

Drums set to beat for 'elastic' athletes

THAILAND AND MALAYSIA FACING STIFF COMPETITION FOR 'FOOT VOLLEYBALL' SUPREMACY

GUANGZHOU — Both Thailand and Malaysia claim to have originated sepak takraw, and their rivalry is fierce in the highly skilled game.



SEPAK TAKRAW

Whoever emerges victorious at the Asian Games will claim bragging rights for the next four years, meaning winning here is a high priority for the neighboring countries.

The event gets underway on Monday with Myanmar and Indonesia also in the hunt, along with the Republic of Korea.

The ROK has been pinpointed by Thailand manager Thavat Kumutpongpanich as a country that has made progress since the last games in Doha four years ago.

"Malaysia is no longer our main rivals, having lost to Thailand in recent years with sub-standard performances," he told Thai media ahead of the games.

"We cannot underestimate them," he added when asked about the Koreans.

"We are well-prepared for the Asian Games after months of intensive training and we will try to win at least three gold medals."

The Thais are defending men's champions and boast Suebsak Phunsueb among their ranks — arguably the finest male server in the sport's history and a household name at home.

"I am not worried about my physical fitness but I must be fully

fit mentally," said Suebsak, who has represented Thailand for 15 years and is competing at his fourth Asian Games.

The sport, unique to the Asian Games, should spark plenty of interest in Guangzhou with its dazzling display of acrobatic twists, turns and body swerves.

Even admirers of overhead kicking would be envious of the elasticity and agility of sepak takraw athletes, who basically play foot volleyball.

Few of the locals in China will have seen anything like it, and the novelty is expected to attract crowds to the Haizhou Sports Center.

Some diehard fans have even made the trek from Southeast Asia.

Sepak takraw made its debut at the 1990 Asian Games in Beijing, where Malaysia won two gold medals.

The sport is played on a court with a hand-woven ball (takraw) by teams made up of two or three people on each side.

Points are scored by hitting the ball above the net and into the court as the opposing players attempt to "block".

Kicks, often performed mid-air at shoulder height, form the basis of the game. No hands are allowed but feet, legs, shoulders and head can be used to keep the ball in play.

Players routinely spike the ball, turning acrobatic somersault movements or bicycle kicks in mid-air to keep the ball in play.

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE



MANAN VATSYAYANA / AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Thai tekong player Suebsak Phunsueb passes the ball during the men's Regu preliminary sepak takraw match at the 15th Asian Games in Doha in 2006.

Korean wins gold for uncle who died in Doha



NICOLAS ASFOURI / AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Kim Kyun-sub of the Republic of Korea competes during the equestrian dressage team competition at the equestrian venue on Sunday.

GUANGZHOU — The Republic of Korea's Kim Kyun-sub realized his dream on Sunday of winning an Asian Games gold to honor his uncle who was killed at the last Asiad in Doha when his horse threw and crushed him.

Kim was part of the ROK team that claimed the equestrian team dressage title ahead of China and Malaysia.

"I hoped I could win gold in dressage to honor my uncle. I trembled before I came into the arena," said Kim, who joined Choi Jun-sang, Kim Dong-seon

and Hwang Young-shik on the podium.

His uncle, Kim Hyung-chil, 47, died on a rain-sodden course in Qatar four years ago when his horse hit a fence, stumbled and threw him to the ground during the individual cross country event.

The mare, Bundaberg Black, fell on him and Kim was crushed.

Kim, who left a wife and two children, died from multiple skull fractures and severe bleeding while the horse broke its hind legs and had to be put down.

For Choi, Sunday's victory was his third straight gold in team dressage, joining another rider from the ROK, Suh Jung-kyun as the only athlete to win the same equestrian event three times in a row.

It was also his fifth Asian Games gold.

"Chinese riders are strong and rode well, but I trust my riders and horses," said ROK coach Shin Chang-moo.

"That's why I thought we could gain the gold medal. It lays a good foundation for further success."

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE