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Taekwondo in Korea

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Introduction

Taekwondo is now a global sport practiced in more than 200 nations, and can rightfully claim to have achieved worldwide impact. Taekwondo is a traditional Korean martial art that teaches much more than physical fighting skills. It is a well-developed discipline dating back several thousand years, combining diverse physical and spiritual elements to unify mind and body, originally used by ancient warriors. More recently, taekwondo has been recognized as a good way to enhance quality of life for the general population.

the most
successful
nation in
Olympic
taekwondo
history

The unique characteristics of taekwondo have made it a popular sport with an international reputation; it was adopted as an official medal sport at the Summer Olympic Games from 2000 onwards. Korea is the most successful nation in Olympic taekwondo history, having won 10 gold, two silver, and two bronze

medals. In the biennial World Taekwondo Championships, up to and including the 2013 event, Korea has won 217 medals (158 gold, 30 silver, 29 bronze), more than twice as many as the next most successful nation.



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This chapter will first provide a general overview of taekwondo, including an explanation of its meaning and offer some reasons for its global popularity. Next, historical developments of taekwondo will be described briefly. Then the various physical and psychological demands of taekwondo will be elaborated in greater detail. Finally, case studies from Korean Olympic medallists will be provided to promote understanding of the psychological perspectives involved in the performance of elite taekwondo athletes.

global
popularity

What is Taekwondo?



view video:
*What is
Taekwondo and
its history?*

Taekwondo is one word in Korean, consisting of three parts, each representing a unique meaning. Tae refers to “foot,” “leg,” or “to step on.” Kwon indicates “fist,” or “fight.” Do means the “way,” or “discipline.” Taekwondo therefore literally means “the right way of using feet and fists,” but it has inherent connotations of controlling aggression in others and keeping the peace because taekwondo also means “to put fists under control” or “to step on fists.” Hence, a more complete meaning of taekwondo is “the right way of using all parts of the body to stop fights and to help build a better and more peaceful world.”

태 권 도
Tae Kwon Do

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Why is Taekwondo so Popular?



view video:
*Taekwondo
best kicks
Beijing 2008!*

It is intriguing that people all over the world have embraced the sport of taekwondo, a Korean martial art. There are various martial art styles in other Asian countries, such as judo (Japan), wushu (China), and kalari (India), but taekwondo differs from these other martial arts in many aspects, some of which are worthy of mention. Taekwondo is dynamic physically with active movements that utilise the entire body. People are often dazzled by the attacking techniques, especially those involving high, fast foot movements, such as spin kicks.

Taekwondo emphasises the principle of alignment between mind and movement. Trainees are encouraged to make their minds peaceful and to synchronise their bodies to their minds. Taekwondo promotes a unity between body, mind, and life, by teaching trainees to bring harmony to their lives and a devotion to the society to which they belong. Trainees are taught to respect themselves and others while practicing taekwondo, on the basis that mutual respect is the foundation for building peaceful societies. In short, taekwondo helps to integrate physical, psychological, and moral principles, which appear to be at the heart of its global appeal.



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A Brief History of Taekwondo

self-defence
and the
struggle for
survival

Taekwondo has evolved over thousands of years through four different historical periods; the ancient times, middle ages, modern ages, and the present day.

Ancient Times

It is well-established that martial arts existed in ancient times for the dual purposes of self-defence and the struggle for survival. The three kingdoms of Koguryo (37 BC - 668 AD), Paekche (18 BC - 660 AD), and Silla (57 BC - 935 AD) were bitter rivals who fought each other regularly in attempts to gain hegemony over the Korean peninsula. Martial arts were an integral part of the training of military leaders and warriors engaged in these wars, and contests were held during festive days and military rituals. The origin of taekwondo can be traced back to two different styles of ancient martial arts, known as subak and taekkyon.

Middle Ages

After unifying the Korean peninsula, the Koryo dynasty (918 - 1392 AD) built strong national defence capabilities to protect against invasion from surrounding countries. Taekkyon was a compulsory element in the selection of military cadets, and soldiers who mastered taekkyon techniques were often promoted to higher ranks. Martial arts were used to prepare soldiers for hand-to-hand fighting situations but, with the advent of gunpowder and related weapons during the latter stages of the Koryo dynasty, support for martial arts waned.



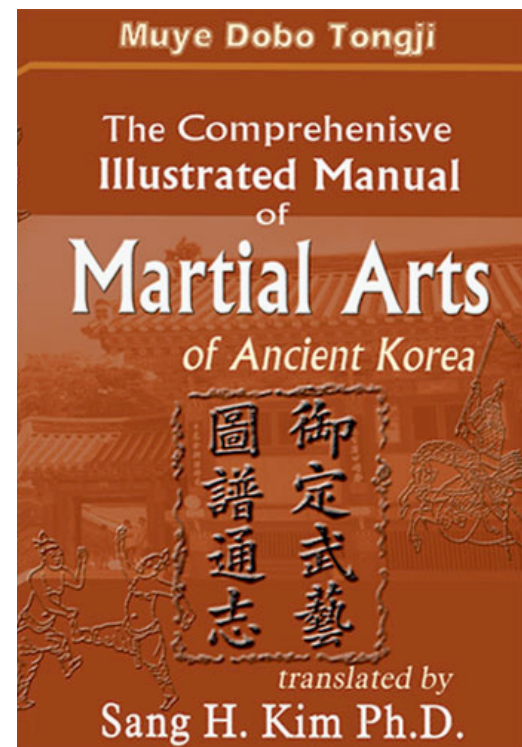
Credit: Korean Olympic Committee/flickr/CC-BY-SA-2.0

Modern Ages

royal entertainment

The Chosun dynasty (1392 - 1910), being founded on the ideology of Confucianism, placed more importance on literary arts than martial arts. Nevertheless, Taekkyon was still popular and contests were held to select soldiers and for royal entertainment. Foreign invasion during this period brought awareness of the need to revive Korean's military training, and in 1790, the *MuyeDoboTongji* (translated as *Comprehensive Illustrated Manual of Martial Arts*) was published, a version of which is still in print today (Park & Yi, 2009). The fourth volume of the book entitled *Hand-fighting Techniques* included illustration of 38 motions, which are similar to those of modern taekwondo movements.

During the period of Japanese colonial rule over Korea from 1910 - 1945, taekwondo was officially prohibited in the country, although its methods and philosophy were secretly handed down by the masters of the art until Korea was liberated after World War II.



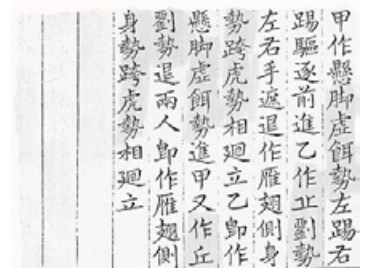
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Present Day

After liberation, the Korean people began recovering their cultural identity and self-reliance, with traditional activities resuming their popularity. Martial arts experts began opening taekwondo gymnasias all over the country and taekkyon master Song DukKi, presented a demonstration before Dr. Syngman Rhee, the first President of the Republic of Korea, on the occasion of his birthday. Subsequently, about 2,000 taekwondo masters travelled to more than 100 countries to share their knowledge of the martial art. Modern day taekwondo has eleven commandments that guide participants (see Table 1).

Table 1. Eleven Commandments of Modern Taekwondo

Loyalty to your country	Respect your parents
Faithfulness to your spouse	Loyalty to your friends
Respect your brothers and sisters	Respect your elders
Respect your teachers	Never take life unjustly
Indomitable spirit	Loyalty to your school
Finish what you begin	



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The Kukkiwon (World Taekwondo Headquarters) was established in the country's capital, Seoul in 1972 to be used as the site for various taekwondo competitions following the nomination of taekwondo as a national martial art in 1971. In 1973 the World Taekwondo Federation (WTF) was established and the biennial World Taekwondo Championships were organized. The WTF became an IOC-recognized sports federation in 1980. Taekwondo was admitted to the Asian Games as an official event in 1984, was an Olympic Games demonstration sport in Seoul in 1988 and Barcelona in 1992, and became a medal sport for the first time at the Sydney 2000 Games. The 2012 London Olympics included 128 taekwondo athletes, 16 in each of eight weight classes (four for men and four for women). Taekwondo has been confirmed for inclusion in the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro.



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Elite Taekwondo in Korea

psychological changes



view video:
Taekwondo
Korean
National Team

The Korean national team is the most successful in the history of Olympic taekwondo, although given that the sport originated in Korea this is unsurprising. However, the tag “birthplace of the sport” does not adequately explain these accomplishments. To gain a full understanding of the reasons underpinning Korea’s success in taekwondo, it is necessary to look a little deeper. It is often said that to be selected as a Korean national team member for taekwondo is almost as difficult as winning the World Championships or Olympic Games, such is the depth of talent in the country. Therefore, gaining selection to the national team signifies to athletes that they have made a significant step towards becoming the best in the world in their sport.

Being selected to the Korean national taekwondo team brings with it psychological changes for the athletes involved, typically in the form of enhanced self-esteem and a great sense of pride at becoming a national delegate in the country where taekwondo originated, which leads to increased self-confidence in international competitions. At the same time, selection to the Korean national team almost automatically provides the athlete with a significant new challenge and additional burden of expectation of becoming the best in the world.



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Complete Dedication to Taekwondo

Korean athletes who have won medals in the Olympic Games or World Championships have frequently reported that attempting to become the best taekwondo player in the world acted as a powerful motivator for them, enhancing the spirit of being “all-in.” It is expected that Korean national team delegates will make sacrifices and devote their lives only to taekwondo for lengthy periods of time, in order to achieve the goal of winning medals in major international championships. As they only get a chance to win a medal once every two or four years, many have had to commit to eight years of total dedication to taekwondo to get that chance in the Olympic Games. This complete dedication to being the best in the world compels an athlete to make every possible effort to accomplish their goal. Generally speaking, the more committed the athlete is to taekwondo the more patience and persistence the athlete shows, which is considered to be another embodiment of the spirit of being “all-in”.

make sacrifices
and devote
their lives

Government-driven System and Relentless Training

After the selection process run by the Taekwondo Association is concluded, the Korea Olympic Committee (KOC) oversees the subsequent process of preparing athletes. Working with the Taekwondo Association, the government provides intensive training camps for the national team members. In addition, the KOC governs and supports all of the administrative concerns for the athletes and coaches on the national team. The athletes and coaches lodge together with delegates from other sports in the National Training Center in Taenung, located in the eastern part of Seoul. The training is rigorous and very demanding, usually involving three sessions per day. Many athletes begin practice at 04:30 or 05:00 and almost all athletes practice late into the evening as well. All Olympic medallists have reported that they had practiced individually until late at night to overcome their weaknesses.



Objective Assessment of Taekwondo Kicks

The Korea Institute of Sport Sciences (KISS; <http://www.sports.re.kr/eng/>), a government-affiliated organization, was established in 1989 for the purpose of helping national team athletes and coaches. KISS includes a “field application system” whereby a team of researchers and support staff are assigned to particular sports. The KISS support team for taekwondo provides information for the national team members in many ways. Through their regular meetings, KISS personnel and Korean national team coaches discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the team with the aim of enhancing performance. For example, a taekwondo-specific psychological skills training program has been developed by the support team and delivered to national team members. The skills taught include concentration, motivation, imagery, confidence, anxiety regulation, goal-setting, and relaxation. Additionally, personal counselling is offered to athletes as required. Also, KISS researchers have implemented taekwondo-specific equipment that facilitates accurate and objective assessment of the speed and power of different type of taekwondo kicks.

Extrinsic Rewards

The Korean Government offers two kinds of extrinsic rewards for the national delegates, including athletes and coaches. One is in the form of monetary rewards, including permanent pensions, and the other is exemption from military service for male athletes. If an athlete wins a medal at an international competition such as the World Championships, Asian Games, or Olympic Games, a point score is awarded to that athlete according to the perceived value of medals in each competition. The point score for the athlete continues to accumulate for as long as the athlete continues to win medals in international competitions. Once an athlete reaches a certain point score set by the government, then the athlete qualifies for a life pension paid by the government. The same points system applies to national coaches as well. In addition, the sport association, the company, or the team to which the athlete belongs also provides the athlete with a financial bonus (see Han, Kim, & Hong, 2014).



Although North and South Korea used to be one nation, they were divided into separate countries after the Korean War (1950 - 1953). The Republic of Korea (South Korea) is a democratic country, and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) is a communist country. They are in a quasi-state of war, remain heavily-fortified, and often confront each other. As a result of this situation, South Korea requires all Korean men to complete a mandatory two years of military service (the mandatory period is seven years in North Korea). However, if a male athlete

wins a medal at the Olympic Games, he is exempted from military service apart from the basic training. Therefore Korean male athletes have an additional motivation to win medals, especially at the Olympic Games. According to the Korean National Training Center records, more than 1,100 national athletes were granted this privilege up to the 2012 London Olympics. Ironically, this incentive can have a negative effect on the intrinsic motivation of athletes, and there are many examples of taekwondo players who made great efforts to win Olympic medals, but subsequently lost interest in the sport afterwards.

Prevalence of Taekwondo in Korean Society



Involvement in taekwondo is extremely widespread in Korea. Most children are raised under the influence of taekwondo as part of their general education. Almost all Korean men participate in taekwondo from childhood to their twenties, including during their military service period. In the military, all soldiers are expected to reach to the Cho-Dan (first grade of black belt) for the purpose of national defence. There are a huge number of taekwondo gymnasias all over the country with trainees of both

genders and across the age span. The rate of female participation in taekwondo has increased significantly in recent years. In addition, taekwondo has evolved from an elite sport to a sport for all, awakening the physical, psychological, and moral influences mentioned earlier. Taekwondo has penetrated deep into the Korean psyche, not only as a beloved elite sport in international games and a source of much national pride, but also as a friendly sport in the everyday lives of Korean people.



view video:
*Taekwondo
Korean kids*

Access to Coaching

In Korea, young people who show promise in taekwondo can readily gain access to be taught by excellent coaches. Their accumulated experiences and know-how are willingly handed down to the younger generation of taekwondo players. Thus, at all ages, it is not difficult to get technical or tactical advice from experienced coaches to help overcome athletes' weaknesses. These young promising athletes also have many chances to see and meet elite athletes during their training, which provides the young players with their own role models of success, creating a shared vision of how to become the best in the world, and planting a seed that may grow into the spirit of being "all-in".





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Accumulation of Research in Taekwondo

scientific aspects of taekwondo

Considerable research has been conducted in Korea, which has investigated various scientific aspects of taekwondo. Populations that have been studied have ranged from elite athletes to children and the elderly. The topics of investigation have included taekwondo-specific questionnaire development (e.g., Lim, 2005; Lim & Cho, 2007), physiological effects (e.g., Byeon, Kwon, & Park, 2008; Kim, Stebbins, Chai, & Song, 2011), nutritional considerations (e.g., Lee, Kim, Kim, Kwon, & Kim, 2002; Shin, Kim, Park, & Park, 2010); biomechanical analysis (e.g., Ha, Choi, & Kim, 2008; Kim, Kim, & Im, 2011; Kim, Kwon, Kwon, & Yenuga, 2010; Wasik, 2011), psychological variables (e.g., Kim, Park, & Chung, 2012; Kukkiwon, 2011; Lim, 2009) and issues from an historical point of view (e.g., Kim, 2006; Kukkiwon, 2006).

The diverse findings about taekwondo that have been produced by researchers in Korea and elsewhere have provided coaches with insightful information to inform technical and tactical innovations and to assist them to devise new training ideas. For example, a study by Kwok (2012), who compared the strategies of taekwondo medallists and non-medallists at the 2010 Asian Games, showed that although roundhouse kicks were favoured by most competitors, medallists implemented push kicks, back side kicks, and reverse kicks significantly more frequently than non-medallists. The WTF and Kukkiwon have recently made efforts to collate important knowledge from the accumulated research and to deliver it to coaches by publishing it in a way that makes it easily accessible.

Lessons from Korean Olympic Champions

Given that Korean taekwondo players have won so many medals in international competition, there is great potential to learn more about the psychology of taekwondo from what they have to say. The following quotes, which are gathered together into themes, were taken from press interviews with several Korean Olympic champions.

The first theme refers to the spirit of being “all-in”, which means setting very challenging goals, making huge personal sacrifices, enduring endless repetitive practice, and showing indomitable spirit in competition.

- *I have strived to concentrate on my goal, to be the best in the world by obtaining the gold medal in the Olympic Games. In order to accomplish my goal, I trained and trained and trained from dawn to late at night. Nothing can be gotten without personal effort* (Jung JaeEun, female, 57kg gold medallist at the 2000 Sydney Olympics).
- *I have given blood and tears in my Olympic Games endeavour. I don't think anyone in the world sweated more than I did for four years ... and I think my efforts were rewarded* (Lee SunHee, female, 67kg gold medallist at the 2000 Sydney Olympics).
- *I have devoted and placed my passion, effort, and everything into taekwondo. It took me eight years to stand at the top of the Olympic victory stand. Looking back on those days, I am overwhelmed with emotion* (Moon DaeSung, male, 80kg, gold medallist at the 2004 Athens Olympics).



Credit: Renano/Wikimedia Commons/CC-BY-SA-3.0



view video:
2004 Olympic
Taekwondo

The development of appropriate competition strategies includes analysing the strengths and weaknesses of opponents and oneself to prepare fully for future competitions. The planned competition strategies are rehearsed and reinforced via extensive physical and mental practice.

- *I have especially focused my efforts on making up for my weak points. Emphases were on 1) doing weight training for the development of physical fitness, 2) analysing possible opponents' strengths and weaknesses, and 3) developing counter attack skills against possible opponents' patterns (Jung JaeEun, female, 57kg gold medallist at the 2000 Sydney Olympics).*
- *For this Olympic Games I have focused on strengthening my strong point (right spin-kick). I practiced over 800 times of Balchagi (kicking) a day. I thought that this kind of repetitive practice of basic skills would decide the destination of the gold medal. And this thought was proven to be true (Jang JiWon, female, 57kg, gold medallist at the 2004 Athens Olympics).*
- *I thought having the inside position would be the key to winning the final match, I tried to do so. And it worked perfectly (Kim KyungHun, male, 80kg, gold medallist at the 2000 Sydney Olympics).*
- *I analyzed him (my opponent) in various ways and prepared well enough to win. I coolly followed the strategies I had planned. I waited for his attack and gave counter attacks in the inside position. It worked perfectly to get the score. That was how I won against him (Son TaeJin, male, 68kg gold medallist at the 2008 Beijing Olympics).*

developing counter attack skills



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Many athletes expressed that they felt a pressing need to win a medal. Sometimes this reflected the burden of expectation from the Korean media and public, and at other times represented their sense of obligation to the coach, teammates, or others close to them. Often, after winning a medal, the athletes emphasized the importance of social support and explained the important roles that other people had played in their success as athletes.

- *I had to win desperately because the senior in my team who had been selected as a delegate had given up his position to me due to his injuries. Because the senior had given me not only technical advice, but also tremendous social support, I wanted to repay what I owed to him (Kim KyungHun, male, 80kg, gold medallist at the 2000 Sydney Olympics).*
- *I really want to express my deep gratitude to those who supported me in many ways. Especially, I thank my parents who have brought up and cared for me so far. Also, I really want to thank the coaches who have helped me overcome a 4-year slump. Without their dedication and support, I could not have achieved my dream. I really want to repay their kindness and favor out of gratitude (Jang JiWon, female, 57kg, gold medallist at the 2004 Athens Olympics).*
- *I was in a deep slump and in trouble after I had failed to be the national delegate after the final selection process for the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games. For a fairly long time I couldn't concentrate on taekwondo. My coaches and important others helped me a lot to overcome those difficulties. Thanks to their excellent advice and help, I re-challenged to become the national delegate (Moon DaeSung, male, 80kg, gold medallist at the 2004 Athens Olympics).*
- *I don't think that I got this gold medal for myself alone. Coaches not only have sacrificed their lives, but also prepared for this Olympics with me. I owe them this glory. I wanted to pay them back by winning this competition, to show what they had taught me. I think I made it (Son TaeJin, male, 68kg, gold medallist at the 2008 Beijing Olympics).*



Credit: Singapore 2010 Youth Olympic Games/flickr/CC-BY-NC-2.0



Credit: Guo Lei/flickr/CC-BY-NC 2.0



view video:
Beijing 2008
Olympic
Taekwondo
Men's 68kg
Gold Medal
Match



Medallists frequently mentioned the fighting spirit they brought with them into competition. Every player in taekwondo is exposed to critical moments of injuries and pain during competition because of the power of the kicks and punches they exchange. As a result, withdrawal from a competition due to injuries is not uncommon. Nevertheless, the Korean medallists who were injured during their competitions refused to give up. Instead, they continued to show their fighting spirit.



view video:
Hwang
hangs on to
Taekwondo
title

- *Although I was injured during the match, I risked additional injuries for the victory and overcame this difficult situation. I thought I could win against her because I might have practiced the basic skills more faithfully than she did* (Hwang KyungSeon, female, 67kg, gold medallist at the 2008 and 2012 Olympic Games).
- *When I was injured during the match I pledged to myself “to bear the pain with clenched teeth and to focus on the game not on the pain”* (Moon DaeSung, male, 80kg, gold medallist at the 2004 Athens Olympics).

Every medallist had, by virtue of becoming an Olympic champion, clearly demonstrated the ability to overcome psychological pressure, control emotions, maintain focus on the things that were important and ignore the potential distractions. Most importantly, during contests, if things were not going their way they were able to refocus on what they had to do right now.

- *Because I lost two points in the first round, I was perplexed and lost my temper. At that time, my coach advised me not to be so excited and to calm down. And he told me, “Let’s refocus and do one thing at a time” right before the second round began and it was very effective. After calming myself down, everything was better than before. As a result I won the match. Because the athlete in the final was a new face, I managed the game carefully but I was not overly tense or excited* (Jang JiWon, female, 57kg, gold medallist at the 2004 Athens Olympics).
- *Korea has obtained three gold medals in this weight category in three Olympics since taekwondo had been adopted in the Olympic Games. Therefore, every Korean thought that I would take a gold medal. That was why I was under big pressure to win. Due to this psychological pressure, I lost two points to Nicholaidis (Greece) and was behind him psychologically as well. At the start of the second round, I emptied my mind and promised to myself “to forget about the score or the result, but to attack for a big point using my kick techniques.” Using this strategy, I could focus again and find my chances. I fought back to tie the score (4-4) and thought that I could find another main chance. Eventually, I got a golden opportunity and delivered my kick 18 seconds before the match was over* (Cha DongMin, male 80kg, gold medallist at the 2008 Beijing Olympics).



Credit: Marc/flickr/CC-BY-NC-ND-2.0



view video:
South Korea
Wins Another
Gold



Credit: Texas Taekwondo/flickr/CC-BY-2.0



Many of the Olympic medallists commented on how they strived to maintain a positive belief system no matter what the circumstances. This even extended to interpreting their dreams is a positive way, especially when the dreams could be interpreted in negative ways as well. They also used this positive belief system as a way of reorganising their tactics to win.

interpreting their dreams



view video:
Lim Carries On South Korean Dominance

- *Many times before important competitions I dreamed about winning. In my dreams, I usually win first prize and it turned out to be true in most cases. I competed with the feeling that I was not alone because I had the Korean people who were cheering with all their might for me. I thank the Korean people. (Lim SuJeong, female, 57kg, gold medallist at the 2008 Beijing Olympics).*
- *In fact, I had a hard time in the final match. That is, I was ahead (2-0) against Lopez (USA), my main rival in important competitions in recent days. However, I was under severe pressure to win this bout, which resulted in extremely high tension and competitive anxiety. I lost my focus and Lopez got two points in a row. Thinking of what she (Lim) said in my dream, I refocused again on what I had to do in the match. An automatic and momentary kick using my right leg hit his upper body and got one point two seconds before the bout was over. This was the deciding gold medal kick. It was so dramatic that it still hasn't hit me yet (Son TaeJin, male, 68kg, gold medallist at the 2008 Beijing Olympics).*



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Summary

a collaborative supportive environment

Taekwondo is Korea's national sport loved not only by Koreans but also by large numbers of people around the world. Taekwondo has global popularity because of the technical expertise and the unique unification of body and mind. Since 2000 when taekwondo was adopted as an Olympic sport, Korean athletes have earned 10 gold, two silver, and two bronze medals.

The highlight was four gold medals (two weight classes each for males and females) in the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. This success in taekwondo is in part related to the fact that Korea is the birthplace of taekwondo, where it has been practiced for thousands of years. Additional contributors to that success are the players' complete dedication, a government-initiated rigorous training system, extrinsic rewards, a collaborative supportive environment, excellent coaches, and accumulated research.

The quotes from the Korean Olympic taekwondo champions suggest that these athletes show many positive psychological characteristics, including the capacity to endure endless hard training, persistent efforts motivated by an "all-in" spirit, development of proper competition plans, a keen sense of obligation, a feeling of gratitude to those who help them, a fighting spirit in the face of injury and adversity, the ability to overcome psychological pressure, control emotions and remain focused, and the maintenance of a positive belief system.



view video:
*The Pressure
Is On*

Although Korea has historically dominated Olympic taekwondo it is uncertain whether this can be maintained given that numerous countries in the world have been copying Korean techniques and training systems. Furthermore, many countries have been scrambling to invite excellent Korean coaches to train their athletes.

The technical gap between Korea and other countries has been narrowed, which is why the Korean taekwondo coaches feel the pressure to produce more excellent results at the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro. Some of the coaches even paint a gloomy picture of the possibility of no medals. The improvement of taekwondo knowledge and skills in other countries will challenge the ability of the Korean taekwondo team to maintain their history of superiority. That dominance is already in question with Korea winning only one gold medal in taekwondo at the 2012 Olympic Games after having produced four Olympic champions in 2008.

positive psychological characteristics



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VIDEOS

page		
3	What is Taekwondo and his history?	www.youtube.com/watch?v=YXZTBLcg_WU
3	Taekwondo best kicks Beijing 2008!	www.youtube.com/watch?v=VQV_OvD7bhM
9	Taekwondo Korean kids	www.youtube.com/watch?v=gWs-1zqirXc
10	Taekwondo Korean National Team	www.youtube.com/watch?v=7-cjzfkMUhl
11	2004 Olympic Heavyweight final Taekwondo	www.youtube.com/watch?v=vgB2ptH5lk
13	Beijing 2008 Olympic Taekwondo Men's 68kg Gold Medal Match	www.olympic.org/video/olympic-taekwondo-gold-medal-68kg-final-beijing-2008
14	Hwang hangs on to Taekwondo title	www.olympic.org/videos/hwang-hangs-on-to-taekwondo-title
14	South Korea Wins Another Gold	www.olympic.org/videos/south-korea-wins-another-gold
15	Lim Carries On South Korean Dominance	www.olympic.org/videos/lim-carries-on-south-korean-dominance
16	The Pressure Is On	www.youtube.com/watch?v=mmQzs5hxR9E

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