

The 74-year-old professional long-distance runner exercises on the esplanade along Suzhou Creek. — All photos by Wang Yong



Exercising outdoors in Shanghai: Fitness for all in harmony with nature

Wang Yong

Last Saturday I got up at 4:30am, practiced pranayama (yogic breathing) for half an hour, and left my suburban home at 5:30am after a simple breakfast.

I walked 15 minutes to the nearest Metro station to catch the earliest city-bound train that departs at 6am. I was trying to reach a riverfront space along Suzhou Creek in downtown Shanghai before 7am, in the hope of joining early-bird exercisers and jogging under the morning breeze.

I chose the destination — a 4.3-kilometer-long esplanade in Putuo District — because it was one of the main venues for Shanghai's Public Fitness Day activities this year, which were held from August 6 to 14.

A more important reason, however, was that the esplanade area would be developed into a landmark garden along Suzhou Creek in the future. Xiao Wengao, head of the Putuo District government, confirmed the garden project in an interview on August 10.

It took me less than one hour — by subway and on foot — to arrive at the easternmost point of the esplanade. A group of elderly people playing badminton by a bamboo grove came into view as soon as I descended from a bridge across Suzhou Creek.

It was the first time I saw so many senior citizens playing badminton. They thrust forward and backward in quick and steady steps, trying to hit the shuttlecock back to their opponents' side on every shot.

As I looked on from the sidelines, I found they had fixed their net to a tree trunk on one side and to a bamboo stick tied to a moped on the other. It was indeed a great "design" improvised for a makeshift outdoor badminton court.

"You play well," I told an old man who paused for some rest.

He looked at me with a quiet smile.

"How long have you been playing badminton? Have you hired a coach?" I asked him.

"Most of us have played for at least 10 years," he said. "We're retired workers; hiring a coach would be a luxury. We just keep practicing on our own."

As we chatted, a woman clad in a red, checkered shirt chipped in: "Guess how old he is?"

"About 65?" I guessed as I looked

him over again.

The woman laughed: "He is 75!"

Her hearty words awakened a corresponding cheerfulness in the old man, and the cheerfulness was contagious.

The woman said she was 60 years old, one of the youngest in this group of elderly exercisers. She explained that they moved here for badminton games only this year.

"We used to play in a nearby park, but later we found that there are more shades here to shelter us from the summer heat, so we now come here every day except Tuesday and Thursday, when we go to play in an indoor gym," she said.

"Isn't it more expensive to play in a gym?" I asked.

"It's affordable, because we share the costs," she replied.

As I jogged westward along the creek, I met more early-bird exercisers: An old lady was practicing tai chi in a small riverside forest; a young couple was running up and down a sloping grassland; a teenage boy was playing tennis against the wall of a brick house while his father looked on; a young woman was honing her swordcraft under the guidance of some senior people; and a group of young people just finished a 5-kilometer jogging race ...

All these people I encountered and places I visited revealed a quieter side of Shanghai, defined as it was by a sense of ease which could only be found and felt in the bosom of nature.

The morning scene along Suzhou Creek reminded me of what Shanghai Mayor Gong Zheng said in a speech earlier this year: "Give the best resources to the people."

The future garden to be built around the 4.3-kilometer-long Suzhou Creek esplanade is part of Putuo District's plan to create "a half-marathon space" on its turf.

Suzhou Creek has 42 kilometers of riverfront paths, half of which are located within Putuo. To put it metaphorically, the district's riverfront paths lend themselves to a half marathon, which also covers 21km. Once completed, the Banma Suhe project will provide downtown Shanghai with a giant public venue for sports and recreation, accessible to anyone who likes outdoor exercises. The term Banma means a half marathon and the term Suhe means Suzhou Creek.