

The KEI Exchange

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Can I Play, Too? Korean Athletes in U.S. Sports Jim Paek, the First Korean to Hoist the Stanley Cup

by Arthur N. Taylor (at@keia.org)

For the over 1.5 million Korean-Americans living in the United States today, what part do sports play in the American experience? For that matter, what role do sports have in Korean culture? This article will begin the examination of the contributions and achievements of Korean-born and Korean-American athletes who have made great strides in U.S. sports, utilizing the case of a Korea-born hockey player, and explore why participation might not be as prevalent as among other cultures.

Koreans and Korean-Americans are often stereotyped in the United States as avoiding sports in favor of academic and/or musical pursuits. On the other hand, South Korea placed seventh in overall ranking in both the 2006 Winter Olympics and 2008 Summer Olympics. In fact, in the past two decades, South Korea has almost always been ranked in the top 10 after all the medals have been counted.

In the sport of hockey, however, economics, regional considerations, and physical characteristics all might have some bearing on the lack of Korean players. To date, there have only been two Korean-born players in the National Hockey League (NHL). Furthermore, if Korea wants to

be more involved in sports on the global level, what can it do to increase its presence? One answer, according to the NHL's first ethnic Korean player, Jim Paek, is to invest more.

Jim Paek was born April 7, 1967 in Seoul. Less than a year later, his family emigrated to Toronto. The reason, according to Paek, was that his father was seeking a better opportunity for his family, escaping the rule of martial law at the time in Korea. He had a job offer in the medical industry in Canada and thought this would be a better climate in which to provide for his children. Such is the rationale for many a Korean who emigrated to North America.

Growing up in Canada meant that young Paek was constantly surrounded by the sport of hockey. He was far too young to remember the climate in Korea, where hockey was not popular. Even his brother picked up the pastime and played while growing up, which further sparked Paek's interest in the game.

One of the greatest constraints on aspiring hockey players, however, is the economic aspect therein. Hockey practice and equipment cost quite a lot of money for skates, sticks, protective ware, and

The author would like to thank Jim Paek for agreeing to be interviewed for this article. The complete transcript of this interview can be found at: <http://www.keia.org/Publications/Exchange/PaekInterview.pdf>

pucks, and for rental time for the ice rink and membership in a league/team. Still, Paek was undaunted and grew more and more to love this endeavor.

As a child, it is difficult to practice the sport, let alone play any games, without someone to sponsor your efforts. Fortunately for him, his parents were very supportive in this measure. He fondly recalled how they were his biggest fans and the main supporters that kept him playing the game.

When I was sixteen years old, I played Junior Hockey. I had 101 games [per season], and my mother went to 100; she missed one of them because she was snowed out of Sault St. Marie. That's the type of support I had. Growing up, my dad woke up at five in the morning to take me to practice in downtown Toronto. Plus, my siblings sacrificed; my little sister would come along. My parents never went on vacation. Our 'vacation' was a hockey tournament at a rink. That's the kind of sacrifices they made for [their] children. Hockey [is] not a cheap sport, and doing whatever it takes for you to be successful [was] unbelievable. That's what they taught their children, and I have children now myself, and their philosophy is about family.

When asked about his biggest supporters during his NHL career, he said that, “without question, it was my parents.”

Growing up, though, he was faced with some stereotypes faced by many Asian-Americans—specifically, that he was more adept at academics than athletics. This was not unfounded in the Paek household, as his parents still drove him to achieve high marks in school. To this day, he stated, when he talks to his father on the phone, he still has to hear, “When are you going to get your degree?” Paek went on to say:

I have two brothers and three sisters. [There are] six of us, and they're all very

successful; my parents have done a great job raising us. You look at my sister, she's a top-rate surgeon in Toronto; my brother's a national manager of a pharmaceutical company; and my little sister, she's a lawyer in the medical field. They've done very well, and with all that support and guidance from [our parents]; I think their children have turned out pretty good.

There were also the stereotypes and slanders that are sometimes seen on the field of play in some sports. Whether racially motivated or purely ignorant, both players and fans have been known to be xenophobic to players who do not fit the norm of their particular sport. In Paek's case, however, this facet was nearly non-existent; still, there were isolated incidents from time to time.

Paek replied to a question about feelings of uneasiness or being viewed as an outcast thusly:

That's a tough question. In a sense, as an individual, I always looked at [these incidents] as 'water off a duck's back.' The more you make out of it, the more of an issue it is. You put that all aside and you go on being the best you can be, and try to beat them with your skill. That was my whole attitude: 'whatever you think, that's fine, but I just scored a goal, how's that?' There were times that you have to stand up for yourself... and then they stop. But the more I made an issue out of it, the more of an issue there was, so I just left it alone, and worked even harder.

After a follow-up question regarding experiencing any hostilities on the ice, or in the arena, he stated:

Oh sure, but, not so much from the players. The players are very professional. [But,] I remember going to these small little towns my first year in the Minors, and the racial slurs that come from the fans; it's kind of sad. An incident that happened in one of

these small towns, my brother came to visit, and my brother's a monster. An altercation breaks out, and that was the end of it.

Despite these minor incidents, there was not a great deal of ethnic prejudice or bigotry in Paek's experience. For his own fans, he admits that scoring and winning are great offsets to criticism. Overall, though, he did not feel as if he was subject to more discrimination due to his ethnicity. What mattered most to the players, coaches, and spectators was how well one played during a game and not the player's country of origin.

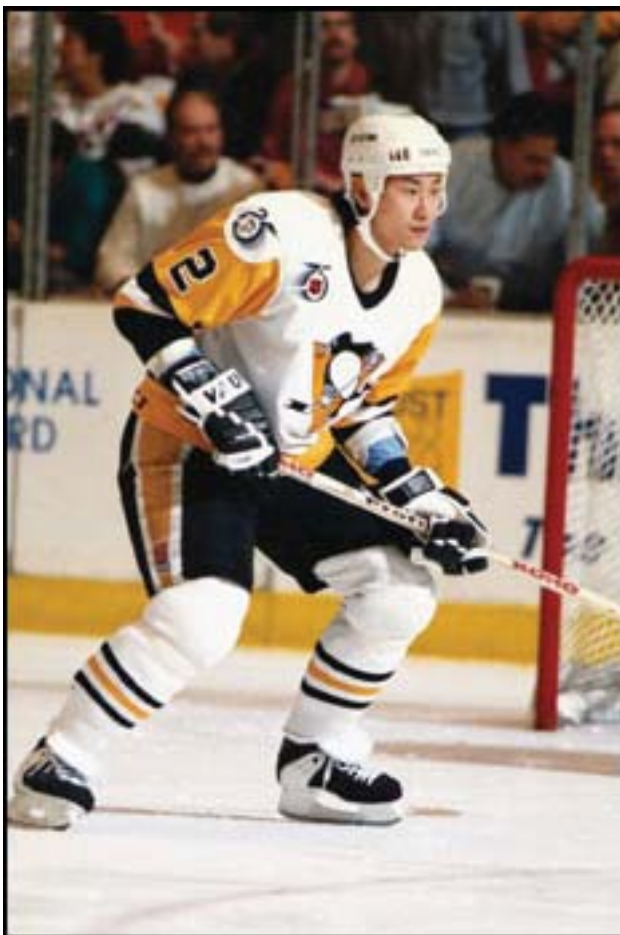


Photo courtesy of Jim Paek

Paek did not experience success immediately, though. After being drafted in 1985 by the Pittsburgh Penguins of the NHL, he spent the next five seasons playing on various minor league teams. In fact, it was not until 1991 that he played in his first NHL game. As luck would have it, though, he

joined at a very opportune time, as the team would go on to win the sport's highest honor, the Stanley Cup, that year. Success stayed with him in the following season, as Pittsburgh repeated this feat, winning back-to-back NHL championships during Paek's first two years in the league.



Photo courtesy of Jim Paek

As is the custom when a team wins this tournament, each player who played with the team throughout the course of the season has his name inscribed on one of the rings of the cup. Jim Paek's name is on this trophy twice; he is the first (and, thus far, only) Korean-born player to have had this honor. For this reason, and for his achievements in the sport, he was inducted into the Hockey Hall of Fame.

Did he even notice at the time how momentous an achievement this was? Were his heritage and the fact that he was the first ever Korean-born player in the NHL something that stood out to him at the time? Apparently, he hardly noticed.

I was very honored and proud, but at the same time I was proud to make the NHL as a hockey player. You work hard because you love the sport, and being Korean, that's a bonus. But, all that blood, sweat, and tears to put into what you want to be, and finally making it, it's an unbelievable feeling. It didn't hit me for a few games, I remember the time too. I was sitting on the bench and just watching the game, and realizing 'I finally made it.' I finally made the big time in Pittsburgh... and I still get goose bumps thinking about that day.

After playing for five seasons in the NHL, Paek left the league to finish out his career with the International Hockey League (IHL), a now-defunct minor league. His tenure there, however, opened the door to the next chapter of his life: coaching hockey. He began this career while still a player and was quickly named head coach of a minor league team in Florida before joining the Detroit Red Wings' organization as an assistant coach of their American Hockey League squad, the Grand Rapids Griffins. Though actively coaching in their farm system, his involvement earned him a third Stanley Cup ring when he was called up during the team's championship season in 2008.



Photo courtesy of Jim Paek

Paek's tenure with hockey is far more global than Michigan these days. He is the inspiration for the Jim Paek Hockey League in Korea, a group that

has been expanding for seven years and is starting to gain momentum. In a country where the sport was formerly viewed as expensive and exotic, according to the *JoongAng Daily*, it is now being described as thrilling and enticing. Moreover, participants shop for their equipment at the Jim Paek Hockey shop in Yangjaedong.

Still, Paek believes there is much work to be done in order to make hockey more viable in his home country. When asked if Korea needs to invest more in its International Ice Hockey Federation organization, he replied:

Yes, especially if they want to pursue hosting the Olympics; they tried for 2010 and lost out to Vancouver. They have to do some work. They have a lot of great young talent, but need proper coaching and ideas. I haven't been [involved with them] in many years, but they need to renew. There are Korean hockey players all over the world; let's get them involved and be successful.

He also remarked on how sports in general can invigorate a country and instill nationalistic pride. He recalled seeing, when Seoul hosted the (soccer) World Cup in 2002, throngs of Koreans wearing their red jerseys and how excited the crowds were. It was, he remembered, a notable moment for every Korean, and something that would help to unite the country more frequently, were the country to invest more in its athletics.

Unfortunately, according to Paek, further efforts to bring the Olympics back to Korea will likely falter until the country does more to promote sports internally first. There simply isn't the same emphasis on athletics as in other countries, which is why, he believes, Korea will remain on the sidelines in the global sporting arena for the foreseeable future. Still, there are hopeful signs on the horizon.

The rate at which hockey, along with other sports, is picking up momentum in the country indicates that Koreans are increasingly turning to sports for

entertainment. This holds true for both audiences and players, and for both men and women. More Koreans are starting to enjoy these pastimes and train for national and global competitions.

There are more Korean-born athletes making the headlines across the globe, especially in golf in the United States. On June 7, 2009, In-Kyung Kim won the LPGA State Farm Classic over fellow-Korean Se Ri Pak, who has 24 professional golf titles of her own. South Korea currently boasts 47 active players in the LPGA Tour, the most of any country outside of the United States. Further attention to Koreans in women's professional golf was garnered due to the rise of Michelle Wie who, although yet to claim a Tour win, is often mentioned prominently in sporting news venues such as ESPN and the Golf Channel.

Jim Paek may have been the first Korean to win a Stanley Cup, but, if efforts to promote the sport in his home country are successful, he likely will not be the last. Currently, there is only one Korean in the NHL, Richard Park of the New York Islanders. There are a multitude of other breakthroughs in other sports, such as Superbowl XL's Most Valuable Player, Hines Ward, who is half-Korean.

Will this trend away from the stereotypical role of Koreans being uninvolved in athletics continue? For the time being, it would appear so. However, that will depend in part on how willing Korea is when it comes to investing, both time and money, in this particular recreation. For Jim Paek, though, it was never a question; he still performs most admirably in the game he loves so much.

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Photo courtesy of Jim Paek

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