



Dilemma in South Korea's Sport Structure: *Socio-Political Impact and Personal Ambition*

Seoul Ambition: The Story and Science of South Korea's Hyper-focused Athletes. By Joel Cressman. Ottawa: Library and Archives Canada, 2023. 232 pages. ISBN: 9781738133505.

Dongyoo HAN

Seoul Ambition: The Story and Science of South Korea's Hyper-focused Athletes, by Joel Cressman—an experienced physical education teacher and coach in South Korea—explores the country's unique sports culture and the meaning of athletic achievement. The book focuses on how South Korea, a society that is extremely academically driven, has managed to consistently produce world-class athletes in specific sports disciplines. Far from being a mere celebration of Korean sports, *Seoul Ambition* critically exposes the often-overlooked darker side behind decades of visible success, systematically identifying neglected issues with a sharp and unflinching tone.

Cressman's commentary, firmly grounded in historical facts and observable phenomena, strikes deeply, particularly for readers with a conventional Korean perspective. Cressman highlights how grassroots sports were marginalized and elite sports became excessively overemphasized or distorted. He attributes much of the blame to past political powers, arguing that the actual victims were the children deprived of the right to enjoy sports. His causal criticism, often uncomfortable to encounter, boldly exposes issues hidden within collective conformity. Although painful at times, his insights are valuable for those seeking fundamental solutions to South Korea's sports problems. Accordingly, *Seoul Ambition* may serve as a valuable scholarly resource for sports coaches and parents of aspiring

Dongyoo HAN is a professor in the Department of Sport Sciences at Hannam University.
E-mail: napoli1987@hnu.ac.kr.

athletes. It is also well-suited for use in graduate-level courses that engage in the sociocultural dimensions of sport.

The book opens with an intriguing question: Why has South Korea excelled overwhelmingly in niche individual sports, such as golf, archery, short-track speed skating, and e-sports, yet struggled to achieve comparable dominance in popular team sports, such as soccer, baseball, and basketball? Why is the sporting talent of hardworking Koreans concentrated solely on certain sports?

Cressman addresses these questions by leveraging varied historical and empirical evidence. He argues that most successful Korean athletes are products of non-voluntary, highly controlled environments, such as the military, coupled with excessive parental involvement. Furthermore, he identifies the significant influence of state-organized support and investment, as well as elite training systems reminiscent of those in the former Soviet Union and East Germany. In this regard, he provides a well-rounded discussion that integrates reasoning and evidence within broader social, cultural, and historical contexts. His arguments are presented across four primary dimensions:

1. **Practice Hours:** The closed, repetitive training methods of Korean elite sports yielded measurable success but became a liability in disciplines requiring creativity and autonomy.
2. **Investment:** Under military regimes, sports functioned as tools for regime legitimacy, leading to an entrenched elite-centered system.
3. **Community:** Behind each athlete's success stood familial sacrifice, particularly parental, rooted in South Korea's strong familist culture.
4. **Fit:** The government's "selection and concentration" strategy funneled resources into specific sports, reinforcing a hierarchy and outcome-oriented approach among different disciplines.

Cressman meticulously describes phenomena surrounding the "practice hours" and "investment" themes. He depicts young golfers in Korean indoor ranges being singularly focused on technical refinement—a

scene emblematic of South Korea's production of world-class golfers. Yet, simultaneously, he hints at a site of structured oppression where childhood freedom is sacrificed for the sake of technical perfection.

This style of learning a sport can become an exercise of endurance rather than pursuing the intrinsic joy of playing...But when this cohort of golfers did start, it was with the recognition that it would be life-consuming. (p. 22)

Cressman highlights the cultural particularities that have been overshadowed by the remarkable success of Korean women's golf. As supporting evidence, he emphasizes that, as of 2020, more than 30 of the top 100 players in the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) rankings were Korean. He contends that behind their global dominance lies a unique educational culture defined by intense parental intervention and repetitive, rote-based learning. The case of Se Ri Pak—the legendary golfer who marks the beginning of the Korean women's golf phenomenon—clearly illustrates this point. Her 25 career victories on the LPGA Tour were not achieved by talent alone. Her developmental journey, shaped by intense training under the full support of her family, encapsulates the essential characteristics of South Korea's sports training culture.

Informed by his teaching experience in South Korea, Cressman's analysis goes beyond simply listing the factors of success. It reveals the structural reasons for Korean athletes' excellence in closed-skill sports, such as golf and archery. Closed-skill sports require a high level of technical proficiency in predictable environments, where planned and repetitive practice directly translates to performance. This creates a favorable environment for Korean athletes, who are accustomed to repetitive learning. In contrast, open-skill ball sports, such as soccer, demand creativity and autonomy in dynamic situations, and the Korean training system has limitations in fostering such flexibility. Strikingly, these cultural traits are not confined to elite athletes but pervade childhood education in general. For example, while American children enjoy over 100 minutes of playtime

daily, Korean children average only 36 minutes—a disparity that impacts creativity, social development, and competitiveness in open-ended sports.

Cressman explains the two seemingly separate phenomena of why Korean women's golf has conquered the world and why Korean men's soccer has not reached the global elite. He argues that they stem from the same distorted roots of Korean sports culture. His criticism is characterized by a fundamental-level perspective: the Korean sports system has obsessively pursued winning medals on international stages, such as the Olympics. Consequently, the system has established a development model for only a very few elites.

The sustainability and self-reliance of the domestic professional league have been pushed away from the center of policy. Structural investment and innovation in recreational and amateur sports have been systematically excluded. As Cressman points out, this bias is not simply a problem of policy failure—it exposes the cultural discrimination regarding who can enjoy sports. The elite-only system has alienated the majority of the public from sports, creating a stark contrast between the sports participation rate in Korean society and the country's remarkable international athletic achievements. In other words, the system itself has encouraged spectatorship rather than participation and obedience rather than autonomy. *Seoul Ambition* exposes the fact that Korean sports have come to exist in a space that is separate from democratic culture.

Cressman explains the origin of this distorted structure in the political context of modern Korean history. He believes the Park Chung-hee regime of the 1960s and 1970s actively utilized sports as a state symbol amid external tensions, such as Japan's success at the 1964 Tokyo Olympics and competition with North Korea. Sports served as a tool for national unity, and thus, the government implemented a militaristic training system and a sports policy centered on an elite circle. These were manifested in the establishment of national training centers, military service benefits, and sports-specific talent systems, which referenced the models of the Soviet Union and East Germany. Afterward, in the 1980s, the Chun Doo-hwan regime blatantly combined these with political objectives, pushing forward

a school sports policy that emphasized control rather than education. Athletes and non-athletes were thoroughly separated, and the middle ground disappeared. In the end, South Korea became a *powerhouse* on the international stage, but sports in everyday life were locked into a distorted pyramid structure that lost its balance.

The author also argues that the entrenched culture of *victory-at-all-costs* in elite sports is reproduced precisely through such dynamics. This tendency is particularly evident in the case of Korean short-track speed skating. From an early age, young athletes learn to follow the *lineage of champions*, viewing the career paths of successful coaches as the only valid model and pursuing only proven paths to victory rather than exploring uncertain possibilities. In this process, the athlete does not become a self-directed subject but a means to achieve victory, while the coach occupies a position of absolute authority.

This pattern is further intensified within the school sports system. Cressman criticizes how an obsession with short-term results deepens in a structure where an athlete's victory is tied not only to scholarships and college admissions but also to a coach's job security. Consequently, acts of violence, abuse, and ostracism are structurally neglected within elite sports. Schools, effectively excluding academics, push student-athletes to focus entirely on training, while coaches exercise extensive control over not only practice and competition but also their future paths. Team hierarchies based on age further reinforce unequal power relations. Senior athletes dominate juniors, and juniors survive by remaining silent—a dynamic that quickly becomes normalized.

In particular, the hierarchical relationship of dominance and subordination commonly observed among senior and junior members in team sports reveals the problem's seriousness. This relationship is structurally distorted and functions as an efficient management tool for team control, through either the direct encouragement or tacit approval of coaches. Seniors, while advocating unity, order, and tradition, actually wield delegated authority to dominate the team through unilateral instructions and physical force, placing juniors in a situation where their athletic careers may be threatened if they do not comply. Such repeated oppressive hierarchies have not been resolved within

the atmosphere of Korean sports, where collectivist sentiments are deeply rooted. As a result, a culture has emerged in which unjust practices, including violence and discrimination, are continuously concealed and tolerated. In this situation, athletes themselves also gradually become desensitized to violence and coercion, coming to accept them as a natural order, thereby perpetuating a vicious cycle. Furthermore, this phenomenon has become entrenched in an environment that prioritizes achievement and outcomes, such as advancement to higher-level schools or professional teams. This is reinforced by an organizational culture in Korean elite sports where an excessively goal-oriented atmosphere and personal ambition coexist. Together, these foster a climate in which coaches, athletes, and even parents tacitly condone such practices.

Cressman suggests that this culture of silence and submission undermines the fundamental educational values of sports: autonomy, community, and human development. He observes that many student athletes are deprived of opportunities to gain experience through self-directed training in a horizontal setting. This leads them—despite possessing good potential—to becoming merely mediocre players with passive tendencies or succumbing to early retirement before even reaching their athletic prime due to excessive exploitation. In this environment, there is no space for enjoyment or fulfillment; only the burden of victory and the survival logic it generates remain. Subsequently, what appears to be the *optimal environment for winning* develops into a situation wherein true victory becomes increasingly elusive. This paradoxical reality illustrates how a form of *victory obsession*, distant from true victory, is continually produced. Additionally, this distorted elitism leads to a fundamental question: For whom does sport exist? *Seoul Ambition* indicates that all these processes are still ongoing. Even today, many sports-related policies are obsessed with elite-centered efficiency and performance indicators, and recreational sports are considered less important. The essence of the structure that Cressman denounces remains the same.

While agreeing with the author's overall argument, one may also hold different perspectives depending on the issue. This possibility serves as a thoughtful reminder of aspects the author may not have fully considered.

For one, the positive aspects of elite sports in South Korea should not be discounted entirely. Korean elite sports have, in some respects, driven the growth and expansion of recreational and amateur sports. Achievements in international sporting events have heightened social interest in grassroots sports. Moreover, the sports infrastructure and various facilities established for hosting global events have provided a foundation for the quantitative and qualitative development of grassroots sports over the long term.

For example, in contrast to Cressman's perspective, Se Ri Pak's success on the international stage changed the social perception that golf was exclusive to a certain class. This event marked the beginning of golf becoming a more familiar sport to the South Korean public. After the 1988 Seoul Olympics, the concept of *lifelong sports* became deeply established in South Korean society; starting with the 2002 World Cup, amateur football participation increased rapidly. The *enjoyable football* culture through youth football clubs became widespread. The broad and solid player base and advanced *player view* formed during this process became the foundation for the emergence of top-class players, such as Heung-min Son and Kang-in Lee.

These cases differ from the main argument of *Seoul Ambition* and suggest that, despite historically unfolding within a framework of opposition, elite and amateur sports have transformed into a mutually complementary and symbiotic relationship. This is similar to the historical case where the Chun Doo-hwan government planned the 1988 Seoul Olympics as a political tool to secure the legitimacy of its dictatorial regime but ultimately produced social progress, such as the expansion of freedom of the press, the growth of civic consciousness, and the promotion of democratization. This can be called a paradoxical consequence of history, and this perspective can be understood as a complementary discussion presented as an extension of Cressman's critical insights.

In this context, his perceptive insights resonate even more deeply—while simultaneously offering a foundation for further research. Considering his analysis, there is a viable possibility for systemic restructuring that would allow for the balanced development of grassroots and elite sports without relying on state control. Developing a sustainable support system for elite

sports—free from regime propaganda and parental anxieties—requires more concrete discourse on the underlying motivational factors and strategic frameworks at both national and societal levels. This line of inquiry moves beyond the issues of power surrounding sports and overlaps with broader analyses of how it operates within complex societal structures, such as education, media, corporate capital, and popular culture.

Toward its end, *Seoul Ambition* reminds readers that training in elite sports often occurs in a kind of vacuum devoid of play and joy. While there are signs of progress—such as the growing resistance to the win-at-all-costs ethos in youth football and a shift in parental perceptions—Korean elite sports continue to struggle within the dual constraints of personal ambition and statism. In this respect, the book underscores the need for institutional reform and strengthens the legitimacy of efforts aimed at improving public awareness. Notably, the author's perspective—one that probes the structural problems of Korean sport while presenting a balanced view of its potential for change—not only expands the horizons of sports sociology but also makes a meaningful contribution to discussions within sports science. It is a valuable resource for deepening our understanding in areas such as sports policy and cultural theory, and it stands as a substantial contribution to fostering a healthier discourse around sports in South Korea.