

Sports

No skate parks: Vietnamese medal hopefuls skating under nose of Lenin

HANOI: They have few places to practise, no government funding and little public support, but Vietnam's first national skateboard team are carrying high hopes of winning medals for their country. The youth-friendly sport is being featured for the first time in the Southeast Asian Games, which open in the Philippines on Saturday, and it will also debut at next year's Tokyo Olympics. But skateboarding's reputation as a teenage, counter-culture hobby has been a major hurdle for the sport in Vietnam where there are no proper training facilities and just a handful of skate shops.

"The biggest problem is that we don't have a skate park," said Do Ngoc Linh, the manager of Vietnam's three-person skateboarding squad heading to Manila this weekend. His troubles don't end there. Though the Vietnam General Administration of Sport has recognised skateboarding as a sport, it does not offer any funding for training or travel.

Instead the squad secured sponsorship to help fund their trip to the Games, where they will compete in the game of skate and street skate categories. The team has been practising for several hours most days, gathering at an abandoned basketball court where they've installed a few rails and benches.

Some days they go to Lenin Square or other public grounds, popular skate spots in the city

sometimes crowded with children or tourists — or foul-tempered police trying to shoo them away. With no skate parks in Hanoi they won't be trying their hand in the Park category, which includes bowls or ramps, nor will they be racing in the Downhill. But that's not holding back their ambitions. "I want gold," 23-year-old Tran Dinh Anh told AFP, his skateboard underfoot.

'I FELL IN LOVE WITH IT'

Regardless of the results, the team knows that even just going to the Games is a chance to re-brand the sport back home, where it is known as a frivolous — and dangerous — pastime by some. "This is really important for us because any medal we get, the sports federation can help make the sport bigger and make a skate park," said Linh, who opened the city's first skate shop 10 years ago. "People can see this is not just something for the street — this is a sport," he added. Back when he opened his store there were few customers and almost no awareness of the sport, but today he estimates there are a few thousand skaters in the city.

Most are young and like his team members were first exposed to it on YouTube or in music videos. "I fell in love with it... I realised there's a culture that comes with it — music, fashion, arts," said 20-year-old teammate Tong Cam Vu, who practises with Japanese pop



HANOI: Tran Dinh Anh practices at a skateboarding ground in Hanoi. They have few places to practice, no public funding and little public support, but Vietnam's first professional skateboard team are carrying high hopes of winning big at the upcoming SEA Games. — AFP

blaring in his earphones. He hopes that skate culture will continue to spread in the buttoned-up capital of communist Vietnam, where more than half the country's 95 million people are under the age of 30. Coach Linh anticipates the biggest competition at the SEA Games will

be from established skateboarders from Indonesia, Philippines or Thailand, where facilities are years ahead of Vietnam's. But still, he's hopeful about the team's prospects. "I think we have a chance, I'm just hoping we get something," he said. — AFP

Canadian Latifi replaces Kubica at Williams for 2020

ABU DHABI: Canadian Nicholas Latifi said his dream had come true after Williams announced yesterday he would be making his Formula One debut in 2020 as Robert Kubica's replacement. The 24-year-old, who is second in the Formula Two feeder series with two races remaining this weekend, is already the British team's reserve and has driven for them in six practice sessions this season.

"For me, it's a dream come true and something I've been working towards for almost half my life," Latifi said in a statement ahead of the season-ending Abu Dhabi Grand Prix. "It still feels a bit surreal. I don't think it will sink in fully until I'm on the grid in Melbourne next year."

Latifi's appointment alongside Mercedes-backed Briton George Russell, who made his debut this year, fills the last vacant spot on the 2020 grid. "Nicholas has become an established and well-respected member of Williams," deputy team principal Claire Williams said. "We look forward to him stepping up into this new role as we look to fight our way back to the midfield."

Former world champions Williams are currently last in the overall standings. Kubica, who made his Formula One comeback this season after a near-fatal rally crash in 2011, has scored the team's only point. The 34-year-old has been outperformed by Russell, however, and announced in September that he would be leaving the team. He has been linked with a move to US-owned Haas in a reserve or simulator driver role. Latifi, who can bring valuable funding to the team with his billionaire father already having invested in McLaren, had been a leading candidate to replace Kubica. "I can't wait to take the next step forward as a full-time race driver," he said.

"I don't underestimate the challenge ahead, going into F1 as a rookie, but I'm extremely motivated and determined to give it my all." His confirmation means that Nico Hulkenberg, who is being replaced at Renault by Frenchman Esteban Ocon for 2020, is now sure to leave the Formula One grid after Sunday's race. — Reuters

Hamilton eyes season-ending victory in UAE twilight zone

ABU DHABI: Lewis Hamilton heads into this weekend's season-ending floodlit Abu Dhabi Grand Prix seeking to mark his 250th Formula One race with a memorable performance as Mercedes bid to bounce back from an off-form outing in Brazil. The six-time world champion, whose future beyond 2020 when his current contract expires has been a subject of intensifying speculation, has conceded that he faces a battle with his advancing age next season against the sport's new generation of younger tyros.

"I feel like I'm still able to kick it with these guys right now and so I am excited about the future," said 34-year-old Hamilton. "But you know it's inevitable that the youngsters are going to come through."

Speaking after he finished third on the road in Sao Paulo, before being penalised and dropped to seventh for a late clash with Red Bull's Alex Albon, Hamilton made clear also that he still relishes on-track battles and hopes next season will see a multi-team multi-driver scrap for glory.

"That would be great for Formula One," he said. Mercedes team chief Toto Wolff's future has also been under scrutiny and linked with Hamilton's as the sport prepares for the introduction of a radical new set of rules to brighten up the racing in 2021.

Wolff, tipped by some as a future boss of the sport, was absent in Sao Paulo, missing his first race since 2013, and said this week that he wants to see a reaction from the champions at the Yas Marina circuit this weekend.

Hamilton won from pole position last year and has enjoyed four pole position starts at the track and four victories, but may not have it all his own way in this weekend's twilight contest scheduled to maximise global viewing potential.

"Brazil was disappointing for us — we didn't have the fastest car and we lost a lot of points due to our own mistakes," said Wolff. "But we have analysed what went wrong, both our



Lewis Hamilton

reliability and our decisions during the race, to make sure it doesn't happen again. "It was a good learning experience for the entire team and something that will make us stronger in the long run. So, this weekend, we head out with a point to prove in Abu Dhabi. We know that in Formula One you are only as good as your last result."

Mercedes have won the last five Abu Dhabi Grands Prix, but know that both Ferrari and Red Bull will mount a fierce challenge to them in

the season finale, which starts in sunshine and finishes under floodlights. Hamilton will hope, in particular, to add to his record 87 pole positions after struggling in qualifying, relatively, since taking pole at the German event in July, his fourth this season — a meagre return by his standards.

Both Sebastian Vettel, back in form after a desultory early season run, and his team-mate Charles Leclerc will be aiming to take pole for Ferrari and to claim the Italian team's first win at a venue sited very close to the vast Ferrari World theme park.

Leclerc has taken seven poles this year to emerge as a leading contender for future titles and this weekend may see him in a close battle with his fellow-22-year-old rival Max Verstappen, who won in Brazil for Red Bull.

Their futures appear destined to be locked in championship campaigns long after the dust settles on Sunday night. — AFP