

Thai soccer boys recall cave ordeal, moment they were discovered

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Twelve boys and their coach from the Wild Boars soccer team receive gifts from the local government during their first press conference on July 18, 2018, in Chiang Rai, Thailand, after being rescued from a cave in northern Thailand the week before. They were discharged early from Chiang Rai Prachanukroh hospital and thanked those involved in their rescue. Photo by: Linh Pham/ Getty Images

Trapped in small spaces inside a flooded cave in northern Thailand, the 12 boys and their soccer coach were trying to dig their way out when they heard voices in the darkness. Their coach quickly told everyone to be quiet.

"We weren't sure if it was for real," said 14-year-old Adul Samon. "So we stopped and listened. And it turned out to be true, I was shocked."

That stunning moment when two British divers found the missing soccer team was recounted by the boys on Wednesday, July 18. It was their first news conference since the rescue that riveted the world's attention.

Warm Reception For Boys

The group, looking healthy after recuperating at a hospital, entered to applause from reporters and classmates. The kids put on a quick demonstration of their ball-handling skills on a miniature soccer field set up in the hall where they met journalists from around the world.

The boys were dressed in green and white uniforms with a red wild boar, their team's nickname. They hugged their friends before taking seats up front with doctors and members of the Thai navy SEAL unit that helped rescue them. Others who helped them during their ordeal, which began on June 23 and ended after more than two weeks, were also there.

Boys Honor Thai Navy SEAL Diver

In one moving and emotional moment, a portrait was displayed of Saman Gunan, the former Thai navy SEAL diver who died in the rescue attempt, and the team members showed their gratitude and respect for him. One of the boys, Chanin Vibulrungruang, covered his eyes as if wiping away a tear.

The boys, whose ages range from 11 to 16, and their 25-year-old coach answered questions submitted by the media. They spoke about the lessons they learned during their experience.

Lessons Learned From Experience

"I feel stronger, I have more patience, endurance, tolerance," said 13-year-old Mongkol Boonpiam.

Adul said, "This experience teaches me not to live life carelessly."

Several said they want to become professional soccer players, while four said they want to be like the heroes who saved them.

"I want to be a navy SEAL because I want to help others," said one.

They all said they want to apologize to their parents, most of whom they had not informed in advance about the trek to the cave after soccer practice.

"I Know My Mom Is Going To Punish Me"

"I know my mom is going to punish me and I am in big trouble with my mother," one of the boys said when asked what he expected to happen when he got home.

Doctors said the 13 were healthy in body and mind. They said the boys gained around 6.6 pounds on average since they were rescued from the cave. They were said to have lost an average of 9 pounds during the more than two weeks they were trapped in the cave.

The news conference was the first opportunity the members of the team had to speak directly to the media, though video of them in the hospital was released previously. Officials reviewed the questions being asked in advance to make sure none of them could trigger the kids after what they had experienced. Being asked certain kinds of questions could make them relive their experience and could cause psychological damage.

The Wild Boars teammates had entered the Tham Luang cave on June 23 for what was supposed to be a quick, relaxing excursion after soccer practice. However, rain began falling while they were underground, and water filled the caverns, cutting off their escape.

British Divers Found Group On July 2

The British divers found the group huddling on a spot of dry ground deep inside the cave on July 2, hungry but generally healthy. An international team of rescuers used diving equipment and pulleys to extract the 12 boys and their coach. The rescuers guided them through the tight, flooded passageways in three separate missions.

Some of the boys were treated for minor infections during their hospital stay, but all 13 have been described as recovering well.

Big Family Welcoming Party For One Boy

Following the news conference on Wednesday, July 18, about 30 relatives gathered at 13-year-old Duangpetch Promthep's house to welcome him home, clapping their hands and cheering.

Banphot Konkum, an uncle who has raised Duangpetch, was teary-eyed as he hugged his nephew.

Earlier that day, Banphot said he would have a renovated bedroom and gifts awaiting him.

"We'll do whatever he wants," he said. "If he wants anything, we'll buy it for him as a present, as we promised that when he gets out, whatever he wants, we'll do it for him."