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10-27-2010 17:17



Using sport to cross cultural divide

By Joe Trolan

Moving to a new country to live can conjure up many emotions such as nervousness, excitement, fear, and apprehension.

Unfortunately, on many occasions these emotions are too much and people leave before truly experiencing their new "home." In Korea, the culture shock can certainly be daunting if you cannot adapt quickly. The fear of not being able to speak Korean and not having friends close can make the first few days, weeks, or even months tough. One way to potentially combat this feeling of "loneliness" can be through sport.



A perusal of sport events in Seoul highlights there are many options for foreigners to participate in and make new friends. While offering a way to make friends with other foreigners this could lead to a tendency to become very cut off or divided from the local people. In fact, on many occasions of viewing sport events I have seen a separation of native Koreans and expats. Whether watching recreational soccer, basketball, or rugby, I have seen the cultural separation. This separation is even more acute for women than men as there are very few sport teams that cater to women.

A new sport in Seoul is trying to make a positive change in the cultural interaction between Koreans and expats. The Seoul Gaels Gaelic football team in the past few years has attracted interest from both the male and female local population. It is a traditional Irish sport played with a round ball where players can use both their hands and feet.

It has been played in Ireland since the late 19th century. The sport has recently become very popular in Asia, with teams in places such as China, Thailand, Vietnam, Taiwan, Singapore and Malaysia. Initially, the majority of players were expats from mainly native English-speaking countries but recently there has had an influx of Asian players.

In Korea, the Seoul Gaels is the prominent Gaelic football club and the club offers the opportunity for both men and women to participate in some recreational sport. The Seoul Gaels are part of the Asian County Board, which is a registered organization with the main Gaelic Athletic Association based in Ireland. The Seoul Gaels club has about 50 members from all around the world. In particular, the women's team has given the opportunity for expat women and local women to come together and play sport.

The women's team has been very successful in both local and regional tournaments. The local population makes up about 20 percent of the team and has been increasing every year. Most of the new members hear about the club through word-of-mouth from friends and the ladies of Seoul Gaels offer a friendly environment for Korean women to take part in a new and interesting sport.

Other women teams throughout the Asian Gaelic scene have a mixture of local and expat populations and the Seoul Gaels women's football team is one of the leading teams in Asia in bringing together the local and expat population. Though the sport may seem intimidating to play, many of the local girls playing have picked up the skills quickly and really enjoy playing.

Gaelic football and in particular the Seoul Gaels women's team can offers the opportunity for both the expat and the local female population to participate in a fun recreational sport and to learn about each other's cultures in a stress free and fun environment. It is true that in our daily lives the local or foreign population may not interact but sport gives us the chance to bond with each other.

The writer is a lecturer in sport management in the Department of International Sport and Leisure at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies. He plays Gaelic football for Seoul Gaels and is researching how sport can integrate immigrant communities. He can be reached at joetrolan@hotmail.com.

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