

Former aerobics No 1 gives national team jump on rivals

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Ex-world champion Angela McMillan of New Zealand hails spirit of Cambodia's young sport aerobics team ahead of the first Asian championships next month

SPORT AEROBICS?

Sport aerobics emerged in the early 1980s as a competitive sport set to music that combines aerobic choreography and gymnastics elements. There are currently five categories in competition: individual male; individual female; mixed pairs; trio; and group.

CAMBODIA'S national aerobics squad this week received some extra coaching from former world champion Angela McMillan in the countdown to the first Asian Aerobic Gymnastics Championships in Bangkok on December 3.

McMillan, a 28-year-old New Zealander who claimed the world title in 2004 and currently holds the No 3 ranking, arrived in Phnom Penh last week with her sister, fellow aerobics competitor and trainer Dianne McMillan.

The pair, who will spend a total of nine days with the Cambodian team, said they were impressed by the local talent.

"When I first came I couldn't believe these guys had only been training for a year," Angela said Wednesday afternoon as she worked with the Cambodian men's aerobic trio on a new routine to the Bon Jovi hit "It's My Life".

"They already look like international athletes."

The extra training at the Olympic Stadium gymnasium has been a great boost for the team of 10 that was formed last year by national gymnastics coach Nay Phonna, who listed a lack of human resources as being among the team's biggest obstacles.

"They only have me to prepare routines and decipher the rules of the sport," Nay Phonna said, adding that it is often difficult to understand every aspect of the sport's strict international rules, which he said were only provided in English.

Nay Phonna tried contacting many international teams for help but didn't have high expectations until the Kiwi sisters volunteered their time.

"They are both at a high level. A lot of countries want them and offer them money for training, but for us, they didn't think about money. They just came to help," Nay Phonna said, noting that the Cambodian Gymnastics Federation covered the cost of their airfares and were contributing toward their expenses.

Encouragement

For 19-year-old Sum Srorn, the McMillan sisters' help has been invaluable.

He began training as a gymnast in a club in his home province of Takeo. After spending three years on the national gymnastics team, Sum Srorn switched to aerobics and placed sixth in the men's individual event at his first international competition in Macau last year.

"I was excited and proud about my placing. I didn't expect to be able to compete against the other Asian countries. Some of them have been training for 10 years," he said.

Sum Srorn, who is in his final year of high school, trains six days a week and said the \$30 a month provided to each team member by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport for eight months of the year is difficult to live on. To save money, Sum Srorn and his fellow athletes sleep on gym mats at the federation.

"It is difficult to be on the national team," he said.

"The training is hard, and we do not have good equipment or facilities. But the extra training [Angela and Dianne] have given our team has improved us in every aspect of the competition."

Looking forward

Srorn says that during the past week he has developed new routines, learned the importance of controlling every part of the body, including eye direction and facial expressions, and now has a much clearer understanding of the rules of competition.

"We may not be ready to take a medal yet. I've watched a DVD of previous competitions and the other teams are very strong. But we will be much more competitive and perform at a higher level with the training they have given us," he said.

Angela McMillian has held the New Zealand national champion title since she first entered the sport via her high school team 15 years ago, and she now coaches new athletes both at home and abroad.

In comparison to the other teams she has worked with, materially "the Cambodian team have nothing", she said.

But she is confident this has not hindered their progress. "It's fantastic to see people that haven't had anything handed to them competing at this level. It proves it doesn't matter what you have to train with, it's how much you feel it, and they feel it. It's inside them."

Already speaking of plans to return in 2009 before the Southeast Asian Games in Laos next December, Angela said the team spirit among the Cambodian athletes and support for one another was inspiring.

"The training has been intensive. We've become very close," she said. "I'd love to go to an international competition and see these guys there competing."