

Professional football league of the republic of Korea: features and brand potential

UDC 796.332



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Abstract

Objective of the study was to determine the national characteristics of the professional football league of the Republic of Korea (RK) and to assess the brand potential of this sport for the country.

Methods and structure of the study. The research method of the case study with a single result (single-outcome study) was taken as the main tool of the methodological base to determine the specifics of the experience of the Republic of Korea.

Results and conclusions. The authors analyzed the national features of the functioning of the K League 1 (Korean Professional Football League), which takes place annually from March to November, where 12 regional teams participate. The article gives a brief description of the clubs and analyzes their brand potential as a factor influencing the prestige of the state in the field of politics and international sports. The effectiveness of the training system for athletes of the major leagues was assessed based on the results of the 2022 FIFA World Cup held in Qatar.

Keywords: *K League, Korean Professional Football League, national football characteristics, South Korea, brand potential.*

Introduction. Geopolitical realities are reflected not only in diplomatic, economic, social relations, but, as it turned out, they also affected big sport. The Union of European Football Associations announced the decision to prevent Russian football clubs from participating in European competitions in the 2022/23 season, and the Russian national team from playing in the League of Nations. But Russia is not only a European, but an Asian country. Therefore, a situation may arise when Russia applies for membership in the Asian Football Confederation. Considering that there is very little information in the scientific literature about the structure and the Asian football itself, this article aims to fill this gap.

This scientific work is a continuation of the earlier research, which is described in the article "Mixing sports and political journalism: modern communication technologies" [5, p.1].

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Results of the study and their discussion. Tournament system K League. Before the 1970s, there were two major leagues in South Korean football, the National Semi-Pro Football League and the National Collegiate Football League. However, they were not professional. In 1981, the government pool of the President of the Republic of Korea, Chun Doo-Hwan, began to consider sports as one of the means to reduce the degree of discontent in a society that

demanded democratization. The professional community came to the need to form the Korean Super League, which at that time included only two professional (Hallelujah FC, Yukong Elephants) and three semi-professional (POSCO Dolphins, Daewoo Royals, Kookmin Bank) clubs. Subsequently, the semi-professional clubs were transformed. Thus, the league was founded in 1983 as a tournament competition between five teams of the professional football association.

The league became fully professional in the 1987 season, falling from eight clubs in 1984 and 1985 to five, but by 1995 it had grown again to reach eight member clubs again. Since then, the league has continued to gradually expand and grow, reaching 10 teams in 1997, 12 in 2003 and its peak of 16 teams by 2011. At the end of 2011, the Korean Football Association announced the launch of a second division national league, which once again contributed to the growth of the number of professional clubs in the country. In technical terms, the Korean Professional Football League is two related leagues that form the first and second levels of the South Korean tournament pyramid. The teams applied for participation and got into one of the divisions: the highest K-League Classic and the second K-League Challenge. For the 2018 season, the leagues were renamed to eliminate the confusion between Classic and Challenge, with the top league being called K-League 1 and the second league being K-League 2 [1,3]. In the run-up to the 2020 season, various semi-professional and amateur leagues have been reorganized and renamed under a pyramidal scoring structure. As a result, leagues from K3 to K7 were formed. Currently, K-League 1 still has 12 teams, while K-League 2 has 10 teams since 2017.

In K League 1, each team usually plays an unbalanced 38-game season, with three games against each team plus an additional five final games. Whereas K League 2 usually has a simple balanced 36 game schedule with four games against each team. The best team in the second tier league receives a guaranteed promotion, while the worst team in K-League 1 loses its position in the final team leaderboard. The next top three teams in K-League 2 then advance to the play-offs as they climb the ladder. The fight for third and fourth place consists of two games in which the winner goes to second place. After that, another two-game series is played, where the winner moves on to the 11th-

place team in K-League 1. The winner of this two-game series receives a place in the top professional league.

Characteristics of the leading clubs of the RK. There are a number of South Korean footballers who have achieved success on the global sports scene, including Park Ji Sung who played for Manchester United, Tottenham Hotspur striker Son Heung Min and Ki Sung Yoon of Newcastle United. However, each of them started his career in one of the national clubs of the Republic of Korea. This scientific work examined the activities and gave a brief description of the leading football clubs in South Korea, which are leaders in the first division of the country's professional football league according to the sports results of the teams as of April 11, 2023, published on the official website of the professional football league of the Republic of Korea [2]. Ulsan Hyundai FC, Pohang Steelers and FC Seoul are the leaders among the current football clubs. Currently, the leader of the last season is the Ulsan Hyundai club, supported by Hyundai Corporation. The club was founded in 1983 and was previously called the Hyundai Horang-i.

The Pohang Steelers are one of the oldest and most stable teams in the Korean League. The club was founded on April 1, 1973. Throughout its history, the club has been owned by the South Korean steel company POSCO FC, formerly known as the Pohang Iron and Steel Company. Pohang are also the most successful Korean team in the AFC Champions League, having won it three times. Originally a semi-professional club, they turned professional in the 1984 season and changed their name to the POSCO Dolphins. A year later, they were renamed POSCO Atoms. In 1986, they won their first championship and remained at the top of the league for some time. Between 1985 and 1998, the club consistently finished in the top four of the K-League.

Closes the top three football club FC Seoul, territorially assigned to the city of Chungnang-gu of the administrative district of Seoul. It is the most popular and attractive team in the country with a long history dating back to the mid-80s. For years, the club's activities have been reflected by internal tensions and the economic situation of the owners of FC Seoul.

Note that despite financial difficulties, FC Seoul is the six-time champion of the K League 1. FC Seoul's home matches are played at the Seoul World Cup Stadium. The sports arena has become one of the



main works of the Korean architect Chun-Su Ryu, who was hired by LG. Seoul World Cup Stadium is a cutting-edge training facility where a professional and comfortable environment for athletes and fans has been created by improving the technical equipment of the stadium.

The South Korean clubs we have considered are the basis of the country's personnel sports football potential. It is from the leading football teams of K-League 1 that athletes are selected for the national team. Note that to obtain the status of a professional team, the club must meet a number of criteria approved at the legislative level by the government of the country: the official salary of the players, the availability of an academy, base and infrastructure. Thus, the prestige of the clubs of the Republic of Korea is regulated by the interest of the state apparatus in improving the image and reputation of the Republic of Korea.

Football clubs of the RK as the direction of the national brand. It is important to remember that football clubs can be considered not only as subjects of sports marketing [4], but also as an active direction of national branding. The state brand is not only an instrument of the country's image strategy, but is also part of the process of cross-cultural communication. The results achieved by the Government of the Republic of Korea in popularizing football as the country's national sport have increased the country's recognition in the international arena. After demonstrating the skill level of the Republic of Korea national team at the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, where the South Korean team defeated Portugal in the third round match of the group stage of the championship, the international professional football community recognized the potential of Korean players. This success is the result of long and systematic work. As mentioned earlier, until 1983 there was no professional football in the country. However, after the establishment of the K-League and the assignment of the status of a national sport by the government, the situation began to change. The sports market began to undergo rapid changes. The main engine of progress for the Korean national team was the government's lack of prejudice against the idea of inviting foreign head coaches on a regular basis. Thus, Guus Hiddink (2000–2002), Humberto Coelho (2002–2004), Johannes Bonfrere (2004–2005), Dick Advocaat (2005–2006), Peter Verbeek (2006–2007), Afshin Gotbi (2007), UI-

rich Stielike (2014–2017) and Paulo Bento (2018–2022). The desire to adopt European experience is also noticeable among the aspirations of South Korean football players. The situation is as follows, most of the top players leave for Europe, using the local league solely as a launching pad to start their professional careers. On the one hand, this strategy has a positive effect on the recognition of Korean football stars abroad and increases the amount of investment in the industry, but on the other hand, local clubs are neglected, which significantly devalues the resources they have invested in training athletes.

Conclusions. The 2002 World Cup was the trigger for the development of Korean football, which left the Republic of Korea with a ready-made structure - now there are 12 clubs in the K-League 1, 11 in the K-League 2, 16 in the K3 League, and 17 in the K4 League the first two divisions are professional, the other two are semi-professional. In addition, an important feature of Korean football is the institution of succession. Coaches started their careers as footballers, regularly improving their skills and moving up - from juniors through youth teams to the main squads. In addition, it was possible to establish that in Korea, club management is most often carried out according to the following model: a large holding structure takes on the security of a football club assigned to a certain territorial unit. This is even reflected in the names of the sports team, where the corporate interests of the owners or sponsors are more taken into account, rather than regional indicators. The clubs described above also prove this proposition. Ulsan Hyundai is owned by Hyundai Corporation, Pohang Steelers is owned by POSCO FC, and Seoul FC is owned by GS Group.

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