

ACCEPTED VERSION: ‘THE FIFA WORLD CUP, INTERNATIONAL FRIENDSHIP AND THE ‘MYSTERY MEN OF THE EAST’: WHEN MIDDLESBROUGH FELL IN LOVE WITH NORTH KOREA’

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Structured Abstract

Article Type: Research Paper

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Findings: Focusing chiefly on the role of British agency in the creation and

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Findings: Focusing chiefly on the role of British agency in North Korea-UK interactions, this research reveals the combination of local sporting conditions, international relations and individual and institution engagement in constructing bonds between Middlesbrough and North Korea since 1966. In doing so, the article draws out some of the peculiar local, economic and political factors that have shaped and nurtured the sporting, pseudo-diplomatic connections between Pyongyang and Teesside.

Practical Implications: This study highlights the important role that sport can play in harnessing new international interactions and understandings between peoples from different cultural and political systems. The power of football and bonds created at a local level (in this case Middlesbrough) to help nurture international diplomatic relations and embrace common transnational interests is also considered, as are the limitations of what might be considered a strand or extension of sports diplomacy.

Originality, Value: Expanding beyond the existing literature on sports diplomacy, mega events and official interactions between North Korea and the UK, this article utilises hitherto unpublished historical documentation and new oral testimony to bring a new perspective on the benefits and challenges posed by interactions across international borders facilitated by sport, both at the FIFA World Cup in 1966 and in recent decades.

The FIFA World Cup, international friendship and the ‘mystery men of the East’: When Middlesbrough fell in love with North Korea¹

The FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) World Cup of 1966 marked the highpoint in English international football history as the host nation triumphed 4-2 against West Germany at Wembley to win, to date, their only World Cup and major tournament. Although the story of Bobby Moore, Geoff Hurst et al. has been the dominant narrative associated with the tournament held across England in the summer of 1966, in one corner of England the most mysterious and unlikely of heroes emerged in the shadow of chemical plant and steelworks that defined the working-class industrial town of Middlesbrough. A team of hitherto unknown North Koreans stunned the footballing world with the shock of the tournament - and arguably the biggest in World Cup history – by defeating much-fancied Italy courtesy of a solitary goal by Pak Do Ik (Pak Tu-ik) at the town’s Ayresome Park. The victory features regularly in media countdowns of sport’s giant killings and every four years during FIFA World Cup coverage archival footage of that famous night is beamed across the globe as pundits hope for the next upset. Yet there is another dimension to the story of the North Korean’s success, that of a bond that is an exemplar of the role sport can play in bringing together different cultures, in this case between the tournament’s unlikely heroes and the people of Middlesbrough. The link has continued into the twenty-first century against the backdrop of, and often at odds with, wider international attitudes to the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.²

Historiography

As world soccer’s showpiece event, the FIFA World Cup has unsurprisingly been the subject of numerous popular and academic histories and documentaries, with the 1966 competition in England receiving heightened attention around the fiftieth anniversary of the tournament in 2016. This included popular histories, academic publications and online features spanning overviews of the tournament, revisionist interpretations of the event and studies of the wider organisation of the World Cup.³ The controversial Russia 2018 tournament also spawned new work exploring the political and social history of the competition, including the *History Workshop Online*’s ‘World Cup Series’ including the author’s comparisons between England 1966 and Russia 2018, and a subsequent paper presented at the International Institute of

Korean Studies at the University of Central Lancashire from which this article is developed.⁴ Perhaps the most notable scholarship to emerge in recent years of relevance to this present study is Tennent and Gillett's innovative work on managing sporting events centred upon detailed analysis of the 1966 World Cup's organisation.⁵ By exploring the wider economic and political curveballs thrown up in organising a major sporting event and bringing nations and nationalities together, they have revealed some of the diplomatic and political sensitivities of North Korea's participation.⁶ Building upon Polley's study of the diplomatic issues posed by North Korea's qualification including sensitivities around acknowledging a nation not recognised by the UK government,⁷ Tennent and Gillett have highlighted how the Asian side's qualification made 'the interaction between football and international diplomacy simply unavoidable' and gave rise to new international connections.⁸

The role of such transnational bonds facilitated by the World Cup has received relatively little attention, with the ground breaking 2002 documentary *The Game of Their Lives* by director Dan Gordon and Nick Bonner of Koryo Tours the standout exception.⁹ A culmination of four years of negotiations, Gordon and Bonner led a western film crew with unprecedented official access to North Korea to tell the story of the achievements of the 1966 football team that competed in England.¹⁰ The project and award-winning documentary received acclaim from media outlets across the globe, the UK's Minister of Sport and the European Commission's European Commissioner for External Relations.¹¹ Ultimately, *The Game of Their Lives* would lead to the return to Middlesbrough of North Korea's heroes of 1966 and reignite the connection between the town and the players. Tennent and Gillett have since described the relationship as 'a strange and powerful bond' that helped facilitate international connections.¹²

In contrast to the primary focus on the national and global dynamics analysed by Polley, Tennent and Gillett, the focus here will hone in on Middlesbrough as a case study and provide an insight into international sporting diplomacy enacted at a local level. Drawing upon a range of sources including local government records, football club documents, newspaper articles and oral testimony, this article will track and seek to explain the evolution of the Middlesbrough and North Korea relationship. The article explores early attitudes towards the 'mystery men' of North Korea in the lead up to the World Cup, the

Middlesbrough public's embracing of the Asian underdogs as they shook the footballing world, and subsequent engagement with the other heroes of England 1966 into the twenty first century. Limited access to North Korean generated sources - with *Rodong Sinmun* and Korean Central Yearbook material on the earlier interactions either not readily accessible or non-existent – has meant that this work has a stronger focus on the ways in which the international connection was developed from the British, and specifically Middlesbrough, perspective. Nevertheless, the article does draw upon interviews with the Korean footballers of 1966 and, in the case of the interactions in recent decades, correspondence from North Korean officials and the limited news content on the links with Middlesbrough released by the Korean Central News Agency.

In exploring the relationship between Middlesbrough and North Korea facilitated by football, it is useful to consider the definition and boundaries of 'sports diplomacy' as a concept in order to better understand its practical application and context. Moreover, this will also help gauge whether this relationship can be understood as sports diplomacy and, if so, whether it was successful in achieving improved transnational relations that forms the fundamentals of diplomacy. Murray has noted the varying degrees to which sports diplomacy can act as a useful tool to encourage improved development and dialogue, whilst pointing to some of the problems of the hybridity of bringing 'sport' – competitive in its nature – together with 'diplomacy' as the business of negotiation, compromise and peace enacted by the state.¹³ Blurring boundaries between traditional diplomatic approaches, Murray has noted the range of tactics utilized by deploying sport as a means of communication, in particular the increased agency of non-state actors such as sportspersons and sporting institutions through public diplomacy, pointing to the example of Ping-Pong Diplomacy widely credited with reopening China-US interactions in 1971.¹ By utilising the international, culture-crossing language of sport, governments have engaged in 'sportification of diplomacy' to increase its reach by tapping into the global game of football with its worldwide, media profile.¹⁴ Murray too has considered the problems posed in the uses of sports diplomacy both as a term and in application. He has argued that the notion is contradictory given the competitive nature of sport compared to diplomacy's goals of seeking to minimise friction, whilst he has

¹ See also Håvard Mokleiv Nygård and Scott Gates, 'Soft power at home and abroad: Sport diplomacy, politics and peace-building', *International Area Studies Review*, Vol.16, No.3 (2013), 235-243

also contended that it works only sporadically and on a case-by-case basis, albeit acknowledging its successes in challenging ‘entrenched social constructions of the ‘enemy’.¹⁵

In contributing to the underexplored topic of the relationship between international sport and diplomacy, the study of Middlesbrough’s interactions with North Korea also highlights the multi-fold networks deployed as instruments of diplomacy noted by Murray and Pigman.¹⁶ Looking to the two models identified by Murray and Pigman of ‘cases in which international sport is consciously employed by governments as an instrument of diplomacy’ and the second category of international sport as diplomacy that concerns ‘diplomatic representation, communication and negotiation between non-state actors that take place as a result of ongoing international sporting competition’, it will be argued that the Middlesbrough and North Korea interactions fulfil some of these criteria.¹⁷

Middlesbrough and North Korea: Unexpected hosts and unlikely qualifiers

At the FIFA Congress held in Rome in 1960, England was named as the host nation for the eighth FIFA World Cup, seeing off competition from Spain and Germany. The matches would take place during July 1966 and be divided regionally between London, the Midlands, North West and the North East – the category consisting of Sunderland and, eventually, Middlesbrough.¹⁸ In fact, Middlesbrough was not initially amongst those locations selected to host World Cup matches. It was only in 1964 that Middlesbrough stepped in to replace nearby Newcastle as a result of disputes between Newcastle United Football Club and the local authority over ground improvement works and developing the venue for the wider community, albeit Middlesbrough’s Ayresome Park had been considered as a potential host venue as early as 1961.¹⁹ Despite the short timescales to execute ground improvement works to meet the criteria to host tournament matches, the news was met with delight by Middlesbrough Football Club’s chairman and seen as recognition of the ‘high regard’ the club was held by the footballing world.²⁰ Although not on the scale of the multi-media, global, sponsorship driven spectacles that characterise World Cups of the twenty-first century, the 1966 incarnation of the tournament provided an opportunity for provincial towns such as Middlesbrough to enjoy heightened profile and time in the media spotlight. These benefits were not lost on Middlesbrough Town Council who recognised the opportunity to showcase the area’s culture, industry, green spaces, retail provision and sporting activities

and leave a 'lasting impression' at a time when the town was undergoing a period of transition.²¹ Middlesbrough had expanded rapidly in the Victorian period centred upon the growth of the iron and steel industries along the banks of the River Tees. Firms including Bolckow Vaughan and Dorman Long were at one point amongst the largest steel manufacturers in the world, with the latter listing Sydney Harbour Bridge, Bangkok Memorial Bridge and Newcastle's Tyne Bridge amongst its famous projects. However, the heavy industries had endured decline between the World Wars, although and the area's role in the development of the chemical sector had brought some reprieve. When the World Cup arrived on Teesside in 1966, much of the industry had moved downriver away from Middlesbrough and the World Cup provided an opportunity to promote the town as the modern, commercial centre for the wider region. Despite the benefits of place promotion, the public met the impending arrival of the World Cup with mixed emotions following the draw that confirmed matches between Chile, Italy, North Korea and the USSR would take place at Ayresome Park. One local newspaper article reported on the range of supporters emotions spanning excitement at seeing the Italians, disappointment at Brazil not been drawn to play in the town, and total apathy towards the tournament.²² The relegation of Middlesbrough Football Club – nicknamed the 'Boro' - to the third tier of English football for the first time in their history immediately before the tournament did little to whet the appetite for a summer of football as reflected in Ayresome Park attracting the lowest attendances of the tournament.²³

Whilst Middlesbrough's involvement in the tournament was unforeseen, the qualification of North Korea was even more unexpected and unorthodox. The qualification stages for the tournament were fraught with problems posed by the majority of African and Asian football associations boycotting the World Cup in protest at the allocation of only one place for those hailing from the aforementioned continents and Oceania.²⁴ After South Korea pulled out due to concerns that participation by their footballers in the qualifiers would prohibit the individual players from competing in the 1968 Olympic Games, Australia and North Korea remained to compete for the one qualifying spot.² Even then there was doubt surrounding the

² See Gwang Ok and Kyongho Park, 'Cultural Evolution and Ideology in Korean Soccer: Sport and Nationalism, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, Vol.31, No.3, 363-375 for an alternative explanation of South Korea's withdrawal centred upon concerns that defeat by North Korea would expose its ideological weaknesses.

Korean's participation, with reports circulating in the weeks leading up to the two-legged play off in neutral Cambodia suggesting the *Chollima* would not compete owing to lack of preparation by the Asians due to their soccer season having ended.²⁵ North Korea were no strangers to controversy and late withdrawals in the lead up to major sporting events. Two years earlier, a number of North Korean athletes selected to represent the joint Korean team at the 1964 Tokyo Olympics were banned from competing after participating in the anti-imperialist and anti-IOC Games of the Newly Emerging Forces (GANEF0), prompting an outright withdrawal by North Korea.²⁶ Despite this uncertainty, the matches in Phnom Penh went ahead and allaying the Australian players' pre-match confidence, North Korea won 6-1 and 3-1 – an aggregate defeat 'not surprising' to some quarters of the Australian press who praised the Koreans' speed, strength and 'sound knowledge of modern football techniques'.²⁷ Despite the comprehensive victory of the Asians, there were still reports in the Australian press casting doubt on North Korea's participation as late as February 1966, with the Asian qualifiers having not made any contact with World Cup officials or arranged visas to enter the UK.²⁸

In the northern hemisphere, the preparations of the North Koreans also prompted curiosity and speculation in the column inches of the north east England regional press. *The Northern Echo* reported on the curious issue of the language barrier between the British hosts and visiting North Koreans, with Middlesbrough Football Club 'racking their brains on how to entertain the North Korean team'.²⁹ A solution was found in Mr Cho, a Korean living in nearby Haverton Hill, who offered services as an interpreter for the visiting players as he had done for Korean athletes while resident in London during the Olympic Games of 1948. The curiosity surrounding the North Koreans was explored by the newspaper's Teesside reporter, who chronicled the dilemmas surrounding catering for the Asian visitors. 'Wouldn't they go for roast beef and Yorkshire pud?' he asked Mr Cho, a reference to a traditional delicacy hailing from the county, before going on to query what the Koreans might wish to see whilst on Teesside, with the area's industries and local works suggested as sites of interest. The Middlesbrough-based *Evening Gazette* too indulged its readers with further speculation on the Koreans, reporting in February 1966 on the silence of the 'mystery men of the East', with Middlesbrough FC secretary Harry Green stating 'we still haven't heard a word from them...there is still a lot of mystery about these people'.³⁰ By early March with their participation confirmed, the column inches dedicated to the Koreans increased significantly.

The front page of the same newspaper led with the headline ‘A Korean ‘Grilling’ for Boro’!', accompanied by a photograph of the delegates inspecting the Ayresome Park turf and a report on the first encounter with the Koreans:

‘This was the Koreans’ first glimpse of the ground where they will play all three of their World Cup games...not that it was easy to glean whether they were impressed or not. They were brought from their hotel to Ayresome Park, went straight on to the pitch and then the barrage of questions began. How high will the grass be for our games in July? *How high would it grow if it were not cut?* How much is the camber? What will the temperature and humidity be in July? Exactly where does the sun rise and set? It won’t be as wet as this in July? Etcetera, etcetera!’³¹

The detailed enquiries of the visiting delegation prompted a fascination at the unknowns, reinforced in the article’s closing statement that ‘They will return to Korea when they are satisfied with the arrangements. That could be before the end of the week. But, of course, no one really knows’.³² The presence of a Korean advance party on Teesside in June 1966 prompted further coverage of the culture and customs of the visitors not found in reports on the Chileans, Italians and Russians. The *Evening Gazette* reported on the Koreans’ ‘mock despair’ at the dreary British weather and reported on the team’s two-year long preparations for the tournament.³³ The arrival of the rest of the footballers at their training base near Teesside Airport led to further curiosity at the preparation methods of the team, with the Korean’s diet deemed ‘slightly staggering’ to ‘Western eyes’ chronicled in details for the readers of the *Evening Gazette*.³⁴ Three days later the Middlesbrough public received news that the North Korean team would move training to the town after the arrangements prepared by Middlesbrough Parks Department at the team’s hotel were deemed substandard by the visitors.³⁵

As the tournament approached, there were signs that the Teesside public would be encouraged to rally behind the Asian underdogs. This was no more evident than at a civic reception held at the Mayor’s Parlour in Middlesbrough Town Hall, with the Mayor Alderman Jack Boothby promising the Koreans support declaring ‘You wear the same colours as Middlesbrough, we will shout for you’.³⁶ The centre of municipal life in the town

also flew the North Korean flag alongside other competitors for good measure, a move that brought pride for the visiting footballers.³⁷ Russell has since pointed to how the mayor aligned the town's involvement in the tournament with feeling part of the nation.³⁸ Boothby clearly recognised the value in the town embracing all the trappings of the tournament, evidenced through the local authority investing £10,000 in supporting the World Cup in Middlesbrough through infrastructure developments and 'an unrivalled string of events'.³⁹

At Ayresome Park, the promise of the Mayor would come to fruition at the meeting between North Korea and the USSR on July 12th 1966. Although the Asians were defeated 3-0 by their Soviet counterparts in a comprehensive loss for the adopted 'home' team, the locals embraced the underdogs and availed any notions of hostility towards 'enemy' footballers in the aftermath of the Korean War.⁴⁰ In fact, the rough tactics deployed by the Russians brought criticism in the press and helped mobilise a sympathetic Ayresome supporters behind the Koreans.⁴¹ The North Koreans faced elimination from the tournament if they were defeated by Chile in their next match. The Chileans took an early lead that left the Asians once again facing defeat, and with it the end of their participation in the World Cup. However, a late North Korean equaliser with only minutes remaining prompted frenzied scenes at Ayresome Park in stark contrast to the muted response to the South Americans' opener. One contemporary football commentator described the crowd's as 'anxious' for the underdogs to succeed, the support 'enormous' and boldly acclaimed 'they have never cheered Middlesbrough like this for years here'.⁴² Post-match, perhaps appreciating the potential for the Koreans to propel Middlesbrough into the spotlight, Mayor Boothby greeted the players, praised their performance and hailed the invigorating Asian football.⁴³ In a 2001 interview for *The Game of Their Lives* documentary, North Korea's goalscoring hero Pak Seung Zin (Pak Sŭng-jin) still considered the people of Middlesbrough's support for the team as a 'riddle' which he still did not understand.⁴⁴ Analysis of local newspaper archives helps explain some of the ways in which the exploits of that July night at Ayresome Park helped nurture the evolving bonds with the Teesside fans. Noting the praise of the North Korean Manager for the local support,⁴⁵ the *Evening Gazette's* report hailed the 'Ayresome crowd's big part' in backing the Koreans, with reporter Cliff Mitchell capturing the emotions of the moment:

‘The World Cup records for 1966 will record that two minutes before the end of the Group 4 match between Korea and Chile at Ayresome Park on Friday, July 15, Pak Seung Jin equalised for Korea to make the result 1-1. That is the cold plain truth. But I think it is correct to say that the crowd of 13,792 was as much responsible for the goal as the jubilant little Korean forward. When the equaliser came, some electric strip lighting in the Press refreshment room up in the stand at Ayresome Park was brought down by the stamping of a crowd that has well and truly ‘adopted’ the Asians’.⁴⁶

In going beyond the ‘cold plain truth’, the sense of football going beyond the turf is evident in the public’s ferocious support of ‘the men from the land of the Morning Calm’ and the local press’ romanticised depiction of an equaliser. Contemplating the reasons for such vociferous backing of the Asians, Mitchell continued:

‘Why don’t they cheer the Borough like that? Maybe they have done in the past – but the response has not always been so satisfactory! The Koreans, obviously heartened by the fact that they were cheered every time they were on the ball, attacked with tremendous enthusiasm...Tears there were at the end. Tears of sheer, amazed joy from the Koreans and of bitter sorrow from the Chileans...I imagine that there will be quite a good crowd of Borough (or should it be Korea?) supporters at Ayresome Park for the final match against strong favourites Italy next Tuesday’.⁴⁷

The Koreans were given little hope prior to their clash with Italy, so much so that *The Guardian* detailed plans for the Koreans to attend a Football Association reception for eliminated teams in London anticipating their ‘likely’ defeat by the Azzurri. The article also revisited attitudes to the Koreans in the UK and reported on the ‘Diplomatic welcome for North Koreans’.⁴⁸ The distancing of sport from politics was apparent with the article outlining arrangements to welcome the Asians ‘in spite of the fact that the Government does not recognise the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. Which means, it seems, that what applies to politics does not apply to sport’. In fact, *The Guardian* article is revealing of an eagerness to separate international politics from detracting from the action on the pitch, going as far as to hit out at a ‘Government that has already

been made to look foolish over its decision not to allow the North Korean flag on the 1s 3d World Cup commemorative stamp'.⁴⁹

Despite gloomy predictions at the Koreans' prospects, the Middlesbrough crowd rallied behind the Asian underdogs against Italy, drowning out the noise of some 3,000 Italian supporters in attendance at Ayresome Park. With the game tied in the first half, Italy were reduced to ten men due to an injury to legendary captain Giacomo Bulgarelli.⁵⁰ The North Koreans took full advantage of their numerical advantage through a Pak Do Ik strike inside Ayresome Park's Holgate End penalty box to give the *Chollima* a 1-0 half time lead. Despite an Azzurri onslaught on the Korean goal in the second half, the Asians held on to record a shock result and sent the stadium into a state of delirium. BBC commentator Frank Bough exclaimed 'this stadium has never had support like this for years and years' describing Ayresome Park in 'uproar'.⁵¹ The North Koreans once again hailed the local support, declaring 'our success is due to the support given by the citizens of Middlesbrough and because our players fought for the fatherland'.⁵²

The *Teesside Star* report on the match led with the headline 'The Mouse That Roared' and hailed the day 'the little Korean lion roared, and for 90 breathtaking minutes out-tackled and out-ran the mighty Italians'.⁵³ The role of the Middlesbrough support was also reiterated:

'They had an ally in the Boro' crowd, who went wild when the Koreans scored and followed this up with chants of 'Easy' and 'We want two' to the chargin of a large, colourful and childish Italian contingent in the crowd...As the game went on the Italian supporters got more and more quiet, and the home crowd – football foster parents to the Korean team – shouted for more and more...When the final whistle went the Italians slunk dejectedly from the field while the Korean team and their handful of officials danced and shouted with delight to a standing ovation from the 17,000 crowd'.⁵⁴

As the Italian team were pelted with rotten tomatoes upon their arrival home, 3,000 Middlesbrough supporters prepared to make the journey to Liverpool to support the North Koreans against Portugal at Everton's Goodison Park. Middlesbrough supporter Dennis Barry equated the trip with a desire 'to support our local team', confirming how North Korea had temporarily become Middlesbrough's footballers of choice.⁵⁵ Despite taking a spectacular 3-0 first half lead, the brilliance of Portugal's Eusebio would ultimately see the

men from the Iberian Peninsula triumph 5-3 and bring to an end the Korean's 1966 World Cup adventure. Despite having exited the tournament and the home nation England going on to win the World Cup, the exploits of the Koreans were not forgotten in the ensuing months. The Middlesbrough FC annual shareholders meeting in August that year found time to reflect on having initially been greeted with diffidence, the Koreans had improved with each match and with it the tournament embraced by the public.⁵⁶ In the same month, the players, officials and fans involved in the games at Ayresome Park and Sunderland's Roker Park were also the subject of a World Cup swansong special on north east regional television.⁵⁷ *The Guardian's* Albert Barman too found time to hail the feat of the North Koreans and described the 'Diddymen' as having been 'taken to heart by Merseyside and earlier by the north-east' and speculated on what might have been had the Asians defended better against Portugal.⁵⁸

After 1966: Mystery and reconnection

Although memorialised every four years in coverage of the FIFA World Cup and in reminiscence of Ayresome Park following Middlesbrough FC's move to the Riverside Stadium in 1995, the connection between Middlesbrough and North Korea was confined to history and romanticised memory until the early 2000s. Some fleeting references were made to North Korea's triumph over Italy at a regional level in Tyne-Tees Television's live broadcast of the last league game at Ayresome Park in 1995. In 1997, *The Independent* newspaper marked the Middlesbrough debut of Italian footballer Fabrizio Ravanelli with reference to Pak Do Ik's exploits, suggesting the new signing 'like all proud Italians...learned to wince at the mention of the M-word, that sometime scene of national suffering somewhere in northern England', quoting Ravanelli expressing joy at his new team's move to a new stadium away from the site of the Azzurri's national disgrace.⁵⁹ In terms of tangible legacies, the one notable development was the installation of 'The Trophy Room', a series of bronze cast interventions developed by artist Neville Gabie working with Cleveland Arts and commissioned by Wimpey Homes on the former site of Ayresome Park.⁶⁰ Installed between 2000 and 2001 to mark the footballing history of the site, the series of sculptures included a cast bronze football and a bronze pitch puddle covered in stud marks commemorating the spot from where Pak Do Ik struck the winner in that famous game of 1966. The marker would provide a centrepiece for the return of the team to Ayresome Park in 2002 and a photo opportunity for Pak Do Ik's return to the spot guided by Gabie. Wood and Gabie in their

study of the football ground and visual culture contended that although relatively unknown in Middlesbrough, the pitch puddle is the only public artwork outside of North Korea to be recognised by that government and thought to be considered a National Historic Monument.⁶¹ The emotional return to the site generated excitement amongst the returning players, including singing from the North Koreans as they returned to the site.⁶²

The Game of Their Lives and the return to Middlesbrough

The return to the site of Ayresome Park by the surviving members of the *Chollima* of 1966 was instigated by filmmaker Dan Gordon and Koryo Tours' Nick Bonner building upon the success of *The Game of Their Lives* documentary, filmed in late 2001. The inspiration for the project lay with stories regaled by Gordon's father of the other heroes of 1966, with permission to film granted to Gordon and Bonner after four years of negotiation with the DPRK government.⁶³ Their correspondence with Middlesbrough FC during preparations for filming reveal the early support of key figures amongst the club's hierarchy for rekindling the Middlesbrough-North Korea narrative. Commercial Manager Graham Fordy provided Boro memorabilia as gifts to the Koreans and in a letter to Gordon expressed sentiments of hope that 'they remember us as warmly as we remember them'.⁶⁴ The correspondence between Middlesbrough FC Chairman Steve Gibson is also revealing of received memory and personal attachment felt on Teesside some 35 years after the tournament:

'The story of the North Korean's heroics in the 1966 World Cup is the stuff of legends up here in Middlesbrough. They are still warmly remembered and I am thrilled that, through your programme, their remarkable tale will now reach a wider audience. Please pass on our best wishes to the players and the people that you will meet on your trip'.⁶⁵

Enduring emotional attachment and personal connections felt by the Koreans towards Middlesbrough were evident in press coverage in the lead up to the launch of the documentary. The first question asked of the filmmakers by Han Bong in (Han Pong-jin) queried whether Mayor of Middlesbrough was still alive, with Bonner noting visible signs of sadness by the 1966 team's number 11 upon informing him of Boothby's recent death.⁶⁶ Han Bong Jin was amongst a number of interviewees featured on *The Game of Their Lives* that revealed a bond towards the town and its people and recalled the support and affection between the Koreans and Middlesbrough.

The popularity of Gordon and Bonner's work galvanised a desire to bring the surviving members of the team back to England, a project that brought significant diplomatic and economic challenges. It also brought support from across continents and North Korea's southern neighbours. In correspondence with Frank Cook, Member of Parliament for Stockton North (the constituency immediately north of Middlesbrough) and Ra Jong-Yil, the Ambassador of the Republic of Korea (South Korea), *The Game of Their Lives* received political backing through recognition of its potential to 'play a part in raising awareness about both halves of the Korean peninsula among the British public'.⁶⁷ Moreover, it was felt by Ra Jong-Yil that the 'idea of inviting North Korean footballer players to Middlesbrough will be very useful in promoting cultural exchanges between the United Kingdom and North Korea', with the Ambassador referencing the Sunshine Policy aimed at engaging North Korea with the wider international community.⁶⁸ Cook's support for the project prompted a reply from the surviving players in which they praised the MP's 'positive understanding about our people' and expressed eagerness 'to meet those British people...especially the citizens of Middlesbrough who still remember us and who had not only enjoyed our games from the beginning to the end but also gave us sincere and whole-hearted support'.⁶⁹ Back on Teesside, the *Evening Gazette's* Eric Paylor described arrangements to bring the North Koreans back to Middlesbrough as an opportunity to 'renew their friendship links with the Teesside public' and 'revisit the scenes of their memories'.⁷⁰

Financial and in-kind support for the project would be forthcoming from a number of quarters including Middlesbrough Council, Middlesbrough Football Club and Virgin Atlantic.⁷¹ As well as a return to the site of Ayresome Park, the Speaker of Middlesbrough Ken Hall held a civic reception for the returning Koreans in an effort to show appreciation of the Koreans as Mayor Boothby had done some 36 years before.⁷² A celebration dinner was held at Middlesbrough Football Club and the players paraded before the Middlesbrough supporters at the home match against Leeds United. The Middlesbrough fanzine *Fly Me To the Moon* produced a 'DPRK Special' to mark the occasion, complete with features 'The Koreans are here', 'The Day the World Cup Came to Town' and a front cover featuring Pak Do Ik's goal and the returning heroes photographed on the site of Ayresome Park.⁷³ Editor Rob Nichols, who provided tea for the players at his home on the site during their visit, declared:

‘Today...sees the return of the Ayresome heroes of 66, all the way from North Korea to see us. If you read this in time please try and get down to the stadium early. The players will be appearing on the pitch at quarter to three, apparently they received a fantastic reception at Goodison [Park, home of Everton FC] last Saturday let’s make it even more special for them at the Riverside. Great to have you back Gentlemen’.⁷⁴

The visit also coincided with national anti-racism week and Nichols was quick to contextualise this by focusing on the Asian-Ayresome bond:

‘Today’s game is our chance to play a part in the national anti-racism week. With rising racism in Europe and closer to home this is no time to feel complacent. Football would be far poorer but for the multi-ethnic, multi-cultural makeup of our football teams...Lets not build barriers and prejudices, our lives can be so much enriched by opening up to other cultures and communities. So it couldn’t be more appropriate that our friends from Korea are visiting today. We have been touched by the presence of the little men from the DPRK, let’s return the compliment, give them a rousing reception and then turn on the atmosphere.’⁷⁵

Elsewhere in the special issue, contributor Chris Bartley reflected on the enduring attachment and wrote of ‘one of life’s cruellest ironies for someone who has spent over three decades avidly watching football, when the World Cup came to town I was in the house probably mashing up my rusk or in the garden making mud pies’.⁷⁶ Despite having not attended the match, Bartley nevertheless notes that the Koreans were a ‘great enigma’ and that ‘although it’s hard to believe now, the choice of North Korea to play all their games at Ayresome Park didn’t initially set the pulses racing’.⁷⁷

The notion of cultural interactions and understandings of the team’s dietary preparations for the tournament once again caught the imagination some 36 years, Bartley humorously noting that ‘with a hearty diet like that they were ready to face the world as they’d nearly eaten the rest of it’.⁷⁸ Describing the evolution of affection towards the Koreans, Bartley contends ‘a largely indifferent Teesside fell head over heels’:

‘Pak Do-Ik quite deservedly became a legend overnight and we have to thank him earnestly because he has ensured that Ayresome Park and Middlesbrough will be featured on footy retrospectives throughout the world every four years for as long as the World Cup captivates our hearts and minds...In July 1966, they put a little

known place in the north of England well and truly on the map of the world and we in return provided the platform to make Pak Do-Ik a legend'.⁷⁹

The fanzine's centrefold also printed in full a September 2002 letter from the footballers of 1966 addressed to the town's population, complete with photographs of the players and a graphic of the DPRK flag next to an image of Ayresome Park:

'Dear Citizens of Middlesbrough,

36 years have passed since we had the game on the alien land of Britain which is far away from our fatherland. In Korea there's a proverb which says that even the rivers and mountains can change in 10 years. But there's still one which does not change even in 36 years, that is, the features and the cheering voices of the citizens of Middlesbrough which remain fresh still in our memory. Your support gave us a great strength to win against the Italian team, one of the strongest teams in the world, and to gain the victory which overthrew the imagination of the football world. Though a long time has passed and our hairs turned grey, we can clearly remember the people of Middlesbrough who had warmly welcomed us, enthusiastically supported us during our game against Italy and even followed us up to Liverpool where we had the game against Portugal. Since the production and completion of the documentary, *The Game of Their Lives* by Dan Gordon and Nick Bonner of VeryMuchSo Productions, the memory and the warm feelings towards the people of Middlesbrough which cannot be forgotten linked us with you more strongly than ever. Dear fellow citizens of Middlesbrough. We are looking forward to seeing you in the stadium with warm and friendly feelings of 36 years ago.

The footballers of 1966.'⁸⁰

In April 2003, several months after the Koreans had departed, fanzine editor Rob Nichols contended:

'The greatest ever giant killing is almost as much our story as the Koreans. That sense of shared history was reinforced last year when the Koreans returned to their second home. The warm welcome they received at functions was climaxed

by the roars of the Riverside crowd as they took to the pitch. They were back where they belonged in the hearts and minds of Boro fans'.⁸¹

The topic was revisited amidst wider discussions of legacies for the town beyond the brief return, Nichols arguing 'there's a real feeling that we can't let this rest here...we are communicating through football people to people. It would be marvellous to take the special relationship forward into the 21st century'.⁸² Talk of a North Korea Day for Middlesbrough, calls for the documentary to be shown on mainstream terrestrial BBC Television and a twinning of some description were discussed. Football acting as a means of facilitating interactions across difficult diplomatic situations echoed the Pak Do Ik's outlook that 'football is not only about winning. Wherever we go playing football can improve diplomatic relations and promote peace'.⁸³

Later that year the DPRK flag flew once again above Middlesbrough Town Hall to mark the July 19th anniversary. Peter Hodgson, who had been involved in the organising the previous year's visit, told the local press:

'We hope that July 19 becomes a date which is remembered fondly both locally and nationally...This is a very important part of football history and a story that will be told for many years to come. July 19, Pak Do Ik and the importance of North Korea's World Cup victory on that day in 1966 is very significant in World Cup history and we hope that this will be fully appreciated.'⁸⁴

Appreciation of the gesture was not universal amongst the public. Debates arose echoing those around the flying of the same colours in 1966 that had infuriated South Korean officials and had led to Foreign Office concern at potential upset to Korean War veterans.⁸⁵ The 'Letters' section of the local *Evening Gazette* revealed notable anger from one army veteran:

'It should never have been flown. Every November this council has members going on the Remembrance Day parade to honour our dead, including our dead in the Korean War. I am an ex-army veteran, but you never see us going round celebrating victories of war. We just remember our lost friends and relatives, but this council seems to think it's better to honour our enemies'.⁸⁶

Another contributor referenced family members who had fought in the Korean War, labelled the reason for that flag flying as 'pathetic' and criticised the symbolic celebration of one

victory by North Korea when England had received no similar recognition despite winning the tournament.⁸⁷ The outcry would see Middlesbrough Council's Karen Shields, who had helped organise the 2002 visit and subsequent celebrations, appear on local radio to respond to the criticisms levelled at the local authority. Speaking in 2018, Ken Hall, Speaker of Middlesbrough at the time the flag was flown, reflected:

'The flag was flown in 1966 out of friendliness and I thought that, it's no big deal, it's not a political statement. I have made my views clear that this is just recognition of those nice friendly men who have took the time and trouble to come back to see us and I thought 'let's just fly the flag for one day'. On reflection, however, I should have been a bit more circumspect. I didn't realise the date was so close to the [anniversary of the] ending of the Korean War. One or two councillors at the time did fight in the Korean War and they chastised me in private. I am not sorry that I did it because it had to be done but perhaps my timing was a bit off'.⁸⁸

The connection between Middlesbrough's civic elite and the North Koreans later extended beyond the town, initially through the establishment of the DPRK Embassy in Ealing in 2003. The event propelled the special bond once again in the media gaze with Hall invited to attend the official opening ceremony as a result of 'the kindness the town showed to North Korea when its footballers played there in the 1966 World Cup'.⁸⁹ *The Times*' 'Comedy at Ealing' report on the event quoted Hall as saying 'I'm here to celebrate football, I'm not worried by the moral issues today, it's a nasty world out there'⁹⁰ amidst protests outside the Embassy.

In recent discussions of the Ealing event, Hall revealed that the invitation to attend the opening prompted a lukewarm reaction from some members of Middlesbrough Council, with no funding offered towards cost of attendance despite his representation of the town. In fact, it turned out that Hall would have a more significant role in the event than he had anticipated, with the Middlesbrough representative handed a pair of scissors to cut a red ribbon and officially open the venue.⁹¹ Diplomatic appreciation of Hall and the sporting connection was also extended by Kim Jong Sik, Director of Foreign Affairs of The People's Committee of Pyongyang City. Relaying the gratitude of the citizens of Pyongyang to Middlesbrough, Kim Jong Sik sought 'to confirm that the friendly emotion originated from the football will surely continue as the cultural and economic exchange between two cities' and expressed hopes for future interactions in Middlesbrough and Pyongyang.⁹²

The positive relations facilitated by sport evidenced through the Middlesbrough-North Korea connection were also the subject of discussion in the UK's House of Commons. Speaking at a January 2003 debate on the UK's bid to host the 2012 Olympic Games, Alan Keen MP (Feltham and Heston) pointed to the Middlesbrough-North Korea bond as an example of nurturing multiculturalism and international bonds:

'I want to give one or two examples to illustrate what sport can do. Again, I very well remember the 1966 World Cup, when Middlesbrough, which I still regard as my home town, hosted the North Korean side...Hon. Members should bear in mind the fact that that was only a few years after the Korean War, yet the people of Teesside took the North Koreans to their hearts and supported them. Thousands travelled to Liverpool to watch the North Koreans play at Everton's ground in the quarter-finals. That friendship still exists today. The North Koreans from that original team came over here, and Mr. Speaker entertained them in his apartments. We took them to Middlesbrough, and there was a special dinner for them. The man who scored the goal against Italy was led out on to the pitch at Riverside and allowed to put the ball into the back of the net, as he did way back in 1966. Sport can cement friendships. On the day the North Koreans arrived here, we heard the first announcement that North Korea was not going to get rid of its nuclear weapons programme, but friendship through sport can overcome many difficulties'.⁹³

Common Ground: A decade of diplomatic relations

The hope for interactions in Pyongyang and the building of friendship would be realised a number of years later when the British Embassy in the DPRK approached Koryo Tours in 2009 to explore ways of marking a decade of diplomatic relations with North Korea. It was 'decided the best way to celebrate this was with football, a passion for which has long been shared by both sides' and 'one which transcended political and social barriers'.⁹⁴ In conjunction with the British Embassy, Koryo Tours arranged for Middlesbrough FC Ladies to visit Pyongyang and play two matches against Korean opponents, 'Middlesbrough being chosen due to its historical links with the DPRK'.⁹⁵ The move represented a new chapter in the football-inspired friendship by creating new links through women's football – a game

very popular in North Korea whose national team occupied the upper echelons of the world rankings.⁹⁶ Having overcome a range of logistical and political challenges posed by the trip, including issues on the availability of some Middlesbrough players, the Middlesbrough delegation departed the town on 16th September 2010, with the first match kicking off three days later in the 25th April Stadium on the outskirts of Pyongyang in front of an estimated crowd of 6,000.⁹⁷ The two matches would see the Boro defeated 6-2 by April 25th (the military team) and 5-0 by Galmaegi Women's team, with the matches broadcast to millions in North Korea.⁹⁸ Beyond North Korean coverage, Middlesbrough manager Marrie Wieczorek in a recent interview recalled receiving press enquiries from around the world and participated in a live interview on Australian radio as the coach travelled from the team's Middlesbrough home to London Heathrow Airport.⁹⁹ The friendship facilitated by sporting interactions was once again in evidence amongst players from both sides. Middlesbrough Ladies striker Nicky Duckling described how the 'unbelievable, smiling and waving' crowd made the team feel famous, whilst coach Wieczorek pointed to a mutual appreciation between the supporters and players and believed the trip provided 'evidence of football's power to break down cultural barriers'.¹⁰⁰ Beyond the action on the pitch, the Middlesbrough team built further ties by visiting a local school where they provided football training and enjoyed social interaction with members of the April 25th team – including a rendition of a Middlesbrough FC supporter's song - at a British Embassy Reception in Pyongyang.¹⁰¹ From a Korean perspective, April 25th's Kwon Bom Hyang hoped the Middlesbrough connection would help 'promote the development of football in the future'.¹⁰²

Conclusion: Explaining the enduring connection

As a town famed for bridge building, Middlesbrough's relationship with North Korea can be seen as another example of the former 'Ironopolis' helping to connect people by bridging divides. By making an effort to engage with the North Koreans from the outset, the Middlesbrough football supporters helped change the Asian's self-perceptions as the 'enemy', although there is little evidence – excepting the cases of hostility to the flying of the flag at Middlesbrough Town Hall in 2003 – that these perceptions existed amongst the local support. Louise Taylor of *The Guardian* has argued the bonds formed are testament to football's ability to 'bring the unlikeliest people together', although as Horton has noted, the lack of North Korean sources makes it difficult to understand the motivation for Pyongyang

approving the later interactions.¹⁰³ Even with an array of British sources, it is difficult to align Middlesbrough's love affair with the North Korean footballers during the 1966 World Cup and beyond with one particular explanation. As Jong Song Lee has contested in his study of football in the Korean peninsula, the fervour for the North Koreans amongst the Middlesbrough faithful cannot be explained simply by a curiosity of the unknown. Instead, he has suggested the cult of the underdog might help explain the local support, nurtured in English football through the Football Association Cup's giant-killing culture of lower league teams defeating teams higher above them in the league pyramid.¹⁰⁴ At a local level the poor performance of Middlesbrough FC in the previous season resulting in relegation, although dampening the initial enthusiasm amongst supporters for the tournament matches initially, might help explain how the success of the underdogs donning the same red colours as their local team offered hope and a brief reprieve from recent disappointment. Moreover, the friendly, open nature of the Korean players also helped their popularity with the local population, including young autograph hunters.¹⁰⁵

At a civic level, the positive engagement with the North Korean visitors by Mayor Boothby in 1966 and Speaker Ken Hall in 2002 played an important part in forging bonds. As the town's leading citizens for ceremonial purposes, Boothby and Hall brought official support and legitimacy for the North Koreans. The civic gestures were valued by the Koreans as evidenced in the affection for Boothby and later affirmed in the invitation of Hall to open the DPRK Embassy in 2003.

The importance of Gordon and Bonner's work in reigniting the friendship cannot be understated and it is debatable whether any of the connections made since the turn of the millennium would have occurred had it not been for their pursuit of the 1966 story and ability to secure financial and political support. At a local level, the financial backing of Middlesbrough Council including investment in promotional material across the town and symbolic support in literally flying the flag, underline the connection's value and cultural significance to local sporting heritage. Middlesbrough FC's encouragement of and involvement with the project, including advocacy from the owner, highlights the significant place of the events of July 1966 in the club's wider historical narrative and memory. The fact that the underdogs' unlikely victory has helped cement Middlesbrough in sporting folklore

can do little harm too, whilst the media profile afforded to the area through the return of the North Koreans incentivised support at a local level.

The notion of sport as a (relatively) apolitical platform is also apparent from this case study. Even when the interactions were driven by political and formal diplomatic interests – such as in the case of the DPRK Embassy opening in 2003 and the friendly matches of 2010, the emphasis on sport as a tool to bring together the two cultures and peoples away from wider diplomatic complexities is evident throughout. Yet, it would be naïve to suggest that sport and the connections it nurtures exist within a vacuum exclusive of wider diplomatic relations and historic international interactions. The hostility to flag flying celebration of the North Koreans in 2003 underlines sports diplomacy's limitations in changing attitudes and transcending wider international, historic conflict and constructions of the 'enemy'. Yet, this should not overcloud the benefits of sport as a mechanism to 'cement friendships' through sports diplomacy. Against the backdrop of concerns regarding nuclear weapons programmes, Keen's House of Commons example of the enduring ties between 1966 and 2003 convincingly highlight how sport, and the Middlesbrough-North Korea connection specifically, at the very least negated some of the diplomatic difficulties of the recent past. However, the limited apparent implications of this positive connection at a state level suggest that these links, at least to date, have had little impact on the wider global diplomatic arena.

Even if the reach has been limited, the fact that the relationship has endured into the twenty first century through the new connection of the Middlesbrough Ladies team's visit to North Korea suggests there is potential to build on this positive connection arising from sport. The Middlesbrough-North Korea examples can serve as a model for other nations wishing to develop relationships and "break the ice" through sport.¹⁰⁶

As narrator of *The Game of Their Lives*, Gordon declared 'at the eighth World Cup a friendship had been allowed to blossom between two peoples whose worlds would otherwise never have collided'.¹⁰⁷ The question now in the context of the ever-changing international relations between the West and North Korea is how this unique bond can foster new developments for a new generation. Any plans to mark the forthcoming twenty year

anniversary of diplomatic relations between North Korea and the UK would provide an excellent juncture to consider how these positive connections might help underpin a new chapter in this most unlikely of friendships and promote new understanding between peoples.

Biography

Tosh Warwick joined Manchester Metropolitan University in January 2019 as Research Associate (Impact) in the History Research Centre. He has research interests in urban history, heritage and sport and has published on the experience of Britain's northern industrial centers in the twentieth century.

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