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Politicising the strawberry

A Japanese Olympic curler's comment on a South Korean-grown strawberry has caused a multinational dispute



A member of the Japanese Olympic curling team enjoyed Korean-grown strawberries as a mid-game snack during last month's winter Olympic games in Peongchang, South Korea. Ever since, the curling team has been attempting to repair the damage after a political public relations nightmare.

The unnamed team member declared the strawberries as "surprisingly delicious" which resurfaced a decades-long dispute over the ownership of the original strawberry genetics.

The Wall Street Journal reported that the Japanese curling team posed for photos enjoying Japanese grown strawberries last Tuesday, after a fluster of comments online and via media, backlashing praise for the Korean-grown fruit.

During the 1990's, two Japanese-developed varieties of strawberry – the Red Pearl and Akihime – were imported into South Korea. During that time South Korea had no legislation that dictated the protection of plant products, so licensing agreements that existed in Japan had no effect on South Korean farmers.

The varieties took off and were favoured for their high yields and sweet fruits. A treaty was signed in 2002 allowing foreign farmers to register their original products for protection in Korea but didn't come in to effect until 2012. During that time local Korean farmers developed hybrids of the varieties which they were able to register separately as their own products.

Japan takes its fruit industry very seriously and has a niche in high quality luxury fruits. Tsutomu

Imura, a Japanese official responsible for the copyright of fruits and vegetables in Tochigi (a well known strawberry-growing prefecture) says he was disappointed to learn that the Olympic players were eating Korean fruit.

He told the Wall Street Journal that it shouldn't be the source of a dispute between the countries but added that Japan has only been growing strawberries since the mid-19th century from seeds originally imported from Holland.

The South Korean agriculture ministry declined to comment on the matter due to diplomatic sensitivities over the issue.