

SPORTS

BASKETBALL



An aerial photo shows the court just prior to tip-off at Monday's Village BA final between Team Zunyi and Team Qiandongnan in Taipan, Taijiang county, Southwest China's Guizhou province. The so-called "Village Basketball Association" is a grassroots tournament that showcases the passion for basketball in rural areas. XINHUA

IN A LEAGUE OF ITS OWN

Rural village's unique grassroots hoops tourney proves a winner on and off the court



Ethnic dance performances entertain the crowds in the stands. XINHUA

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Just how big can the "Village Basketball Association" become? Even hoops legend Yao Ming says he is unsure if he can get a seat in the stands.

The popularity of this year's "Village BA" was evidenced by the sold-out crowds that packed into the 30,000-capacity stands over the weekend at Taipan village in Southwest China's Guizhou province.

The two-day grassroots event attracted fans from across the nation to the tiny village, which has a population of about 1,200. Media also descended on Taipan, with national broadcaster cctv.com even providing a live broadcast of the action. The finals captured the imagination of netizens on Chinese social media too, with the hashtags "Guizhou Village BA finals" and "People in the stands at Village BA are not photoshopped" viewed over 65 million and 14 million times respectively on Weibo by Monday afternoon.

Four teams contested this year's finals, which tipped off on Saturday. A torrential downpour forced the championship game to be rescheduled to Monday afternoon when Team Qiandongnan prevailed 68-65 against Team Zunyi. On Sunday, Team Tongren overcame Team Bijie 57-50 to finish third.

With the teams comprised of amateur players mostly hailing from local villages and nearby cities, spectators flocked from all over the country to soak up the unique festival-like atmosphere. Apart from the hoops action, fans enjoyed pre- and post-match parties, local markets serving food and snacks, and music and dance performances that showcased local ethnic culture.

Chinanews.com reported that — based on search statistics from multiple online platforms — demand for hotels, restaurants and markets in Taipan was 11 times higher than a week before the tournament.

Over the weekend, tourist bookings at Qiandongnan Miao and Dong autonomous prefecture, where Taipan village is located, rocketed by over 140 percent compared with the same time last year.

"Our hotels are fully booked. On the day the match schedule was revealed, all the rooms were instantly snapped up," said Zhang Shouwu, who runs a hotel with about 30 rooms in Taipan.



Sturgeons are awarded as prizes to the players of Team Zunyi at the 2023 Village BA. Local specialties such as duck, rice and pig feet are also used as gifts for players and spectators during the event. XINHUA



For late arrivals who can't find a seat, the next best option is to watch the action on ladders, with local retailers reporting a brisk trade in the items. XINHUA

"Hotel rooms are highly sought-after for match days. Every year our rooms are fully booked during the tournament, but I keep the price at the same level. I can't just raise prices because of the Village BA. It would damage the reputation of Taipan people."

But the most-coveted spaces in Taipan are court-side. Hours before matches tip off, spectators pour into the stands to enjoy performances by local ethnic dancers



The grassroots basketball event is inspiring more kids to pick up the sport. XINHUA

and various cultural activities. If you dare to leave your spot for just for a minute, you're unlikely to get it back. As a result, spectators go to great lengths to hang onto their vantage points.

"Many people even wear adult diapers so they can sit for hours in the stands. If you go to use the bathroom, your spot will for sure be taken by others," said Xie Lingchu, who runs a shop in the village.

"Items like small portable chairs and portable chargers are all hot commodities during matches. To ensure the best view from the stands, some even buy herringbone ladders in my shop. And of course, snacks and beverages are the most popular items."

The Village BA is about as grassroots as sports can get, with the matches originating from the local Chi Xin Festival, which celebrates harvest on June 6 of the lunar calendar. As part of the festival fun, locals would spontaneously shoot hoops among themselves, and gradually the games assumed a more formal tournament structure.

Since 2016, local government has added its support to the area's grassroots basketball development. In 2021, Guizhou province launched the "Gorgeous Countryside" campaign, which promotes development in rural China via culture, tourism and sports. A rural basketball league was also included in the campaign, with Taipan chosen as a host for matches.

Last year, videos of the basketball action in Taipan went viral on social media, leading netizens to dub the tournament the "Village Basketball Association". This year, the first edition of the Village BA finals was staged in Taipan, which is now considered something of a shrine to grassroots Chinese hoops.

"It's not an easy job to organize such an event. All the hard work paid off, and the deafening sound of people's cheers is the best reward," said Liu Shangbo, a local sports bureau official who has been stationed in Taipan for the Village BA for over a week.

"We now attract more and more tourists, and the facilities here are improving all the time. Everything is on the up here," he added.

"The event is helping the development of the village and it really motivates more people to embrace sports."