IT is unmistakable. Jonathan Tinggang is a proud descendant of the minority Bukitan or Baketen (currently estimated at 400-strong). Available evidence suggests that the sub-ethnic group, historically squeezed out by other larger groups, have been on the move in the last few hundred years, originally from modern-day Palim, Kalimantan to Lubok Antu then to Betong and finally settling in Tatau today (40km from Bintulu town).

We sat down with Jonathan on a sheltered grass patch at the Jubilee Ground on April 4, 2014. It was late morning and he had just won the long jump (6.62m) on the third day of the 42nd MSS Sarawak Track and Field Championship – his third gold medal of the state-level schools championship after winning the triple jump (14.20m) on Day 1 and high jump on Day 2 (when he stole the limelight by not only creating a new state schools record but also a new Sarawak state record). Our first impressions of the 17-year-old proved somewhat on the mark as the interview proceeded. He is a confident young man, maybe even a bit brash. He is a quick thinker and fast talker. Most evidently, however, he is proud of where he comes from – Sungai Penyarai – he offered to write it on my notebook as he guessed correctly that I have not heard of the place before.

Jonathan’s main event is the high jump. No one actually ‘discovered’ his talent except perhaps himself. After literally ‘jumping about here and there for fun’ while in primary school, he soon figured he could be good at it. One day, the form one boy asked his SMK Tatau teacher to enter him for a school competition. Since that day barely four years ago, Jonathan’s rise has been meteoric. In an elemental event in which the sole objective is simply to jump higher and higher, he has soared and soared.

In his first year of competition, the 13-year-old did well enough to represent Bintulu Division at the 2010 MSS Sarawak Championship but he was unplaced. The following year he again represented his division but also made it into the Sarawak contingent to compete at the 2011 MSS Malaysia Inter-State Championship in Ipoh, Perak. He cleared 1.85m (6 ft 1 inch) to win his first national junior title in the Under-15 high jump. He improved his personal best to 1.96m (6' 5") to retain the title and break the national schools record in 2012 at Kangar, Perlis.

Last year, 16-year-old Jonathan had to compete against the ‘big boys’ as he moved up to the Under-18 category at the 2013 MSS Malaysia championship in Kuantan, Pahang. It was a tight 3-way battle. With the bar at 1.95m, Johor’s Norshafee Mohd Shah and Terengganu’s Mohd Zulhelmi both needed three attempts to clear 1.98m. Jonathan did it on his second try. When the bar was raised to 2.01m (6’ 7”), he succeeded on his very first attempt while Norshafee made it on his last and Zulhelmi crashed out. The Sarawak boy beat his Johor rival on a count-back after both failed at 2.04m.

2.30 pm on April 3, 2014: The field of 11 athletes assembled for the high jump (Boy’s Under-18) at the 42nd MSS Sarawak Championship. The preliminary jumps started from 1.60m with the bar raised progressively by 5cm. After about half an hour all but two competitors have been eliminated as officials put the bar at 1.85m. Limbang’s Jackson Chieng was to fail in all his three tries. A small crowd of about 80 had gathered in the vicinity in anticipation of a certain jumper from the Bintulu team going for his own record of 2.02m (6’ 7 1/2") soon. They could never imagine the twist to the drama that was about to unfold.

Jonathan, like almost all competitive high jumpers today, uses the Fosbury Flop technique – crossing the bar face-up and landing with his back on the mattress. He sailed effortlessly over 1.85m. But he landed at the edge of one of the five pieces of mattresses. That piece moved as it was not held together by...
a covering sheet. So Jonathan crashed into the ground in between two pieces of mattresses! On his back!

For the next 20 minutes, he lay dazed, then struggled to sit up and finally received attention from first aiders. Everyone was relieved when he finally stood up. Having seemingly regained his composure he then decided not just to continue. He went for broke!

He requested officials to raise the bar from 1.85m (6' 1") to 2.03m (6' 8").

He wanted to go for the record now! He failed on his first attempt and also the second. But the silent crowd erupted when he soared on his final try – yes, he had broken the state schools record! The height then went up to 2.05m (6' 9").

He amazed everyone when he succeeded on his first try to shatter the Sarawak state record – the old record had lasted since 1994 – three years before Jonathan was born! Somehow, three subsequent failed attempts at 2.08m did not seem to matter. In the prior 30 – 40 minutes, the 1.77m tall wonder kid had displayed every virtue from resilience to courage, single-minded concentration to guts, and physical to mental toughness, all in the midst of adversity.

Not to mention his sheer talent. He has gone so far in his 4-year athletics career mostly training on his own with some help from his school teachers.

Asked two days later why he never considered going to a local sports school to benefit from greater coaching expertise, he shot back immediately in his clear-minded manner with an air of certainty, “I am afraid of getting injured. Training in my own school is enough.”

The training there can be too intense. Then he added: “I am afraid of getting injured. Training in my own school is enough.”

EiKman Teo
Education director Datu Abdillah Adam congratulates Jonathan. — All photos by Chimon Upon