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Contestants Jo Jin-hyeong (second left) and Jang Eun-sil (center) of Netflix reality competition series Physical: 100 attend a fan event in Seoul. — AFP photos



Contestants of Netflix reality competition series Physical: 100 attend a fan event in Seoul.



A man participates in an endurance game as he attends a fan event of Netflix reality competition series Physical: 100.

## 'WHOLESOME' SOUTH KOREAN REALITY TV PROVES A GLOBAL HIT

The challenge is straight from Greek mythology: hold a boulder aloft as long as possible. Korean car dealer Jo Jin-hyeong lasted over two hours, captivating global audiences in a reality show that could signal a new K-culture export success. After films such as Oscar-winning "Parasite" and TV series including Golden Globe-bedecked "Squid Game" helped popularize K-content overseas, industry figures have said South Korea's high-quality reality shows may be next in line for domination.



Contestants of Netflix reality competition series Physical: 100 attend a fan event.

"Physical: 100", the new Netflix show that gym buff Jo competed in, featured 100 men and women in prime physical condition, including South Korea's ex-Olympians and former special forces soldiers, performing absurdly difficult challenges. It is the first unscripted series to top the streaming giant's non-English chart, building on the popularity of "Singles Inferno", a Korean dating show that became a sleeper hit worldwide last year.

Part of the charm of such shows is the contestants: Jo, who started hitting the gym as a weedy teenager and has never been a professional athlete, found he could hold his own against some of South Korea's strongest people. The 41-year-old won one of the show's most brutal contests, the Greek myth-inspired

"Punishment of Atlas" challenge, where contestants had to lift and hold a boulder that bodybuilder contestant Kim Kang-min estimated was at least 50 kilograms (110 pounds). Jo managed two hours and 14 minutes.

"When I lifted it I thought it was going to end in about 30 minutes," he told AFP, saying he kept telling himself: "hang in there for just 10 more minutes, then 10 more minutes..." He came fourth overall in the show-an achievement he said was once unthinkable. "I started exercising in middle school because I was too puny. I wanted to be stronger," he said, getting emotional when he thought of his younger self, who he thanked "for not giving up".

### Wholesome and authentic

Over the last few years, South Korean content has taken the world by storm, with over 60 percent of Netflix viewers watching a show from the East Asian country in 2022, company data showed. Netflix, which spent more than 1 trillion won (\$759 million) developing Korean content from 2015 to 2021, said it was expanding its South Korean reality show output this year.

"Korean nonfiction shows didn't travel before Netflix started taking them global," said Don Kang, the company's vice president of Korean content. "There are some things we did to make shows more easily understandable to the global audience," he said, such as simplifying subtitles.

Car dealer Jo said he thought the show was proving a hit abroad due to the genuine sense of camaraderie in South Korea's sports community. "We cheered each other on in every contest, comforted each other when someone lost," he told AFP. The "relative wholesomeness" of South Korean reality shows is a core part of their appeal to foreign audiences, said Regina Kim, an entertainment writer and expert on K-content based in New York City.

"It's like a breath of fresh air for American viewers who might be tired of watching reality stars hook up or fight all the time," she told AFP. "There could definitely be more Korean reality shows that become popular overseas, including in the US," she said, pointing to suc-

### Global fans

"Physical: 100" caused some controversy by pitting contestants of different genders against each other, prompting questions about whether it was fair. Ultimately, the top five contestants were men. But Jang Eun-sil, one of 23

ship she demonstrated on the show. Although she didn't win, she said competing allowed her to bring her beloved sport to a broader audience.

"To be honest, wrestling is an unpopular sport in South Korea," she said, adding it was a "huge honor" that, thanks to her,



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cessful Korean reality formats that have become global franchises. "There are US remakes of Korean reality shows like 'The Masked Singer' and 'I Can See Your Voice' that have been super popular here," she said, referring to the hit South Korean music shows later produced in English by Fox.

women competing in the show, told AFP she found the format "original and fresh", and that it helped to motivate her throughout the challenges.

"I just gave my best every moment, so I have no regrets and never thought it was unfair," said the 32-year-old wrestler, who was widely praised for the leader-

more South Koreans had become aware that women wrestlers existed. She's also seen an influx of global fans flooding her social media accounts. "I now plan to add English subtitles (to my YouTube channel)," she said. — AFP

## Elation and fear: Everest pioneer recounts historic climb

He's over 80, but the Austrian climber Peter Habeler—one half of the duo that was first to scale Everest without supplemental oxygen—is still fantastically fit and scaling mountain peaks, which he calls his "fountain of youth". Many thought it impossible when he and Reinhold Messner of Italy-both Tyroleans-set out to conquer the world's highest peak in 1978 without additional oxygen. When they reached the summit, "I was beside myself," the mountaineer told AFP at his home in western Austria, feeling "happiness and also sadness and fear". "The higher we got, the slower our steps became. But the more certain we became that we would reach the summit," he said.

As soon as he and Messner—who is from just over the Zillertal Alps in Italy—took their "obligatory" summit photo, "I thought, 'How do I get down?'" Climbers who go above 8,000 meters enter what

is considered the "death zone" due to the lack of sufficient oxygen to sustain human life for long periods. At 8,848 meters (29,032 feet), Everest was deep in that danger area. Habeler still recalls his "jitters", wanting to return safely to his family. "We didn't know what would happen with the brain, what would happen with the muscles," he said.

Since then, numerous climbers have summited the world's highest mountain without carrying oxygen, even though more than 300 have lost their lives on the Nepalese peak since 1950. Habeler, who has lost none of his wiry, electric energy, said he feels "privileged" to have been able to go up the Himalayan giant before it was overrun by climbing tourism.

### Peaks are 'friends'

Even into his ninth decade, he continues to climb, describing mountains as "friends" which have brought him experiences as precious as "splinters of diamonds". Climate change, however, is posing "a huge problem", he said, including in his native Alps, with entire routes expected to disappear as warmer temperatures melt permafrost, raising the risk of rock falls. A champion of sustainable tourism, Habeler started out as a mountain guide, and one of his sons still runs the ski school he set up in his native Mayrhofen. The veteran insisted that he was "never a mountain collector" chasing records, but instead wanted to "open the door" for himself and others-to show that it could be done.

### I'm a minimalist

A few years after Everest, and spending time in his native valley, "the eight-thousander fever got me a bit again," and he did several more big climbs-though never again with Messner. Messner, now 78, went on to become the first to climb all the world's 14 highest peaks, the so-

called eight-thousanders. "You could do anything with Reinhold," said Habeler, thanking Messner for helping him to overcome his jitters on Everest. For his part, Messner wrote a tribute to the

avalanche in Canada's Banff National Park still brings tears to Habeler's eyes. The accident made Habeler more cautious, though he still continues to climb mountains with as little material and out-



Peter Habeler poses for a picture at his home.— AFP photos

"ingenious" Austrian in Habeler's latest book. "I experienced it as a sure instinct. He can simply climb mountains: in any terrain, at any height, under any circumstances," Messner wrote.

Indeed, at the ripe old age of 74, Habeler set another record, becoming the oldest mountaineer to climb the north face of the Eiger in Switzerland with his former student David Lama, then aged 26. Lama's death two years later in an

side help as possible. "I am a minimalist. When I'm mountaineering, I always have the minimum. I don't want to have too much in my backpack," he said. While Habeler's parents were not mountaineers, he credited the mountain guides and others "who bring out the best in you" for helping him get to the roof of the world. — AFP

## Japan inn sorry for changing communal bathwater twice a year

The head of an upscale Japanese inn apologized on Tuesday for only changing the water in its hot-spring bath every six months, allowing bacteria to breed 3,700 times over the standard limit. Local ordinances stipulate a weekly replacement of the water in which guests traditionally soak naked together after taking showers, with men and women bathing separately. Makoto Yamada, president of the company that operates the nearly 160-year-old inn, said the facility had neglected to keep the water hygienic by using enough chlorine. He "didn't like the smell" of the chemical, he said at a press conference.

"It was a selfish reason," Yamada added, describing the lapse as a "wrongdoing that completely disregarded the health of our customers". The lax measures at Daimaru Besso inn-where Japan's emperor Hirohito once stayed-began around December 2019. Since then, staff at the facility in the southwestern Fukuoka region grew even more complacent as the number of guests dropped during the pandemic, Yamada said.

Even before the scandal made headlines, there had been red flags. An inspection last year by authorities found double the permissible amount of legionella bacteria in the inn's bathwater. At the time, the inn "falsified documents to claim that the chlorine had been properly added," Yamada admitted. A subsequent probe by health authorities detected a whopping 3,700 times the standard limit of legionella. The germ reportedly caused an individual who had visited multiple hotels including Daimaru Besso to fall sick. Legionella bacteria can cause lung infections.— AFP



Peter Habeler, Austrian extreme mountaineer and mountain guide who, together with Reinhold Messner, scaled Mount Everest in 1978 for the first time without supplemental oxygen, shows Zillertal mountain at his home in Mayrhofen im Zillertal, Austria.