

# THE FIGHT

## INTERVIEW WITH THE PRESIDENT UN-YONG KIM "TAEKWONDO AND THE OLYMPIC DREAM"

Testo: domande di Angelo Cito  
Foto: Fita



Un Yong Kim (March 19, 1931 – October 3, 2017)  
The interview was made a few weeks before the death

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ood morning Mr Kim! First of all, I would like to say hello on behalf of President Angelo Cito, who wanted to thank you for agreeing to this interview with the Italian Taekwondo Federation.

Thank you for having me. I was happy to meet Angelo in Muju, during the World Championships. I'm glad he's the President of the Italian Federation. We talked about President Sun Jae Park and

recalled a few episodes of our experiences. That's when we had the idea of this interview.

**2. You gave life to the WTF. Could you tell us how you got the idea?**

When I was elected President of the Korean Taekwondo Association, this was one of the few well organised national associations with an international perspective. Despite the very bad reputation

of Taekwondo in Korea at the time – because of the association's internal struggles – the KTA began spreading knowledge on our sport, sending some of its instructors to America and Europe. Outside of Korea, Taekwondo was then known as 'Korean Karate'. Sporting community and the Korean society itself looked down on us. Times weren't all that good, let's say. People expected a lot from me, because they knew how much I was devoted to my work and they were also aware of what I could achieve. They had hopes of coming together in a single entity with common values, like all other sports federations. The biggest dream of all Taekwondo athletes was to have a central gym that could represent a point of reference for everyone, an official headquarters, where we could welcome visiting foreign athletes. Back then, Korean economy was not in a happy place. Today, people know about us, but back in 1971 no one could even say where Korea was geographically. I remember when I took part to the first meeting of all National Olympic Committees, as President and Secretary General of the Korean Olympic Committee, organised here in Rome by Giulio Onesti in 1975, I had to stay quiet in a corner of the room together with Taipei and Vietnam, as Korea had no power back then. I didn't forget, however, the dream of having a central Taekwondo gym and during the press conference I declared I wanted to build such centre for the KTA, which was to be the Kukkiwon that you all know today. Building the gym was not an easy project to take on, because we did not have an adequate location let alone the budget to start. The KTA only received 10 million Won per year. Through marketing operations, I managed to gather 6 millions, which was incredible for those times, as Korea was not (and is not yet at present) well developed



under this aspect. I met many public figures from whom I received not only funds, but also cement, steel, glass and all we needed in order to complete the building in one single year (and all without government support!).

Another dream I had was to organise a World Championship competition. In order to do so, I had to work for the unity of this association and I had to unify all the different styles. I was convinced that if we wanted to compete with the rest of the world, we needed to be united and strong, to standardise our evaluation criteria for belt and Dan changes, as I thought the level of preparation of instructors was paramount. At the time, every style had its specific judging criterion and, at times, up to 600 diplomas could be issued in one single day. Today the level has much improved and many of our instructors are very well prepared, they're PhD holders and work at the head of university institutions, while in the past, 70% of our instructors had an elementary education level. I felt it was also necessary to define the history and origins of Taekwondo. Today we have many

reference texts, but then nothing was written, we had only some handwritten notes that the coaches used while teaching. We still practiced 'Hyung' then, only after did we codify forms as they are known today, with the Korean name of 'Poomsae'. There was, also, the need to create a single competition regulation and to introduce adequate protections for athletes' safety. Once such bases were established, I started to develop the Federation which would have led to our internationalization.

**3. You were also the man behind the inclusion of Taekwondo in the Olympic programme. How did you achieve this goal and what was your biggest challenge?**

It was important to first register all our discipline as members of all the different international organisations. Therefore, Taekwondo needed to be a member of GAISF (Global Association of International Sports Federations), of FISU (International University Sports Federation), of CISM (International Military Sports Council) and to take part to all major sporting events. Becoming Presi-

**"I met the president in Muju, Korea. I asked him if he remembered me. He told me smiling: <<Angelo! Sure, I remember! I also remember when you made me eat spaghetti with that instrument of torture that you call "fork">>"**

Angelo Cito

**“The biggest dream of all Taekwondo athletes was to have a central gym that could represent a point of reference for everyone, an official headquarters, where we could welcome visiting foreign athletes”**

dent of the GAISF, role that I covered for 20 years, and organising the World Games, allowed me to include Taekwondo also in continental competitions (All-Africa, Asian, Panamerican etc.), a break-through towards the possibility of being enlisted in the Olympics programme.

The Korean situation was very unstable in those years but in the meantime, as I had become member of the IOC, I kept working incessantly for the Olympic Games of 1988 in Seoul. I managed to include Taekwondo in the programme as demonstration Olympic sport.

It then became urgent to write adequate competition regulations that would be accepted worldwide. These were compared to regulations for Karate, Kung Fu and of other martial arts and also to the regulations of different sports. In fact it was during the Olympic Games of Los Angeles that I got the idea, from boxing, of introducing an helmet to ensure athletes' safety. The Western world would never have accepted kicks in the face.

All this has marked our route towards the Olympics and gave great support to our instructors. It was essential to bring Taekwondo to all five continents, including Africa, which had just joined our movement, and we worked together to reach this goal.

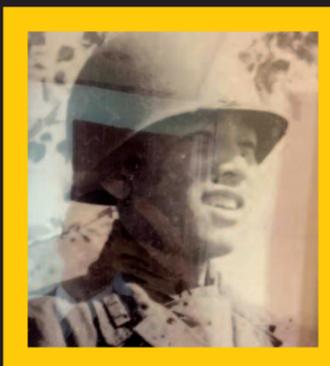
It wasn't easy to organise the first World Championships. We didn't have funds nor actual national federations we could rely on. What we had were simple organizations. So we decided to involve all our instructors who had been sent abroad, and who held talks with the respective local governments. We managed to gather 15 countries and 19 teams. It was a dream come true! There weren't many nations taking part, however we attracted attention thanks to the presence of many personalities. All this was a good boost for our identity,



which we needed to build.

When I first tried to register Taekwondo to the GAISF, the President of the Judo Federation claimed we were just a Karate style. Everyone was opposing my decision and we had to seat through many meetings in order to further explain and discuss our reasons and point of view, before people could understand the difference between Karate and Taekwondo. My mission was made even more difficult by the fact that instructors teaching in America had put on their gym a 'Korean Karate' sign instead of just 'Taekwondo', creating a lot of confusion, which was hard to explain to IOC.

This is how Taekwondo started its transformation path from being a national martial art to being an international sport. The World Federation began with our small World Championships. I remember that day the stadium was full of people. They were all enjoying seeing techniques and



kicks remarkably different from Karate moves (which are more static and focused on fist techniques).

Initially, I wanted to name the federation "International Taekwondo", but General Choi, who was teaching in Canada at the time, had already used the name for his organization, so I thought it would be better to use the same acronym, and chose WTF - World Tekwondo Federation. I wanted Taekwondo to become first of all a national sport that anyone could practice, and then globalise it and show the entire world our Korean potential. In fact, Korea had had nothing to show during the Olympic Games before. In 1960, at the Games in Rome, my country did not win one single medal. It took us 30 years to win the first medal, in Montreal.

As already mentioned, the launch of Taekwondo on the international scene started with the membership to GAISF, together with athletics, ski and skating. Karate became part of it after, but I did not oppose its inclusion, and the same for the ITF [International Taekwondo Federation]. I dedicated all my efforts to Taekwondo.

Once we became members of international sporting organisations, our dream became bigger: we wanted to take part to the Olympic Games. At the time, the American Taekwondo Federation received a million dollars from the Los Angeles Olympic Profit. I could not help them financially then, but I could help them to improve their position. The same happened with Italy, where Sun Jae Park saw his organisation become a national federation, which allowed him to take advantage of annual support from CONI [Italian National Olympic Committee] and IOC. This was what I could do from my position as a leader, for these and other countries and continents.

During the Seoul Olympic Games, in which I was directly involved, I was able to bid for Taekwondo to be in the programme as a demonstration Olympic sport. Even if medals were not considered in the official Medal Table, they still had a significant symbolic value for us, because they were supported by the Organising Committee. All there was left to do then was to bring Taekwondo to the Games as an official sport. But this was not easy. We were lucky to have a IOC President like Antonio Samaranch, with whom we often worked during the organisation of the Games, precisely on television right negotiations and also helping the Soviet Union and East Europe to take part to the Games while avoiding boycotting actions from some nations. We have worked together on many projects. Korea finally became part of the international community. Taekwondo was also part of the Games' Opening Ceremony, with a thousand athletes performing in unison at the Olympic Stadium, leaving the entire world in amazement and allowing us to show also the martial aspect of the discipline together with the sporting aspect. I always say that yes, Taekwondo became universal, but we still need to focus on its martial spirit and on its tradition, so it won't become a sport like boxing.

During the Olympic Games of Barcelona, I was already Vice President of IOC and suggested Taekwondo again as a demonstration Olympic sport. Reaching this objective was not at all easy, if you think how difficult it was for the Seoul Games, where both baseball and badminton were introduced in the programme before Taekwondo, with a real risk of exclusion for us. Talking to Samaranch, I declared Taekwondo our National Sport, which was why we prioritized it. Then President of IOC, who visited Kukkiwon in 1982 right after

Seoul had been appointed seat of the Games, Samaranch saw with his own eyes what I had achieved as a young man and how I had managed to develop a new sport/martial art. All this helped the inclusion of Taekwondo in the demonstration sports programme in Seoul.

At the Barcelona edition of the Games, Basque Pelota and roller hockey had already been introduced in the programme as demonstration Olympic sports. I appealed to Samaranch's good will again during the Executive board meeting, saying that had Taekwondo not demonstrated at the Games, all of our instructors in Europe would have lost face. He luckily accepted and, after some negotiation, we managed to place it as third demonstration sport in 4 days, exactly like in Seoul. This time we had also the support of the Organisation Committee.

Taekwondo was now well positioned and was present in all 5 continents. We put on a Championship competition in Madison Square Garden in New York, and many sport celebrities came to see us. In Paris however, during a IOC session to discuss the inclusion of Taekwondo in the official programme of the Olympic Games, for reasons which I ignore, Samaranch suggested to introduce it with Triathlon medals (1 men 1 for women). I objected, knowing that I now had the necessary political power and strength. I sustained Taekwondo could not start off with two medals. It would have been impossible to combine 8 men and 8 women categories in a single category per gender, had this not been possible, it would have been better to call everything off. That was the start of a long negotiation which brought us to obtain 8 categories, 4 for men and 4 for women. Many IOC members already knew about Taekwondo and many had visited Seoul and

were present at the demonstration for the Opening Ceremony in 1988. During the Paris meeting, I was asked to explain ITF's behaviour (in those days, the ITF had sent IOC a series of documents against the WTF, while Karate threatened to take legal actions against IOC, had taekwondo been introduced in the programme). My strategy was to say nothing at all. I said I only knew the WTF as member of the GAISF, of the Pan American Games, of the All-Africa Games, FISU, CISM, World Games etc. specifying also the number of member National Federations and the number of World Championships we had organized. Then we voted. I was the only one admitted in the room, all our supporters had to wait outside. We obtained 85/85 votes. I went out to give the good news to all the Taekwondo family. Franco Carraro was then Director General of the IOC and had predicted this would finally happen despite some opposition (which, in the end, did not materialise).

From then on, the entire world organisation of Taekwondo has undergone big changes and the more organised National Federations soon managed to be acknowledged by the respective Olympic Committees, with a subsequent increase of annual budget. The Italian Federation, with President Sun Jae Park and Angelo Cito as Secretary General, was among these.

Even maintaining our traditional values, it was essential to have a new vision in order to become an Olympic sport and we had to have an international sporting federation like other disciplines, which would be able to take care of all sporting aspects, but also of political and international aspects. We had grown enormously in Asia, coordinating the Asian Games, and we managed to finally achieve the stability so sought after. Then and now, it is pa-



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amount that all the different institutions have a common vision and focus on maintaining unity, instead of fighting against each other to protect individual interests - as it often happens in Korea, among Kukkiwon, KTA and WTF.

**4. How did you feel when Taekwondo was finally introduced in the Olympic programme?**

The biggest moment of any sport is the inclusion in the Olympic programme. It took 20 years for us, it was a slow and suffered process. But other sports even took 100 years, while others still have to merge two different federations (like Badminton and Baseball). Thanks to my work in the IOC and with President Samaranch, we managed to achieve this goal without having to unite the WTF and the ITF.

We're talking about unification today, but I doubt this will be possible, because our regulations are very different and the two Federations evolved in completely different ways. Politically of course, reuniting would be a great idea, but I don't think it would be technically easy.

**5. Who else had a relevant role in making Taekwondo an Olympic Sport?**

From the IOC side, President Juan Antonio Samaranch certainly played an important role; while inside the Committee, many were supporting our cause. For example, the promoting work our instructors carried out in the world was fundamental. It was thanks to all of them that Olympic glory was achieved. I did not certainly invent the front kick, just like Jigoro Kano - the father of modern Judo - did not invent seoi nage, but just like he regulated Judo, I regulated Taekwondo and glorified it, achieving the Olympic dream thanks to my role as IOC Vice President, and as President of GAISF, of the Korean Olympic

Committee, of the Olympic Games Committee of Seoul in 1988 and also thanks to the work I did setting up Kukkiwon and the WTF, all without the help of the government. I know however that our instructors were the basis without which I could not have given my contribution to Taekwondo and I'd like to emphasise that without the help of Antonio Samaranch our sport would not have been included in the Olympic Games.

**6. Life is full of victories and defeats, just like any athlete's life. What is the best way to face them?**

Give your best. Like De Coubertin said, Life is but a competition, only sometimes you lose even if you give all you have. It happens to big champions, who sometimes miss a win because of a mistake. It can happen to all of us, but you still have to give your best and play fair.

**7. What has changed in the international sport scene in recent years?**

We got too market-driven. We certainly need more money in the world of sport in order to fund the development of disciplines, but Olympic values are something different (solidarity, friendship, peace etc.). We often lose sight of these values and become slaves to the market. There is also too much professionalism, too much ego and all this causes a series of problems, like what we've witnessed at the last Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro. This is also why now cities don't want to host the Games. In the '90s, everyone thought that hosting the Games meant more income, but the expense is really too high while revenue next to nothing. This is why Rome withdrew its candidacy the last time, together with Budapest, Madrid, Boston, San Francisco, etc. We have two appointed cities

now and this will be enough for the next 11 years. We'll see what will happen after.

Times are changing, the IOC should work hard to lower excessive costs and contribute more. The same goes for Taekwondo. It needs to find its own vision instead of simply aspiring to medals, and contribute to the building of a healthy and strong society. In order to do this, we need inner cohesion.

**8. You took on some important assignments and prestigious roles also in matters different than Taekwondo. What did you learn from these experiences?**

I learned what can be done in our society. I learned that you always need to have a dream. Taking on my responsibilities, I managed to achieve many things. Through dreams, young people can learn to share, to achieve. The Olympic Games are also meant to teach the importance of sharing. The WTF is working on this, but I'm sure much more can be done.

**9. What did it mean for Korea to organise the Seoul Games of 1988?**

Korean modern history saw two main events: the war (which meant to protect the nation) and the Olympic Games in Seoul. People forget easily, but we have to remember that before the Games of '88, Korea was marginalised, not only in sports, but also culturally, economically and on all fronts. Koreans had no faith in themselves. Many things happened in the years preceding the Games, sometimes bad things, but in the end the positive always came through. Korea saw a great development in politics, diplomacy, society, economy, medicine and sport. A country that in 30 years had only won one gold medal at the Olympic Games, during the Seoul Games only won 12 gold medals, which were

then confirmed in Barcelona and the success was kept in later editions. I think that the number of medals will decrease in the next Tokyo Games, because we focused too much on the immediate result and we're not investing in future athletes. This will certainly be a problem in the long run. We're doing good in the Short Track, but it's not the same.

During those historical Seoul Games, people began to realise they could make it, they finally acquired self-confidence. Coming from a difficult period in our history, living conditions were awful, women could not even travel and Western and European cultures had not yet filtered in the country. We only had the influence of American soldiers who were in the territory after the war.

In conclusion, the Olympic Games of Seoul came into such reality and brought the country to a global development, starting from the single individual all the way up to big corporations like Samsung, Hyundai, Korean Airlines, etc. We now need to be careful not to be overconfident, or we'll be in trouble.

**10. Why are the Olympics so important for countries?**

Because they give great visibility to the hosting nation, and, if it is a small nation like Korea, they bring pride and unity among its people, encouraging the country to reach its goals. In Korea, national spirit grew stronger because of them and the city of Seoul sped up its development. I do not know if it will be the same for PyeongChang, you need to consider that Winter Olympics are different and you cannot compare Cortina D'Ampezzo or Turin to the Olympics in Rome.

**11. The IOC is the organism governing world sports and you have been its Vice President for many years. We are now witnessing important changes in its go-**

**vernance. What are your thoughts about this?**

The IOC is not a factory, like FIAT, however it relies too much on marketing its logo at the expense of its ideals. Due to big sums of money, the Committee is easily exposed to criminal organisations and all this at the sports detriment, leading to scandals like doping, as for FIFA or IAAF and many other organizations. Tokyo will host 33 sporting disciplines and Japan has the necessary funds to sustain the programme, but future cities will face serious problems. What the IOC leadership needs to do is focus on re-establishing values and harmony in today's complicated context of international terrorism, refugee crisis, financial crisis etc. If the IOC will not be able to face such problems, the future will be problematic.

**12. Do you have any particular memories of Italy?**

Yes of course, many! Italy is a very strong country on the sports scene. I visited the CONI on many occasions, and, as I said earlier, I took part to my first IOC meeting right here in Rome, in 1975. During the years of spreading the gospel of Taekwondo to the world, I often met with Sun Jae Park and Angelo, and the CONI, and asked them for help when necessary. Thanks to the Olympic Games, I then visited Aosta, Turin and Rome, where I was also appointed Knight Commander. Nebiolo was a dear friend, and so are Pescante, Carraro, Grandi and Cinquanta.

**13. Thank you very much for your time. I would like to end this interview by asking you if you have a message for our readers and especially for young people.**

Have a goal to reach, a vision to achieve. They need to stay united and give their best, contributing to the development of Taekwondo... They need to have a big dream!

**“Have a goal to reach, a vision to achieve. They need to stay united and give their best, contributing to the development of Taekwondo... They need to have a big dream!”**

