

The businesses of the Korean Kukkiwon Authorities

Since the FBI's arrests made of numerous top figures within world football it has become increasingly apparent that not all sporting association's business is conducted entirely above board . Anyone still in the belief that this is solely an issue within world football may still possibly be convinced that it is Santa Claus delivering the Easter eggs!! Taekwondo is no exception and has its shady past too. Anyone not willing to entertain this scenario should perhaps stop reading this article here and now to preserve their illusion of our great Taekwondo sport.

Who owns the sport?

Anyone wanting to confront this sad truth first needs to answer the following question: who owns the sport? Does football belong to the English? Table tennis to the Chinese? Baseball to the Americans? Does the Japanese government have a legitimate claim over judo and karate? Of course not, no sport belongs to one nation. All forms of sport are common property and belong to no one.

Taken literally this is correct. Nevertheless the answer is wrong. All championships hosted worldwide by the World Federation, the World Taekwondo Federation (WTF) (1) permits members to participate to whom they are paying the Kukkiwon authority a 'fee'. The Kukkiwon Authorities are subject to the Korean Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism – therefore the Korean government. (2)

Regardless of whether a competitor attends an Olympic games or any other of the federations 60 tournaments, they are forced to transfer a mandatory contribution to the Kukkiwon Authorities.

And if only a portion of the rumors are true which are currently circulating then South Korea is seeking to greatly increase this monopoly of the sport. Of course the question must therefore be asked as to whether this economic development which is damaging the value of the sport is agreeable with the statutes of the IOC?

Would such a scenario within football be imaginable? Would it be conceivable that worldwide all football players playing within a league would be obliged to buy their 'players pass' from the Swiss Ministry of Culture because of the location of the, now suspended, FIFA President Josef Blatter? One can only shake the head at the thought of it! All would agree that this scenario would be totally unacceptable. Or would it? This would imply that it is perfectly possible for certain countries to select a sport art and claim it as their own to cash in on its success worldwide.

So it has to be questioned as to how it became possible for the South Korean government to gain such a strong influence over the Taekwondo Olympic sport, as if it were its own property. To understand how this happened we must turn back the clock some 40 years.

Establishment of the World Taekwondo Federation (WTF)

The very first Taekwondo World Championships took place in Seoul, S. Korea between the 25th and 27th May 1973. These championships took place in a sports hall in the district of Gangnam-Gu. This particular sports hall had only recently been built, between November 1971 and November 1972. If one is able to believe the available sources, the building was named 'Kukkiwon' (3) in February 1973.

One day after the opening ceremony of these first championships, 28th May 1973, the World Taekwondo Federation (WTF) was founded. The first president to be elected was Dr. Un-Yong Kim. The newly formed federation then moved into the offices of the newly built Kukkiwon sports hall.

Over the years Kukkiwon developed itself into a 'mecca' for Taekwondo enthusiasts from all over the world. Anyone referring to 'Kukkiwon' was obviously referring to this sports hall in which the WTF's offices were now housed. Kukkiwon was actually just another name being used to refer to the World Federation, WTF.

Establishment of the 'Kukkiwon' Foundation

No one in the world would have been able to predict the global influence of the newly elected president Dr. Un-Yong Kim. Out of the public eye, he formed a foundation which was officially registered on the 7th August 1974 under the name of 'Kukkiwon'. (3) Allegedly the Kukkiwon Foundation was formed to promote Taekwondo sport worldwide.

However the reasons for forming this foundation were apparently not for promoting the sport but for veiling the name of the sports hall in question. Afterall, the aim of the newly formed WTF was to promote Taekwondo worldwide. So what purpose was the Kukkiwon Foundation to serve? What were its objectives in reality?

As so often is the case, it was to revolve around power and money. We will never really know the exact details of which businesses were involved in the murky past of the Kukkiwon Foundation. However, what is certain is that the new president Un-Yong Kim had little interest in the countries which were existing members of the WTF. On the contrary. His Kukkiwon Foundation was to become a global catching bowl for Taekwondo athletes and students that did NOT wish to join the federations, including the WTF. Therefore, under close examination, the Kukkiwon Foundation could be viewed as a worldwide competitor to the WTF.

Services for commercial sports schools

There were, and still are, many clubs and sports schools that do not wish to join any association. The main reason for this being that they wish Taekwondo sport to operate independently. However in reality maximum profit is the real motivator.

Within the commercially driven sports schools students participate in Dan examinations. These exams are, as a rule, considerably more expensive than those within the national federation. To provide an equivalent quid pro quo sport school owners

require a Dan certified representative to be present to appear to fulfill and confirm the requirements of a highly approved certificate.

Thus it was the Kukkiwon Foundation that took over this function – worldwide. Kukkiwon provided the trainers of non-affiliated schools with specifically designed Dan certificates. Trainers were able to order these certificates from the Kukkiwon Foundation and present their students with a Kukkiwon Dan Certificate. As these certificates were signed by the WTF President Dr. Un-Yong Kim students assumed could assume that their certificate was WTF approved. An absolute falsehood and in all a profitable disappointment.

There were, and still are, Taekwondo athletes wanting a Dan certificate written in original Korean script to hang on their wall. This was made possible by Kukkiwon. Anyone wanting such a certificate simply had to order one from the Foundation. However importantly obtaining such a certificate required no form of assessment. The certificate was simply completed in Korean and sent back – looking nice! Each individual has to consider for themselves the worth and value of such a piece of paper that has no correlation to a sporting performance.

In addition, Kukkiwon assisted those wishing to complete their Dan examinations in Korea. In each case, the Taekwondo students had learnt their abilities at home in their local sports club or school and Kukkiwon skimmed off the cream from the hard work of others and merely presented them with a certificate at a rich price.

The sell-out of the WTF

At some point over the process of time the double President Un-Yong Kim gave thought as to how it would be possible to boost the demand for the purely Korean Dan certificate. However, the affiliated Taekwondo athletes were completely satisfied with their Dan certificates. Nevertheless it was obvious that a possibility to ‘jazz up’ the Kukkiwon Dan certificate was being sought.

This was achieved by the use of a morally and legally dubious trick. The Federation, thus the President Dr. Un-Yong Kim, simply changed the rules of the sport concerning the authorization of competitors for international championships. It was decided within the staff union, that with immediate effect, each competitor entering a WTF tournament would only be permitted to participate if they were in possession of a Kukkiwon Dan certificate. From a sporting view it was utter nonsense. And yet again it was not a decision taken for the good of the sport, but the profit of the organizations in the background.

A closed loophole

By this point in time Dr. Un-Yong Kim was abusing his role as WTF President purely for the sake of profit and was later condemned for corruption and bribery. His profiteering as World President assisted his ‘Kukkiwon Foundation’ into becoming a very lucrative business by means of his Dan certificate trickery.

In an attempt to tame the critics of this worldwide, one-off compulsory levy being paid to the ominous Foundation, Un-Yong Kim enabled an alternative to be written into the amendment of the rules of the sport, which incidentally are still valid today. In Article 4 of the competition rules (13) the WTF states which criteria an athlete must comply with enabling them to compete at an affiliated tournament. Alongside

the nationality and a required nomination from their relevant country, the age of the participant and the possession of a GAL card, (the WTF's new membership card) are required. Here, however, is the loophole, a Kukkiwon or a WTF issued Dan certificate must also be presented. **(Quote: Holder of Taekwondo Dan / Poom Certificate by the Kukkiwon or WTF)**

When one reads through the article 4, one would believe that all was in order. After all the members wishing to compete in an affiliated tournament are not forced to present a Kukkiwon Dan certificate but have the alternative option of a WTF certificate. However, in practice this is not the case because no certificates have been issued by the WTF on behalf of the associations. Therefore the one and only option remaining was to 'purchase' a Kukkiwon Dan certificate.

The question must therefore be raised as to why the World Federation would allow external documents to state the two alternatives for the registration procedure, when in reality this quite simply was not the case. One would have thought that such a practice would have attempted to have been covered up? One must consider why this was not the case!

In reality this dilemma could have been solved relatively easily. All nations within membership of the WTF would undertake their Dan certificates within their clubs and schools and within the spirit of the World Federation (WTF). The WTF must only agree to the use of national Dan certificates being adequate for the registration of WTF championships.

Anyone who has completed the online process of registering for an international tournament will already be aware that national Dan certificates are not accepted and the entry will be rejected. A registration per internet is therefore only possible once the data of the Kukkiwon certificate has been entered and a copy of the Kukkiwon certificate attached.

If only an entry panel would be added to the Online Registration form to enable national Dan certificates to be entered then all would be in order. However the question remains as to whether the WTF will ever manage to squeeze this minor adjustment through? From behind closed doors it has been rumored that the World Federation receives a handsome sum of money each year from the South Korean government and quite possibly that an amendment to these proceedings would result in this source of money drying up.

Corruption and Prison

Anyone who has been in closer contact with the enterprising World Federation President Dr. Un-Yong Kim, is quickly able to recognize that alongside his role within Taekwondo, Kukkiwon and the IOC he has established an incredible career. However, that career has been comprised of not only highs but also many deep lows. Despite the warning of corruption allegations made against him in 1999, the South Korean stood for the role of IOC President. As is known he was beaten to the position by Jacques Rogge. He was, however, elected in 2003 to the role of IOC Vice President.

Un-Yong Kim had little time to rejoice over his career leap and on the 9th January 2004 he was forced to step down from not only his IOC role, but his WTF and

Kukkiwon Presidency and his various positions following renewed serious accusations of corruption and the acceptance of extremely high sums of bribery money. (5) The search of his house at the time revealed a find of over one million dollars in cash. (14)

In June 2004 he was sentenced to two and a half years in prison. According to the courts his sentence was mild due to his old age, his repentance and for his contribution to the worldwide development of Taekwondo sport.

The prosecutor had recommended a sentence of seven years. They accused Un-Yong Kim, amongst other things, of abusing his position as the President of the World Taekwondo Federation. The exact details of their accusations are unknown. The investigations concluded that Un-Yong Kim was driven by an insatiable greed. He stood not alone.

Chungwon Choue – new WTF president

Following the dramatic fall of Un-Yong Kim in 2004, Dr. Chungwon Choue was elected as new WTF President. He brought with him the reputation of being a forward thinking, global and innovative academic. Despite his many successes and clear progress that he was able to prove under his regency, he was dogged by the unspoken issue of the mandatory membership of Kukkiwon.

Behind closed doors it was rumored that he was 'politically' forced to continue with Kukkiwon. When one considers that the deputy of the governing Saenuri party was standing as his opposition candidate for the WTF presidency, one can only begin to hint at what political struggles were to take place behind the scenes. (10) More about this later though.

Kukkiwons' President Carousel

Dr. Un-Yong Kim was president of the WTF for over thirty years and nearly as long as president of Kukkiwon before he was forced to resign from his posts in January of 2004. Once the seat was available it was a constant cut and thrust tussle for this particularly lucrative vacancy. In an unbelievably rapid succession candidates were elected for the presidency then consequently cancelled.

Not only was it the position of President to be elected, but the Vice Presidency, General Secretary and any number of council members. Thanks to the inflated and consistent flow of money into the Kukkiwon coffers, these were desirable positions. If we were to look carefully at the constant carousel of presidential appointments it would look something like this:

On the 2nd March 2004, not 2 months after the resignation of Un-Yong Kim, Woon-Kyu Uhm was elected as his successor as the President of the Kukkiwon Foundation. By the end of 2005 he was relieved of his duties by Um-Yong Gye, who managed to remain in the post until December 2009 until he was replaced by Seung.Wan Lee. Five months later it was Won-Sik Kang who was sitting on the President's chair. But alas he too was unable to remain long on his throne and was replaced in October 2013 by a certain Kyu-Hyung Lee, who was only able to hold on to the post for a few months before being replaced by Man-Soon Jeong in February of 2014 and currently retains the position of President (6).

Noticeably all, or all known, functionaries of Kukkiwon are South Korean. This is a clear indication that this is a purely Korean state institute. (11)

The ministerial takeover of Kukkiwon

The 4th of February 2010 should have gone down in history as a very special day for Taekwondo sport. It was on this day that the Korean Ministry for Culture, Tourism and Sport took over the Kukkiwon Foundation (3). The former Kukkiwon foundation became the Kukkiwon Authority. No more details are known about this transfer.

It became apparent that the takeover did not take place quite as quietly as it had been planned. Protests, with over 500 participants, took place outside the 'public hearing' on the 10th February regarding this strange takeover. However, as was to be expected of the Ministry, no representative was present.

Many of the protestors were wanting to express their displeasure against the action of the Ministry. The majority of these protestors were of the opinion that Taekwondo sport was not the business of the South Korean government, but should remain in the hands of Taekwondo athletes.

One of the strongest critics of the takeover was Athanasios Pragalos, the President of the European Taekwondo Union (ETU). He declared that he, together with all European countries, would boycott the taking of Kukkiwon certificates. His decision was also supported by the Indian Taekwondo President. (9)

As was to be expected the Korean government would hold little regard for the public hearing. Even a petition with 90,000 signatures collected from 57 countries failed to impress the South Korean government.

However what does seem incredible is that South Korea have never been vetoed for this conduct, neither by a large sporting organization nor the International Olympic Committee (IOC).

The "Global Athlete License" WTF membership card

At a similar time, since 2010, the WTF introduced a new membership card that would have to be purchased by competitors and participants at the WTF tournaments. Without this so called "Global Athlete License", shortened to GAL card, participation in a WTF tournament is not permitted. (15) The card currently costs thirty US dollars and is valid for one year. Additionally, due to the cumbersome registration process, a further twenty US dollars can be added to the equation.

It was of no surprise to anyone that the introduction of the GAL card was nodded through by the national presidents. Many of Taekwondo's athletes are left wanting for answers as to exactly what justifies the thirty dollar fee. Nothing is received in return for this hearty price. One must really seriously question the nonsensical bureaucracy of the World Associations.

The introduction of the GAL card saw no reduction in competitors starting fees, which currently sit between seventy and one hundred dollars. The GAL card can only be seen as a financial assistance for the World Associations and it was reluctantly accepted within the sport.

“Kukkiwon” Dan Certificates outside of Korea

Following the takeover of Kukkiwon the South Korean government did exactly what the critics had feared. The trusted government employees were working on a plan which would result in bringing Taekwondo athletes worldwide to boiling point.

A remarkable event took place at the end of November 2013 in Stuttgart. Kukkiwon and the South Korean government staged a so called ‘Skip Dan Promotion’. Participants were allowed to take part in exams, despite not having completed any recent Dan exams. As opposed to the usual waiting times of a Dan examination the promotion enabled 2 graduations to be skipped. Therefore someone who completed their first Dan at the age of 25 and subsequently gave up training, was able to go to Stuttgart at the age of, for example, 55. Despite the normal regulations, the Skip-Dan would enable this person to complete the 7th Dan examination. It goes without saying that before the examination takes place a fee of approximately 1,500 euros is due to be paid. (12)

Oddly no spectators were allowed to observe the Skip Dan Promotion for which the South Korean examiners had especially made the trip for. The sports hall was held under a cloud by Korean government officials and practically declared as Korean territory. Everyone can make up their own minds as to the worth of such a purchased Dan certificate.

Korean congressman as the WTF opposition candidate

As the Skip Dan Promotion was being made public during the first months of 2013, the news was filtering through that Korea was planning to stage an opposition candidate for the WTF presidential election approaching in August 2013. The candidate was announced as Hong-Moon Jong, a member of the current government Saenuri party. The following media reports rumored the closeness of Moon-Jong Hong to the current South Korean president Geun-Hye Park. Both are members of the Saenuri party. It became obvious that in Korea it would be absolutely normal for the governing party to hold influence over the candidate for the WTF presidential election. (10)

As a congressman Moon-Jong Hong should have been clear as to the thin ice he was treading on with his candidacy as a non-Taekwondo athlete. His chances of election were low. Rather than face an embarrassing defeat it is possible that he avoided this awkward scenario by withdrawing his candidacy. Instead he was made Chairman of the Board (10) in the newly created government authority of Kukkiwon.

The South Korean government’s methods are interesting. Taekwondo is openly treated as though this Olympic sport is the sole property of Korea. Whether South Korea would ever entertain the idea of a non-Korean unknown congressman fulfilling the role as World President may never be known.

Shortly after taking over his post at Kukkiwon, Moon-Jong Hong replaced eleven new board members. Yet again South Koreans, amongst them several congressmen. The direction they choose to take will soon become clear. (11)

The Kukkiwon GmbH

On the 25th May 2011 the company Kukkiwon GmbH was entered into the trading register in Munich under the HRB number 192253 with a start capital of 25,000 Euros by Young-Jae Ko, son of Ko Eui-Min. Company objectives, amongst others, were listed as the sale and distribution of licenses .(16)

One can only expect the scale of profits planned intend to remain in keeping with the Kukkiwon tradition. Ko Eui-Min runs a commercial sports school in Munich. His sports school is neither a member of the Bavarian Taekwondo Union (BTU) nor the German Taekwondo Union (DTU).

Soo Nam Park – The private man and the DTU president

At the beginning of 2015 the agreed business conditions negotiated BY Ko-Eui Min were unexpectedly changed by the Kukkiwon Authorities. This affected the contract agreed between the German Taekwondo Union (DTU) and the Kukkiwon Authority regarding the sale of Dan certificates. The negotiations for the extension of these contracts were led by Park So Nam, the current president of the DTU. Completely surprisingly the officials of the Kukkiwon Authority allowed the contract to expire. For a time no one was certain of how or if the cooperation with Kukkiwon would continue in the future.

Soon after the termination of the contract it became apparent that in the future all Kukkiwon Dan certificates would have to be arranged directly through Park-Soo Nam. After closer questioning it was made clear that it was not through Park-Soo Nam in his role as DTU President, but Park-Soo Nam in private. He would fulfill the role of a wholesaler responsible for the sale of Kukkiwon Dan certificates throughout Germany. Everyone, Grandmasters included, would be obliged to order their Dan certificate through him at his dictated price.

Kukkiwon Germany e.V

On the 20th March Park –Soo Nam founded the profitable association “Kukkiwon Deutschland e.V” based in Stuttgart. The organization is registered there under the VR number 721751. (17) The Chairman is, of course, Park-Soo Nam and the representative is his own daughter Sun Jeong. An employee of his publishing house, Sybille Maier, is registered as General Secretary.

Founding members of the Kukkiwon e.V include Wolfgang Brückel, President of the Taekwondo Union Baden Württemberg, (TUBW) and member of the German national association, the DTU.

At the beginning of August of 2015 seventeen highly decorated and hand-picked Dan awardees travelled to Korea to participate in an instructor training course at the Kukkiwon Authority. Apparently all have passed the requirements of the course and can now begin a lucrative job here in Germany working as an official examiner for the Kukkiwon Authority.

How much longer should the ‘silence’ continue?

At the moment it would appear that no sporting authority, neither the German Olympic Sport Bund (DOSB) nor the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has had the calling to put an end to this unbelievable case of profiteering.

In the defense of these sporting bodies one has to grant that the lack of information and knowledge surrounding the background of our Olympic Taekwondo sport led to ignorance. However, if these practices continue and the perpetrators receive no clear warning from above then it can be perfectly conceivable that soon other sports will be facing similar scenarios – athletes purchasing their right to compete from a national government!

Or perhaps these sporting bodies will opt to leave Taekwondo athletes standing out in the rain. Until maybe finally a national President NOT involved in Kukkiwon's business or employed by them takes a stand and faces them openly and honestly regarding their role within the WTF.

The South Korean authorities should withdraw all connections from Olympic Taekwondo. A government ministry has no business meddling in a world sporting federation.

Text: Peter Bolz

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