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Short-track Speed Skating in Korea

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In

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Introduction

The Republic of Korea has excelled historically in the Olympic Winter Games, especially in speed skating events. Since the introduction of short-track speed skating as an Olympic sport in the Albertville Games of 1992 through to the Sochi Games of 2014, Korea has won 42 Olympic short-track medals, 12 more than China, its nearest rival. In this chapter we provide an analysis of the reasons for Korea's impressive record of international success in short-track speed skating. In doing so, we highlight some of the key features of the training and competition environment for speed skating in Korea and present case studies that detail the experiences of many of Korea's Olympic champions.

Korea has
excelled
historically



view video:
What is Short-
track Speed
Skating?



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Training Environment

In common with other successful Asian nations, an important factor that underpins Korea's strength in short-track speed skating is the extremely demanding training system. Athletes typically attend training three times a day from the early grades of elementary school through to becoming national team members. This level of commitment from an early age requires that parents become dedicated to the daily schedule of their child athletes, beginning with very early morning training sessions through to the final session late into the evening. The competitive atmosphere among Korea's speed skating community does not allow much time for other activities, and the intense atmosphere created during training sessions by the coaches is very demanding. The shared experience of such a rigorous routine over the long-term has the positive effect of creating a close bond between the coaches and their athletes.



Role Models



view video:
2014 Olympics
Women's
3,000-meter
Relay

Another factor that contributes to success is the close proximity of the young athletes with their heroes in the Korean national team. Athletes from elementary school to the professional ranks train together in the confined environment of short-track ice rinks. During training sessions, young athletes naturally get to rub shoulders with Olympic medallists and to experience first-hand the level of training required to become an Olympic athlete. By having close access to so many successful role models, the younger athletes become desensitised to any fear or apprehension they may hold about competing in the Olympics or striving for international success. With Olympic champions preparing together with younger athletes in the same venue, training sessions become a source of energy that assists the newer additions to the national squad to adjust psychologically to the tension that is often inherent in the Olympic Games and other international environments.

successful
role models

Collective Unconscious

Many nations are renowned for excellence in specific sports, such as Brazil for soccer, USA for basketball, and Jamaica for track sprinters. Just looking at the uniform of the powerhouse nation has the capacity to strike fear into opponents. By the same token those who wear a uniform associated with a proud record of international success typically feel a great sense of confidence and an obligation to continue the winning tradition.

The famous psychologist Carl Jung claimed that individual personalities derive from more than genetic characteristics and personal experiences. People also think and behave according to the collective unconscious; that part of the mind containing memories and impulses common to people more generally, of which individuals are not consciously aware. The collective unconscious may be shared by any given society, a smaller group of people, or even the whole of humankind, and is the product of ancestral experiences.



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For speed skaters in the Republic of Korea, the collective unconscious is inherently positive. The history of Korean skating is a collective experience of success passed on to new skaters. Being without fear and feeling confident on the start line and during races makes winning easier. In addition to inheriting the collective unconscious of champion skaters, novice athletes also have the opportunity to model themselves closely on the behaviours and habits of the senior athletes in the team.

without fear and feeling confident

The experience of being part of a system that has already won many Olympic medals helps to demystify the process of winning and imprint expectations of international success in the minds of young athletes who are relatively new to short-track speed skating. This unconscious process can be powerful, allowing athletes to turn a contest against a renowned foreign skater into an event that is not overly daunting. The junior Korean skaters inherit a pedigree that makes international success accessible.

Hence, it is relatively easy for Korean short-track skaters to feel confident during international competitions. Being closely involved during training activities on a regular basis with other skaters who have a record of success at the highest level and experiencing their success vicariously can significantly enhance their own confidence. This confidence is especially strong if they believe that the Korean champions they see every day at training are just like them, effectively evoking the reaction, “If they can do it, I can do it.”



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Learning to Win

As international successes by the Korean national team are accumulated, the national athletes who qualify to participate in major competitions such as the Olympic Games readily develop skills that help them to manage the competition preparation process. Korean speed skaters who participate in the Olympic Games for the first time have already competed multiple times against Olympic medallists during the elimination rounds in Korea. The tension experienced during selection for the national team typically matches or even exceeds that experienced during major international competitions, assisting the desensitisation process.

fierce competition

As Korean skaters often train together, the less experienced athletes get many opportunities to learn from their more experienced teammates. Moreover, because of the close interaction between domestic teams, there is fierce competition between the athletes and coaches from the various teams. This intense competition within Korean skating seems to create an environment that promotes innovative strategies and techniques that move the sport forward and, in the process, enhance Korea's prospects of international success. For example, for the 1998 Nagano Olympic Winter Games in Japan, Korea's Kim DongSung and Chun LeeKyung adopted an innovative "blade-push" technique (pushing the skate forward at the finish line), which was developed during domestic competition and helped them to become Olympic champions. In the women's relay event at the 2002 Salt Lake Olympic Winter Games, the gold medal was secured using a technique that slightly bends the skate blade to the left to optimise centrifugal force when cornering.



The large number of athletes and coaches in Korea who compete to develop technical and strategic innovations engenders an open attitude towards adopting new techniques and competition strategies. Although it is not easy to adopt novel techniques and tactics in competition, the Korean speed skaters approach such challenges with confidence. The previous accomplishments at the Olympic Games have created a culture of challenging oneself to be innovative and to try new approaches.

Extrinsic Rewards

There is a well-developed reward system for successful Olympic athletes in the Republic of Korea. This system includes offering large financial bonuses and substantial lifetime pensions to Olympic medallists. The value of the bonus and the pension varies according to the colour of the medal. Bonuses for gold medals are USD\$50,000 and life pensions can be up to USD\$833 per month (see Han, Kim, & Hong, 2014). Coaches also receive substantial financial payments and life pensions based on the success of their athletes. Additional bonuses may also be provided by the federation, corporations, and the Korean Olympic Committee. Overall, the lure of substantial financial rewards provides a powerful motivational force for Korean speed skaters and their coaches.



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An additional extrinsic reward, at least for the male skaters, relates to military service. All men in the Republic of Korea are obligated to complete two years of military service. If athletes win an Olympic medal, however, they only have to finish basic training and are exempted from the remaining statutory period of service.

Extrinsic rewards in the form of financial bonuses, pensions and exemption from completion of military service all contribute to the relentless work ethic of Korean short-track skaters. The proposed detrimental effect of extrinsic rewards on intrinsic motivation (Cerasoli & Ford, 2014) is occasionally apparent in the Korean system, whereby some athletes who have worked incredibly hard to win an Olympic medal appear to lose their motivation after having achieved their goal.

a well-
developed
reward system

Lessons from Korean Medallists



view video:
Women's
1500M - Turin
2006 Winter
Olympic Games

CASE STUDY: CHOI EUNKYUNG

Achievements: 1 gold and 1 silver medal in 2002 Olympic Winter Games
1 gold and 1 silver medal in 2006 Olympic Winter Games
World Champion in 2003 and 2004
2 gold and 2 silver medals in 2003 Asian Winter Games
5 gold medals in 2005 World University Games

Reflections on Olympic Success



Credit: Courtesy of www.viewcalgary.com

After experiencing my first Olympics, I attempted various competition preparation strategies for other contests, which allowed me to find what suited me. I figured out the traits of opponents, and psychologically ignored the opponents who were worse than me, also excluding them as rivals when doing imagery training. Because of my confidence, I began to feel quite relaxed. Maybe because of this factor, my athletic performance improved during training, and because of the improved athletic performance, I started to be less tense. I think my coach and I became a lot closer. I used to feel quite distant. Because of the attention I got from overseas athletes, my confidence grew even more.

I remember I felt a lot of pressure when I faced a serious new challenge, or in other words, when I competed against athletes who had better performance results than me. After experiencing my first Olympic Games, however, I did not feel fear any longer, but instead felt confident and mentally strong. That is why I got better and how I eventually produced good results.

I continuously ordered myself in my mind, "It is nothing," "I can do well," "Let me take this opportunity that is given to me." I had positive thoughts in my mind, and I relaxed my mind by listening to music alone rather than spending time with others. That is how I relieved my tension and how I spent time to prepare for competition.

I think it was the repetition of this process that made me feel confident after each race. And when I had to race against other athletes who had less athletic ability than me, I even felt arrogance in my mind believing that none of them could defeat me if I did well. But I think this sort of thinking can be dangerous, although it allowed me to do well in some aspects.

**“Let me
take this
opportunity...”**

Benefits of Experience

Participation in the Olympic Games has the potential to generate significant tension in athletes. Choi recalled this kind of negative experience.

I was barely able to see the coach and head coach, and their voices were drowned out by cheers, and I could only vaguely see them waving. Also because of the extreme tension, I was not able to control my own body.

When athletes experience highly pressurised scenarios on a regular basis in the competitive arena, they learn to deal with nervousness and tension. Weber's law states that the just-noticeable difference between two stimuli is proportional to the magnitude of the stimuli (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Weber%E2%80%93Fechner_law). Therefore, it can be assumed that regular exposure to negative psychological experiences during training and competition reduces, and perhaps eventually eliminates, the probability of athletes feeling high tension during major competitions. Choi mentioned the reduction in negative psychological reactions that she experienced.

As I got more experienced (in the Olympics), I felt comfortable at the start line, and it was even funny sometimes to see other athletes worried, and I even laughed when my head coach played jokes.





The experience of participation in the Olympic Games seems to make it easier for most athletes to feel confident and strong. However, perhaps there is something more self-assured in athletes from an early age that differentiates between those who become Olympic champions and other athletes.

I began to think I can do whatever I decide to

I remember the day of the world junior elimination rounds in 3rd grade of middle school. It was my birthday but because of the superstition that says you should not eat seaweed soup before a competition, I hesitated deciding whether to eat it or not. I decided to eat it and I won the competition. After that I no longer had any jinxes, and I began to think I can do whatever I decide to do from then onwards.

International accomplishments do not necessarily lead to ongoing success. Choi talked about the pain of failure due to over-confidence after participating in the Olympic Games.

I often had the tendency to ignore the domestic competitions. I guess it was because there was a huge difference in level and other athletes were afraid of me. After that, I did not aim to participate in domestic competitions, and I sometimes lost in domestic competitions because I was over-confident.

Success and failure provide different experiences for athletes but both may be helpful in improving athletic performance in the long-term. Given the world-class level of Korean domestic competitions, all up-and-coming skaters experience their share of defeats. Those who learn from those experiences and eventually make their way into the Korean national team have learned some valuable lessons along the way.

Sustained Effort

The skaters of the Republic of Korea set challenging goals for training and competition, and put sustained, intense effort into accomplishing their goals and overcoming difficulties in the process. Olympic champions Kang YunMi and Jin SunYoo highlighted the importance of effort in their growth as athletes.

I believe the athlete who succeeds in the end is not because of talent but because of effort. I think only those who were never satisfied with their athletic performance and who endlessly put effort into trying to reach the top in the Olympic Games got the medals in the end (Kang YunMi, 2006 Olympic gold medallist).

not because of talent but because of effort

I thought to myself when I did badly in competition, "You did not do well in the competition so take a break," but when I only had a little time left before a competition, I tried to control myself not by doing what I should not do, but rather by doing more exercise when others slept (Jin SunYoo, 2006 Olympic gold medallist).



Goal-setting

Goal-setting, intention of effort, and personal tenacity influence the degree of hard work skaters put into accomplishing goals. Olympic champion Ko GiHyun provided an example of her strategy for goal accomplishment.

*I had to start my daily training at 5:30 and for that, I had to leave at 5:20 and run a few laps around the field. I went to the rink from 6 and I thought if I start my training earlier than others I can make more laps each day, I can run 2 laps in the morning and 4 in total per day. If I do it for 1 month, it will be 120 more laps. This is how I thought about it. It was not my purpose, but rather it was my way of living
(Ko GiHyun, 2002 Olympic gold medallist).*

Another Olympic Champion, Jeon DaHye, affirmed the benefits of goal-setting.

*It was setting the goals for the Olympic Games and the World Championship rather than willingness that allowed me to become a top athlete, and as I accomplished my goal, I had more willingness and became more motivated
(Jeon DaHye, 2006 Olympic gold medallist).*

I became
more motivated



Credit: Courtesy of www.viewcalgary.com



Relentless Training

Fitness is an important factor in athletic performance and short-track speed skating is no exception. Korean skaters have less than ideal body types compared to skaters from other countries. For instance, most Korean skaters are of modest stature with short legs and small feet. However, rather than allow this body build to frustrate them, Korean skaters constantly work to make up for their disadvantages and to strengthen their advantages.

It seems if you have good fitness, you can use techniques comfortably. Though it does not apply to the one who only has good technique but has no power, it applies to the one who has good fitness because they can defeat their opponents despite lack of technique (Kang YunMi, 2006 Olympic gold medallist)

Fitness provides the fundamental base for adopting techniques. However, athletic performance that is based only on fitness is subdued by other factors as one moves up the ranks of competition (Yun, 2010), Kang YunMi mentioned the change in the role of fitness during her sporting career:

I won medals every time I participated in competitions because of my fitness. I relied on fitness in middle school and high school, where there were not many others who had good power and fitness in my grade. But as I became an adult, it was impossible to excel only with power and fitness (Kang YunMi, 2006 Olympic gold medallist)

The testimony of Jeon DaHye reinforces the notion that the willingness to train when others don't often lies at the heart of success.

when everyone else had dinner, I went for training

When I started my training after coming back from injury 2.5 months ago, I never thought about anything else. Though everyone else took breaks for 30 minutes before lunch and another 30 minutes before dinner after finishing training, I did not like to waste that 30 minutes, and what I did was I directly went to eat meals right after training and when everyone else had dinner, I went for training... (Jeon DaHye, 2006 Olympic gold medalist)



view video:
South Korea's
Lee Takes
the Gold

Although physical condition is a major predictor of performance in many sport events, the advantage of physical condition rapidly weakens after high school, and its contribution to athletic performance becomes only a fraction of what it was during junior competition (Yun, 2010). Nevertheless, Korean skaters recognise that fitness, physical condition, basic skills, and advanced techniques are indispensable factors needed to excel in sport. Korean skaters can master basic skills and more advanced techniques at a relatively young age due to long hours of training. Yi HoSuk mentioned the role of repetitive training.

I remember I tried to practice a skill over 100 or even 1000 times to master it. I repeated it over and over. (Yi HoSuk, 2005-2006 ISU Seoul World Championship gold medalist).



Collective Intelligence

Successful Korean skaters have developed collective intelligence about competitive strategies, and they willingly share that knowledge with younger athletes. Short-track speed skaters from the Republic of Korea have tended to favour a strategy in which they come from behind to take the lead late in the race. As the collective intelligence has been constructed, skaters have tended to use effective strategies spontaneously in competitions without prior planning. This process is identical to the spontaneous usage tendency indicated by research on gifted persons (Benito, 2000).

finding the optimal solution

Creative intelligence, analytical intelligence, and contextual intelligence (see Sternberg, 2000) are closely related to the environment experienced in training or competition. Contextual intelligence is related to competitive strategy, adapting to the environment, and coping with unexpected situations. Analytical intelligence involves the process of finding the optimal solution after briefly analyzing and judging the situation. Olympic champion Park HyeWon highlighted the necessity of analytical intelligence in competition.

If you don't make quick decisions, there are many cases in which the competition is over without having done anything. Thus it is necessary to be able to make quick judgments. It is necessary to decide what kinds of moves to make by watching the opponents (Park HyeWon, 2002 Olympic gold medallist).



The ability to analyze the situation and to find optimal creative solutions is paramount. Creativity is defined as the individual ability to generate new and appropriate ideas, methods, interpretations, or actions (Sternberg, 1988).

The athletes who consistently do well discover something in the situation that they can resolve. Guys like An HyunSoo watch competition videos a lot. He analyzes races by watching competition videos... So, the guys who do well develop their own unique methods (Jeon DaHye, 2006 Olympic gold medallist).



Credit: Courtesy of www.viewcalgary.com

Talented athletes improve the quality of their athletic performances with their own methods, using their creativity to discover new techniques and strategies. Top athletes are always learning.

It seems that learning abilities differ even when the same things are taught. There are some guys who can quickly understand what is being taught and other guys who take a long time to understand what is being taught and make no changes. The guys who do well seem to understand well... Maybe they really do understand well... (Jeon DaHye, 2006 Olympic gold medallist).

I saw many of my teammates who were really good. I had a lot of things to learn from my sister-like teammates. As I observed them closely, I improved, and I won the gold medal in the Asian Games and I steadily got better... (Lee HoSuk, 2007 Asian Winter Games gold medallist).

Summary

The short-track speed skating team of the Republic of Korea performs consistently well on the international stage. The team typically includes a balance of experienced Olympic medallists and younger athletes who grow as competitors as they interact with their elite teammates.

The clear goal of winning gold medals in the Olympic Games is nurtured even during elementary school. The automation of technique through long hours of repeated high-intensity training, while at the same time learning to be flexible in the event of unexpected situations, creates a collective intelligence that maintains Korea as a powerhouse in short-track speed skating.

Korea will remain at the forefront

The coaches devote their time to developing various innovative strategies and tactics such as the “blade-push” technique that changed the colour of the medal won at the finish line in the Nagano Olympic Games. The athletes put in laborious efforts, some training more than three times a day, and pride themselves on believing they are the best in the world and confident that they can defeat anyone. The process of elimination rounds in the Korean selection trials is perhaps fiercer than at the Olympic Games, so they do not feel undue pressure in the Olympic environment. Some of the Korean short-track speed skaters are interested in extrinsic rewards such as pensions or the elimination of military service, while other skaters desire only to have their names recognized in short-track speed skating history. Collectively, these factors make it highly likely that Korea will remain at the forefront of short-track speed skating for the foreseeable future.





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