

## Korean International Sports Stars

By Bang-Chool Kim and Sun Yong Kwon

**EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION:** South Koreans are enamored with a wide variety of sports but, perhaps even more than is the case in many countries, citizens of the ROK look upon athletes who achieve international fame not only as heroes and heroines, but also as national symbols of South Korea's vibrant culture. Our thanks to Bang-Chool Kim of Seoul National University of Education and Sun-Yong Kwon of Seoul National University for the following profiles of three internationally famous Korean athletes.



Image source: <http://www.recliner.com/images/park.jpg>.

### CHAN HO PARK

After becoming a Los Angeles Dodger in 1994, Chan Ho Park won fourteen games in 1997 and was named one of the best pitchers in Major League Baseball (MLB) that year. In 2000, Park was the Dodger's ace hurler with eighteen wins. The twenty-seven year old set a new Asian record for MLB pitchers on September 30, 2000, by pitching a two-hitter in recording his eighteenth win against the San Diego Padres. He also hit a home run

in the Dodgers 3-0 win, which was his second of the season. In 2000, "The Korean Express" was also second in the National League in games started while achieving a season total of 217 strikeouts of opposing hitters, and a sterling ERA of 3.24.

The Korean media aggressively responded to Park's great success by broadcasting all games where Park was the starting pitcher. When Chan Ho Park took the mound for the Dodgers, enthusiastic Koreans watched, even though Seoul is sixteen time zones from Southern California. For those who missed the live broadcasts, highlight clips on sports news programs on TV provided lengthy recaps. Chan Ho Park was not just a professional athlete; he was a national hero. Since his success, a number of Korean baseball stars have gone on to play in the American Major Leagues.



Image source: <http://www.seoul SISTERS.com/players/seri/pakmain.htm>.

### SE RI PAK

In golfer Se Ri Pak's 1998 rookie season, she achieved a dramatic victory at the McDonald's LPGA Championship. Pak became not just a cultural icon, but was featured in the *Time* magazine August 17, 1998, Asian edition special on South Korea's fiftieth anniversary. The weekly newsmagazine featured the LPGA rookie on its cover, superimposed on the South Korean national flag. The article about Pak, entitled "The Golfer Who Had Koreans Looking Up," depicted her as an emerging national heroine who inspired nearly eight million Koreans—seventeen percent of the population—to stay up all night watching her triumph in the US Women's Open. Pak, who was the youngest player in history to win the Open, went on to win four titles that year including two major LPGA championships. Her 1998 achievements earned her LPGA Rookie of the Year title in a landslide vote, and further accolades from *Time*, who named her one of the ten best athletes in the world for 1998.

Pak was considered by many to be the most successful athlete the nation had produced. She was the first rookie since Liselotte Neumann to win a major as her first tour victory. She went on to win three more tournaments in two months, including the US Women's Open. President Bill Clinton congratulated Pak at a White House state dinner hosted for visiting President Kim Dae-Jung. *The New York Times* described Pak as "the best product Korea can export."



Image source: <http://www.icetoice.it/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/yu-na-kim-white.jpg>

### Yu-Na Kim

Already one of the most highly recognized athletes and media stars in Korea, figure skater Yu-Na Kim's recent Vancouver Olympics gold medal has made her a household name for fans of the sport throughout the globe. Kim was the first South Korean skater who medaled and won the International Skating Union's (ISU) Junior Grand Prix series in St. Petersburg, Russia in 2006 when, as a sixteen-year-old high school student, she beat top skaters Irina Slutskaya from Russia and Mao Asada from Japan. Her gold medal was the first ever in the one-hundred-year history of Korean figure skating. Kim has won gold in the last five consecutive Grand Prix events in which she competed, including the 2006 Trophée Eric Bompard, the 2007 Cup of Russia, and the 2008 Skate America. In 2009, Kim claimed her first gold medal with a record 207.71 points at the 2009 World Figure Skating Championship in Los Angeles, breaking the women's 200-point barrier, and recording 131.59 points in the free skate, making her the first Korean figure skater to win a world title.

Kim, now a university student, commands a wide fan base and has become one of the most popular media celebrities in South Korea. Sales for a milk brand advertised by Kim have increased six-fold, and a bakery chain's new product bearing her name increased sale 3.5 times faster than competitors. Many large companies, including Kookmin Bank, have been sponsoring Kim. Hyundai Motor Company signed a two-year sponsorship contract with the star figure skater in 2008. In 2009, *Forbes Korea* named Kim South Korea's top celebrity in its "Power Celebrity 40" Special. ■

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