

The beautiful game in Korea: my experiences

Mike Brandon November 2009

When I first discovered that I would be coming to Ansan as a teacher my first task was to check-out who the local football (soccer) team were. A quick scouting on the internet brought up 'Ansan Hallelujah', playing in the recently built 35,000 capacity Wa Stadium. As a huge lover of the 'beautiful game' I was very excited to get involved in supporting what would be my adopted local club in Korea.

After checking the Korean football league structure, the 'K League', I discovered that the Ansan team were playing in the 'National league', the second tier of Korean club football. However this seemed like no problem for me, as in England, teams in lower tiers than the Premier League still receive huge crowds. For example, Leeds United, playing in the third tier of English football, receive crowds of over 30,000 at each home game. So I went to watch my first 'Ansan Hallelujah' with great anticipation last November.

The first thing I noticed was just how empty the stadium was, I had expected a large size crowd but I was surprised to see just a few hundred at best filling what is a very impressive stadium. It was certainly a far cry from watching my local Premier League team, Everton, play! After this I decided to check out the K-League, watching last seasons K League final between Suwon and Seoul. This was a very different experience, the stadium was almost full and the supporters were very noisy! Much more like home.

Yet I witnessed some more key differences between football here and back home, in particular the fans were 'polite' to the opposition, applauding each others teams for particular moments of skill. Now, back home this would be unheard of, with fans heckling the opposition as much as cheering and singing for their own side. All of this has got me thinking about the development of football in Korea. Certainly Korea is a known footballing force in the world, having qualified for their seventh successive World Cup in South Africa next year, and back home in England; Ji-Sung Park, Ki-Hyeon Seol and Chung-Yong Lee are known Premier League players; Park now being a household name in England. However the domestic league in Korea appears to lack the popularity and depth of its equivalents elsewhere in the world.

If the Korean game is to improve, and certainly if South Korea is to

replicate its 2002 achievements at future World Cups, something must be done about the domestic football situation. In England, and indeed in the league structures of Europe, Latin America and Africa, a football club is very much linked to the locality, and draws much of its support from the local people. As a result, a football club is a big part of a community's identity, whence the consistent level of support even for clubs which are a long way down the league structure. However in Korea I have noticed that teams are not necessarily strongly linked to their location. For example Ansan Hallelujah have only played in Ansan for two years, having been from Iksan originally and also playing in Gimpo for three seasons. K League teams Seoul FC and Jeju United have a similar history, with Seoul FC being Anyang Cheetas before the 'GS group' moved them to Seoul, and Jeju United having been a team from Seoul and Bucheon originally. This type of moving is not healthy for developing strong fan bases, with teams needing to build a history and identity for fans to latch onto.

Also the domestic leagues in other nations have many teams and many tiers to their league structures. As a result, there is plenty of relegation and promotion as teams move up and down the league structure each season, giving any team, in theory, a chance to rise to the top. However in Korea the league structure is divided into three tiers, but only one team is promoted to the K League each year, worse still, due to the financial constraints, the last two winners of the National league declined promotion. This removes much of the excitement and rivalry and also takes away the importance of lower division teams.

It is my desire to see football strengthened in Korea, having followed the Korean game since buying a Korean national side shirt in 2002! I believe that fans are the key to strengthening the Korean game, and I have since made myself a regular visitor to the Wa Stadium, and sometimes travelling to away matches as well. I have had the opportunity to meet some of the players and travelled on the team coach back from an away match against Nowon Hummel, an interesting experience and one I would love to replicate with Everton!

I have seen many Premier League, Serie A and La Liga shirts being worn around the area so I am sure there are plenty of football fans around, but how many of you take the time to watch Korean football? To strengthen the Korean game and support our own local side, we should make our way to the Wa Stadium to watch Ansan football club play! I hope I can see many of you at the Wa Stadium for the 2010 season!!

Some of my pictures from the K League and National League

