

Too *Cool* for the Olympics

Skaters fear loss of freestyle street culture as skateboarding becomes an official sport
by *Maggie Suen, Verena Tse
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嚴禁吸煙
No smoking



It was a scorching hot Saturday, but the skateboarding enthusiasts at the Tseung Kwan O Velodrome skate park were not daunted by the heat. At a low-level skate bowl, a seven-year-old boy, fully armed with a helmet and pads, struggled to balance on his board. Meanwhile, more experienced skateboarders whizzed along the skate park's half-pipes and ramps, gliding smoothly off ledges and speeding through rails, often ending up crashing to the ground.

Warren Stuart, 47, puts down his skateboard, picks up cans of cold beer and passes them around. Relaxing in the shade, he plays with the little son of a fellow skateboarder whom he has known for decades.

"If you are skateboarders, you are automatically good friends," says the vice-president of the Hong Kong Federation of Extreme Sports.

When Stuart first started skateboarding nearly three decades ago, there were no skate parks in Hong Kong. He skateboarded on the

streets, bumping into other hobbyists and forging immediate friendships as they searched for places to skateboard together.

More people have taken up the sport since then. Today, Hong Kong has 14 public skate parks. Skateboarding reached a new milestone in August this year when the International Olympic Committee (IOC) officially announced the addition of the sport for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, alongside climbing, baseball/softball, surfing and karate.

Stuart is positive about the inclusion of skateboarding in the Olympics, but he says some skateboarders are worried that making it competitive will destroy the inherent spirit of the activity. "There are no boundaries and no rules [in skateboarding], but the Olympics is all about organisation, competition and rules. It's completely against the core value of most skateboarders," he says.

Johnny Tang Chun-yin, a 31-year-old professional skateboarder who also runs a skateboard

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shop and teaches skateboarding in secondary schools, chuckles at the thought of himself in a sports uniform. He thinks it would be ridiculous, as skateboarders are supposed to wear whatever they like.

“The skateboarding I used to know was all about cultural freedom,” he says, fixing his man bun. “Now it’s going to be like soccer or basketball, and I don’t like this.”

Tang misses the carefree old days when skateboarders would freely teach their tricks to one another when they met on the streets. “Now, it’s all about battling,” he sighs.

He says in order to win, most people will practise the same complex tricks that will score the highest, when in fact some tricks can still be stylish even though they are not technically difficult.

Luk Chun-yin, 29, one of the three skateboarders in the Vans Hong Kong skateboard team, a sec-

ondary school skateboard coach and a freelance photographer, also thinks it would be difficult to develop a consistent point system to judge skateboarding. He says it is meaningless to judge the sport because variations within a trick would make it hard to define who is the better skateboarder.

But Luk still thinks the Olympics would be a good opportunity for him to travel and learn from others. “The Olympics just happens every four years. When you compete, be in your competitive mode. After that, you can just be yourself again and practise on the streets. Just enjoy it,” he says.

For now, the IOC is still discussing the details of the judging system, which it will finalise in mid-2017.

Luk hopes that the IOC’s recognition of skateboarding will push the government to improve the skateboarding facilities in Hong



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Kong. Current regulations and arrangements serve to isolate the public from the skateboarding culture, making it difficult to promote the sport. Unlike basketball courts, which can be easily found all over the city, the few skate parks we have are mostly located at the remote ends of MTR lines, such as in Tseung Kwan O, Tung Chung and Fan Ling. Luk also thinks that the facilities are not challenging enough for skateboarders to train for international competitions.

The government also built high barriers surrounding the skate parks to protect pedestrians from flying skateboards and noise disturbances. These barriers are expensive, amounting to the cost needed to build a small skate park. “Nobody would be able to see me even if I

could fly on my skateboard, so how can we promote this sport?” asks Luk.

But he has noticed that the public has become more accepting of the sport, breaking the stereotype that skateboarders are troublemakers who cause a lot of nuisance when they practise at night. Luk says parents are more willing to let their children learn to skateboard. The government has also been offering more skateboarding workshops and classes to the public.

Chris Sawney, a secondary school student who has been skateboarding for three years, is also hopeful that the athletes of the sport will gain more respect from the public. He recalls being called “gay” by his classmates because he went skateboarding instead of attending the Hong

Kong Sevens, an annual rugby event.

Stuart of the Hong Kong Federation of Extreme Sports says skateboarders as young as eight years old have blown him away with their skills. But he notices that local kids tend to give up easily. They have too much pride, so they are reluctant to practise new tricks in front of other skateboarders for fear of falling and losing face. Many skateboarders, who play the sport for its carefree street culture, are also unwilling to commit to the intensive and repetitive ancillary trainings needed to attain the body condition of a professional athlete.

“Hong Kong doesn’t lack talent,” says Stuart. “Hong Kong lacks attitude.” ▼

Edited by Natale Ching

