

Canada's unexpected connection to North Korea's Olympic figure skaters

At the Gangneung Ice Arena, Ryom Tae Ok and Kim Ju Sik began their short program in the Olympic pairs figure skating event. An instrumental version of The Beatles' "A Day in the Life" played throughout the rink. The team skated down the ice with immense speed. They approached their first element, gliding backwards. Kim's hands wrapped around both sides of Ryom's small waist while she reached her leg behind her, sticking her toe pick into the ice. Suddenly, and seemingly effortlessly, Kim launched Ryom into the air. Above his head, Ryom spun three times – a blur of black, silver and sequined spandex – before Kim caught her waist and brought her back down to earth. The team finished this triple twist with a perfect landing and matching confident, wide-mouthed smiles.

In the crowd, the red and white-clad North Korean cheerleading squad was also matching, as they cheered and waved flags for their athletes.

This February, North Korea sent 22 athletes to the 2018 Olympic Winter Games in Pyeongchang, South Korea. Ryom, 19, and Kim, 25, were the only North Korean athletes to legitimately qualify (the rest were allocated extra spots by the Olympic committee). They placed a respectable 13th in the pairs event. The team gained international attention for their participation in the Games under the North Korean flag, and their time spent in Montreal last summer, training with high profile Canadian pairs coach, Bruno Marcotte.

The team's Olympic journey – and their exposure to the world outside their secluded nation – actually started long before they stepped on the ice in Pyeongchang. Four years ago, Ryom and Kim trained for 19 weeks at the Canadian Ice Academy, a small skating club in Mississauga, Ontario.

In November 2013, the Canadian Ice Academy (CIA) received a strange phone call. CIA office manager Carolanne Mizen heard that someone was hoping to bring seven North Korean skaters to train at CIA. The first thing Mizen said was, “Oh no, you mean South Korean.”

But Lisa Pak, the voice on the other side of the call, was clear – they were North Korean. Pak worked as education minister at the Light Presbyterian Church, a Korean church in Mississauga.

The church had been doing humanitarian work in North Korea since the mid 1990s, but the figure skating project came from an unexpected source. Do Won Chang, CEO of Forever 21, reached out to Pak. As a South Korean immigrant, Chang had a passion for helping North Korea. He offered to finance all aspects of the skating team’s training in Canada.

Pak worked as the liaison between the North Koreans and the Canadian Ice Academy. When Robert O’Toole, the rink’s figure skating director at the time, heard about this opportunity, he was intrigued. “I thought it would be an interesting opportunity for everybody involved, as long as it wasn’t politicized,” said O’Toole. “That was my biggest concern, but it was guaranteed that it was a humanitarian deal: we wanted to improve the lives of these athletes through sport.”

With O’Toole’s approval, Pak sent a letter to the Canadian embassy in Beijing to obtain the skaters’ visas. In order for the North Koreans to come to Canada, they would have to go through China. After months of waiting, seven North Korean athletes arrived at CIA on January 27, 2014.

The seven skaters – whose ages ranged from 14 to 24 – trained with CIA’s competitive figure skaters five days a week. With Chang’s financial support, Pak rented the skaters a house in Mississauga and bought a van to shuttle them around. Chang also bought the team new skates and clothes to train in.

“It was a fun time, I think it was a great experiment for all the skaters – from both our country and their country,” said Robert O’Toole. “It was a great cultural exchange for our athletes.”

While the North Koreans took lessons from O’Toole and the rest of the CIA coaches, they also had a coach from home and a translator with them at all times. They acted as supervisors for the skaters, and made sure the athletes did not speak to anyone except the coaches, as well as Pak and her father, who drove them to the rink.

Outside the rink, Pak tried to give the skaters a positive Canadian experience. “I was with them literally everyday for like 8 hours,” she said. Pak took the skaters on excursions to the mall, as well as Ripley’s Aquarium, and brought over a Wii for the kids to play with.

“Everything was so new to them, they would be like normal kids,” said Pak. “They tried Nutella – they loved Nutella. They scooped it right out of the jar.”

At the beginning, Pak noticed they were cold and robotic, but within a few months, they opened up. “The coaches were so good at bringing out their humanness,” said Pak. “I think they did find a lot of comfort and wonder here.”

For CIA figure skater Ivana Perkucin, the North Koreans’ visit gave her a bit of perspective. “I think it was very cool that they came,” said Perkucin. “I wasn’t really aware of what was happening in North Korea, I was very ignorant to it. I started to realize how big a deal it was that they were here. Even just the music they were hearing us play on the ice, that was very new to them.”

The skaters spent months away from home, but Pak explained that even in North Korea they did not live with their families. The skaters all boarded at a skating school, and Pak remembered Kim mentioning he only saw his parents once or twice a year.

“Their family is the state,” Pak explained. “That’s the communism mentality. They are brought up as athletes, that’s it.”

“When you ask every single one of them what their motivation is, they say, “we want to train hard and make Kim Jon-un proud of us,”” Pak said.

After the North Koreans went home on June 6, 2014, the Canadian Ice Academy did not receive any updates on the skaters; it seemed as though they would not hear from the athletes again. But, a few years later, O’Toole ran into Ryom and Kim at the 2017 Asian Winter Games in Sapporo, Japan. O’Toole, who was there coaching an athlete from the Philippines, did not know the North Korean pair was competing. “They were so excited to see me,” said O’Toole. Ryom and Kim placed third at the event.

O’Toole was excited to know that Ryom and Kim stuck with skating, and had made even more progress since their time at CIA.

“I had a small part of this, it was fun for me to sit back and watch. Tae landed her first triple toe-loop with me,” said O’Toole. “When they skated at the Olympics I was so thrilled, they did a great job.”

Pak lost touch with the skaters after they returned home. A year after their visit, the church’s humanitarian work came to a halt when the congregation discovered senior pastor Reverend Hyeon Soo Lim had been detained in a North Korean prison while on an aid mission. Lim was convicted of crimes against the state, and given a life sentence of hard labour. After two and a half years, he was released on sick bail and able to return to Canada, but after this harrowing experience, the church has not engaged in any more direct humanitarian work.

“We’re not against the people, but we don’t want the government to think they can get away with something like that,” said Pak.

While North Korea's participation in the Games may have seemed like a possible turning point for the country, Dr. Robert Huish, an International Development professor at Dalhousie University and an expert on North Korea, was unconvinced.

"North Korea has a long history of being bad, making nice, and being bad again," Dr. Huish explained.

Dr. Huish saw North Korea's participation in the Olympics as a desperate attempt to make the regime seem in control. "Sport diplomacy has a long history, but this is not sport, this is still part of the total control," said Dr. Huish. "Their entire form of governance is based upon seeing the Kims like god-like figures."

Both Dr. Huish and Pak expressed concern that North Korean athletes were being used as pawns in the country's political agenda. But Pak hoped the athletes, at least, would be able to make human connections with each other.

"Everything can be political – their citizenship and passports are North Korean. But there's something about athleticism that is somehow able to sideline some of the politics," said Pak. "They just have to look at each other and see actually they're not that different."

"We just want people to see that it's an artificial barrier on the peninsula, it's just ideas that are man-made," said Pak. "If we are more intent on unification and peace, that can overcome that."

"It's a change of mind," said Pak. "It's got to start somewhere."