

Interview with Lee-Kyung Chun,
Legendary Olympian, Olympic Coach, and Television Commentator

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Citizens of a country swell with pride whenever they talk about their homeland's sport legends. Such legends are recognized for not only their athletic achievements but also the contributions they have made to the whole society. Lee-Kyung Chun is considered such a legend for having elevated Korea to a global powerhouse status in winter sport. A four-time short-track gold medalist in the 1994 Lillehammer and 1998 Nagano Winter Olympic Games, Chun reigned the ice track in the 1990s. With Jong-Oh Jin (shooting) and Soonyung Kim (archery), Chun holds the most gold medals in the history of Korean Olympic sport.

Chun was only 12 years of age when she received her first nomination to the national short-track team to represent her country. At 16 she made her first Olympic debut at the 1992 Albertville Winter Olympic Games. Shortly after Chun reached the quarter-final match in the 500-m race in Albertville, she assumed the position as the leading short-track speed skater until her retirement in 1998, ending her career with numerous medals including four Olympic gold medals, NINE gold medals at the World Short Track Speed Skating Championships, four gold medals at the World Short Track Speed Skating Team Championships, two gold medals at the Winter Universiade, and one additional gold medal at the Asian Winter Games.

On her retirement, Chun commenced her activity in various fields. She began her part-time career as a commentator in 2002 and remained athletically active as a professional golfer and ice hockey player. She was nominated to the women's national ice hockey team in 2006 to participate in 2007 Asian Games, but she was unable to participate because of an injury shortly before the event. In addition, she was appointed to the Athletes' Committee of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) by the IOC's president, Jacques Rogge, in 2002, serving a 6-year term in that position.

Since 2015, Chun assumed the responsibility as the coach of Singapore's national short-track team, where she aims to develop the competitiveness of short track, as well as to promote the values of winter sport in Singapore. Within a short time span, under Chun's management, Cheyenne Goh earned her ticket to the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympic Games when she qualified for the women's 1,500-m race. Goh's success under Chun's tutelage, marked Singapore's first appearance in short track on the global stage.

In addition to Chun's participation as a coach and television commentator at the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympic Games, she acted as a symbolic figure as she carried the Olympic torch into the main stadium at the grandiose opening ceremony. During the Olympic Games, Chun stepped away for a lengthy exclusive interview for the International Journal of Sport Communication.

During her conversation with us, Chun shared stories about her life after her legendary career and various aspects of sport communication ranging from media relations to interpersonal communication.

Yoon and Gang: In the minds of many Koreans, you remain a legend in short track speed skating with the four gold medals you captured in the 1994 and 1998 Winter Olympics.

How has your life been after your retirement in 1998?

Chun: I was honored to represent my country as a national short-track skater for about 11 years, in which my life was solely focused on giving continuous effort and hard work to remain number one in the sport. Although I left the ice track at the age of 22, I still had a thirst for the next challenges I would face in my life. That's why I tested myself as a professional golfer and ice hockey player after my retirement. I wasn't as successful in these quests as in my short-track

career, but they paved my way to welcome other challenges (e.g., broadcasting, coaching, sport administration) as they came along. I believe that it was my desire to challenge myself that brought me to where I am now, a national team coach for Singapore and a commentator at the Olympics.

Yoon and Gang: It has been 3 years since you took on the responsibility of national team coach for the short track team in Singapore. How satisfying is it to you as a leader and coach to witness your team's first ever qualification and participation in the Winter Olympic Games?

Chun: Initially, our goal was to qualify for the next Winter Olympic Games in 2022, to be held in Beijing. I must admit that our participation in PyeongChang was influenced by the tremendous luck we had in the qualification stage. Thus, we cannot be satisfied. However, we hope our experience in PyeongChang will give us more experience to compete on the international level and lead to enhanced public awareness on winter sport in Singapore.

Yoon and Gang: Undoubtedly, being a coach requires a very different approach than being an athlete. What do you consider to be your coaching philosophy or your coaching method?

Chun: It is my belief that a coach must possess a firm understanding of the different types of the athletes and that understanding those differences determines the most appropriate approach for each. One certain approach may be suitable for one athlete but it cannot be the master key for everyone. Also, the coach-athlete relationship must be based on a sound flow of communication, in which the athlete needs to assume an active role. In the past, the relationship was defined by

the hierarchical nature of the communication process, where the athletes could only act passively.

Hence, this rigidity existed in the interpersonal dynamics emphasized on outcomes rather than the process needed to identify good outcomes and finding the best way to reach them accordingly. I perceive myself as an offspring of this generation. Knowing the negative aspect of this system, I aim to bring the joy back to my athletes while deemphasizing the necessity to produce results.

Yoon and Gang: In an environment where the emphasis is placed on the pure joy of sport, motivation plays an important role. What kind of strategies do you use to motivate your athletes?

Chun: Each athlete is motivated in different ways. We are prone to make the misjudgment that taking a balanced carrot-and-stick approach is the right way of arousing the maximum level of motivation. But, in the interpersonal communication between the coach and the athletes, the dynamics are much more complex. Simply, take the rewards (or carrots) as an example. There are different types of rewards that can motivate athletes. Also, each athlete possesses a different understanding of what constitutes a reward. Same is true for sticks. Thus, knowing your athletes should be the first step before deciding on which type of motivation to use.

In addition, given that short track is a record sport (e.g., beating previous personal records), setting a realistic goal that is achievable is crucial. Embracing a goal that is attainable not only stimulates motivation to excel, but it also promotes interpersonal communication that reduces the gap between the coach and athlete.

I believe that national players already have their own goals and are intrinsically highly motivated. Thus, they tend to focus on practice and set high goals for themselves because of their internal motivation, and they can achieve success without the external pressures that sometimes come from highly involved parents or coaches. There are limitations in using sticks, and oftentimes the attempts at motivation are unfair and debilitating (e.g., abusive language, unreasonable expectations). Thus, it is important for a coach to create a motivating environment where the athletes are able to realize and identify their own goals and motivations.

Yoon and Gang: In the perception of the general public, the Olympic Games provide a venue for competition to identify the best of the best. What is the best approach here? Is arousing the pure joy of participation more important than raising a world-class athlete through outcome-driven training sessions?

Chun: I think the dichotomy of emphasizing pure joy versus the results-driven approach reveals a fallacy. Of course, we need both approaches to be competitive at the international level.

However, even the most sophisticated training mechanisms must rest on the value of joy. This trend becomes more vivid when we train youth players. Certainly, a coercive environment may foster an immediate increase in performance level; however, we must be reminded that such an approach is what makes athletes act passively. In making athletes passive, coaches reduce the opportunities for internal sources of motivation, and intrinsic motivation is the most crucial factor that influences long-term performance.

Yoon and Gang: As a sports broadcaster, your vivid comments on short-track races at the Olympic Games are enjoyed by the television audience. What were the reasons to start a career as a commentator?

Chun: There wasn't any special reason. Before the 2002 Salt Lake Winter Olympics, the major broadcasting networks in Korea aimed to elevate the quality of live broadcasts. One of their initiatives was to recruit former athletes with Olympic experience. I was then offered with the opportunity to observe and deliver the exciting moments to the audience at the Olympic Games as a commentator. Over the past 16 years I have been fortunate to be a broadcaster at various major events.

Yoon and Gang: Do you think more athletes will pursue a career in media on their retirement?

Chun: Korean broadcasting networks have different strategies. Some broadcasting networks want recently retired Olympians as commentators regardless of their verbal communication skills. Their rationale for selecting such athletes is that the athletes and their accomplishments are well-preserved memories in the mind of the public. However, not being equipped with proper skills may result in a less than desirable on-air delivery of the event. Therefore, I believe that possessing good verbal communication skills that are able to translate the minute moments on the ice track into vivid and digestible expressions is the most essential quality of a sports commentator.

Yoon and Gang: For athletes (and nonathletes) who would like to enter the field of sport broadcasting, how would you advise them?

Chun: I would like to recommend making careful consideration before entering this field. In my case, my name value as a "four-time Olympic Champion" made it possible to persist as a commentator for a while. It is not easy to give a timely comment about constantly changing dynamics in the game in front of cameras. It is totally different from talking to your friends about

the game. It is also not easy to select the proper words to accurately portray the scene in front of you. Many retired Olympians are interested in working as commentators for the Olympic Games, but, many of them have given up on this pursuit after realizing that this is not an easy job. In addition, commentators are exposed to the instantaneous response of the public on social media and various websites. Thus, it is important to deal with public criticism, which may hinder your level of concentration at work.

Yoon and Gang: You have experienced both the Korean and Singaporean media in your career. Do you see any difference between the two?

Chun: I see vivid differences. For instance, the Singaporean media typically quote their interview subjects verbatim. It was surprising to me, because my English is not perfect, that my words would appear just as they were spoken. For the media in Singapore the focus is on the authenticity. On the other hand, the Korean media show their propensity to add more material to make your words more audience-friendly. The Korean approach may enhance the level of understanding when your words are delivered to the audience, but it also leads to misinterpretation, in which athletes can sometimes see differences between what they said and what was delivered.

Yoon and Gang: As a four-time Olympic gold medalist, do you think there are differences in the level of media attention you received between your first and last medals?

Chun: Yes, there was a big difference. The first two medals I won in Lillehammer in 1994, came rather as a surprise and were unexpected, so the reaction of the media was modest. However, for the last two gold-medal events, I was regarded as one of the favorites to compete for gold. Hence, the attention I received prior to the race for gold was significant. Recognizing the

difference in terms of the attention I was receiving, the only thing I was able to do was to focus on my race while trying to distance myself from the news generated by the media.

Yoon and Gang: The media landscape has witnessed a rapid evolution during the past couple decades. How have the athletes adapted themselves to this change? Where do you see the sharp contrast between the past and present in dealing with the media?

Chun: When I was active as a short track speed skater, only television and hardcopy newspaper journalists covered the Olympic Games. At that time, the athletes didn't learn how to deal with media from the perspective of the athlete. As a result, I went through many trials and errors. For example, a long time ago, when I fell during a medal race, it was really hard to give a good interview right after event. Regardless of the result, which greatly affects the emotions from the athletes' perspective, reporters asked athletes for interviews right after the contests. Because my bad performance was very stressful, maybe I looked displeased in the media. After I saw the public's negative response to my interview, I changed the way in which I participated in interviews. Some young athletes tend to reveal their feelings and others do not. I think the athletes need to find their own way regarding how to deal with the media.

Current athletes learn how to deal with media before the games through various practical assistance. For example, when they leave the dormitory to have a cup of coffee with friends, they tend not to take photos with their fans because there is high certainty that the media will cover this and make it a serious issue. This could also be an issue in which the public makes negative comments like "Why is she not focused on the game?" and the negative attention may result in a bad performance.

I think I am very fortunate to have participated in the Olympic Games when social networking sites did not exist. Athletes today need to be able to ignore or handle social-media (and traditional-media) intrusions in order to be successful at the Olympic Games. Thus, if I were to participate in the Olympic Games in today's context, I don't think I would be able to have a good performance because of the negative media reports and abusive comments in cyberspace.

Yoon and Gang: We are at the finish line of the Winter Olympic Games (Editor's note: This interview occurred during the last week of the hallmark sporting event). How would you identify the outcomes, as well as the legacies, of the 2018 PyeongChang Olympic Games?

Chun: It may be too early to make a comment on the outcomes; however, with the various stadia built for the Olympic Games we have the infrastructure necessary to develop the base for both ice and snow events. Prior to this Olympics, it was evident that many of the resources were invested in ice events, while snow events gained less attention. This imbalance can be properly addressed with the available infrastructure for both streams of winter sport. On the other end of the spectrum, the question of how to maintain the facilities in a financially manageable way remains unanswered.

I identify myself as of the generation of the '88 Seoul Olympics, which gave me the reason to embrace a future as an athlete. But, it is equally risky to assume that 2018 PyeongChang will have as much impact on Korean society as the Seoul Summer Olympics back in 1988. I believe that the role of the media is influential and has a significant impact on a country and society because the media have the power to invigorate the public through the promotion of the values found in sport. It is my belief that the duty of the media is not limited to depicting the

effervescence of the Olympics—it should also shed light on promoting participation and attention relative to winter sports.