

Role of Sport Public Relations for the COVID-19 Outbreak: Interview With Kwon Heo, Public Relations Manager at Kia Tigers

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Following a successful flattening of the curve in terms of the spread of COVID-19, the Korean Baseball Organization (KBO) became one of the first professional-level sport leagues to start its season in early. With limited programming available due to various sports cancellations and postponements, ESPN made the decision to broadcast the Korean baseball games. With this in mind, the perspective of a practitioner in Korean baseball could be valuable for numerous sport experts in other countries. Hence, an interview with Kwon Heo, a public relations (PR) manager with the Kia Tigers, was conducted. Heo entered the sport industry as a reporter for Gwangju daily newspapers from 1995 to 2001. Since 2002, he has been working as the head of PR for the Tigers. The Kia Tigers are the most successful professional baseball team in Korea, with 11 Korean series titles, and Kwon is responsible for the overall planning and promotion of the franchise. He also earned a doctorate in sports marketing from Mokpo National University in 2013, and since 2009 he has been teaching sports promotion, sports media, and sports marketing to students as a part-time lecturer at Mokpo National University in order to deliver his field experiences to students. He has also been in charge of conducting lectures regarding the training of sports industry personnel at universities near the region (e.g., Chosun University and Suncheon University).

Son, Williams, and Heo: What kind of work have you been doing for Kia Tigers? Could you describe the overall work of the Tigers PR team and your daily responsibilities as a team leader?

Heo: Since 2002, I have been in charge of PR, particularly media promotion. I am responsible for the team's mid- to long-term vision development. My daily tasks also include active promotion of the team and players. The main duties of the PR team this year include press publicity, managing the franchise's social media channels, and production of promotional materials. As the team leader, I also serve as the spokesperson for the team.

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Kwon Heo—Public relations manager, Kia Tigers.

Son, Williams, and Heo: You have mentioned that your duties include promotion of both the team and players. Are you also in charge of promoting players?

Heo: Player-related PR includes advertising our players. It covers various promotional activities, from developing a new star player to promoting individual players by arranging multiple media exposure. Hence, I work closely with the Tigers players as a PR agent. Regarding COVID-19, I was touched by how the players decided to wait for training at their residences in Gwangju, where the home stadium is located, rather than to return home to take a few days off. At that time, there was a rapid increase in the number of confirmed cases across the country and they tried their best to prevent any disease transmission to their family members. Also, the foreign players' reaction to the COVID-19 incident was unforgettable. Many Korean professional baseball teams sent foreign players back to their home countries after overseas spring camps. That was because Korea was experiencing a surge in the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases during that time. Of course, after some time, foreign players who thought Korea was safer, returned to Korea in a hurry. However, our team's foreign players, manager Matt Williams, and coach Mark Weidemaier came back to Korea with the team right after the Florida spring camp, which gave great trust to the front office officials and our fans.

Son, Williams, and Heo: You have diverse work experience. How did you get into the field of sport PR?

Heo: I started my professional career as a newspaper reporter. During my career, I became a sportswriter reporting on professional baseball. When the team was rebranded from the Haitai Tigers to the Kia Tigers, I got scouted by the franchise as a sport PR specialist. That was in 2002, and I have been working in the field of sport PR since then.

Son, Williams, and Heo: As an industry expert, can you explain the impact of COVID-19 on Korean baseball and the Tigers? What has changed? What difficulties is the industry facing at this moment?