

Action sports

In 14th year, X Games showing no signs of growing pains

By Sal Ruibal
USA TODAY

The X Games is officially a teenager, dude. Like most teenagers, it is also a bit confused about its identity.

X Games 14 begins the annual four-day run Thursday in Los Angeles. But after 13 years in the public eye, the action sports festival can't make up its mind about what it wants to be when it grows up. Or even if it wants to grow up.

It outgrew street luge, in-line skating, sport climbing, video skydiving and the word "extreme," but skateboarding is still the heart and soul of the event.

"Those original sports didn't die out," X Games founder and ESPN senior vice president Ron Semiao says. "They just didn't have the staying power as a televised sport."

With that maturity, skating is evolving from the big-trick vert ramp to the slick style and finesse of street, park and — new for 2008 — Superpark. The well-armored warriors of the pipe are being replaced by emo-listening 20-somethings who think a stalefish is bad sushi.

And now the X Games is asking for the keys to the car.

Yes, there are cars in the X Games. There are dangerous Rally cars, which fly and flip and crash. Motor sports are the next wave of X, and the money is already there: \$1.65 million in prizes.

Moto X and Rally will pay out \$678,500 in prize money this week, while skateboarding winners will receive checks totaling \$554,000. BMX cycling is at the Olympics now, but it pays out only \$392,500 at the X Games.

That's because one of the few constants about the X Games is that it reaches a large number of young, male viewers who have yet to be hard-wired for brand preferences in automobiles, deodorants, cellphones and snack foods.

For marketers, this is the mother lode.

"Rally would be a huge sport in or out of the X Games," Semiao says. "We've always had an automobile sponsor, but with Subaru in it, Rally has really become a targeted value sponsorship."

The X Games hopes to do for Subaru what it did for Mountain Dew, but with a different ending. The glowing green soda got so profitable it has its own action sports event, the rival Dew Tour.

But there are resisters. Surfing is not in X Games 14.

In the new world of extreme, surfing is too unpredictable for prime time because even ESPN can't order the waves and surfers to appear. "We'll have surfing back next year," Semiao promises.

Looking at the evolution of the event, Semiao is proud of its cultural impact.

"Back in 1993," he asks, "who ever thought that someday dads and moms would be skateboarding and snowboarding with their kids?"

On TV: Coverage of X Games 14 will include 20 hours of live programming on ESPN, ESPN2 and ABC from Thursday through Sunday. Additional coverage is on ESPN International, EXPN.com, ESPN Classic, ESPN360.com, *SportsCenter* and ESPN2's *X Center*. For a complete schedule, go to expn.go.com.

► Check bnqt.com/xgames for blogs, photos and athlete interviews

Corrections & Clarifications

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A news brief Tuesday about Nancy Lieberman's recent return to the WNBA misstated how many years she had been retired. It is 11.

