

When Less Vision Is More in the Olympics

By [Jim Litke](#)

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The headline sounded too good to be true: "Legally Blind Archer Smashes World Record." Turns out it almost certainly was.

A day after setting the first world records of the 2012 Games, Im Dong-hyun led South Korea to a bronze medal in the team event Saturday and somehow managed to leave behind more questions than answers about exactly how impaired his eyesight is.

At one moment, speaking through an interpreter, Im described himself as farsighted and said the colors in the target — almost 70 meters away — appeared "blurry, not bad ... like a drop of paint in the water."

A moment later, he said he didn't need glasses to drive or read, unless he was tired, describing his problem as "old man's eyes." Later, he said the vision in his left eye was 20 percent of a normal-sighted person and 30 percent in the right. Not long after that, his coach, Oh Seon-

Tek, raised that number to 60 percent and laughed at the notion that his star pupil had any problem seeing the target at all.

Finally, after Im was asked directly a second time whether he was legally blind, he grinned widely and replied: "It's really a matter of common sense. If I were legally blind, do you really think I could participate in the Olympics?"

"I'd rather participate in the Paralympics," he added. "There, I'd have a much greater chance to win a gold medal."

Why Im has been described as legally blind in published reports dating back several years is a matter of some conjecture. A South Korean journalist who knows him well said Im occasionally passes close by without so much as a hint of recognition and that the various answers to questions on the topic may have more to do with the stigma attached to disabilities than his actual condition.

What is clear is that no matter the extent of Im's visual impairment, it hasn't affected his ability to compete. Officials of several federations suggested it might even be an advantage in a sport where some competitors sometimes focus too long and too intently on the target and freeze up, rather than rely on biomechanics or muscle memory to help them decide when to release the arrow. Called "target panic," it's archery's equivalent of the putting "yips" that bedevil even top-flight golfers.

That, however, has never been a problem with Im, who arrived at the Olympics as the No. 2-ranked archer in the world. On Friday, he broke his own personal 72-arrow mark and contributed to a second record in the team shoot. Then he shook off a slow start and nearly turned back a surprisingly hot-shooting American team that upset the South Koreans in the semifinal round.

The Americans, in turn, were upset by Italy in the gold-medal match. It turns out the Italians had a visually impaired archer of their own, Mauro Nespoli, because it's not all that uncommon in the sport. What thrust Im into the spotlight, and kept him there, are his consistently world-class results. He's got one more shot at redemption in these games come Friday.

"It's not the end of the line," he said after the victory over Mexico in the consolation round. "It's still a long way to go." Still, after winning the last three team golds — the South Korean women have won all six since archery became a medal sport at the 1988 Seoul Games — the scale of the disappointment was etched on coach Oh's face.

"Pressure is inevitable," he said through an interpreter, then explained how his nation's coaches and assistants have been needling one another for more than a decade about who would be in charge when the dynasty took a hit. Oh managed a weak smile to indicate that it was him.

"Only eight arrows determine everything," he added.

Oh's words and expressions barely hinted at how crushing the expectations for this squad were back home. Only soccer and perhaps baseball elicit anywhere near the same passion

among his countrymen. Among Olympic sports, archery has no competition.

Before coming to London, the South Koreans built an exact replica of Lord's, the most hallowed ground in cricket. Not only that, they built it inside a baseball stadium, filled it with spectators to simulate crowd noise, and put together a video to make it feel like the real thing. What they forgot to adjust for was the London weather.

"It was a true replica," Oh said, smiling ruefully. "But we were not able to make the wind."

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