

Dan Gordon and Nick Bonner

It remains one of the biggest upsets in World Cup play. In 1966, the unheralded, 1,000-1 shot team from North Korea stunned heavily favored Italy 1-0. The win propelled the North Korean team into the quarterfinal — the first time an Asian squad had advanced that far — and made the team an unlikely fan favorite at its training base in Middlesbrough, England. In the quarterfinal, Portugal ended North Korea's Cinderella run, 5-3, but only after Korea took an early 3-0 lead.

In relating the history of the '66 World Cup, most writers focused on England's "home-court" win. What happened to the team from North Korea, however, was anybody's guess. Due to the North Korea's closed, Communist society and Kim Il Sung's despotic rule, no journalist had gained sufficient access to contact, much less interview, former players. Rumors circulated that the players had been imprisoned — or sent to labor camps — upon their return.

Several years ago, two intrepid filmmakers from England decided to investigate the story. What director Dan Gordon and producer Nick Bonner discovered became the basis for the feature-length documentary "The Game of Their Lives," which includes original footage from the '66 Cup as well as rare interviews with the seven surviving team members, filmed in North Korea. (The film's executive producer is Passion Pictures' John Battsek, who won the Academy Award for best documentary feature with "One Day in September," about the terrorist attack at the 1972 Olympic Games.) "The Game of Their Lives" is a fascinating, moving documentary that unearths a long-buried chapter in sports history; the Asian Wall Street Journal's Ron Gluckman wrote that "For sports diehards, it's the greatest story never told."

The film has won several awards in England, including Best Sports

Documentary from by the Royal Television Society. It has yet to be released in the United States; Bonner and Gordon are seeking American distribution.

Recently, SportsLetter emailed questions to the pair, who currently are in North Korea shooting another documentary. You can learn more about the film at www.thegameoftheirlives.com.

— David Davis

SportsLetter: How did you become interested in this story?

Dan Gordon: I was probably around 8-years-old. My father gave me a copy of “Goal!” the official film of the World Cup 1966. I found the Korean story fascinating, even though it was England that won the tournament. As I grew older, I heard more personal stories and wanted to find out what exactly happened to these far-away heroes. I chose the team, not the country. I had no idea where North Korea was, or its political issues. I only learned about that once I started researching the program.

Nick Bonner: I heard about the story from Dan and immediately became intrigued. At first I thought Dan was a journalist wanting access into North Korea for any reason but the football film, but it was soon evident that he is football mad. It turns out we went to school together in the U.K. — I’m about 12 years older — but this was a good enough excuse for us to develop the trust needed to make such a film! If we had known what it would involve, then maybe we would never have started.

SL: Why do you think that North Korea’s upset over Italy became an overlooked chapter in World Cup history?

DG: We do not think it is overlooked — it is mentioned in most books on World Cup history. It was always shrouded in mystery though. No one knew what became of the team on their return to North Korea.

SL: Obviously, one of your major challenges was to get access to the surviving players living in North Korea. How did you make contact with

North Korea officials? Were they cooperative? How long did the process take before you were able to visit North Korea to interview the players?

NB: Since 1993 I have been a regular visitor to DPRK/North Korea, specializing in leading tours there. Dan approached me five years ago with the idea of making a film about the players of '66. My initial response was that this would not be possible — journalists had tried before to interview the players but to no avail. Journalists are not allowed into DPRK unless invited — and very few get invited! For a documentary film crew to interview not only the players but also the day-to-day life of Pyongyang would be next to impossible. On top of this no one knew what had happened to the players, whether DPRK held them in high regard or not.

However, my North Korean colleague, with whom I play football in Beijing, liked the idea, and we approached the Korean authorities. The Koreans knew me and trusted the fact that I would not be involved in a documentary that would be “bad for Korea,” and the discussions started. My Korean colleagues and I spent a few months with the negotiations (relatively straight-forward), discussing access, timing, etc. However, it was not until two weeks before we departed that we were told we would have access to seven of the players. We were hoping for just three!

At the same time I met Dan — previous correspondence had been via email — and we hit it off. He came with me on one of the tours and familiarized himself with DPRK. He and the crew heeded my advice on filming DPRK, and it was because of this that we got such unprecedented access.

SL: Were you able to film as much as you wanted there?

NB: Yes. We had a wish list that we thought would be impossible to fill, but in fact we got everything we asked for and more. We got access to [star forward] Pak Do Ik's home and the families of the players, their photo albums, etc. Once the authorities met Dan and realized he was football mad and that the film crew were specialists in sports filming then they really relaxed. Because they were so chilled out we were allowed unprecedented access such as on the tram/metro etc. We also carried out a few “surprise” interviews with the general public without the cameras,

primarily to check to see what they thought of the match of '66 and if they had heard of the players. Everything we asked for was given, albeit rather more polished.

DG: Meeting the players was the most surprising. We only had a vague idea of what they would be like today. They were heroes then: Would they live up to expectations? We had seen the 1966 match over 40 times before meeting them in Pyongyang, and we recognized them instantly. But the best part was that they are just wonderful characters, and this comes across on the film. If you interviewed football players of today, you would get the usual “Yeah, it was a good game of two halves” response. But what we got from our interviews was wonderful. Rim Jung Son and his quote: “We saw lightness out of the darkness.” Pak Do Ik and his quote: “I learned that football is not only about the winning. Wherever we go . . . playing football can improve diplomatic relations and promote peace.”

SL: Published reports stated that the North Korea team members were punished with imprisonment after the '66 Cup, apparently because they partied to celebrate the win over Italy. What really happened?

DG: Not only were the DPRK team of 1966 allowed back to the U.K. with us for a cultural exchange, but also they all hold jobs in football management or coaching. Two of them helped train members of the 2003 DPRK Women’s World Cup team. If they had been imprisoned or purged, it is doubtful they would hold such good jobs now. The four players who were not represented in the film had died but not in suspicious circumstances. We asked the players about the allegations of internment and purges, clear as can be, to their faces. They laughed it off — I think the Korean translation worked out as “bollocks.” There is no way to prove it either way. I know for certain that they were heroes on their return and are heroes now.

We followed up two of the big accusations of womanizing and drinking. We went to the bar that served the players in Liverpool. We were disheartened to hear they had drunk the bar dry, but then the barman added . . . of soda water! The fact is the players had trained to play football and win. They were playing for more than just their country. If it is possible there was even more pride than that. Rim Jung Son told us, “Before the Italian game,

our victorious mood was such that even if we were faced with a huge mountain, we could demolish it and march right through.”

SL: While the Cup was being contested in England, the Middlesbrough locals formed an attachment with the North Korea team, and even began to root for them. Do people there still remember the team, 35 years later?

DG: Very definitely, and this was the most beautiful part of the story. More than just a sports documentary, we believe we captured this incredible support that developed. Over 2,000 Middlesbrough fans followed the team to support them against Portugal, on the other side of the country.

SL: You brought the seven members back to Middlesbrough: What was the reaction — from the players and from the locals?

NB: The close of the project was taking the players back to Middlesbrough (something they really wanted to do, to relive old memories and to carry on the goodwill as Pak Do Ik so eloquently explains at the end of the film). Let’s put it this way: the DPRK flag flew over Middlesbrough Town hall and the Middlesbrough Football club, and the players received a standing ovation from 33,000 fans. At Everton [the site of the Portugal game] 40,000 fans gave them a standing ovation.

SL: Your film shows that the Italians have never quite gotten over this defeat. Was it difficult to arrange for Italian players to talk with you?

DG: Certainly the saying “another Korea” has become national code for any disaster in Italy - whether it be a football defeat, spaghetti overcooked or Mt. Vesuvius erupting. After the 2002 World Cup [when South Korea defeated Italy], that just reinforced its use! The Italian players — Massola and Rivera — were wonderful and gave us great insight into the game. What is interesting is the interpretation of the tomato-throwing incident. Rivera (ever the politician) said it was a little problem, whereas Massola said it was — like a war.

SL: North Korea’s improbable run was stopped by Portugal, 5-3, with four goals by the legendary Eusebio. Did you try to interview him?

DG: We tried. Nick spoke to him. However, his manager asked us, “How much can you pay?” and we felt this was not in the spirit of the film. The Italians had not charged and had gone out of their way to see us. Also we decided in the end that very little would have been gained. The film and the North Korean team expressed all we needed.

SL: There was talk within FIFA of trying to get North Korea to host one of the ‘02 World Cup Games, an effort that failed. Do you think there will ever be a reconciliation between the two Koreas for the purpose of sport?

NB: There have been many occasions where North and South have had sporting events together — the majority involving football. Perhaps the most spectacular event was North and South Korea walking into the Sydney Olympic Stadium under one flag.

When we started filming we thought the end of the story would be the world broadcast and maybe an award or two. After meeting the players and getting to know them, we began to understand that what we had created was the start of something with much bigger potential.

The 1966 matches in England created a bridge connecting common ground between North Korea and the outside world. If projects like this are not followed up, then the cultural gulf will remain. There will never be a more appropriate time or a more appropriate project which holds the world’s attention and provides a neutral meeting of two very different peoples.

DG: Above all, I wanted to do justice to a complex story that needed to be told. I also wanted it to be the best and most memorable documentary for anyone who saw it. We went into the edit with no preconceived ideas of how it would turn out as a story — and I think that was a key to the success of the film from an editing point of view.

SL: What are your favorite soccer films?

NB: “Goal” is the FIFA film of the World Cup of 1966, which was well pieced together. But for over-the-top fun it is definitely “Escape To Victory,” [released as “Victory” in the United States] starring Sylvester Stallone

as the keeper, and slammed by the critics. A great laugh. Dan also likes “Gregory’s Girl,” set in Scotland about a schoolgirl joining the boys team.

SL: Which do you think was the greatest upset in World Cup history: the North Koreans’ win over Italy in ‘66, or the U.S. win over England in ‘50?

DG: We believe the ‘66 game was the greatest upset. The team came from nowhere, from the ashes of war. They came to Britain as the enemy and ended up being adopted as the “Home Team.” They scraped through in the last four minutes to draw with Chile, then beat Italy with a superb goal. They were backed up by stunning defense, with cat-like leaps and saves by the keeper Ri Chan Myong. They followed this with the fantastic game against Portugal. You simply cannot beat their story for excitement and drama. Of course, everyone has their own opinion. Certainly, the U.S. win was spectacular, but for us the prize goes to the Koreans.

SL: What are your plans for the film: will it play at festivals here?

NB: We’ve had no U.S. distribution, which is really upsetting as it has been shown worldwide (including North Korea and South Korea). Is this censorship? We are really keen for our film to be shown in the U.S. We believe that what the film has captured is the spirit and humor of a much-maligned people. The film allows the “outside world” to see Koreans as individuals, as real human beings.

SL: What are you working on now?

NB: We are following two gymnasts and their families over a six-month period as the girls prepare for the indoor Mass Games [an annual event to celebrate the country’s statehood]. For the first time we are being allowed total and unrestricted access to daily life in Pyongyang. It is truly amazing stuff. A 44-minute version of the film, entitled “A State of Mind,” was broadcast on WNET on September 11th. We will produce an 80-minute film with additional footage at the end of the year, and hopefully we will come on a U.S. tour with the film next year.