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SUBHEADLINE: The Asian X Games Qualifier 2000 held recently in Phuket not only stirred the competitive spirits of the athletes but also fostered the spirit of fraternity among them

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For seven consecutive days, Phuket was the realm of all possibilities, even the least reasonable, the craziest and the most staggering. Over 350 extreme athletes from 15 Asia-Pacific nations had indeed gathered there for the Asian X Games Qualifier 2000 sponsored by Toyota, turning Patong Beach into a vast playground, attracting tens of thousands of spectators.

Whether it was the climbing walls, the park course, the halfpipe or the vert ramp, athletes defied the law of gravity, perhaps of reason too with tricks, spins and stunts outdoing each other in acts of daredevilry.

Skateboarding, bicycle stunts, aggressive in-line skating, sport climbing and wakeboarding were the five sports on show, as exhibition events only for the two first (skateboarding and bicycle stunt), or for the strongly stimulating possibility of taking part in the Summer X Games 2001 (Philadelphia) for the last three. And incidentally for a first prize amounting up to \$4,500 (196,000 baht).

Thailand had its share of representatives in each discipline, yet few succeeded in outdoing other nations' expertise.

Indonesia dominated redoubtably in sport climbing with both women and men grabbing the first three ranks in the two competitions; darting Etti Hendrawati winning the women's final, Toni Firmansyah the men.

Korea exerted its supremacy in both women's and men's sport climbing, bouldering category, taking for itself the top two ranks in each competition respectively \_ Go Mi Sun and Lee Jea Yong becoming overall winners.

Meanwhile, Malaysian ``Pa'din" Ahmad Fadzil Bin Musa, 24, acted as the king of cool in the skateboard park final, winning the gold medal and setting a good example for his compatriots to follow. Out of 13 finalists, seven were from Malaysia.

On Nai Harm Lake, Australian athletes emerged victorious in the wakeboarding event, securing four places for themselves amongst the top seven. It is the third year in a row that Australia has grabbed the top rank in this event. Australian Wayne Mawer stole the show with 71.22 points \_ a perfect run and high level of difficulty while no Thai wakeboarder, neither favourite Toon Amornkiat, nor Boonyalo Jumreuang managed to pierce through the final.

Thailand struck a strong blow where it was least expected \_ grabbing the gold, silver and bronze medals in the bike stunt flatland, thanks to the dexterity of Anan Padna, 23, Visit Diloksri, 21, and Kritsada Pratumma, 20.

``I never expected to bag the gold medal, I went there thinking of having a good time and fun. I think we all were very lucky," commented Ramkhamhaeng student and gold finalist

Anan, still amazed at Thailand's victory which disproved the prevision of a Japanese domination.

One of the extreme sport favourites, in-line skater Jeerasak Tassorn who ranked as the world's fifth best skater in the US Summer X Games 2000, failed to live up to his promise. The 19 year-old Phitsanulok student, who was the first Thai athlete to take part in a top extreme competition, managed to secure a sixth place to win \$350 (15,200 baht) in prize money, pinning his poor score to pressure, a recent change of skates and training on a smaller-sized park.

He gave way to Japanese skaters to dominate the final; Ken Kitada secured the top position, ahead of Australian Sam Fogarty and three other Japanese teenagers, while the aggressive in-line vert final was won by Australian Shane Yost and the vert doubles by the redoubtable Japanese brothers Takeshi and Eito Yasutoko

These two in-line skating gold medallists outperformed yet again the other pairs, no one being able to match their height, perfect symmetry, timing and flawless execution on the ramp.

`` I don't think we have to worry about a lack of technical or physical skills concerning Thai skaters. To me it is more a question of being able to train on a park in accordance with the international norm, getting good equipment and better support from the authorities. I must admit I was quite confused because of the size of the park," commented Thai in-line champion Jeerasak, who came all the way from Pitsanulok to Bangkok every weekend in order to practise with other professional skaters.

Thus, this year Asian X Games did not really bring a good crop of awards for Thai athletes, although the Junior X Games held previously (from December 3 to 5) drew two worthy medals.

In the wings of the competition amongst Thai athletes, a sense of bitterness could be felt.

`` In-line skating is surely one of the most competitive extreme sports \_ there are loads of athletes and many different categories. Thai skaters are still among the top 10 in Asia but overall their performance was less impressive when compared to last year. That was a question of stamina because most of the athletes practised the whole day to compete in the evening," commented Apichat Rutnin, president of Thailand In-Line Skating Club and coordinator for the Asian X Games. `` Last year, athletes from countries like Korea, Japan and Taiwan were beaten by Thai skaters. Thus, they took more rigorous practice and their performance improved by 100 percent this year

`` Next year, they will be even more threatening. Meanwhile here we don't get much help," Apichat added, desperate to find a suitable area to set up the 30-by-30-metre park and implying that Asian X Games 2001 would be organised in Malaysia because of a lack of support from the Thai government.

On the side of the organiser, Entertainment Sports Broadcasting Network (ESPN) declared without involving itself in any controversy that `` following X Games tradition, the Asiad would also move to a new location every few years, bringing the X franchise to new markets around the region. ESPN has selected Malaysia to host the next three Asian X Games Qualifier and Junior X Games," declared Mark Reilly, vice-president of ESPN International, paying rich tribute to the commitment and enthusiasm of Thailand and the governor and people of Phuket.

Whatever it is, seeing the stamina of young athletes such as Australian pocket-size CJ ``Tomato" Wellmore, 11 years old, we can be assured that there will always be someone to take over from the broken champions.