

# Sports in Korea

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Korea

Unlike sports in many European countries, Korean sports do not have their roots in a club system. For youth the schools are the primary area for their physical activities and students can experience and learn various sports throughout their school life. Schools, however, merely provide Physical Education classes and extracurricular physical activities. After graduation, Koreans have even less opportunities to become involved in sports and accordingly 67 per cent of Koreans do not participate in any kind of sports. Those who want to participate in sports either attend a private sports centre or join a Korean style sports club called 'Dong Ho In'.

By Ahn Min-Seok

In contrast to school sports and community sports, which are on the developing stage, so-called elite sports have demonstrated a remarkable record at the world level over the past twenty years. These results have been fostered by successive governments maintaining an elite sports oriented policy. Illustrative of this is the fact that athletes who win a medal at the international level, such as the Olympics, are assured of a lifetime pension. The Korean Sports Promotion Law states that athletes winning Olympic gold are granted one million Korean won, which is equivalent to approximately USD 800.

A major distinctive feature of Korean sports is an elite-dominant paradigm. Grassroots sports have clearly suffered

from the serious imbalance in comparison with elite sports in terms of the number of athletes allotted for various competitions. By means of the central government's sports promotion fund elite sports and grassroots sports have respectively been granted USD 0.9 billion and USD 0.5 billion, during the period 1998-2002.

Four major reasons can be found for elite sports to have dominated the public sector in Korea. First of all, a high value is placed on receiving international prestige through sports. As Korea is not well known and as international sports enjoy high visibility, sportive victories over other countries are a good means to gain worldwide recognition. Second, sports are believed to further the desired sense of national unity. Under the military regime, sports

played a complimentary and supportive role to integrate people. The competition of athletes can provide temporary emotional surges of national unity. It was the military regime then, which created the Foundation of Professional Baseball in 1982. Third, elite sports are used for propaganda and for ideological purposes. Sport results were often interpreted as the outcome of a competition between political rather than athletic adversaries. During the Cold War, competition in sports between North and South Korea was likened to 'war without weapons'. For South Korea, an athletic victory against North Korea could be interpreted as a victory of its own political and economic systems. Fourth, elite sports are suited for achievement oriented policy. While the investment for grassroots sports take a long time to be effective, elite sports bring about immediate results by means of only a reasonable budget. Thus, government financially supports national teams and athletes and accommodates them at the Olympic Training Center throughout the year. Hence also, government finds it attractive to award pensions to athletes who obtain a medal at an international competition.

These days, however, the poor conditions of sports facilities within civil society have often been criticized. For one of the most popular sports in

Korea, football, ironically, there are only a limited number of public fields available, and a club system has yet to be properly established. The total number of public gyms in Korea stands at 285, and there are only 90 public swimming pools nationwide. Whereas in Japan, 20.8 per cent of sports facilities are publicly owned, only 4 per cent of such facilities are publicly owned in Korea. As a result of the limited number of sports facilities, just 32 per cent of Koreans regularly participate in any kind of sporting activities

The 2002 World Cup is without questions an opportunity to expand and promote grassroots sports including football to improve the quality of life for Korean youth and citizens. The development of grassroots sports is one of the most central significant changes for Koreans that the World Cup potentially will bring into civil society. Unfortunately, the elite sports paradigm still dominates, perpetuating the status quo. The number of youth football teams may have grown slightly since 1996, the number of spectators going to professional matches has not seen a significant increase. The 2002 World Cup seems to have failed to reform the Korean football system in advance. While hosting the World Cup, Korean football has thus lost an excellent opportunity to improve the underdeveloped football structure.

On the other hand, the rapid increase of the number of 'Dong Ho In' over the last few years evidently indicates that the Korean football boom has just started. In addition, professional teams have begun to support youth teams last year, and the football lottery has been intro-



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duced in 2001. Ten new stadiums will contribute to developing football culture in spite of concerns regarding stadium remaining idle after the World Cup. Had Korea not hosted the World Cup, these things could not even have been imagined.

In conclusion, elite sports clearly maintain their dominance over grassroots sports in spite of Korea co-hosting the 2002 World Cup, and the country has lost a golden opportunity to introduce an advanced football culture based on a club system. But, as Korean football may well change after the World Cup, an evaluation on how the event influences Korean football and other sports should definitely be evaluated in the long term.

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Also in Korea, basketball has proved increasingly popular, particularly among young urban Koreans.

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