

# Colonial Korea's First Participation in the Olympic Games (1932)

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Despite its significance as the first time Korean athletes had participated in the Olympic Games, the 1932 Los Angeles Summer Olympics has attracted little scholarly attention. In this paper, I examine the 1932 Olympic Games' multifaceted impact on colonial Korea beyond the typical nationalistic historiography that focuses on Japanese discrimination vs. Korean resistance. The Olympics, at that time a Western-dominated mega-sports events, provided a golden opportunity for Koreans to boast of the power of the Korean nation, a nation that had been largely absent from the world stage since its annexation by Japan in 1910. Three Korean athletes (Kim Ŭnbae, Kwŏn Taeha, and Hwang Ŭlsu) were acclaimed as national heroes, being the first Koreans in the nation's history to compete in the Olympic Games. Colonial Korea was swept up in Olympic fever in the summer of 1932. However, even the Olympics could not hold all Koreans together or make them proud of their fatherland. During the 1932 Olympics, a significant number of Koreans living in Los Angeles were not hesitant to dismiss the Korean athletes, viewing them not only as members of the Japanese national team but even as national traitors. For some Korean intellectuals focusing on the popularization of sports, propagating calisthenics was a much more urgent issue than sending a handful of elite athletes to the Olympics, especially given the fact that most Koreans were suffering in poverty and lacked access to medical facilities. Even the three Korean Olympians were not happy with their Olympic debut because of their disappointing results. In sum, the wide array of Koreans—athletes, fans, national leaders, Korean residents in America—observed, participated, and consumed this mega-sports event one way or the other. If the Olympic Games as a whole was a convoluted social phenomenon, so too were Korean reactions to it.

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