

Sports: Youth embrace thrilling new disciplines

2024
year in
Review

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“However, she’s really gotten into the habit of being disciplined.”

For He Miyao, it’s not just a sport. “Riding the bumps and curves on the pump track is super cool! I love the ups and downs, the speed — it’s so freeing,” she said.

And her talent is now being noticed. Last year, she traveled to Suzhou, Huzhou in Zhejiang province, Beijing and Yantai in Shandong province, among other cities, to participate in youth BMX racing events.

In the national youth U-series racing championship held in Taizhou, Jiangsu province, on July 25-26, she ranked fourth in her category.

Just a few days later, she watched on TV the then-18-year-old cyclist Deng Yawen scoring 92.60 points in her second run to become China’s first-ever Olympic BMX freestyle gold medalist.

At that very moment, the burning desire to represent China on the international stage as a cyclist surged within He Miyao’s heart. The urge only grew stronger when she met Deng in person at the China Pump Track Series’ stop in Suizhou, Hubei province, in September.

“She has developed a sense of national pride,” said He Wei, adding that the family plans to support He Miyao in traveling abroad to take part in an international competition this year.

Youth power

Deng, after unexpectedly winning China’s first BMX freestyle gold medal at Paris 2024, is determined to promote the sport among a wider audience in the country.

“Because in the Olympic family, this discipline is indeed very young,” Deng said.

Though BMX racing made its debut in Beijing 2008, BMX freestyle became an Olympics event only at the 2021 Tokyo Games in Japan, with the participation of 18 athletes. Back then, no Chinese riders qualified for the event. BMX freestyle arrived late in China, with a national team being formed in 2018.

However, at Paris 2024, Team China consistently broke new ground in the “young” disciplines.

In speed climbing, a vertical racing event that made its Olympic debut as a stand-alone discipline for both men and women in Paris, China’s speedster Deng Lijuan bagged the women’s silver medal on Aug 7. The following day, her compatriot 22-year-old Wu Peng, claimed the silver medal in the men’s event with a timing of 4.77 seconds, finishing just 0.02 seconds behind Indonesia’s Vedriq Leonardo.

Similarly, Team China secured three Olympic slots in breaking, a new discipline in the Games program, with the 18-year-old B-girl Liu Qingyi clinching bronze.

With her powerful stage presence and distinctive technical style, Liu has repeatedly made it to the podium in some of the most important international breaking competitions.

Recently, she secured her spot at The World Games 2025 after winning the silver medal in the women’s event at the 2024 WDSF World Breaking Championships on Dec 21 in Chengdu, Sichuan province. Her compatriot Wang Ruimiao, 19, seized bronze.

Breaking brings a distinctive atmosphere that sets it apart from the more traditional events at the Olympic Games. It builds up a vibe that is very different from that of other conventional events.

At the first-ever Olympic Breaking event held at Parc Urbain from Aug 9 to 10, the high-energy MC duo ignited the crowd with some interactive hype. Solo battlers, dressed in outfits that showcased their individuality and sporting trendy hairstyles, showcased their footwork, freezes and power moves on the circular stage.

The audience cheered and waved their hands in sync with the music. The event felt more like a lively party.

“Breaking won’t follow a set pattern. I think that’s what young people are all about — seeking limitless possibilities. It makes young people feel like it’s a lot of fun, and I think that’s what really keeps it attractive,” said Yin Guochen, director of Chinese Dance Sport Federation.

Meanwhile, after making its debut at the Tokyo Games, skateboarding and surfing returned for its second Olympic iteration in Paris.

Fifteen-year-old Yang Siqi became



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China’s first-ever Olympic surfer. Also the youngest competitor in the surfing event, she became the first to represent China as an up-and-coming surfing nation.

Yang, initially considered an underdog, impressed many with her boldness and determination. Despite being repeatedly knocked down by the powerful waves in Teahupo’o, Tahiti, French Polynesia, she persisted in her efforts to catch the waves time and time again.

The gifted young surfer, who was raised in the mountainous areas of Daliangshan, Sichuan province, and had not seen the sea until the age of nine, made it to the top 16.

Among others, Cui Chenxi achieved fourth place in the women’s street skateboarding final at Paris 2024, marking China’s best-ever Olympic skateboarding result. This feat came less than a year after the wunderkind became China’s youngest-ever Asian Games medalist by winning gold in the street skateboarding event in Hangzhou in September 2023 at the age of 13.

The inclusion of these “young” disciplines in recent Games reflects the International Olympic Committee’s wider aim to engage younger audiences and diversify the Olympics program. These modern sports have injected a dynamic energy into the Olympic Games, which has rich history spanning over two millennia.

New vibes

For Zheng Haohao, a Chinese women’s park skateboarder who competed as the youngest athlete at the 2024 Paris Olympics at the age of 11, her first Olympic journey was simply an opportunity “to play and make more friends”.

The presence of some of the world’s top skateboard riders was not at all intimidating for her. “Compared to skating near my home, the Olympics didn’t feel that differ-

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ent to me. It was just a bit more crowded,” she said. She was not too nervous as “staying relaxed helps reduce mistakes”.

Her relaxed attitude may have partly stemmed from the sport’s roots in street culture.

The sport’s vibrant vibe is especially evident in a street skateboard event where athletes wear loose T-shirts and pants as they perform their own distinct tricks and maneuvers on quarter pipes, handrails and various obstacles, all set to the lively backdrop of hip-hop music. When an athlete successfully completes a routine, the crowd erupts in cheers and applause, showing support regardless of the team they represent.

“Skateboarding is also one of the rare competitions without the ‘smell of gunpowder’. There is a lot of uncertainty, mistakes are very common. The athletes seem more like they are here to show

their own tricks rather than to compete for victory,” said Yu Songwen, the mother of 10-year-old skateboarding enthusiast Guo Yu.

Initially, Yu wanted to cultivate an outdoor hobby for her son. The family’s original choice was soccer, but the introverted boy did not adapt well to the intense physical contact required in the team sport.

In 2023, during a skateboarding charity class organized by the Shanghai Extreme Sports Association, Guo developed a liking for this sport, drawn by the cool quotient of the skateboarders and the relaxed atmosphere of the class.

“Skateboarding has tons of cool tricks to teach, and picking up new moves can make kids feel confident,” said his mother.

“It’s a solo sport where everyone has their own style, so there’s no pushing or shoving. Training sessions are more about having fun together than worrying about scores or who’s the best. Boys and girls of different ages play together, and just enjoy the chill, welcoming vibe.”

Guo dedicated 10 hours a week to skateboarding and thanks to the inclusive environment, he gradually became more outgoing.

In August, when the X Games China 2024 Skateboarding returned for its U-pool tour final in Shanghai, Yu took Guo to watch the event. She was surprised to see the once shy boy confidently approaching the Brazilian skateboarder Iago Magalhaes and other world-class athletes to chat in English.

“The sport has opened a window for him to understand the world,” said the mother.

“Despite being sweaty or bruised after riding the skateboard, whenever I ask him, ‘Are you tired?’ he always replies, ‘Tired, but I still love skateboarding,’” the proud mother shared.

He Wei, father of BMX racer He Miyao, has also noticed his daughter’s growth in the extreme sport. “She’s become tougher and more determined. When she loses a race, she might cry at first, but after wiping away those tears, she’s right back to giving it her all for the next one,” he said.

Urban active

With the inclusion of new sports in international galas, the rise of Chinese sports stars in these disciplines, and the government’s efforts to build China into a global sports powerhouse, the new sports are attracting a growing population of enthusiasts across various cities in China.

In Chengdu alone, there are over 500 street dance clubs and training centers, with a community of more than 200,000 street dance enthusiasts, according to the Chengdu Street Dance Association.

A report by the Chinese Mountaineering Association revealed that the number of sport climbing enthusiasts in the country surged from around 10,000 in 2012 to over 500,000 by the end of 2023. Additionally, there were 636 commercial climbing gyms operating across the Chinese mainland, a figure surpassing that of the United States for the first time.

Fan Yi, a 46-year-old sport climbing enthusiast from Changsha, Hunan province, has observed a rapid growth in the sport climbing scene in the city in recent years.

“More climbing gyms have opened up, attracting many families to experience the sport, and talented children can often be spotted,” Fan said.

Fan started climbing in 2011, later turning it into a beloved hobby.

He now frequents local climbing gyms two to three times a week for training.

“After hitting 40, my body may not be what it used to be, but my love for rock climbing hasn’t faded one bit. I actually treasure and enjoy the climbing experience even more now,” Fan shared.

He believes that sport climbing, which needs skills, patience, resilience and strength in small muscles, is a sport that people of varied ages can enjoy.

For Zhou Ping, the founder of Amazing Elephant, a Shanghai-based sports company focused on cultivating BMX bike riders, biking has tremendous potential to become a long-term hobby for a wider population in China.

In 2020, as a cycling lover himself, he decided to launch the company and build several BMX bike training facilities in Shanghai.

“I began mountain biking as a hobby in adulthood and soon realized that for enthusiasts like myself, it’s easy to get injured when your courage surpasses your skills,” he explained.

“My goal is to assemble professional riders to provide systematic and scientific training for the next generation, ensuring that children do not face the same challenges I experienced.”

He observed that after Deng Yawen won China’s first-ever Olympic BMX freestyle gold medal at Paris 2024, more and more parents have shown interest in the sport.

“The victory has raised awareness about this sport among the public,” he noted.

The Amazing Elephant, which has six training centers across Shanghai, has attracted over 1,500 active BMX learners, with the majority being concentrated in the preschool and elementary school stages.

On its part, the Shanghai Sports Bureau is promoting new sports by involving almost 8,000 community sports instructors in experiential activities for sports such as BMX biking, skateboarding, and sport climbing.

Around the time of the 16th National Fitness Day on August 8, the Shanghai Extreme Sports Association organized 36 experiential events for extreme sports in the city’s shopping centers, outdoor squares and communities, said Bao Tingting from the association.

Zhang Xin, a former fitness trainer who started skateboarding in 2019, is among the community sports instructors.

He has witnessed the upgrading and expansion of skateboarding facilities in Shanghai in recent years and actively participates in experiential events to bring the fun of skateboarding to a larger group of people.

He has also found new career opportunities in this hobby.

In May, he opened a small skateboard shop in a local community with a pump track and some street skateboarding props. He now has around 50 young students.

Zhang also feels refreshed by this new business. “Back when I was a fitness trainer, most of my classes were one-on-one, and it just felt like a job to me. But now, hosting classes for these young riders feels like being a parent of a big family,” he explained.

“And when they win awards in competitions, I am overwhelmed with pride.”