

The local extreme sports scene goes over the top as PMEBS take on punishing challenges, reports **TAN TECK HENG**

Zany sports

WHAT was going through Bryan Woon's head when he picked up chessboxing? Was life too easy for the London-based banker? Does he play better chess after a few hard knocks to the head?

Invented by French comic artist Enki Bilal in 1992 before it was officially founded by the Dutch chessboxer Iepe Rubingh in 2003, chessboxing is exactly what it says it is: competitors spar in 11 alternating rounds of speed chess and boxing. It's currently gaining traction in Europe and even India.

"I'm hooked because it pushes me to mental and physical exhaustion," says Mr Woon, who started the sport over two years ago. "The closer your body feels to shutting down and giving up from fatigue and pain, you realise the more alive you are."

Mr Woon is not the only professional around who is going nuts over extreme sports. There's growing interest by PMEBS here in zany concepts beyond our shores, and they are keen on seeing similar events sprout up in Singapore.

Take private banker Benn Ng for instance, who will head for the Marathon du Medoc in Pauillac, France, come September. Founded in 1984, the Medoc gives other sporting events a run for their money – a scenic 42.195km route that cuts through some of the finest chateaus in Bordeaux, and – you guessed it – you get to hydrate with wines. Hungry? There are also cheese and oysters served mid-race. And forget the tracksuit, it's also a costume party: this year's theme is "The Science Fiction", so Mr Ng – who has just completed the Great Wall Marathon in May – is planning to go as an extra-terrestrial.

"If I have to rate the Medoc as opposed to our local events, the latter is by far the best", says Medoc alumnus Collin Ng, who completed it in 2010 while dressed as Fred Flintstone. "The crowd support, drink and food stations, originality and the route through vineyards and old chateaus, were all fantastic; I hope to see such unique events in Singapore".



PHOTO: JOHN HENG

Mr Ng's wish may be fulfilled sooner than he expects: the extreme sports scene here is catching on too, and has begun to mature. Various clubs have begun to go pro: the Stirling Underwater Hockey Club (SUHC) was set up since 2004, and has since grown from eight members to 53. They will send a team to compete in the Asian Underwater Hockey Championship 2013 in the Philippines at the end of the year.

Or consider Bossaball Singapore, the only Bossaball organisation in South-east Asia. Founded in 2007 by biomedical engineering lecturer Mohamad Saifudin Abu Bakar, the sport combines elements of volleyball, soccer and gymnastics, and is played on a trampoline court. They may also compete in the World Cup at year's end.

Plethora of activities

In the same year, Vanda Sports Group (VSG) started White Collar Boxing (WCB), a philanthropic tournament which pits PMEB boxing amateurs against one another after a three-month training, and in front of a black-tie crowd. They have since raised over US\$2m for children's charities.

More recently, Taferine Huang set up the Chilli Padi Derby Girls in 2010, and the contact-roller-skating team has been working towards certification which allows them to compete in roller derby's international league. There's also iFly Singapore, a \$25m indoor skydiving facility at Sentosa opened in 2011 by ex-military skydiver Lawrence Koh. The Sentosa site became the first in the Asia Pacific to hold the Indoor Skydiving World Championships in December last year, with over 400 competitors from more than 10 countries, and a prize pot of \$150,000.

Two further events – triathlon MetaMan Bintan, and a muddy run with obstacle course named Lion Dash – were just started last year and are gearing up to capture a larger slice of the market. And finally, The Color Run makes its debut in Singapore this year. The untimed 5km race sees participants doused in coloured powder at every kilometre.

The popularity of these latter three events is obvious: MetaMan Bintan had 250 participants last year despite its offshore location, 12 of which were professionals vying for a US\$154,000 prize pot. Organiser MetaSport is expecting the figure to double for their August 2013 race.

Similarly, Lion Dash is projecting a number between 1,000 and 3,000 for their December run, up from 850 in 2012. The Color Run takes the cake however, with all 12,000 tickets completely sold out within three hours. Presenting sponsor CIMB Bank has decided to release another 750 tickets tomorrow.

Extreme sports seem to attract a certain breed of athlete: Bossaball's founder Mr Saifudin says that over 30 per cent of adult bossaballers are PMEBs; similarly, MetaMan reports a 77 per cent PMEB participant rate for their event last year, and 42 per cent with an annual income higher than \$200,000.

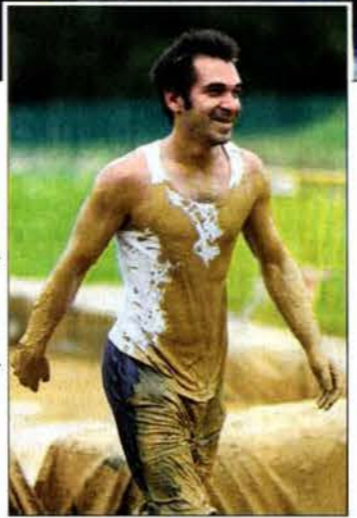
It's probably because both the learning curve and expenditure are rather steep. Managing director of MetaSport Nathalie Marquet puts some numbers to it: she reports that PMEB triathletes spend an annual average of \$9,000 on competitive bicycles and related equipment, \$2,500 on race fees, \$1,800 on training and running gear, and up to \$1,000 on nutritional supplements.

Further, Medoc participant Benn Ng notes that such sports require a lot of commitment: "You need to have good knowledge and discipline, and are required to read up or even attend courses." He has already participated in five marathons this year – one of which is an ultra – and his daily training involves running a 12km route back home from work every evening. Adds the forex adviser: "Such sports allow me to take on greater pressure with more energy."

Some sports fans, like MetaMan's half-iron participant Sebastien Normand, are a model of discipline and dedication. The managing director of Resources Global Professionals does at least 10 sports including surfing, boxing and judo, and happens to also be a father of three. "If you manage it well, you can still spend quality time with your family," says the 41-year-old Frenchman.



Let's get physical: PMEBs' appetite for extreme sports spans the gamut – members of the Queenstown Stirling Underwater Hockey club jostle for the puck (top, main picture). The aim is to compete in the Asian Underwater Hockey Championship 2013; White Collar Boxing (above) pairs PMEB boxing amateurs in front of a black-tie crowd; a muddy run with obstacle courses called the Lion Dash (right) tests the endurance of its participants; the MetaMan Bintan triathlon (below) saw 250 entrants last year, 12 of which were professionals vying for a US\$154,000 prize pot. PHOTOS: VANDA SPORTS GROUP, METASPORT, BENN NG



'You need to have good knowledge and discipline, and are required to read up or even attend courses.'

– Private banker Benn Ng (right) who finished the Great Wall Marathon in May. He has completed five marathons this year



"And when it comes to diet, I try to restrain myself and drink maybe, just three glasses of wine when friends are over," quips the oenophile, who also loves chicken rice. "My neighbours and colleagues look at my lifestyle and think I'm crazy!"

But these novel physical activities are not just about the thrill – they are usually more beneficial than just hitting the gym. "Any exercise that incorporates a fun element, or which allows one to go out in the open or new environment, is always more invigorating, challenging, and even relaxing," says cardiologist Ruth Kam, who has participated in a couple of half-marathons and one full marathon so far.

"These sports incorporate multiple joints and muscle group movements, and involve core muscles that help maintain posture and balance, compared to exercises in the gym that work single joints or muscles," she explains.

Adds founder of Lion Dash, Adam Bauerly: "Staying fit and healthy takes a lot of dedication, and it's very easy for people to quit or lose interest if they get bored. Having all these different sports and events keeps things exciting, and it keeps Singaporeans running and exercising – that's important to me."

It's not always smooth sailing of course; some stumbling is to be expected while newer players try to find a foothold. Lack of exposure is a common problem – extreme sports draw a more mature crowd who are better travelled and well informed, which is counter-intuitive, considering the strenuous nature of the zany sports.

Going the alternative route

For instance, MetaSport reports that 48 per cent of their triathletes are above 40, and very few local educational institutions are actually encouraging youths to explore alternative sports. "Underwater Hockey is a team sport that is not played in local education institutes, with the exception of SMU," laments SUHC's vice-president and electrical engineer, Lee Wei Meng.

Lion Dash also premiered last year to mixed reviews. While some netizens lauded its originality, others cited logistical issues as an impediment – for example, route markings were unclear and there were insufficient marshals to facilitate obstacles.

Founder Mr Bauerly has since apologised: "I take full responsibility – I tried to do everything myself and made too many assumptions... I assumed that 90 per cent of the volunteers would turn up but only about 20 per cent did; it had a huge negative ripple effect on the event," says the ex-banker.

"In light of these lessons, we're bringing on a local partner who has a lot of experience... I'm also in the process of setting up a board of advisers to share their insights with me." That said, what's on the wish list for extreme sports fanatics?

"It'd be cool to have some sort of chessboxing variant in Singapore – like Muay Thai and Chinese chess," says chessboxer Mr Woon, "or cheaper options that don't need any equipment – free-running or parkour".

Adds SUHC's Mr Lee: "Hopefully the main sport governing bodies in Singapore will give more support for these novel sports and related events; it'll also help if they can gain more media exposure."

And as quirkier sports emerge, South-east Asia (S-EA) looks set to become the new market, with Singapore as its hub, says Robbie Henchman, senior vice-president and head of Business Development at sports and media business, IMG Asia-Pacific.

"Singapore is the heart of S-EA and the launch location for many commercial enterprises into the region due to the ease of conducting business in the city, and the transparency with policies and requirements," he says.

"And SE-A is host to a set of dynamic, expressive and outgoing populations, and they are hungry for new concepts and exciting ventures to take part in," he continues. "Extreme and novel sports lend themselves to people who are looking to move outside their comfort zone, and become bigger and better individuals in the process."

PMEB playgrounds

MetaMan Bintan
www.metamanbintan.com

Compared to its contemporaries, this classic triathlon event still has all its marbles. With a US\$154,000 prize pot drawing the likes of Olympian triathlete Courtney Atkinson, it looks set to be the region's extreme sports staple after soft launching last year.

Lion Dash
www.liondash.com

Dashing through swamps and clambering over walls are usually the purview of national servicemen, but Lion Dash makes getting dirty downright hip with its second annual event on Dec 8. Modelled after the mud runs in North America, participants can look forward to splashing up a storm while tackling obstacle courses.

The Color Run
www.thecolorrun.com.sg

Forget the confetti, The Color Run hurls multi-coloured powder at its runners. To be held on Aug 17 and 18, this untimed 5km run sold 12,000 tickets in three hours. Presenting sponsor CIMB will give \$1 to charity Project Happy Feet for every participant.

White Collar Boxing
www.vandapromotions.com/whitecollar.php

Take office politics to the ring with Vanda Sports Group. In their White Collar Boxing event, they train rank amateurs for three months before pitting them against each other in front of a 1,300-strong black tie crowd. The event has raised over US\$2m for children's charities since its inauguration in 2007. Sign up for the next tournament on Nov 29.

Stirling Underwater Hockey Club
sites.google.com/site/stirlingunderwaterhockeyclub

As if hockey isn't tough enough, this club brings it to a whole new level – underwater. SUHC is currently forming teams to compete in the Asian Underwater Hockey Championship at the end of the year.

Bossaball Singapore
www.bossaball.com.sg

Singapore is the only country in South-east Asia which plays host to Bossaball – it's a cross between volleyball, soccer and gymnastics played on a trampoline court. They are looking to compete in the upcoming World Cup at year's end.

Chilli Padi Derby Grrts (CPDG)
www.facebook.com/thechillipadis

South-east Asia's first roller derby league comprising working professional women (and a man) is always recruiting, and have their sights set on qualifying to compete in the international league.

iFly Singapore
www.iflysingapore.com
iflysingapore.com

Singapore is the little red dot that could, but it's still too small to have a drop zone for skydiving enthusiasts. Instead, head over to indoor skydiving facility iFly Singapore at Sentosa, which offers customised packages for ProFlyers.