

KOREA CHAIR PLATFORM:

Kim Yu-Na and Pyeongchang

By Victor Cha

The best thing about South Korea's performance in the recently-concluded Winter Olympics in Vancouver, Canada was not the unparalleled performance of Kim Yu-Na. Of course, her flawless displays of grace and strength demonstrated how an athlete's perfect performance approximates artistry more than sport, but the significant and more consequential result was South Korea's overall medal performance. It finished seventh in the overall medal count, which is quite respectable. But more important, it finished first among Asian countries in the overall medal count. It also finished first with more gold medals (6) than China (5) and far more than Japan (0).

If South Korea competes on the global stage, why take solace in the fact that it beat out all of Asia? Because the outcome of these games should put South Korea in very good stead to achieve its long-held quest to host the next Winter Games. In my research for a book on Sport and Politics published last year by Columbia University Press, I learned that despite all the politics and persuasion that swirl around the International Olympic Committee bidding process, it really comes down to two key criteria: Logistics and performance.

By logistics, I mean that the IOC grades the candidate host city on its demonstrated capacity to host the world for two weeks of events well. This means fielding not only state-of-the-art athletic facilities, but also a transportation and telecommunications infrastructure that is climate-friendly, and a viable business model. The standard here was not the one set in Atlanta in the 1996 Summer Games which was widely judged to be a logistics nightmare. Spectators waited hours for shuttle buses. Athletes showed up late for events because of traffic nightmares.

On this score, South Korea's candidate city, Pyeongchang, should do well. In its previous two bids, it scored among the highest technical ratings in the bid process. In the competition for the 2010 games, Pyeongchang's bid actually won the first ballot of the IOC, and almost became the upset candidate to win before losing out to Vancouver. And in the bid for 2014, Pyeongchang was judged to have the best overall technical report, better than both of its competitors, Salzburg, Austria and Sochi, Russia.

The fact that South Korea came so close in the last two competitions to winning the bid was disheartening to many who worked hard on the bid committees. But these decisions are not just based on logistics, they are also based on performance. Performance is important in the sense that the host city must be representative of a country strong in winter sports. This is important not only for optics, but also for marketing purposes where the Games become a vehicle for the promotion and popularity of winter sports through the star athletes that emerge. Place like Innsbruck or Salzburg, Austria immediately conjure up images of winter sports Mecca.

On these criteria, Asia has not done well historically. The only two times the Winter Games have been hosted in Asia ever have both been in Japan in Sapporo (1964) and Nagano (1998). The latter Games were not perceived to be extraordinarily successful. There were no Asian athletes that became household names in winter sports. Yet the IOC understands that the next big growth market for winter sports is in Asia.

It is here that performances by Kim Yu-Na, Mo Tae-bum, Lee Kyu-hyuk, Lee Sang-hwa and others are significant because they demonstrate that world-class winter athletics thrive in Asia, not just on the Swiss Alps or in St. Moritz. Every little girl (and male) skater around the world wants to be Kim Yu-Na. Her name is as famous as any world class winter athlete: Jean Claude-Killy, Katarina Witt, Peggy Fleming, Shaun White and Kim Yu-Na. This should be of great help to Pyeongchang's bid.

But there is one thing that the ROK must avoid in the bid process. It must avoid again politicizing its candidacy. In my own view, this was the mistake that was made by the Roh Moo-hyun administration in the bid process for the Sochi Winter Games. Korea was actually the front runner after it had the best technical report. But then as the voting came down to the final ballot, and the political heads of Korea, Russia, and Austria descended on Guatemala, the ROK government opined about how awarding the bid to Pyeongchang could help foster Korean unification. The Governor of Kangwon province pressed the point that Pyeongchang was situated in the only province on the Korean peninsula divided between North and South. ROK officials talked about how they would seek to field a unified Korean team if they hosted the games. And then in dramatic fashion, the North Korea IOC representative declared that North Korea supported South Korea's bid, and that if Pyeongchang won, then would participate in the torch relay, would jointly train athletes, field a joint team, and hold joint opening and closing ceremonies.

Given that the Olympics movement does seek to promote political reconciliation through sport, the ROK government calculated that this would help their bid. In fact, I believe it had the opposite effect. It essentially conveyed a message to the IOC that if they did not award the Games to Pyeongchang, then they would be implicitly responsible for obstructing inter-Korean relations. I believe this sort of political leverage worked against ROK interests.

So when the IOC convenes in July 2011 in South Africa to decide on the next Winter Olympics, I presume that President Lee and the leaders of Germany (Munich candidate city) and France (Annecy candidate city) will be present. This is undeniably tough competition for Pyeongchang. But let the bid stand on its own merits and on the performances of Kim Yu-Na. Don't let it stand on North Korea.

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