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11 Sporty K-Dramas to Watch to Celebrate Olympics 2024

These Korean shows deftly utilize sports in their storylines to demonstrate the characters' unrelenting perseverance and will to survive.



BY JAE-HA KIM

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As the 2024 Olympics continue in Paris, it's the perfect time to delve into K-dramas with Olympics-related storylines — and there are many, including some that explore Korea's fascinating history with the Olympic Games.

In 1988, Seoul hosted its first ever Olympics. In the K-drama *Reply 1988*, high school student Deok-seon (portrayed by Lee Hye-ri) is selected to be a *picket girl* — one of the pretty young women carrying the banners of the participating countries — for Madagascar. A middle child overshadowed by her siblings, Deok-seon's hopes are dashed when Madagascar pulls out of the Games. But the first episode finishes with a satisfying ending: Deok-seon gets her moment in the spotlight after Olympic organizers have her lead the Ugandan team instead.

Related: [K-Drama Star Park Ji-hu Talks *All of Us Are Dead*, NewJeans, and Crafting Empathy for Her Characters](#)

While the rest of *Reply 1988* isn't about the Seoul Games, the popular series captures an important era in South Korean history. It includes archival footage of marathoner Sohn Kee-chung, then 76, carrying the Olympic torch into the stadium to roaring applause. In 1936, Sohn was the first Korean to win a gold medal at any Olympics. However, because Korea was ruled by Japan at the time, the marathon runner had to compete with a Japanese name (Son Kitei) and under the Japanese flag. At the Seoul

Olympics, Sohn was a triumphant reminder of what Korea had overcome to get to this stage. And South Korea used this opportunity to showcase that it was no longer the poverty-stricken country from the 1950s that many foreigners still imagined it to be.

Even in 1988, though, K-dramas weren't **must-watch** TV for anyone outside of South Korea (or diaspora who rented grainy, bootlegged VHS tapes from their local Korean grocery store). Clearly it's a different era today with streaming services like Netflix and Hulu competing to snare the next new K-drama. In honor of the ongoing Paris Olympics, here are 11 Korean shows that deftly utilize sports in their storylines to demonstrate the characters' unrelenting perseverance and will to survive.

All of Us Are Dead

After adults and their government fail to rescue them from a virus outbreak, high school students fend for themselves in this zombie thriller. In too many genres, women are presented as needing to be rescued by men. But in *All of Us Are Dead*, Hari (played by Ha Seung-ri) is one of the calmest heroines. Her coach has written off the teenage archer as a loser who's not good enough to become an Olympian. But she proves her mettle, taking out zombies with her bow and arrows and literally saving human lives. Notably, the South Korean national team dominates this sport. Since archery's Olympic debut at the 1988 Games in Seoul, the South Korean women's team remains undefeated at the Games; the men's team have won gold at seven of the 10 Olympics. (Netflix)

All of Us Are Dead | Official Teaser | Netflix



and silver in the 10-meter air pistol competition at the 2024 Paris Olympics. Here, *The Glory* star Shin Ye-eun portrays a competitive air pistol shooter who is intent on figuring out how her twin brother died. After transferring into his high school, Chami joins the school's shooting team, where her skills are fodder for some of the show's most impactful vignettes. After teaming up with classmate Soo-hyeon (*All of Us Are Dead*'s Park Solomon), the pair navigate through a psychological whodunnit full of twists and turns that will keep viewers on their toes. (Hulu)

Revenge of Others | Trailer | Disney+ Singapore



W

Lee Jong-suk stars as a teenage gold medalist in Olympic pistol shooting. Initially heralded as a wunderkind, he is later accused of brutally murdering his entire family. That scenario sets up his return to glory and his vow to find the actual killer. Director Jung Dae-yoon describes *W* as the story of a man and a woman “who discover their reason for existence, while living in different dimensions in Seoul,” and that’s the best way to chronicle this show without giving the plot away. This clever K-drama adds a twist to the time-travel, parallel universe genre by throwing in a *manhwa* (Korean comics) twist. Han Hyo-joo plays the surgical resident trying to make sense of the inexplicable, as she strives to save both her father, and the man she loves who lives in another dimension. (Viki)

W - Official Trailer | Lee Jong Suk & Han Hyo Joo 2016 New Korean Drama



Lovely Runner

With his bronze medal in the men's 400-meter freestyle on July 27, 2024, Kim Woo-min became the second South Korean swimmer to ever medal in swimming at any Olympics. The first was four-time medalist Park Tae-hwan — who makes a cameo in *Lovely Runner*. Park won gold (400m freestyle) and silver (200m freestyle) in 2008, and two silver medals in 2012. Swimming plays a central role here, because before Sun-jae (Byeon Woo-seok) becomes a K-pop idol, he was a high school swimming star who competed against Park. While his injuries prevent him from advancing to the Olympics, his good looks and talent allow him to pivot into the music world. Kim Hye-yoon stars as Sol – Sun-jae's biggest fan girl – who travels back in time to save him from premature death. Throughout this series, undying love and sacrifice are stressed. But it's the early puppy love and the leads' chemistry that make viewers swoon (and tear up) at all the right moments. (Viki)

Lovely Runner | Official Trailer | CJ ENM



Twenty Five Twenty One

Hee-do (Kim Tae-ri) is an elite high school fencer and Yi-jin (Nam Joo-hyuk) is a former engineering student who had to drop out of college due to his family's bankruptcy. One of the beauties of this K-drama is that instead of focusing on romance, *Twenty Five Twenty One* depicts the importance of female empowerment and friendship. Hee-do's frenemy is her fencing rival (played by Bona), whose excellence pushes her to be better. This series is a parable for young women to choose and invest in themselves first. Though some viewers found the ending to be disappointing, I found it to be exquisite, getting the point across that an important romance doesn't have to define your life. (In real life, Oh Sang-uk won gold in men's individual sabre at the Paris Games.) (Netflix)

Twenty Five Twenty One | Official Trailer | Netflix [ENG SUB]



Weightlifting Fairy Kim Bok-joo

Body shaming and what defines a woman are explored in this sports-themed show, which centers on competitive college athletes. While female weightlifters like Bok-joo (Lee Sung-kyung) are mocked for being “built like men,” rhythmic gymnasts are punished for gaining even an ounce. Bok-joo and her friends are happy with their strength. But when she meets a handsome doctor, she tries to lose weight to look more traditionally feminine. The doc’s younger brother (Nam Joo-hyuk) is a childhood friend of Bok-joo’s and though it’s obvious they will eventually end up together, he is cruel to her, describing her as fat and pig-like. This K-drama is loosely based on weightlifter Jang Mi-ran, who won gold at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. (Kocowa+)

[NEW] Weightlifting Fairy Kim Bok Ju 1st teaser, 역도요정 김복주 1차 티저



Fight for My Way

In 2018, the South Korean government designated taekwondo as the country's national sport. Korea has dominated the martial art, winning the most Olympic medals in the sport. So it's not surprising that so many **K-dramas** incorporate taekwondo into the plot. In *Fight for My Way*, Dong-man (Park Seo-joon) is a high school champion who seems like a shoo-in to make Korea's national taekwondo team. But after he is accused of throwing an important match, he vows to never compete again. He has a contentious relationship with his childhood best friend Ae-ra (*Queen of Tears*' Kim Ji-won), whose own dream of being a TV news anchor has been derailed. Throughout all the will-they or won't-they teasing, the writers add relevant socio-political commentary about slut shaming, a woman's right to raise her own children, and the burdens a Korean wife is expected to suffer from her in-laws. (Kocowa+)

He's just okay-looking | Fight For My Way EP01 | KOCOWA+



Bloodhounds

In this eight-episode K-drama, the protagonists are two boxers who meet as competitors and forge a friendship that turns into one of the most wholesome bromances in K-drama history. Geon-woo (Woo Do-hwan) and Woo-jin (Lee Sang-yi) bond over the years they (separately) served in the Marines, their love of boxing, and their hatred for those who steal from the disadvantaged. They're just young and dense enough to have no qualms about trying to take down the city's most dangerous money lender. While the stabbings and bone-crunching fights will make some viewers wince, there is an underlying sweetness to this series, thanks to nuanced acting and clever writing. The finale is especially good, with the addition of an butt-kicking female archer. (At the 2024 Paris Olympics, South Korea has two athletes competing in boxing and both are women.) (Netflix)

Bloodhounds | Official Trailer | Netflix [ENG SUB]



Racket Boys

In this slice-of-life K-drama set far away from Seoul, badminton is a major plot catalyst. When teenager Hae-kang (Tang Joon-sang) is forced to move away from the city to the countryside – leaving behind his baseball teammates to compete on a ragtag badminton team instead – he is not happy. But he is extremely competitive and confident. Eventually, he grows to care for the quirky villagers, as well as his motley crew of badmintonists. The will to survive and do the right thing are explored throughout each episode, making *Racket Boys* more than just another sports-themed show. (South Korea's An Se-young – the world's top-ranked women's badminton player – is competing at the Paris Olympics.) (Netflix)

Racket Boys | Official Trailer | Netflix [ENG SUB]



Prison Playbook

Baseball is wildly popular in South Korea, which won the gold medal at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. *Prison Playbook* focuses on Je-hyuk (*Squid Game*'s Park Hae-soo), a squeaky clean but not overly bright pitcher who accidentally kills a rapist and is sentenced to a year in prison. He learns quickly that his superstar status makes him an easy target. He wises up during his incarceration, learning how to deal with prison guards demanding money and fellow prisoners who view his body as a prize to be won. He gets through each day, thanks to a childhood friend (played by *Hospital Playlist*'s Jung Kyung-ho) who just happens to work at the prison. Though it is Je-hyuk's story that dominates this show, there are numerous compelling sub plots explored, including a drug addict who is repeatedly locked up rather than treated for his addiction. (Baseball — which became an Olympic sport in 1992 — isn't at the Paris Games. Each host country gets to decide if they will have baseball. While Paris took a pass, it will return at the 2028 Olympics in Los Angeles.) (Netflix)

tvN - Prison Playbook Trailer



Like Flowers in Sand

A mystery thriller as much as it is a wrestling saga, *Like Flowers in Sand* is set in a small town where everyone is obsessed with *ssireum*, traditional Korean wrestling. Once a child prodigy in the sport, Baek-doo (Jang Dong-yoon) is the family's failure who hasn't lived up to his potential. Now in his early 30s, he has to decide whether to retire — as he promised in a drunken stupor — or try again for a win that continues to elude him. Meanwhile, people are being killed in this sleepy town. Even more disturbing to Baek-doo is a woman (Lee Ju-myung) who refuses to acknowledge that they grew up together. This series thrives on Jang's earnest likeability. He creates a man-child who is believable even in the most out-there possibilities. (While *ssireum* specifically isn't an Olympic sport, Koreans are big fans of wrestling. Kwon Sim-ho became a national hero in 2000 after becoming the only South Korean wrestler to win two gold Olympic medals. His were in back-to-back Games.) (Netflix)

Like Flowers in Sand | Official Trailer | Netflix



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Jae-Ha Kim is a columnist for the Chicago Tribune news syndicate. Born in Seoul, Kim specializes in covering Korean entertainment for outlets such as Teen Vogue, Rolling Stone, TODAY.com, NPR, **K-Culture with Jae-Ha Kim**, and many more. An in-demand voice on Korean culture, Kim has been featured in... [Read more](#)



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