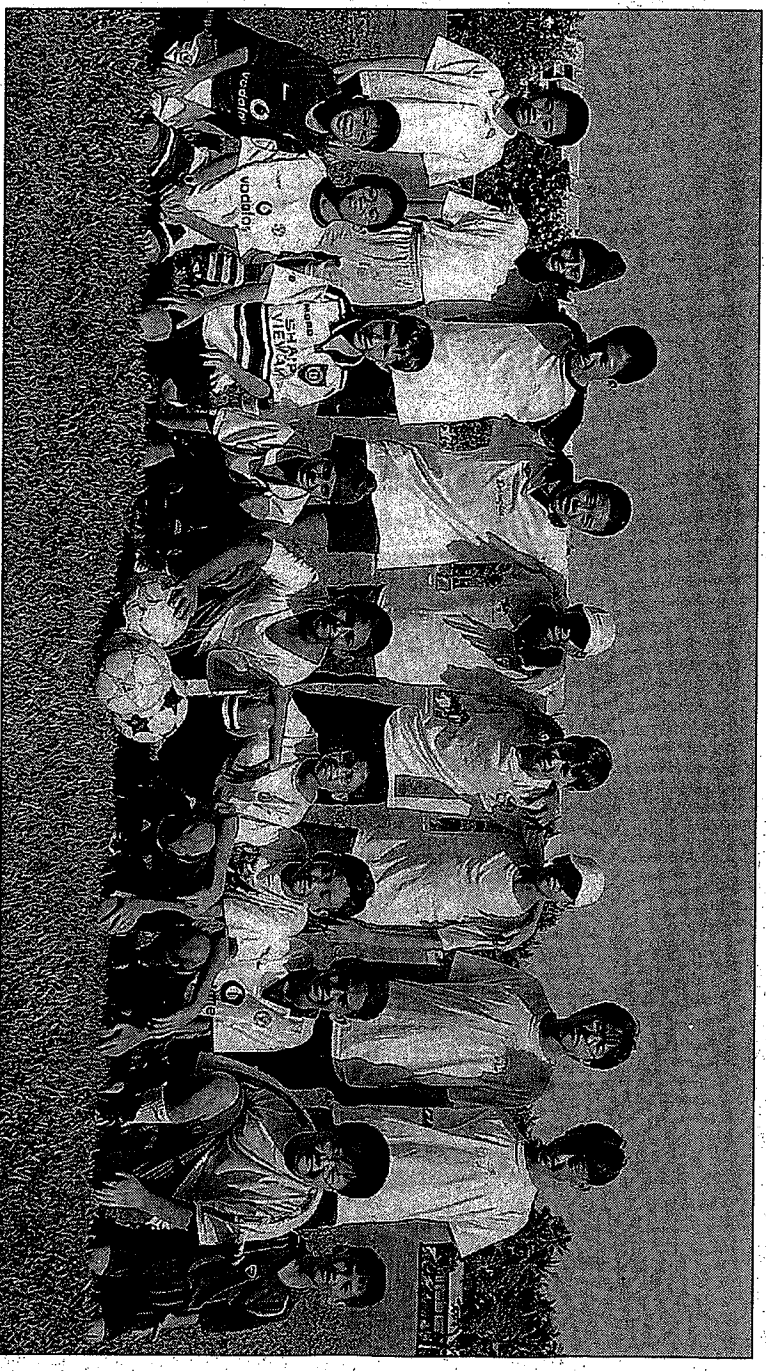
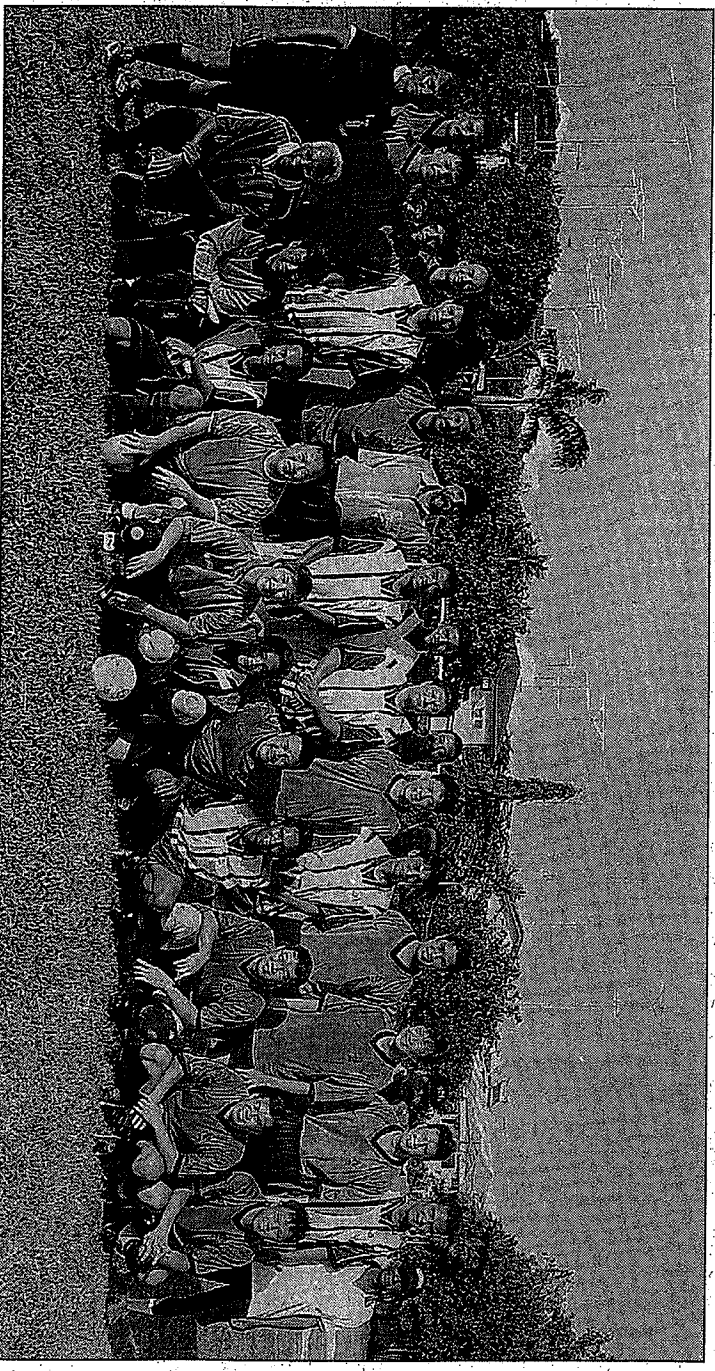
While they bond with their sons, the men are not about to let their wives or daughters be benchwarmers for long either.

Mr P Ramakrishna, who is in charge of coordinating social activities, said: "Now that our soccer team has taken off, we're planning to get the rest of the family involved.

**"The next challenge is to have our wives and daughters form**



REPORTS  
DAWN CHIA



**"their own captain's ball team."**

Mrs Stephanie Joseph, 38, a businesswoman, thinks it is good when parents get involved in their children's activities.

"Kids will be encouraged to do even better when parents participate with them," she said.

Essex is the name of the road where St Michael's School is located and the club was started by chance. (See report on next page)

Now, there is even a mini committee within the group to help coordinate the activities.

There is a chairman (Mr Leong Kok Fann), a main coordinator (Mr Anselm Desouza), a social coordinator (Mr Ramakrishna), and a treasurer (Mr Richard Tan).

Mr Ray Teo, who takes pictures of the matches and social events, doubles up as a marketing communications person.

He also reviews the matches and updates the group regularly to keep those who have missed events in the loop.

Christmas gatherings and birthday parties have helped forge stronger ties.

They even travel to Malacca to play against their peers — the most recent one was just two weeks ago.

Although these soccer dads know that it won't be long before they hang up their jerseys and boots, they are determined to ensure that this unique alliance which they have forged over the years will not come to an end.

Chairman Leong, 44, said: "We might have started this team to journey with our kids and strengthen our relationships with them. But in the process, something else has evolved — camaraderie, sportsmanship and a healthy tradition.

"And it is this fellowship that we want our sons to carry on."

**WEEKLY SOCCER FIX:** Every Sunday, fathers (top) and sons (above) meet to train and spar with each other.



**CHEERLEADERS:** Mothers and wives turn up to give their sons and husbands support.

# Family

## THIS SOCCER FELLOWSHIP

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— *Mr Leong Kok Fann, chairman of Essex Veterans*

Club was built on passion

IT all began in 1999.

Former national footballer Leong Kok Fann and some parents got together with St Michael's School to form the school's Soccer Academy.

Back then, the parent group had only five or six members who volunteered to organise training sessions, inter-class competitions and soccer camps during the June holidays.

But as they got more involved in their sons' soccer training, they started playing with, and against, one another and their sons.

Now, even after most of their sons have already left primary school, the parents continue with the "soccer sparring" they had started with their sons.

Chairman Leong said: "Essex Veterans was not founded on lofty ideals or goals.

"We came together because we are passionate about the sport, and want to spread our enthusiasm and the benefits.

"If many like-minded people do this, we will form a base of interest and generate more passion in the sport."

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