

Deer Musk & Female Dominance: North Korea in the 2012 London Olympics

by Benjamin R. Young

In a matter of days, the welcome ceremony for the 2012 Olympics will commence and the games will officially begin. If past experience is any guide, world media will be mainly focusing on [the three major athletic powerhouse nations](#) of the United States, China, and Russia. However, North Korea, unlike many similarly sized smaller nations, seems hardly likely to fall under the radar of the world media during the Olympics.

The world media, specifically the U.S. media, will be highlighting the mysteriousness and secrecy of the North Korean athletes, not their athletic prowess. This phenomenon has already [started](#). In interview with Tania Branigan of *The Guardian*, B.R Myers is already lining up North Korean sports ideology with that of Nazi Germany: "In contrast to the Nazis, who considered the Aryan race not just morally and intellectually but also physically superior, North Korea claims only moral superiority," says the Dongseo University professor.

Whatever questionable racial theories they or their critics may employ, the North Korean government will still be sending 51 athletes to the 2012 Olympic Games.¹ The most likely chance for North Korean medals is in the sports of woman's soccer and weightlifting. In the 2008 games, North Korea won two gold medals in women's weightlifting and gymnastics. Before 2008, the DPRK had not won gold since 1996.



North Korea women's football team raises the trophy after winning the 2008 Asian Football Confederation (AFC) Women's Cup
Source: http://askakorean.blogspot.com/2010/07/ask-korean-news-north-korean-soccer_24.html

Pyongyang Valkyries: DPRK Women's Football | Leading up to the 2012 Olympics, controversy has surrounded the DPRK women's football team and the women's gymnastics team. [Nicknamed the "Chollima," the football squad has been suspended from the 2015 World Cup for doping.](#) Five DPRK players failed drug tests in the 2011 World Cup.² North Korean authorities blamed hormones of musk deer for the failed drug tests. The hormones were to be used to treat maladies caused by a supposed lightning strike that occurred weeks before the World Cup. Many world news outlets [broadcasted this bizarre explanation](#) to readers and viewers.

In response to the doping scandal, FIFA has banned the DPRK team from competing in the 2015 World Cup. Recently, the Australian soccer team has [publicly expressed their disapproval](#) at the IOC and FIFA for allowing the DPRK team to compete in the upcoming Olympic Games. The Australian women's football team, commonly known as "the Matildas," did not qualify for the Olympics as the DPRK grabbed the last spot in the Asian qualifying tournament in September of 2011.

The DPRK defeated Australia 1-0 in this Olympic qualifying tournament; thus the protest. Given that the World Cup had occurred just a month prior to the Australia match, it appears more than likely that the five North Korean players did have steroids in their system during these qualifying games. No drug tests were levied at this qualifying tournament, resulting in further Australian disappointment. As "Matildas" defender Thea Slatyer said, "... It does make you really upset to know that a team that has conducted this behaviour is kind of allowed to get away with not being tested."



Hyong Un Jong after winning the gold medal in the vault at the 2008 Beijing Olympics
Source: <http://perfect10.rustyparts.com/wp-content/uploads/jong1.jpg>

Jumping Through Hoops, but Whose? | There will be no redemption [of Hong Un Jong's gold medal in the vault](#) in this year's Olympics. The DPRK women's gymnasts are banned from the Games for allegations of age falsification. Hong Su Jong, a North Korean artistic gymnast, "listed three different birthdates in registering for international competitions from 2003 until this year."³ This is not the first time that the DPRK has falsified someone's age in gymnastics. Kim Gwang Suk, the gold medalist at the 1991 world championships, was listed as 15 years old for three years in a row.

This begs the question: Why do North Korean teams cheat? Certainly, it is not the individual choice of the players to take steroids or falsify their age. Could it be the immense pressure on the coaches to produce results on the international stage? Perhaps. Could the actual government be forcing these coaches to cheat? Maybe. Could it be an immense sense of patriotism and nationalism that forces both coaches and athletes to be willing to do anything in order to gain results for their nation? Most likely and if this is the case, B.R Myers explanation of North Korea's claiming of "only moral superiority" is too simplistic.

Like most issues concerning North Korea, outsiders will never know for sure and can only take educated guesses. Also, many other nations and athletes cheat in sports. This is not a new trend that the DPRK is setting. The question for all athletes can be: Why cheat when you know you might be caught. It is merely the absurd excuses, given by DPRK officials, which attracts media attention to North Korean athletic scandals.



DPRK women's national team at the 2011 World Cup

Women at Labor: On the Feminine Dominance of North Korean Sport | It is worth noting the gender imbalance concerning DPRK athletics on the international stage. North Korea has been a minor powerhouse in women's athletics while men's athletics lags behind. In May 1986, the first North Korean national women's football team came to fruition. Three to four years before the official establishment of the team, official DPRK publications snickered, "The rotten and diseased world of capitalism does not spare women from kicking a ball. Not only women's soccer, but also other former objects of criticisms such as women's judo and women's weightlifting now act as medal-winners for North Korea sports."⁴ The North Korean men's soccer team surprisingly qualified for the 2010 World Cup in South Africa. However, they lost all three of the games, including a 7-0 loss to Portugal that was shown live in North Korea. On the other hand, the women's soccer team is always a major challenger on the world stage and American soccer player, Heather O'Reilly, has called the North Korean team, "[fantastic.](#)" On July 31st, the Americans and the North Koreans will face off in London. North Korean gymnasts were known to be medal challengers and North Korean female weightlifters have a fierce rivalry with the Chinese as both Asian nations churn out strong competitors in the sport.

In 2006, Pak Hyon-Suk clinched a gold medal in the 63kg division of women's weightlifting. After winning the gold, she said, "I just kept it in my head that my Dear General's eyes would be watching over me, and that encouraged me to lift this weight. I am overjoyed by the fact that I have brought great joy to our Dear Leader." This [statement quickly gained fame in the world news](#) for its perceived "bizarreness." What did news outlets think she was going to say? To say anything other than what Pak said might have brought her and her family trouble once back in North Korea. Pak played it safe by praising Kim Jong Il.



[Chinese paid actors cheering on the 2010 North Korean men World Cup football team]
Source: <http://chinalawandpolicy.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/North-Korean-fans-007.jpg>

North Korean Football Hooligans in London? | As you watch a North Korean team/athlete compete in London, remember that a love and obsession with sports is

universal. An athletic incident in the DPRK sheds light on this fact. In 2005, the men's soccer team faced off against Iran in a World Cup qualifying match in Pyongyang. Iran won the match 2-0 and there were questionable calls given by the referees. The Pyongyang crowd responded by throwing bottles and rocks at the officials and Iranian players. After the match, crowds gathered outside the stadium and prevented the Iranian bus from leaving.⁵ Similar soccer riots occur every year throughout the football world. Like so many others around the world, many North Koreans are obsessed sports fans, prone to drunkenness and even belligerent fandom.

Most outsiders have very little idea of what a North Korean sports fan even looks like. In the 2008 Olympics and at 2010 men's World Cup, [Chinese paid actors cheered on the DPRK teams](#). It appears that this trend will be happen once again in London as there are no plans to send DPRK citizens to the games. This is a minor detail but it does question Kim Jong Un's commitment to reform and opening up, not to mention the limits of Chinese influence. If sending DPRK fans to the Olympics is seen as too risky by the government, other similar "apolitical" exchanges will also be seen as too risky.

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¹ "51 DPRK Players Qualified for the 30th Olympiad." *Korean Central News Agency*, July 4, 2012. <http://www.kcna.co.jp/item/2012/201207/news04/20120704-24ee.html>.

² "Five North Korean players test positive." *ESPN*, July 16, 2011
http://espn.go.com/sports/soccer/news/_/id/6775108/2011-women-world-cup-five-north-koreans-positive-steroids.

³ "North Korea gymnastics team banned from 2012 Olympics for age falsification." *USA Today*, November 5, 2010. http://www.usatoday.com/sports/olympics/2010-11-05-north-korea-gymnastics-ban_N.htm.

⁴ Ask A Korean!. "Ask a Korean! News: North Korean Soccer (Part II)." http://askakorean.blogspot.com/2010/07/ask-korean-news-north-korean-soccer_24.html.

⁵ Soccer: Iran wins amid riot in North Korea." *The New York Times*, March 31, 2005.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/30/sports/30iht-soccer.html>.