

The “Garlic Girls”: South Korean curlers a global sensation

By **Kristen Gelineau**
and **Hyung-Jin Kim**
The Associated Press

GANGNEUNG, South Korea — Forget Lindsey Vonn and Adam Rippon. The real rock stars of the PyeongChang Olympics were a humble group of Korean curlers who had no idea they’d become a global sensation.

They are known as the “Garlic Girls,” the South Korean women’s curling team with the fairytale story whose moniker reflects the locally famed garlic grown in their hometown. Never considered a medal contender coming into PyeongChang, they have rose to No. 1 in the rankings, earning worldwide attention for their fierce talent and funny personalities.

And yet the Garlic Girls were almost totally sheltered from the international frenzy both by personal choice — they switched off their phones during the games to block outside attention — and by a protective coach who is keenly aware that curling is as much a mental game as a physical one.

After a match, the women were quickly shuffled past waiting reporters, giving journalists apologetic smiles and greetings of *Anyonghaseyo!* (hello) before vanishing. None of them, said coach Kim Min-jung, were aware that they’d become superstars.

“I’m sorry that I could not bring the athletes today, because I’m worried there will be too much pressure and burden on them,” Kim said. “Even the crowd is too interested in them.”

That interest is understandable. The Garlic Girls seem tailor-made for stardom.

The wildly skilled underdogs came into the Olympics ranked eighth in the world and went on to crush curling heavyweights including Canada and Sweden. They are cute and comical, referring to themselves by quirky nicknames such as “Pancake” and “Steak.”

Two teammates are sisters and all are longtime friends, creating irresistible chemistry on the ice. The team’s “skip,” or captain, has a steely gaze and funky, owl-eyed glasses that have become fodder for endless internet memes.

Many Koreans who had never seen a curling match nonetheless travelled to remote Gangneung to peek at their nation’s new darlings in person.

“I’m very proud of them,” said Lee Ji Sun, a 26-year-old who had never been inside a curling arena before one of the Olympic matches. They are “showing we can do well even in new sport events.”

Every match featuring the team was

Hey Yeong-mi: South Korean businesses join curling craze

By **Youkyung Lee**
The Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — In South Korea’s sudden craze for curling, it really is all in a name.

Free flights and baseball tickets are just some of the freebies South Korean companies are offering to anyone named Yeong-mi (yuhng-MEE), the first name of the lead sweeper for the women’s curling team that won an unexpected silver medal at the recent Winter Olympics in PyeongChang, South Korea.

The five-member team, from a remote province famous for its garlic, captured hearts in a country that hardly knew curling before. Dubbed the Garlic Girls, they have become sought-after models for commercials and inspired countless online memes and catch-phrases.

Among them is “Yeong-mi ya,” or “Hey Yeong-mi,” which the team’s skip, or captain, repeatedly called out to give guidance to lead sweeper Kim Yeong-mi. Commentators dissected the skip’s intentions based on how she called Kim’s



packed with screaming, flag-fluttering Koreans who leapt to their feet to cheer on the women’s stunningly precise shots. One fan in the crowd at one match waved what appeared to be a hand-drawn portrait of skip Kim Eun-jung with her trademark spectacles.

The excitement surrounding the women even prompted a few dozen senior citizens from the southern city of Jaechon to charter a bus to the arena so they could revel in the country’s newfound curling prestige.

“I actually don’t know curling rules, so I have to find out what’s going on from people sitting next to me,” said Yang Chang-nam, 77. “I feel very good as the South Korean team is doing well.”

That curling has gained any prominence in Korea is surprising in itself. Korea didn’t even have a team in Olympic curling until the 2014 Sochi Games.

It took Koreans a while to wake up to curling, largely because the country lacked sufficient facilities until recent years, Kim Young, a curling legend who started the Korean Curling Club in 1988, said by e-mail. Now, he says, Korea has six dedicated curling arenas, and many schools have curling teams.

In 2006, South Korea’s first curling center was built in the rural town of Uiseong. Four of the five team members attended Uiseong Women’s High School, where they were on the school’s curling team. Uiseong’s reputation as the nation’s default curling capital slowly grew, and the curling center has hosted about 15 major domestic and international curling events.

Still, until the women’s team began their surprise winning streak in PyeongChang, Uiseong was better known for its prolific

name or how many times she said “Yeong-mi,” a common first name.

And so a marketing campaign was born. Budget carrier Tway Air is giving away 200 roundtrip tickets to Nagoya, Japan, to people named Yeong-mi. Hundreds have left a comment on the airline’s website identifying themselves as Oh Yeong-mi, Cho Yeong-mi, Lee Yeong-mi, etc.

The Samsung Blue Wings baseball team is inviting anyone with the name to its opening day K-League game. The Lotte World amusement park is offering discounts through mid-March to people who have either “Yeong” or “Mi” in their names.

In the team’s home province of North Gyeongsang, the BlueOne Water Park is being even more generous: It is giving free entrance to those sharing the first name of any of the five team members.

Curling is relatively new to South Korea. The first curling center opened in 2006 in Uiseong, where four of the five Garlic Girls attended the same high school. The team, which came into the Olympics ranked eighth in the world,

Continued on page 8

SILVER STUNNERS. South Korea’s Kim Seon-yeong, left, sweeps ice with her teammate during a match against Russian athletes at the 2018 Winter Olympics in Gangneung, South Korea. The team known as the “Garlic Girls” came into the PyeongChang Games as the underdog who few believed would earn a medal. (AP Photo/Aaron Favila)

words for their favorite breakfast foods, figuring that would be easier for others to grasp.

Though the women’s team received much of the attention, Korean fans went wild for the men, too. After one men’s match, a player from the Korean team began throwing t-shirts into the crowd, which surged forward with outstretched arms.

Kim Heae Darm, a fan who leaped up and managed to snag a shirt sailing overhead, pressed it to her face and screamed with glee. She then turned to capturing the attention of Korean mixed doubles player Lee Ki-jeong, who scrawled his autograph in her notebook.

As she struggled to catch her breath, she explained her excitement by noting that Lee was strong, athletic, and “very handsome.”

“I like them so much!” she squealed.

Kim believes the exposure the sport has received in PyeongChang will lead to an influx of new curlers in the country, particularly because parents will support children taking it up.

As for the success of the women’s team, Kim, the founder of the curling club, couldn’t be prouder. “They are heroes!” he said.

Yet the Garlic Girls do have one request: Maybe someone could come up with a nicer team name for them?

“We would prefer the name “Team Kim,” Kim, the coach, said with a laugh. “Because although our hometown is Uiseong — which is related to garlic — we have no relationship with garlic at all.”

Kristen Gelineau and Hyung-jin Kim, Australia bureau chief and Seoul correspondent respectively for The Associated Press, were on assignment at the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics.

garlic production.

Koreans consider garlic a health food that boosts stamina. Seo Eun Ha, a 26-year-old Garlic Girls fan, believes garlic may have contributed to the team’s success. (She also credits the women’s good teamwork and strong relationships.)

Like many fans at Gangneung, Seo is particularly fond of the curlers’ unusual nicknames: Sunny, Steak, Pancake, Annie (a brand of yogurt), and ChoCho (a type of cookie).

“I think their nicknames go well with their lively images,” Seo said. “I like ‘Steak’ the most. It sounds so funny and unique.”

The nicknames started as a gag over breakfast one day, said Kim, the coach. The women were talking about how difficult it was for athletes from other countries to pronounce their names at international competitions. All five team members and their coach also share the same surname — Kim, which is very common in Korea — making their names even more confounding for foreigners.

Kim Seon-yeong, who was eating a sunny-side-up fried egg, joked that she could go by the name “Sunny.” The other women loved the idea. They each opted to nickname themselves after the English

2017 Most Honored Elder Award Recipient

Benny Avecilla

Benny Avecilla was born in Sorsogon, the Philippines, the son of Gregorio Madrid Avecilla and Irene Otano. He was married for 54 years to the late Carmen Deona Avecilla, an engineer, and has five daughters: Lorna, Maryanne, Gail, Lynn, and Sheila. While living in the Philippines, he worked for the Emerito Ramos Corporations as an accountant, office manager, and assistant vice president. Benny immigrated to the U.S. in April of 1977 and ended up in Portland via San Francisco. He worked for the West Coast Marine Co. as an accountant, and later was employed by the St. Paul Insurance Company until his retirement. He has been an active member of the Filipino-American Association of Portland & Vicinity since 1980 and served as chairman of the board for three years and president for eight years during his nearly four decades with the organization. He volunteers with St. Ignatius Church as well as the Meals on Wheels program of Loaves & Fishes. He is an avid bowler and organized the Fil-Am bowling league. He currently serves as the international director of the Filipino Canadian American (FilCanAm) Bowling Tournament. Benny has five grandchildren, two step-grandchildren, and one great-granddaughter.



AP Photo/Jan Landis

The Asian Reporter Foundation is accepting nominations for its 2018 “Most Honored Elder” awards.

The recognition banquet will be held Thursday, April 26, 2018 at southeast Portland’s Wong’s King Seafood Restaurant. Nomination forms and guidelines for eligibility are available for download at <www.ARFoundation.net>.

The nomination deadline is
Wednesday, April 4, 2018 at 5:00pm.

The Asian Reporter Foundation’s 20th Annual Scholarship & Awards Banquet features:

Most Honored Elder Awards	Cultural entertainment
Exemplary Community Volunteer Awards	Ethnic dinner
College Scholarship Awards	Silent auction