



Cambodians Get Lessons in Skateboarding, and Life

This is the VOA Special English Education Report.

Some young Cambodians are learning a new sport -- skateboarding. The country's first skateboard park is located on the grounds of a local charity group at the edge of Phnom Penh, the capital.

Fifteen-year-old Chea Sophanit has been skating for about six months. "When I see the different styles from skateboarding, especially from the best skaters, I just want to be like them," he says.

Sports like Khmer boxing and soccer are wildly popular in Cambodia. But Chea says skating has already become his favorite sport.

The skaters are learning tricks like launching off a jump or half-pipe and flying through the air on their narrow wooden boards.

A nongovernmental organization called Skateistan Cambodia organizes weekly programs at the park. Skateistan started its work in Afghanistan. Rory Burke works with the group which expanded to Cambodia last year.

RORY BURKE: "Yeah, it's definitely not a typical Cambodian pastime. And I think the idea of 'why skateboarding' is that it's not been done before here. We want to use skateboarding as something saying, 'Hey this is new, this is something different.' And that kind of itself becomes a little bit of hook. People see it and they think and they say, 'Whoa, what is that?' and they want to get involved."

Skateistan partners with local groups that work with young people. The park is on the grounds of the group known as PSE, where children attend school and learn a trade. There are almost one hundred twenty participants. Many come from troubled lives.

Sean Burke says for some, skateboarding is a chance just to be a kid for a couple of hours a week. He says he hopes the program will help them build life skills through sport.

Seventeen-year-old Sang Rotha is a student at PSE. "Sometimes I don't do well on topics like math," he says. "I feel bad when I find it hard to keep up with my lessons. So that's why I skateboard, to improve my bad feelings."

He says he began skateboarding more than a year ago. Before he started training, it seemed very easy. But it was very difficult to learn tricks, and he got hurt a lot from falling off.

Rory Burke says learning to deal with the difficulties is part of the lesson for these young skateboarders.

RORY BURKE: "You know, it's pretty daunting to get on a skateboard for the first time. And then when they drop in for the first time and ride some of the ramps, it's pretty scary. It kind of teaches them, 'Hey, you're going to fall down a bunch, but you've got to get back up.'"

Skateistan Cambodia plans to open the country's first public skate park later this year in Phnom Penh.

And that's the VOA Special English Education Report, online at voaspecialenglish.com. I'm Fritz Bodenheimer.

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