

When Tibet and Greenland were not allowed to raise their national flags, the organisers simply distributed thousands of paper flags in the audience

Greenland v Tibet – football from the heart

By Karen Balling Radmer

When a total of 5,000 fans packed into Copenhagen's Vanløse stadium in the summer of 2001 to witness a unique event – a football match between the national football teams of Greenland and Tibet – they did not just witness a game. What they saw was the culmination of months of political high tension and drama, including a major political row with China which made headlines across the world

After such a long struggle to get the match played, both the Greenlandic and Tibetan teams could celebrate victory on the day. It was a dream come true for these small 'nations' to play an international match. A match that, if it were up to FIFA, would not have been allowed to go ahead.

»Greenland has, for a long time, sought FIFA membership in order to play friendly matches with teams like Iceland or the Faroe Islands,« explains Jens Brinch, the General Secretary of The Sports Confederation of Greenland. »However, FIFA will not allow us membership because, among other things, we cannot meet the required conditions for the transmission of

games. FIFA hold something resembling a monopoly. You cannot play against a FIFA member nation if you yourself are not a member.« However, FIFA remained unimpressed by Greenland's lobbying.

Then one day Brinch received a call from Michael Nybrandt, the International Coordinator for Tibet's Football Association, who suggested a match between Tibet and Greenland. The idea soon gained momentum, and both football associations agreed to play the game. Since neither was a member of FIFA, all they needed was a football ground not owned by a FIFA club. Vanløse Stadium in Copenhagen fitted the bill, and a date was set.

»It was a perfect match between two states that were both famous for their ancient culture, and both had been occupied by colonial powers« says Michael Nybrandt.

Then the politicians began to get involved. The Chinese Embassy in Copenhagen did its best to get the game called off. Greenlandic fish exports to China were threatened. Pressure was also applied by FIFA, which suggested that going ahead with the game could af-



PHOTO: KIM AGERSTEN/POLFOTO

fect Greenland's chances of being admitted as a future member. Also involved in the furore was the sports company Hummel, which sponsored the game, and the Greenlandic sports organisation Team Greenland.

However, despite the political turmoil, the two small football associations held their ground. The game was shown across the world on CNN' continues Michael Nybrandt. »Spectators flew the flags of both nations. I firmly believe that 60 percent of them had never attended a football game before.«

»It was a football game straight from the heart – and there were no losers,« adds Jens Brinch.

The Critical Nomad

Thirty-four-year-old Olukayode Thomas has already quit his job as a newspaper reporter in Nigeria three times due to his critical sports articles not making it into print. He has come close to being arrested, has been referred to as a 'satanic scribe' has thwarted an attempt to buy his silence, and has, for the past four years, been voted Sports Journalist of the Year in his native country.

Olukayode Thomas describes himself as a 'nomad' in the field of critical journalism – and with good reason. With a dogged will to uncover the stories behind the brief news items, he has, since 1996, fought to circulate his critical articles in the Nigerian media. Topics he has covered include corruption in the Nigerian Olympic Committee, doping, and an expose of those who control his country's sport from behind the scenes.

»I am certainly the only critical sports journalist in Nigeria who is able to write whatever he likes...« he says, »...as long as I have my current editor's backing on (the Nigerian new-



spaper) The Guardian. They also know that I would quit if I wasn't allowed to write what I want'.«

»During the five years I have been working as a sports journalist, I have not been able to get accreditation to the football World Cup Finals,« he continues. »The Football Association would rather not see my face. I am refused entry to press conferences – often by my own colleagues in the sports world, who condemn me for being too critical'.«

Olukayode Thomas points to three factors that contribute to the difficulties of working as a critical journalist in Nigeria – or, for that

matter, most African countries. 'The first is the lack of job security' he says, 'the second is the censure and pressure you are exposed to, and the third is money – journalists' wages in Africa are very low. There have been times when I have not received wages for months on end.'

'It is easier to remain uncritical,' he continues. 'If, as a sports journalist, you want to report from the World Cup or the Olympics and your media organisation either cannot or will not pay for your trip, you are forced to look to banks or private businesses for sponsorship.'

Despite the problems he faces, he would not trade places with anyone else in his native country. 'I don't want to be included in a list of those people who have accepted money,' he says in his presentation to Play the game. 'If you take this road, you can lay yourself open to blackmail'.

Olukayode Thomas concludes that in his opinion, Nigerian sport is not yet ready to deal with critical journalism, just as Nigerian society is not yet ready to accept mainstream critical journalism.