

Sandman: The Vietnamese snowboarder training on dunes

May 28 2019, by Tran Thi Minh Ha, Jenny Vaughan



Sun-kissed and shaggy haired, Nguyen Thai Binh swaps his flip flops for bulky boots ahead of snowboarding practice on the sand dunes of southern Vietnam—the unlikely training ground for the country's fledgling winter athletes

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bulky boots ahead of snowboarding practice on the sand dunes of southern Vietnam—the unlikely training ground for the country's fledgling winter athletes with mountain-sized ambitions.

Binh is one of Vietnam's top snowboarders, pioneering a push to boost [winter sports](#) in Southeast Asia where snowfall is virtually unheard of.

But it's been an uphill battle for athletes like him facing funding shortfalls, lack of public interest and few training facilities, namely snowy mountains.

"This sport is so new for Vietnamese, and we don't have any snow to practise on," said 29-year-old Binh, looking California cool in a Quiksilver cap and bright boardshorts.

Though Vietnam's northern Sapa mountains see the occasional dusting in [winter months](#), there are no snow slopes for aspiring skiers and snowboarders in the tropical country.

Instead, Binh boards on the undulating sand dunes of Mui Ne, better known for picture-perfect vistas and breakneck ATV rides on offer for tourists in the sunny southern province of Binh Thuan.

Binh made his international debut at the Asian Winter Games in Sapporo, Japan in 2017, joining Vietnam's first-ever team to compete in the tournament long-dominated by Japan, South Korea and China.



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It was a lifelong dream for Binh who fell in love with sports as a scrawny kid, so skinny that he was taunted by classmates for looking like a drug addict.

Committed to bulking up, he tried his hand at martial arts, then kitesurfing and longboarding before he started sandsurfing in 2007.

Like most of his teammates, the Asian Winter Games in Sapporo was his first time seeing snow. The skiers too had only ever trained on sand using tree branches as slalom poles on the sandy slopes of Mui Ne.

"I was hesitant, I'd been practising on the sand dunes for a while so I had the technique, but the snow was so slippery," Binh told AFP.

Broken limbs, frozen toes

It was an eventful week for the seven athletes who competed for Vietnam.



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Many didn't have proper [winter](#) gear and froze if they stayed outside for too long. Skier Pham Tien Dat tumbled during slalom training, broke his shoulder and couldn't compete. The Vietnamese journalists covering the games got sick and were hospitalised.

As for sports junkie Binh, his other hobbies served him well in Sapporo.

"Binh was a fast learner because of his longboarding and surfing skills," said Le Quan, the Vietnam team coach.

Vietnam walked away with no medals, but plenty of pride.

"We went to Sapporo not aiming for a high ranking but to challenge ourselves," Quan told AFP.

There were eight Southeast Asian teams at the 2017 games, the highest number since 1986 when the Philippines became the first country from the region to compete.



The Asian Winter Games in Sapporo was the first time Vietnam's snowboarders and skiers competed on snow having only ever trained on sand using tree branches as slalom poles on the sandy slopes of Mui Ne

The director general of the Olympic Council of Asia Husain Al Musallam said winter sports have developed among Southeast Asian athletes "in a very good way" and expects the number of participants to jump for the next games in 2021.

Many athletes so far have been skaters, thanks to an increasing number of ice rinks in malls and sports centres across the region, including Vietnam.

Further afield, countries with warm climates from Ghana to Mexico to

Nigeria have broken into winter sports.

Perhaps the most famous tropical team is Jamaica's bobsled troupe whose story is chronicled in the popular 90s comedy "Cool Runnings".

The main hurdle for winter sports in warm weather countries is money.

Vietnam's communist government has put some money into skating and ice hockey, but Binh says snowboarding remains a neglected sport.



Alongside Vietnam, countries with warm climates from Ghana to Mexico to Nigeria have broken into winter sports in recent years

"Snowboarding is struggling to develop here because there's no snow, and Vietnam doesn't have much money to send athletes abroad to train," he said.

Binh is hoping to compete at the next Asian Winter Games in 2021—if he can find a sponsor.

Until then his main focus is on longboarding, with sights set on the Southeast Asian Games in Philippines later this year.

Skateboarding made its debut at the competition last year and will premier at the Olympics in Japan in 2020.

But Binh says snowboarding is still his first passion, and he's proud to have helped it grow in Vietnam.

"Before we competed (in Sapporo) no one knew about winter sports, no one could have even imagined we could have a team."

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Citation: Sandman: The Vietnamese snowboarder training on dunes (2019, May 28) retrieved 8 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-05-sandman-vietnamese-snowboarder-dunes.html>

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