



# Barbecues for the beautiful game

## Soccer inspires solidarity, writes **Craig Emerson**

RODELU is an unfamiliar name to most Australians. It means Uruguay, a poor Latin American country. For most of the past 18 years, Juan Santa Cruz, president of the Rodelu Soccer Club, and his soccer-crazy friends have barbecued beef spare ribs on Saturday nights for the club's small band of loyal patrons.

An inexpensive cut of beef, the spare ribs barbecued and smoked on an open-fire grill are traditional Uruguayan fare. Children descend from surrounding hills for a free meal and companionship. They are from broken homes. Many have been bashed and abused by parents in rages fuelled by alcohol and illicit drugs. They are under-nourished and definitely under-loved. Their parents do not know where they are at night. Most don't care. These children don't have much chance in life.

That such misery should be a daily routine for children in Uruguay is tragic. That it should occur in affluent Australia is

scandalous. You see, the Rodelu Soccer Club is in Woodridge, 20km southeast of Brisbane's city centre. Juan Santa Cruz migrated to Australia with his family in 1977 and has held the Rodelu Club together through thick and thin — mainly thin. His hardy band of Uruguayan compatriots are all poor. The club stays afloat through the voluntary service of Juan and his executive.

Not only has Juan given dozens of vulnerable children a reason to live, a reason to believe in a better world, their club now also hosts regular Sunday soccer tournaments among recently arrived African refugee children. They play for their respective countries of birth. Sudan, Congo, Burundi and Ethiopia all compete, joined by teams from Uruguay, Peru, Columbia, Argentina, Venezuela, El Salvador, the Middle East and Australia.

It's a wonderful welcome to Australia for these children of war-torn African states. Their love of soccer brings them together.

They are poor. On a typical Sunday about \$17 passes over the bar, mainly for soft drinks. But when the Scots turn up they drink the place dry. Even the sickly sweet mixer spirit drinks that have sat in

the back room for six months are bought and consumed.

The Scots help Rodelu Soccer Club stay solvent.

Now the Burmese are arriving, persecuted minority hill tribes from the refugee camps on Burma's borders with Thailand and India. They, too, will be invited to form a soccer team and play. The Rodelu Club is a refuge not only for these children, it is also a safe haven for the white children who come out of the hills on Saturday nights, lured by the mouth-watering, smoky aroma of barbecued spare ribs.

For the past six months the barbecue grill has been parked behind a tin wall. Vandals poured a chemical poison over it and the cooks hadn't been able to get rid of the toxic smell. Until now.

The barbie is now being fired up in the open air once again. And once again the children will descend from the surrounding hills in search of friendship and a good feed.

After 16 years of unsurpassed economic growth, this is Australia.

Craig Emerson is MP for the federal seat of Rankin, which includes the suburb of Woodridge.