

KOREAN SPORTS IN THE 1980S AND THE SEOUL OLYMPIC GAMES OF 1988

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*“Our national sense of confidence and advanced national consciousness, given the success of the Olympics, pose on us a new challenge and obligation that we should fulfill[,] the tusk of joining the advanced nations and achieving full democracy in the country.”*¹ RohTae-Woo, President of South Korea.

In the drama of the Seoul Olympics, South Korea² became both actor and stage in not only the event itself but more in a drive on the part of the city of Seoul to host the Games. Not many people expected that Seoul would become the venue of the 1988 Olympics. Even after the International Olympic Committee (IOC) awarded the Games to Seoul, many people believed that South Korea would not be an effective host of the world’s biggest sporting event.³ The awarding of the Games’ venue to Seoul was made despite fears that the Games might be marred by unfortunate incidents in the tension-ridden, divided country. The Games were awarded in the wake of a staged military coup led by General Chun and only fifteen months after the tragic and bloody Kwangju pro-democracy uprising of May 1980.⁴ Moreover, the nation was continually confronted with the dangerous relations between itself and North Korea with intermittent bursts of violence. Although South Korea had grown to become a modern industrial nation out of the ashes of the Korean War almost three decades before, no one could tell what Korea would be like in another seven years when the Games would be held.

The timing virtually ensured that the success or failure of the 24th Olympic Games would be inextricably linked to political change in Korea. As many scholars have pointed out, South Koreans believed the Olympics were tainted from the beginning by an association with the Chun regime.⁵

According to Richard W. Pound, vice-president of the IOC, the decision to award the Olympic Games to Seoul was considered: “at best as risky and at worst as recklessly foolhardy, depending on one’s degree of optimism and place on the political spectrum.”⁶

The South Korean military government made the Olympics its top priority. The Chun government poured more than three billion dollars into the Olympics and relative projects. Hosting the Olympic Games was a big gamble for the unpracticed new military government under

President Chun, but the government was continually involved in other sport events. Two months after the IOC decision, the Asian Games Federation also chose Seoul as the venue for the 10th Asian Games in 1986.⁷ At the end of the same year, the Chun government ordered the creation of a professional baseball league.⁸ It was the beginning of a new era in South Korea, understood by the Koreans as the “Sport Republic”.

What did the “Sport Republic” mean for the Chun government, and why did the Chun government place sports enterprises as the nation’s top priority? Various sports enterprises were important for South Korea’s international relations as well as internal politics in the 1980s. Internationally, the Seoul Olympic Games and the Seoul Asian Games proved South Korea, an adherent of capitalism, chances to prove its achievements and national well being. The Chun government presumed that such international athletic events would make the Chun regime legitimate in the eyes of both the people of Korea and the international community. Internally, international sport events clearly emphasized nationalism - nationalism and national unity grounded in traditional Korean loyalty and patriotism. Therefore, sports events, especially the Seoul Olympic Games, could be a decisive factor in the resolution of long-term political tensions. Chun believed that hosting successful world sport events could bestow prestige and enhance his authority to govern. Under such circumstances, fashionable sport entertainment rapidly affected people’s lives in South Korea. People loved to have a new professional baseball league and to show pride by hosting prestigious world sport events. Yet, sometimes, they watched baseball games in the stadium with tears in their eyes because policemen, to obstruct student demonstrations outside the stadium, shot tear gas. South Koreans also had to pay heavy taxes to prepare for hosting world sport events. However, sports were one of the typical topics of South Koreans during the Chun regime-the Sport Republic.

To accomplish its objectives, the Chun government had to overcome many difficulties. There were major problems in relation to the Seoul Olympic Games. First, North Korea, jealous of the positive international attention the South Koreans had received because they were hosting the Asian Games and the Olympics, might resort to military action,

either overt or covert. Second, the 37 National Olympic Committees that did not have diplomatic relations with South Korea, including the Soviet Union and China, might boycott the Olympics, perhaps out of solidarity with North Korea. Third, the promised “first peaceful transition of power in South Korea’s history,” was scheduled to occur early in 1988 shortly before the Olympics. There were, however, possibilities of inciting rioting in the streets, martial law, and even a military coup. As IOC president Samaranch stated: “If there is no stability, there will be no Games”.⁹

Part of the instability the South Korean government faced was the potential Olympic boycott from communist countries. Immediately after the IOC’s Seoul selection, North Korea objected to holding the Olympics in Seoul. North Korea argued that Seoul, the capital city of South Korea, was not an appropriate site for the 1988 Olympic Games because of its uncertain internal and international problems. North Korea’s protests, however, attracted little attention from its allies. Although most communist countries originally opposed the IOC’s Seoul selection, they did not give serious attention to North Korea’s protest. The situation was different from the Soviet Union and its allies boycotting of the 1984 Los Angeles Games. The world already experienced two major Olympic boycotts in the two previous Games, and since most communist countries did not have diplomatic relationships with South Korea, no one would guarantee participation for the 1988 Olympics. Moreover, the Soviet Union began to protest the Seoul Games actively following the Soviets’ shooting down of a South Korean airliner in September 1983, killing 269 people.¹⁰ The Soviets would not favor sending its athletes to anti-communist country, South Korea, in which serious anti-Soviet demonstrations were going on. Yet, by late 1984, the IOC’s firm support for the Seoul Olympics and the detente of international political situation prevailed over the potential boycott of the Seoul Games. At the annual meeting of the Association of National Olympic Committees in Mexico City following the Los Angeles Games, a declaration was adopted urging all members to participate in the 1988 Olympics.¹¹

No member of ANOC spoke against the declaration, not even North Korea. At an Extraordinary Session of the IOC in 1984, the IOC formally reiterated its selection of Seoul for the 1988 Olympics.¹²

Having failed to persuade the IOC to change the venue of the 1988 Olympics, North Korea adopted a new tack. North Korea proposed that the 1988 Olympics be divided between Seoul and Pyongyang, each hosting half of the events, and that the two Koreas field a single team. The IOC felt the need to intervene, setting the stage for a series of three-way meetings among representatives of the IOC and the NOC’s of the two Koreas, to negotiate an agreement on

the issue of Pyongyang’s participation in the Seoul Olympics. The North Korean proposal featured North and South Korea serving as joint hosts of the Olympiad, while the Games would be labeled the Chosun or Pyongyang-Seoul Olympics. The North Korean proposal also maintained that North Korea should be allowed to host the same number of Olympic sports as South Korea, that the organizing committee should be jointly formed, and that the revenue from the sale of TV rights should be divided by the two Koreas. The IOC and South Korea rejected the North Korea’s proposal. Yet, to guarantee the Games’ success, the IOC proposed that North Korea be allowed to host all or part of five Olympic sports - archery, table tennis, women’s volleyball, a preliminary round of the soccer competition, and the men’s individual cycling road race. North Korea agreed in principle to accept the IOC proposal in the third inter-Korean sports talks in June 1986 but reverted to its former position in the fourth talks in July 1987, demanding the right to host more sports. IOC President Juan Antonio Samaranch, who said the IOC had made its final offer, asked both Koreas to respond before September 17, 1987, one year before the opening of the Games. The Seoul Olympic Organizing Committee announced it would accept the IOC offer. Pyongyang, however, rejected the proposal and refused to allow IOC officials to travel from Pyongyang to Seoul via Panmunjon, the truce village in the demilitarized zone dividing the Korean peninsula.

North Korea’s refusal indicated that free travel by the Olympic Family to and from the two Koreas would be impossible during the Olympic period. Failing to be made co-host in early January 1988, North Korea decided to boycott the Seoul Olympics.¹³

As the Olympics approached, the whole question of elections and constitutional reform became more and more urgent, with the political opposition pushing for democratic reform prior to the Seoul Olympics and the ruling party favoring the existing system or some variation of it.

On April 13, 1987, President Chun, in a nationwide television address, announced plans to suspend the debate over constitutional reform until after the Olympics. His announcement sparked weeks of protests in the streets of Seoul and in dozens of other South Korean cities, in which growing numbers of citizens joined with students and other opposition forces. The most violent student demonstrations in Korean history broke out, and the general public also strongly disapproved of the decision.¹⁴ It was hard to say with absolute confidence that the country would not be embattled, or even under martial law at Olympic time. Yet, such political chaos calmed down after Roh’s famous June 29 Declaration. Roh Tae-Woo, Chun’s hand-picked successor, announced that all protesters’ demands would be implemented, including political freedom, relaxed press

curbs, and direct popular Presidential election. The declaration broke the logjam and opened the way for a successful hosting of the Olympics - but not completely.¹⁵

After North Korea decided not to participate in the Seoul Olympics, South Korean students and dissidents demanded the co-hosting of the Olympic Games. By May 1988, less than a half-year before the Games, the anti-Olympic demonstrations reached their climax. Yet, the demonstrations did not advance farther because the masses of South Koreans were justifiably proud of the rapid progress they had made in social and economic development and wanted the Games to take place in a stable political environment befitting their other national accomplishments. Most of the people did not want anything to disturb the Seoul Olympics, and the student protests alternatively lacked the necessary support of the South Korean population.

The Games of the XXIVth Olympiad began September 17, 1988 with impressive Opening Ceremonies at the Seoul Olympic Stadium. The Games were the result of seven years and five months of preparations. The Games turned out to be a great success for the IOC and South Korea. Although there were fears of terrorism and a boycott, and there were disputes and divergence on whether it was wise to hold the Olympics in a divided country in the preceding years, the Games were held with resounding success. In spite of different ideologies and political systems, the Olympics had brought together the top athletes from 160 countries and regions to compete under the Seoul Olympic motto of "harmony and progress." South Korea failed to have harmony and progress with the most important neighbour and people - North Korea. North Korea remained out of the 1988 Olympic Games although most of its allies participated in the Games. Despite the lack of cooperation between North and South Korea, more athletes and countries competed than at any previous Olympics. The Seoul Games were also one of the best organized Olympics with excellent facilities. This vindicated the South Korea's confidence in its ability to host the Games successfully.

NOTES:

- 1) Roh Tae-Woo, as quoted in Foreign Broadcast Information Service - East Asia (F.B.I.S.-EAS), 7 November 1988, p.24.
- 2) Republic of Korea is South Korea's official name. I am using South Korea as distinguished from Democratic People's Republic of Korea or North Korea.
- 3) IOC sportdirector, Walter Tröger, said: "Everybody was aware of the fact that an Olympics in Seoul would present many problems, but since nobody believed Seoul would win, there was no opposition." Walter Tröger, as quoted in William O. Johnson, "A Rich Harvest From A Sea of Trouble," *Sport Illustrated*, 24 December 1987, p.63.

4) It was difficult to identify incidents in other nations that were exactly analogous to Kwangju, but Beijing's Tiananmen Square massacre is probably the closest. During the 1980's, the Kwangju massacre had become a central reality of South Korea's politics and a principal source of contention between the government and opposition groups during the years leading up to the Seoul Olympics. The Kwangju uprising also became a symbol and rallying cry that was inextricably related to the question of democratization, which, in the Korean context, meant ridding the government of military influence. Larson and Park, *Global Television and the Politics of the Seoul Olympics*, p. 160. For more detailed information of the Kwangju pro-democracy uprising, see Donald N. Clark, *The Kwangju Uprising: Shadows over the Regime in South Korea*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1988).

5) Pound, Larson, and other scholars also believe that the Seoul Olympics were associated with Chun's regime. James F. Larson and Park Heung-Soo, *Global Television and the Politics of the Seoul Olympics*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), Passim, Christopher R. Hill, *Olympic Politics: Athens to Atlanta 1896-1996*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), Chapter 8; Richard W. Pound, *Five Rings Over Korea: The Secret Negotiations Behind the 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul*, (Boston: Little, Brown, 1994), pp.47-49; and Martin B. Vinokur, *More than a Game: Sports and Politics*, (New York: Greenwood, 1988), pp.127-130.

6) Pound: *Five Rings Over Korea*, p.xi.

7) *Korea Herald*, 27 November 1981, p.1.

8) *Ibid.*, 12 December 1981, p.7.

9) As quoted in David Miller, *Olympic Revolution*, (London: Pavilion, 1992), p.138.

10) *Los Angeles Times*, 1 September 1983, p.I 1.

11) Minutes of the 89th Session of the IOC, Lausanne, 1-2 December 1984, pp.39-40, from Richard Pound Collection.

12) *Olympic Review*, No. 207, January 1985, p.12.

13) For more details on the Lausanne Sports Talks, see Korea National Unification Board, *A White Paper on South-North Dialogue in Korea: 1988*, (Seoul: National Unification Board, 1988) pp.307-327.

14) Han Sung-Joo, "South Korea in 1987: The Politics of Democratization," *Asian Survey*, Vol.28, No.1, January 1988, pp.53-54 and Richard W. Wilson, "Wellsprings of Discontent: Sources of Dissent in South Korean Student Values," *Asian Survey*, Vol.28, No.10, October 1988, p.1066.

15) The June 29 Declaration was an important turning point of South Korean history not only politically but also sport. For more details on the June 29 Declaration, see James Cotton, *Korea under Roh Tae-Woo: Democratization, Northern Policy and Inter-Korean Relation*, (Australia, St. Leonards: Allen & Unwin Pty, 1993), Part I, pp.1-92.
