

*While the Olympic ideal emphasizes "Citius, Altius, Fortius" or the sport as an end in itself, political tinges of various hues have always pervaded the modern Olympic Games. DPRK athletes are right in the middle of this conflict. Those who medal can't expect a lucrative contract that would make Croesus blush, so why do they do what they do? The DPRK chose to focus in a few sports and have already acquitted themselves well. As of this writing, they have already broken World and Olympic records in their key events. The essay, which follows Benjamin Young's previous work on North Korean women at the Games ("[Deer Musk and Female Dominance](#)," an excellent piece of work which was [picked up by Gawker](#)), finishes with observations both local and universal: sport as a venue to humanize and empathize with the human condition. – Roger Cavazos, Coordinator*

## **An “Honest Mistake” and “DPRK Successes in the Olympiad”: A Midway Review of North Korean Results and Affairs in the London Games**

by Benjamin Young

Despite [a rocky start](#) to North Korea's entry in the 2012 Olympics, the DPRK (or the PRK as the International Olympic Committee has coded North Korea) has [surprised](#) many viewers. As of August 1, the nation has four medals (two gold medals in men's weightlifting, a gold in women's judo, and a bronze in men's weightlifting). This is more gold medals than the DPRK has obtained in any of the last four Olympic Games. In the medal standings, this has placed the DPRK in 11<sup>th</sup> place, one place ahead of the hosts, Great Britain.



The “Korea DPR” was pictured next to the South Korean flag on the first day of Olympic competition. The bottom picture is the shocked look of North Korean sports officials upon seeing the flag blunder.

**Not as Bad as Borat** | Despite North Korea's success in London, the major

headline regarding the DPRK has been the [flag blunder](#) before the North Korea-Colombia women's soccer match. The North Koreans had walked off the pitch in protest after witnessing the "[honest mistake](#)," as British Prime Minister David Cameron has called it. After the match, North Korean coach Sin Ui-Gun said:

"Winning the game cannot compensate this. It is a different matter. We hope there is no repeat in the next matches."

The North Koreans were not happy, and who can blame them? North Korean IOC member Ung Chang said, "Of course the people are angry. If your athlete got a gold medal and the flag of some other country was put up what happens then? Imagine the reaction." However, no flag blunder in a sports event can rival this [recent catastrophe](#) in which the official Kazakh national anthem was mistakenly replaced by the fake, rude, and highly offensive "Kazakh national anthem" from the movie, *Borat*. It does not appear, however, that the gaffe was reported in the DPRK's Korean-language media, which has been [following the Olympic successes with relish](#).



DPRK weightlifter Kim Un Guk celebrating his Olympic record.

**Chollima Style: Lifting Record-Setting Weights for "The Great Leader"** | The most stunning results have come from weightlifting. Kim Un Guk [produced an Olympic record](#) in 62kg weightlifting. After winning the gold, he said, "I want to lift up the world." Kim Un Guk later added, "Kim Jong-un is waiting for the news so I will be pleased to get the news to him. The whole country will be happy, and the father of the country will be very happy too."

Om Yun Chol was a surprising upset in the men's 56kg category as he became one

of a [“a handful”](#) of weightlifters who have lifted three times their body weight in the clean and jerk. Om was placed in the “B” group with lower ranked lifters but lifted more than any of the “A” group lifters who competed later in the day. Unlike Kim Un Guk who praised the new leader Kim Jong Un, Om Yun Chol praised the recently deceased leader Kim Jong Il instead. Om said to the Olympic News Service, “How can any man possibly lift 168kg? I believe the great Kim Jong Il looked over me.” This evokes the question: Why did one lifter praise Kim Jong Un and the other praised Kim Jong Il? Surely, it is not a major topic to debate but it is interesting to consider and may allow one to question their preferences towards the two leaders.

Meanwhile, Om's defeated Chinese counterpart was [reduced to tears, apologizing to the nation](#). (Video via *Beijing Cream*.)



North Korean player, O Hui Sun, during their match against France in which the DPRK was defeated 5-0.

**“Evil-minded Foreign Media” and Hallway Staring** | The DPRK’s accomplishments in London have not gone unnoticed at home, as KCNA released an English article titled, [“Local People Delightful at DPRK Successes in Olympiad.”](#) Kim Chon Sok, from the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications worked in a nice quote: “Some evil-minded foreign media asserted that the DPRK would take only one silver medal, but our sportspersons refuted such assertion with good results. The hostile forces had better try hard to get a correct understanding of the DPRK.”

Seemingly true to form, the “evil-minded foreign media” and “hostile forces” have responded with surprise and contempt at North Korea’s success in the Olympics. [June Thomas of Slate Magazine](#) even questioned “[h]ow on earth could athletes from a nation of starving slaves perform so well?” One can only wonder what Christopher Hitchens would say.

While a [few articles](#) have detailed North Korea’s surprising results in the Games, many articles relating to the DPRK in the Olympics have included title words

such as “[nuclear](#),” “[Cold War](#),” and “[mystery](#),” emphasizing the political import or incongruity of North Korea's participation.

During the Olympics where athletes often communicate and interact with other athletes from around the world, North Koreans [remain the greatest and often most sought after interaction](#) from athletes. The U.S. and DPRK women's football teams stayed in the same hotel prior to their game, Tuesday, but there was little interaction beyond hallway glances at one another. However even through these hallway encounters, American football players have seen a difference in North Korean behaviors from last year's World Cup in Germany.

U.S. player Megan Rapinoe, commented, “Compared to last year, they seem a lot happier. It seems like they are enjoying themselves this time, so it's nice to see. They are smiling more. If you lock onto their stare long enough, they give you one back.” Despite questioning whether staring can be considered a worthwhile cross-cultural exchange, it is good to see that the North Korean players may be “happier.” However, this is perhaps due to the team's [young age](#), rather than any significant changes at home. The majority of the North Korean team is 18 or 19 years old. The oldest player on the squad is 25 while the oldest player on the American team, [Christine Rampone](#), is 37.

The hallway encounters between the North Koreans and Americans will be ending as the North Koreans did not fare as well as hoped and will not be advancing past the group stage. They lost to France, 5-0, and the United States, 1-0. Rochester, NY native (like the present author) and star American soccer forward, Abby Wambach, commented, “From, like, a humane level, I want to know what their lives are like. And what they do for fun.” As so do many others, Abby.

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