

Underwater hockey to make waves at Southeast Asia mini-Olympics

KUALA LUMPUR: Swimmers wearing snorkels and gripping short, curved sticks dive to the bottom of a pool in Malaysia and charge at a puck as they compete in an energetic game of underwater hockey.

Invented in the 1950s in Britain — where it is known as “Octopush” — to help divers keep fit during the winter months, the game has gained a small but dedicated following from Europe to Asia. This year the unusual discipline is set to debut at the Southeast Asian Games, the region’s biennial mini-Olympics that attracts thousands of athletes.

At the national aquatics centre in the Malaysian capital Kuala Lumpur, male and female players donned snorkels, flippers, caps and gloves ahead of a tough practice session. Underwater hockey is not for the faint-hearted — players shoot around at high speed, swimming over one another and jostling as they try to hit the heavy puck, and smash it fast through the water. They occasionally bob up to the surface for a breath of air before diving back down again. “You need to be able to swim, and you need to be able to hold your breath,” said Ishmael Ho, who will captain the Malaysian men’s team at the SEA Games — held in the Philippines in November and December.

“Verbal communication is almost impossible,” he told AFP. A match usually consists of two teams of six playing in a space measuring 15 by 25 metres (50 by 80 feet) at a depth of two metres, with each half lasting anywhere from 10 to 20 minutes, depending on the tournament rules.

It starts off with teams charging from opposite ends of the playing area for the puck and then fighting it out below the surface as they try to push it into the opposing side’s goal. The goals are usually two long trays at each end of the playing area.

STRANGE SPORTS

Ho took up the sport as a university student in Wales eight years ago and helped to pioneer it in Malaysia in 2016, playing with a handful of enthusiasts at a public pool outside of Kuala Lumpur. About 50 people in Malaysia now play the game, with the most dedicated doing four training sessions a week for two hours at a time.

Malaysia will send 24 players to compete in male and female categories of the sport at the SEA Games. Four gold medals are up for grabs and other teams competing are the Philippines, Singapore, Indonesia and Myanmar.

The Philippines, where underwater hockey has been played for decades, is seen as one of the best sides while Singapore and Indonesia are also regarded as strong contenders.

Relative newcomers Malaysia, who are funding their trip to the Philippines out of their own pockets, are underdogs but hope to at least win bronze. “The team is working hard to get at least a podium finish,” Ho said. “For the bronze, we will give our competitors a good fight.” Indonesia coach Reza Anggara meanwhile said he was “optimistic” about his sides’ prospects, with the men targeting gold and its women aiming for silver.

“The team has been working hard training



JAKARTA: This picture taken on August 25, 2019 shows members of Indonesia’s women’s underwater hockey team during a training session at the Senayan Aquatic Centre in Jakarta ahead of the Southeast Asian (SEA) Games in the Philippines later this year. — AFP

and they’re ready to go,” he told AFP after a recent practice session. SEA Games host countries are allowed to drop or add sports at the tournament. While regular sports such as athletics and gymnastics always feature, a crop of strange new disciplines usually appear at each edition,

drawing criticism that hosts are seeking to tilt the tournament in their favour. Other new sports at this year’s Games include eSports, Sambo, a martial art developed in the former Soviet Union, and an ancient form of wrestling from Central Asia called Kurash. — AFP

Hamilton wary of Mercedes’ vulnerability in title run-in

SOCHI: Lewis Hamilton and Mercedes will venture into this weekend’s Russian Grand Prix with a rare sense of vulnerability after suffering three successive defeats by Ferrari ahead of a race they have dominated for five years.

Defending five-time champion Hamilton should have every reason to feel confident — he has won three times at the former Olympic Park venue, including last year, and Mercedes have won every contest since 2014. But after seeing Charles Leclerc triumph in Belgium and Italy and Sebastian Vettel win in last Sunday’s Singapore Grand Prix, he knows Ferrari have the car performance and the power to end the Silver Arrows’ supremacy by the Black Sea.

And, more than that, he also knows that his own team-mate Valtteri Bottas has a sense of unfinished business to attend to at one of his favourite circuits where, irked by finishing second last weekend, Leclerc has extra motivation to succeed.

For Hamilton, what was once seen as a comfortable run-in to his sixth drivers’ title now looks to be a perilous prospect. “These next races are going to be tough,” admitted Hamilton. “If anyone feels relaxed they need talking to because we should all be feeling the pain in our team. I think I am a realist so I see the

situation we are in — and Ferrari have come up with some sort of upgrade that’s given them a massive boost and something like 20 or 30 points.

“Clearly, their car works everywhere now so it’s going to be very hard to beat them, particularly as they are so fast on the straights. At the moment, they are delivering better than us so we have to get back together, work hard and move forwards.”

Hamilton may lead the title race by 65 points ahead of Bottas, but he has not had two successive wins since the French Grand Prix in June and knows the Finn, in Sochi, will be a tough rival if the team allow him.

“I’ve got unfinished business in Sochi,” said Bottas. “It has normally been a good track for me and I need to make sure it will be again.” Last year, Bottas was heading to victory until Mercedes asked him to let Hamilton through to win, a decision that irked him, just as Ferrari’s use of the under-cut for Vettel did the same to Leclerc in Singapore.

The Monegasque was initially furious, but calmed down after the race to adopt a more diplomatic tone ahead of Sochi.

“I think we were surprised by how powerful the under-cut was,” he said. “It was very frustrating for me in the car, but out of the car I understand the situation a lot more and I’m happy for the team, and for Seb. He deserved it.

“Now I move forward. Sometimes it goes that way. It’s life. I will bounce back stronger and arriving in Russia after three wins with the team, three positive weekends, feels great.”

Much will depend on how Ferrari’s updated car, with a heavily-revised front end, behaves at the demanding Sochi circuit, with several inviting straights, where Vettel has been the only non-Mercedes driver to claim pole in 2017. — AFP

US judoka Hatton, dead at age 24

WASHINGTON: Jack Hatton, considered one of the top United States judo prospects for next year’s Tokyo Olympics, has died unexpectedly at age 24, USA Judo announced Wednesday. Hatton achieved his top result in the world judo Grand Prix circuit in April 2018 with a silver medal finish in the half-middleweight (81kg) class at Antalya, Turkey.

“It is with extremely heavy hearts that USA Judo announces the unexpected passing of USA Judo national team member, Jack Hatton,” the US national governing body said in a statement which did not give a cause of death. “We extend our sincere condolences to the Hatton Family and Jack’s teammates, coaches and friends. Jack was one of America’s top judo players and was a multi-time medalist for USA Judo in various competitions across the globe. “Jack made an indelible mark on all who had the pleasure of knowing him, and he will not be forgotten. We grieve with the entire USA Judo and international judo community during this tough time.”

Hatton reached the second round in each of the past three Judo World Championships, the most recent last month in Tokyo in his final competition, and lost in a bronze medal match at last

month’s Pan American Games in Lima, Peru.

“I’m deeply moved by the sudden death of @USAJudo international Jack Hatton,” tweeted International Judo Federation president Marius Vizer. “On behalf of @Judo I send my sincere condolences and wishes to USA Judo and Jack’s family and friends.”

Hatton trained under Jimmy Pedro, a seventh degree black belt who won the 73kg world title in 1999 and bronze medals at the 1996 and 2004 Olympics. Pedro’s Judo Center in Wakefield, Massachusetts, posted a tribute on Facebook.

“It is with our deepest sorrow that we inform you of the untimely passing of one of our students, teammates, brothers, and friends, Jack Hatton. “Jack has been a member of Pedro’s Judo Center since 2015 and pursuing his dream of becoming a member of the 2020 Olympic Team.

“Along with being a top US Judo athlete, Jack was kind-hearted, caring and an all-around great person. He was a true role model for students at our dojo and judoka all over the country. “He will be deeply missed... by all of us at Pedro’s Judo Center and the rest of the judo world.” — AFP