



Researching the world's most secretive football club is tricky, with even North Korean football fans banned from attending many of their games. Instead, 'official' results are published a week later in state-run propaganda newspapers - it's safe to say these should be taken with a pinch of salt. - Author's note

NORTH KOREA MILITARY SIDE APRIL 25'S CONTINENTAL EXPLOITS GAVE THE WORLD A RARE GLIMPSE AT FOOTBALL IN THE SECRETIVE NATION.

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Fighting a losing battle against floodlights and neon, Mong Kok Stadium's mountain backdrop disappeared into the dusk. A panorama of peaks and valleys during afternoon fixtures, the distant New Territories were relegated to the bench as darkness fell. The evening's entertainment was already sorted and no distractions were needed. Hong Kong was heating up.

Two days earlier, 20,000 people had attended one of the first major demonstrations against a proposed new extradition bill and, within weeks, hundreds of thousands would be on the streets. With anger over Beijing's growing influence in the territory boiling over, fans in the main stand needed only to point to the away dressing room for a handy cautionary tale.

Kicking off towards the now-hidden mountains were Tai Po FC, fresh off a first ever Hong Kong championship. Facing them, in an all-white sponsorless kit, were North Korea's biggest club. Founded and run by the Kim dynasty's army, April 25 Sports Club (shortened to 4.25) had unsurprisingly gained a reputation as a disciplined, well-drilled side. In recognition of their importance to the state, all players were officially considered army officers. This wasn't just football, it was diplomacy with studs.

On paper, 4.25 are North Korea's most successful side, with 19 national titles and multiple cup wins. In reality, the truth is murkier. Football in Kim Jong-un's hermit state is closely guarded, with player stats, match results and even league standings difficult to obtain. To confuse matters further, until recently a bizarre system of rotating cups was used to determine a yearly champion. Clubs could go months without action before being forced to play game-after-game in a matter of days. As well as inhibiting player development, it confused the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) so much they banned North Korean clubs from their continental competitions.

It took the surprise appointment of Jorn Andersen as national team manager in 2016 to end the impasse. Shocked by the exhausting domestic schedule, the globe-trotting Norwegian demanded a more traditional league system to help improve his squad. By the time he crossed the border to manage South Korean club side Icheon in 2018, the AFC were content. For the first time in decades, North Korea's clubs were invited in from the cold.

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The first two seasons back in the AFC Cup, Asia's version of the Europa League, had been a learning curve for 4.25. In 2017, they had qualified from their group before falling in the first knockout round against India's Bengaluru. In 2018, they went one round further before losing to Allyn Asyr of Turkmenistan. Despite this painful away-goals elimination, they had notched up 8-0, 5-1 and 5-1 group stage wins before humiliating Singapore's Home Utd 11-2 on aggregate. 4.25 were finding their groove and 2019 promised even greater things.

What's more, it appeared they had a bona fide star on their hands. Kim Yu-song, a young striker from the port city of Wonsan, could not stop scoring. In 2017, despite his side's early elimination, he won the tournament's Golden Boot with nine goals. In 2018, he scored six, despite missing the goal-glut versus Home Utd because he was too busy scoring four on international duty. Kim, who turned 24 just before the 2019 season, was hitting his peak just as 4.25 were establishing themselves on the continental stage. Expectations were rising – and in North Korea, that can be a dangerous thing.

Despite the growing pressure, the 2019 AFC Cup had started well. By the time they arrived in Hong Kong, 4.25 had already beaten Taiwan's Hang Luen (where Kim scored) and Tai Po's local rivals Kitchee (where Kim scored again). Tai Po had also made it two wins from two, setting the stage in a group where only one team could progress.

The North Koreans took just three minutes to get going, when some nice trickery from left-winger Son Pyong-Il sent his marker tumbling to the ground. Tai Po had six men in the box but Son's perfect cross found Kim, who directed a header in off the post – his third goal in three games. The drummer in the home end stopped abruptly; Tai Po would likewise struggle to regain their rhythm. With two minutes left in the half, 4.25 repeated the feat, Son nodding in another pinpoint cross.

The crowd became restless as friendly curiosity gave way to anger. With fans mocking on-field theatrics by imitating ambulance sirens, one supporter mimicked rifles with his fingers pointed at all the 4.25 players. When yet another visiting player crumpled to the turf, the same fan raced towards the pitch, almost jumping the perimeter fence.

With 20 minutes remaining, 4.25 were temporarily reduced to 10 men as Kim received treatment on the sideline. The home fans smelled blood, having already pulled one back. To their dismay, an attacking move broke down and the visitors raced back up the field on the counter. Kim had been patched up and was now impatiently waiting to be waved back into play by the officials. As 4.25 surged forward, he took matters into his own hands and nipped onto the field. The crowd noticed the apparent infringement but the referee did not. As boos erupted, Son once again bamboozled his marker before sending an inviting cross to the back post. To the fury of the crowd, Kim arrived to nod it in. The player was jeered furiously but the game ended 3-1. It wasn't pretty and it wasn't strictly legal – but North Korean soldiers are never too concerned with making friends.

Matchday in Pyongyang and things were getting serious. 4.25 had strolled through the rest of the group stage, Kim scoring twice more to bring his tally to six. Back home, they had secured the national title without losing a match – albeit with an asterisk. In true pragmatic North Korean style, the season's final four games had been scrapped once the championship was mathematically won. The new league system might have appeased the AFC but it was still no place for football purists. Here's your medal, see you next season.

In the knock-out stages of the AFC Cup, however, things are rarely that simple. 4.25 had been drawn against Bangladesh's Dhaka Abahani, a creative and confident side coached by young Portuguese manager Mário Lemos. Journeyman Nigerian striker Sunday Chizoba and Bangladeshi international Nabib Newaj Jibon had combined for 37 league goals that season, and the pair weren't finding the AFC Cup any trickier.

In a topsy-turvy first leg in Dhaka, the Army side had made error after error at the back, their defence dizzied by an array of tricks and flicks. Three goals in five chaotic first half-minutes saw Dhaka Abahani go into the break with a 2-1 lead before Chizoba made it 4-2 after a similarly-frenetic second half burst. The visitors pulled another back but were unable to draw level despite the late introduction of Kim, hampered by injury. 4.25 were on the brink of yet another inauspicious knockout exit.

The stakes were particularly high when Dhaka Abahani arrived in Pyongyang. Just days earlier, Kim Jong-un's army had fired two missiles into the Sea of Japan, infuriating Tokyo and setting alarm bells ringing from Seoul to Washington. As the game kicked off at Kim Il-sung Stadium, the eyes of the world were firmly on North Korea. Despite this, just 3,600 supporters were rattling around the 50,000-seater ground.

As well as a small crowd, 4.25 also had to contend with the fact their star man was once again on the bench. The first half remained scoreless, with the North Koreans unable to find the goal they needed to progress. Just before the interval, however, Kim was sprung from the sideline due to another injury. Four minutes after half-time – eight minutes after he'd been brought on – he scored. Like so many of 4.25's goals in the tournament, some good work on the left hand side led to a ball into the box. Kim controlled with his left foot before quickly switching to his right to prod the ball past the goalkeeper. The home side were level on aggregate – and winning on away goals.

In the second half April 25 SC turned the screw, dominating the game after Dhaka Abahani were reduced to ten men following a reckless challenge. Chance after chance followed before Kim raced clear in the 83rd minute. Shrugging off two defenders, he sided-footed the ball calmly into the net. The small crowd, especially the colour-coordinated group being directed by a European-style capo, erupted. 2-0 on the night, 5-4 on aggregate. Beaten manager Lemos was gracious in defeat. 'We tried to stop them but today the best team won. They're just better than us.' Just how good 4.25 really were remained to be seen.

The following day, a footnote in the *Dhaka Tribune* match report made interesting reading. 'The conditions at the stadium Wednesday were not the very best as there was no internet connection, while the visiting team were also not able to talk to the media,' it said. 'There was no live streaming of the match, as well as no live updates of the game.' On the surface, this was simply a throwaway gripe from the press-box. As it turned out, it foreshadowed the absolute chaos that would detail the season and send shock-waves through Asian football.

After beating Dhaka Abahani in what was essentially the quarter-finals, 4.25 were pitted against Hanoi in the semi-final (also called the Inter-zone play-off final). They progressed on away goals, Kim scoring the decisive equaliser, becoming the first North Korean club side to ever reach an Asian Cup final. This is where things went wrong.

It started with an international match between North and South Korea on October 15. The home side, wary of the qualifier's importance, banned all foreign fans and media from Kim Il-sung Stadium. Such a fixture needed to be carefully stage-managed. Live matches are never shown on television. They are always at least 24 hours later, when the images can be edited to suit the desired narrative.

In this case, there was good reason. While the game ended 0-0, it wasn't pretty. South Korea's general manager Choi Young-il said North Korea played like they were 'waging war,' while Son Heung-min said escaping without injury was a minor miracle. FIFA president Gianni Infantino, one of the only people allowed in the stands, was not happy. The AFC were embarrassed and angry. It wasn't a good time, in other words, for a North Korean club side to reach a continental final.

To complicate matters further, 4.25 were expected to host the showdown. Coming so soon after the circus in Pyongyang, disaster was inevitable. North Korea once again put its foot down and demanded a media ban. The AFC, based in Kuala Lumpur, bristled. A curt statement issued on October 22 said the match would be moved to Shanghai due to 'challenges' raised by their corporate partners. In another bizarre twist, three days later the match was moved again, this time to Kuala Lumpur. It may have saved the suits a trip to China but the tournament was descending into farce.

Player-turned-pundit Rhysh Rohan Rai, who anchored coverage of the final for the AFC, argued the situation was more nuanced. Looking back, he said: 'It would not have been fair to have a final at the end of a season and then not be allowed to broadcast or promote it. I think they made the correct call by moving it... sometimes, before we criticise, we should think holistically about situations and the constraints that may not be apparent.' What was beyond debate, however, was that the venue change was a huge blow to 4.25. For obvious reasons, North Korea is a difficult place to visit and Kim Il-sung Stadium had become a fortress. 4.25 were yet to concede at home, notching up a 13-0 aggregate scoreline by the time they reached the final. They were robbed of home advantage by their own officials' demands and instead would face Al-Ahed of Lebanon on neutral ground. As the final approached, the team were dealt more bad news: Kim was injured and would once again be relegated to the bench.

In the end, just 500 fans turned up – a disaster for the AFC but no surprise given the game was held 4,673km from Pyongyang and 7,621km from Beirut. 4.25 and Al-Ahed both struggled to gain a foothold during the early exchanges, as some noisy members of the Lebanese diaspora made themselves heard in the near-empty arena. Roshan, who covered the game from the sidelines, believes it was Al-Ahed's pace that changed the game. 'That's what they used to find the breakthrough,' he said. 'A quick counter resulted in the 4.25 goalkeeper being sent off for a foul after Ahmed Zreik had broken in behind and then pushed past the goalkeeper, who then fouled him.' They were down to ten with over an hour to play.

Just before half-time, disaster struck again as an injury forced a premature change. Kim, clearly unfit, was deployed from the bench. Unlike against Dhaka Abahani, no supersub heroics would follow. With 15 minutes to go, Al-Ahed took the lead. Kim urged his team on but there would be no fairytale ending. Minutes from time, exhausted, he suffered the ignominy of being subbed off despite not starting the game. The match ended 1-0 and 4.25's adventure came to a bitter end.

On the surface, the final debacle appeared a disaster for 4.25 and an embarrassment for North Korea. A chance of glory, at home in Pyongyang, had been in their grasp before being ripped away by the state's own arrogance. But public relations takes many forms in North Korea and officials in Pyongyang knew exactly what they were doing when they challenged the AFC. The live coverage – particularly of advertising banners in a stadium named after the state's socialist founder – was a red line. They never wanted to host the game.

Kim, with 24 AFC Cup goals in three continent-zigzagging years, now faced spending his peak years playing at home in a media blackout. April 25, despite their glorious and unpredictable run to a historic final, had been ushered back into the shadows. But sometimes, that's exactly how North Korea likes it.

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