

GYM CLIMBER

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No. 2

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**THE SECRETS OF
ONDRA'S TRAINER**

**CLIMB
A GRADE
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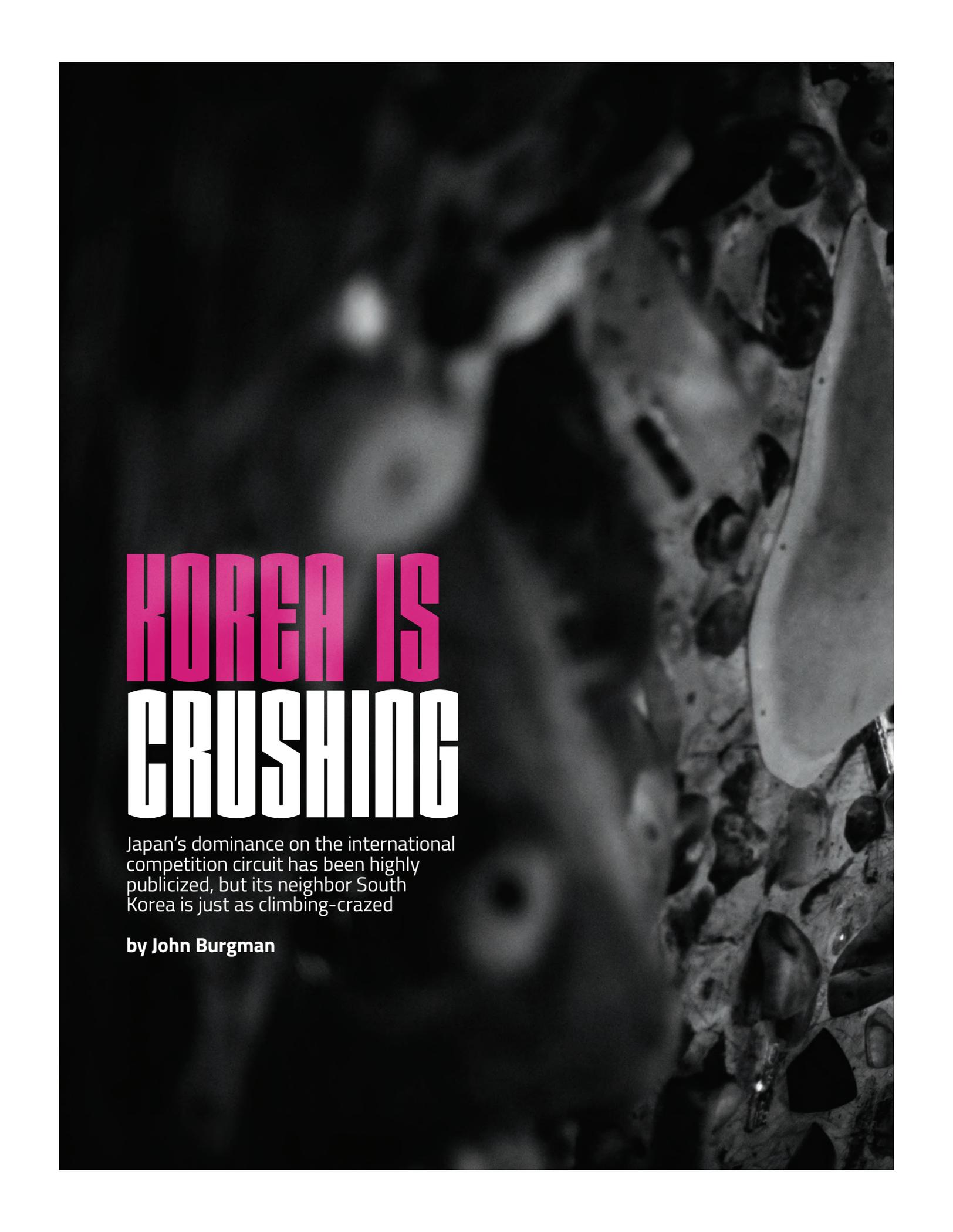
**INJURY
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KOREA IS CRUSHING

Japan's dominance on the international competition circuit has been highly publicized, but its neighbor South Korea is just as climbing-crazed

by John Burgman

Last September, as Korea’s superstar competitor Jain Kim took first place at the 2018 IFSC Lead World Cup in Kranj, Slovenia, she also notched her way into the record books as the winningest competitor in IFSC history. With more than two dozen victories to her name, Kim is rightly a celebrity within the competition-climbing sphere. But she’s also famous in the Korean landscape at large.

Over the years, Kim’s sponsorship deals have included usual suspects like La Sportiva, Spyder, The North Face, and Red Bull, but she has also enjoyed endorsement deals with SK-II, a Korean company that makes beauty and skin-care products, and Korea’s mega-brand of electronics, LG. In 2017, she even climbed a Seoul skyscraper, the Lotte Tower, as a televised event. It was promoted as Kim’s attempt to become the first woman to climb a skyscraper taller than 500 meters, and publicize climbing to a larger Korean audience.

Kim’s ongoing renown in her home country would not be as smooth if South Korea, one of the most media-rich countries in the world, was not quick to devour any climbing-related content. Inherent in climbing are many of the dualities that epitomize Korean culture—an embrace of both traditionalism and modernism, equal parts metropolitan and mountainous, and genial while also undeniably competitive. *The Korea Herald*, one of the country’s leading newspapers,



Above: Jain Kim has won 29 golds, 14 silvers and 16 bronze World Cup medals.

Left: A typical afternoon session at a Korean gym begins as crews gather, snacks get pooled, and smartphones sit ready to capture and upload any big sends.



acknowledged the increasing interest in the sport and asserted, “Possibly the best part about picking up climbing is the growing number of competitions catered to beginners, amateurs and professionals alike.”

While Koreans have long had select success on the international competition stage, recent results indicate the country is in the midst of its own climbing flourish—not unlike the highly touted climbing boom storming Japan, where, in Tokyo alone, there are over 50 gyms.

Consider that South Korea’s national bouldering team

finished the 2018 World Cup season in eighth place—right behind a country that is approximately one hundred times its size, the United States. Kim’s male teammate, Jongwon Chon, is irrefutably one of the best boulderers in the world. Like Kim, Chon is known for his methodical style, exceptional crimp strength, and, of course, his dancing. Chon won overall World Cup titles in 2015 and 2017, and most recently the 2018 Asian Games. A slew of other top Korean competitors such as Hanwool Kim, Hyunbin Min and Sol Sa, who have placed as high as third and fifth respectively at World Cup competitions, indicate that the country’s national team has incredible depth.

Such abundance of elite competitors is based on a grassroots interest in climbing that has manifested in the form of many climbing gyms popping up around South Korea in recent years. Seoul, a city of roughly 10 million, has 50 gyms jam-packed within its urban confines. The city has seen the founding of B Bloc Climbing in its posh Gangnam region, The Climb in its

BJORN POHL/RED BULL CONTENT POOL

college-centric Hongdae neighborhood, and V10 Climbing in the retail-dense Cheonho area, just to name a few. While Korean climbers at these gyms sometimes use Western brands of accoutrements—like Organic chalk buckets, E9 climbing pants, and Evolv shoes—they also wear Korean brands. Kolon Sport and Blackyak are popular Korean activewear companies, and Butora shoes—also of Korean origin—are prolific at every gym.

The formation of an overseeing organization, the Korea Sports Climbing Wall Association, less than three years ago gave a collective voice to nearly 200 gym owners and managers at its inception—indicating the breadth of South Korea’s gym industry.

INSIDE THE BOWELS

Given the country’s urban density, most of the new Korean gyms take the form of cozy bouldering spaces wedged in the bowels of corporate centers and shopping malls. Consider Koala Climbing Gym, a 2,000-square-foot facility that resides in the fourth basement of a 20-story office building—mere steps away from a nail salon and a ramen-noodle restaurant in Sang-am, one of Seoul’s busiest swaths. The limited space, approximately the same as the average coffee shop, means that patrons are inclined to interact—which makes any gym visit a social as much as a physical experience.

Koala Climbing Gym’s owner, Chaeyeon Lim, says that



Left: Kim at the 2018 Asian Games.

Above: Silver medalist Sol Sa of Korea during the Boulder final of the Innsbruck World Championships, 2018. Sa would place an impressive second in Combined.

South Korea’s youth, in particular, gravitate to these gyms that offer a degree of mingling inside the greater retail spaces. And bouldering at a gym makes for great video content in a country that seems obsessed with smartphones. “Koreans in their 20s and 30s spend a lot of time on social media like Instagram,” says Lim. “Bouldering fits perfectly with those platforms. It’s easy to record at the gym, and tops are awarded very quickly—so young people just seem to dig it.”

This blending of climbing and socializing—and social media—in South Korea is extensive and fascinating. While it is common for a climber in the United States to visit a gym and climb alone, such a thing is rare in South Korea.

Korean society is communal, a trait indicative of Confucianism, the philosophical foundation of Korean life, and traces back to the lessons of Chinese teacher Confucius more than 2000 years ago. Confucianism emphasizes group interaction and social inclusion. Even in the present, Confucianism influences





most everything in South Korea, from public bathhouses (known as jjimjilbang) to group rooms for Karaoke (known as noraebang). For climbing, this ethos prompts a myriad of climbing social clubs—known as “crews” in Korea or, more formally by their Korea name, dong-ho-hwe. These climbing crews, usually comprised of half a dozen or more members, regularly meet at the gyms to climb, session on a MoonBoard, grab a bite to eat or frequent a nearby bar. There are no membership dues or formal requirements other than simply hanging out together and climbing a lot.

If that sounds like the sort of activities you do with your gym buddies on a regular basis too, you’re right—but in South Korea, the crews also brand themselves with formal names and logos, their own Instagram pages, and even eponymous stickers and T-shirts. Respect Bouldering Crew, Hold-Holic, and Beaches Climber Girls are just a sampling of the crews with robust social-media presences.

A typical climbing session with these crews at a gym is loud but focused. Usually only one crew member climbs at a time, with other members watching intently, yelling encouragement in the form of “kaja, kaja”—Korean for “go, go,” not unlike the common cry of “allez, allez” in French gyms. Instagram selfies abound and beta is discussed—often over coffee. Another unique feature of Korean gyms is the presence of coffee vending machines. As a session inevitably morphs into relaxation, the crew sticks together and climbing remains the focus.

“In Korea, there are a lot of crews or groups—not only in the climbing community, but in many other sports too,” says

Left: Jongwon Chon, 2018 World Trip; Hachioji, Japan; Bouldering World Cup qualifiers.

Right: A young climber stretches before taking to the walls of Gorilla Climbing Center in the Korean city of Seosan.

Lower: Chon whips up his fans at the World Championships in Innsbruck, in November, where he placed 2nd in Bouldering, 33rd in Lead and 110th in Speed.

Donggyu Lee, who founded his own crew, Armstrong Climbing Crew, with fellow climbers who happened to be frequenting the same gym. “I think Korean climbing culture reflects Korean general culture—the many crews are indicative of a more communal aspect within Korea’s culture.”

The same mentality that makes climbing crews ubiquitous at gyms permeates the highest level of the sport in South Korea, where the national team operates in an equally close-knit fashion. Byungju Hwang is the Chief Director for the Korean national team, and he notes that the team is founded on unity and a familial vibe. The team not only trains together, but also often hangs out together, travels together, and eats together—shared meals are an important thread in the country’s social fabric. A Korean National Team Training Center allows team members to spend even more time together with intensified training, and the group approach to training starts early.

“Since 2015, we have sent a team of about 20 to 30 young climbers to the

World Youth Championships, which helps climbers naturally gain experience and the competitive spirit together,” says Hwang. “I think this provides a good foundation for Korea’s national team.”

Starting climbers on the national tract at an early age comes with certain eventual complications that competitors in other countries—particularly the United States—don’t have to overcome: All men in South Korea are required to serve in the military for about two years, usually before they reach the age of 30.

“Most men in our country must go to the army in their early twenties,” says Wookyung Kim. Kim is a diehard climber from Seoul who dutifully completed his mandatory military service eight years ago. Since then, he has taken trips to climb in Yosemite and Arapiles while holding down a steady job in marketing at an outdoor equipment company. “The military service wastes an important time in our lives,” he says, speaking for climbers like himself who accept the conscription as an obligatory multi-year break from climbing. He acknowledges that the future could be bright because there is a “sports unit” in the military for Olympics-related training. “But,” says Kim, “there is no climbing ... yet.”

The possibility of the military’s “sports unit” someday including climbing indicates that Korean culture is still evolving with its climbing craze. Kim’s international travels to climbing hotspots have made him hyperaware of the

importance of conservation as well. He notes that as part of the popularity surge, Koreans must also embrace responsible outdoor ethics with climbing’s recent popularity surge.

“Some old places are quietly disappearing,” he says. One popular sport crag on the peak of Seonunsan was closed to climbing because human traffic and litter were angering monks who consider the mountain sacred. Seonunsan has since re-opened to climbers as a result of friendly discourse with the monks, but the situation illustrates the fragility of South Korea’s ancient sites.

The climbing boom and its brunt have prompted the launch of Korean conservation groups, such as Go Real Rock, which has developed new bouldering areas such as Dobisan and Jinan while also protecting older crags and holding group cleanups. The abundance of gyms has translated to a breadth of outdoor grades; the hardest boulder in Dobisan is rated V7, while Jinan features a burly V14 boulder. Go Real Rock’s mission aptly encapsulates the whole communal mentality of South Korea and its climbing: Only through teamwork with local communities can we create the kind of culture that respects our environment and ensures the future of climbing in Korea.

John Burgman is the author of Why We Climb and coaches a youth bouldering team at Hoosier Heights in Indianapolis, Indiana. He lived in South Korea for five years and writes about South Korea’s climbing community.

WORK IS NO EXCUSE



CITY SENDER: AVAILABLE IN BACKPACK AND MESSENGER BAG

