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Afghanistan has the highest proportion of school-age children in the world, according to the UN. For most of these seven million youngsters, sports are virtually nonexistent. (Tyler Hicks/The New York Times)

## In Kabul, skateboarding over life's troubles

By Adam B. Ellick

Published: January 26, 2009

**KABUL:** It looked like an ordinary neighborhood playground: six children tumbling off their skateboards to the tune of laughter. But not so long ago, just 20 yards away, the body of a suicide car bomber was sprawled beside a glistening pool of blood.

Afghan youth have learned to recover almost instantly from such routine violence. One person determined to inject something normal into their lives is Oliver Percovich, 34, from Melbourne.

He plans to open this country's first skateboarding school, Skateistan, in the spring. He sees sports as a way to encourage students into after-school activities like English and computer classes, which are otherwise reserved for the elite.

"Teenagers are trying to dissociate from old mentalities, and I'm their servant," Percovich said. "If they weren't interested, I would've left a long time ago."

When he pulls his motorcycle into a residential courtyard here, a dozen youngsters pounce before it comes to a stop, yanking six chipped skateboards with fading paint off the back. The children, most participating in a sport for the first time in their war-hardened lives, do not want to waste any time.

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Their skateboard park is a decrepit concrete fountain with deep fissures. The tangle of novice skaters resembles bumper cars more than X Games.

But Percovich has raised the money needed to build an 800-square-meter, or 8,600-square-foot, bubble to house the nonprofit Skateistan complex, and the Kabul Parks Authority has tentatively donated land. He is still waiting for official permission to begin the project. Since a spate of kidnappings and the car bombing in November, he has reduced his daily sessions at the fountain to once or twice a week.

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Among those who look forward to his visits is Maro, an elfin 9-year-old girl who was terrified of skateboarding at first.

"It gives me courage, and once I start skating, I completely forget about my fears," she said.

Maro's glittery Mickey Mouse shirt indicated middle-class status. She stood out from the street children in muddied clothes who shared the skate space. Because the sport is so new and unusual here, Percovich said, it may help mend the country's deep social and ethnic divisions.

But for Hadisa, a 10-year-old girl from a conservative family, skateboarding has not been accepted. She said two older brothers beat her with wires for skating with poorer children in September. Several friends said they had seen blood flowing from her leg.

"I'm not upset with my brothers for beating me," Hadisa whispered on a recent day when she did not skate because her oldest brother was nearby. "They have the right."

Some girls cannot skate enough because their window for participation is short. When Afghan girls reach puberty, they must be veiled and can no longer associate with men outside the family.

Percovich said his indoor skate park could be part of the solution, with boys and girls in separate classes.

"If my family doesn't let me skate when I grow up, and they tell me I need to be at home, then I have to respect my family," Maro said. "And I won't be able to skate."

Maro's grandfather, Abdul Hai Muram, a retired political commentator, stroked her ponytail as he considered her future. He said he wanted her to be able to play outside when she turned 15 but worried about society's reaction.

"Families are still careful and thoughtful about letting their daughters out," Muram, 65, said. "We're entitled to be very strict and afraid because negative consequences from the Taliban time are still out there, and men do whatever they want to women."

He added, "It may take 10 years for things to be normal for women."

Perhaps no one is more excited for the skateboard park than Mirwais, a 16-year-old boy who can do an ollie, an aerial trick that is the foundation for more advanced moves. Mirwais, who dropped out of school after second grade, first noticed the skate sessions from an adjacent parking lot, where he washed cars for \$4 a day to support his family of eight. Percovich said Mirwais was often high from sniffing glue.

Now Mirwais looks tidier and earns \$8 a day working for the Skateistan project, repairing boards, running errands and assisting at the informal skate sessions. "I want to improve as much as I can, and continue to support my family with skating," he said. "It's my future."

Still, many middle- and upper-class youngsters complain that Mirwais ridicules them, using foul language, evidence of the challenge with mixing social classes and ethnic groups here.

But Percovich is determined to overcome the obstacles. He arrived here rather impulsively in early 2007 because his girlfriend at the time had taken a job in Kabul. He gave up his bakery business, stuffed some clothes - and his skateboards - into a bag and left Australia.

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Unable to find work, Percovich did what he has done since he was 6. He rode his skateboard, undaunted by the military convoys, pushcarts, donkeys, suffocating dust and occasional car bombings.

"Whenever I turned up, kids gathered around and asked, 'What is that?'" he said, referring to his skateboard. "They'd ask to have a go, and I realized quite fast it's an excellent way to interact with youth."

Afghanistan has the highest proportion of school-age children in the world, one in five, according to the United Nations. For a vast majority of these seven million youngsters, sports are virtually nonexistent.

Most public schools, stretched to provide basic materials, do not have playgrounds. Boys play pickup soccer or volleyball games on dusty fields. But sports are an afterthought for most girls, who are discouraged from public gatherings.

About 20 embassies and nongovernmental organizations rejected Percovich's financing proposal for a skateboarding school. After breaking up with his girlfriend, he said, he was down to \$1,500 and had maxed out his credit card to pay the rent.

"I was banging my head against the wall, saying, 'What am I doing with no money?'" Percovich said. "But in the afternoon, I was laughing and skating with kids running toward me saying, 'Oli, Oli, Oli.'"

Even his successes have been somewhat frustrating. Last March, an Australian retailer donated 30 skate sets - including boards, shoes and body pads - but Percovich could not afford the \$5,000 for shipping. The equipment remains in Melbourne.

Percovich's break came last October, when the Canadian, Norwegian and German governments pledged a combined \$120,000. The Kabul Parks Authority chose a site in a poor area, about 13 kilometers, or eight miles, from the fountain.

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Andreas Schützenberger, whose German company, IOU Ramps, has built 300 skate ramps in places like Israel and Mongolia, plans to install the platforms at no cost once Skateistan is built.

Percovich recruited Titus Dittman, who delivered a ton of secondhand skate equipment this month. In 1982, Dittman transformed a parking lot in Münster, Germany, into one of the world's best-known cult skate scenes, Monster Mastership.

The goals for Skateistan are a bit more grounded.

"Afghan kids are the same as kids all over the world," Percovich said. "They just haven't been given the same opportunities. They need a positive environment to do positive things for Afghanistan and for themselves."

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