

MEKONG REVIEW

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Our team

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Do you remember the first time you fell in love? I don't remember the exact date, but I remember the score..

Crusaders 4, Portadown 3 in the Northern Irish League Cup. My team, Crusaders, had been down 3-1 at half-time away to Portadown, the dreary town I grew up in. There was something intoxicating about the ferocious, defiant comeback that night in the cold winter air as I fell in love with a semi-professional team from a small, working-class part of Belfast that I had only visited but never lived in, never really belonged to.

I also remember the last time I fell in love, the exact date and location. It was 23 January 2018, and I stood outside a small hole-in-the-wall shop around 80 Tran Hung Dao Street in Hanoi, and Vu Van Thanh had just sent Vietnam to the final of the AFC U23 Championship.

The fullback scored the winning spot kick in a penalty shootout against Qatar after a pulsating 2-2 draw. He wheeled away in celebration and stopped to strike a pose, crossing his arms and trying to keep his facial expression stoic and composed, but was unable to avoid the smile creeping over his face before his teammates swarmed him in a joyous embrace.

As much joy as there was on that pitch in Changzhou, China, there couldn't have been more than there was among the hundreds of people on that street in central Hanoi. Men and women, young and old alike all erupted in celebration right there on the street.

The first cheers came from those watching on tiny terrestrial TVs as they watched Thanh's shot hit the back of the net, then the delayed screams of ecstasy from the bank employees watching via online streams filled the air.

I was meant to be reviewing a craft beer joint just around the corner for *Food & Beverage Magazine*, but when I arrived, utter bedlam had broken out. Some men, patrons and staff alike, were shirtless, a few were covered in cake and all of them were wildly drunk and wildly celebrating, jumping up and down on tables, singing and chanting. A man I later learned was the manager ripped down a paper national flag that had been affixed to the window so he could wave it above his head.

The magazine review was postponed, as was all productivity across the city that evening, as thousands of fans took to the streets to celebrate in that very Vietnamese fashion, by driving their motorbikes, cars, trucks and even tractors around and around the streets, honking, screaming, singing, just erupting with passion and uncontrollable joy.

Who wouldn't fall in love with that?

We're now more than four years on from that day in China, and a lot has changed about the world and international football, but unlikely Vietnamese success has remained a constant. While that U23 side would go on to lose a heartbreaking final to Uzbekistan in the Changzhou snow four days after the high of the semi-final, the senior national team, largely made up of the U23 players, lifted the Asean Football Federation Cup at the end of 2018, only the second time Vietnam had stood at the summit of Southeast Asian football. Greater was to come, though, with

advancing to the final round of World Cup qualification for the first time in history last year after a campaign plagued by Covid-induced interruptions undoubtedly the pinnacle.

Unfortunately, the Vietnamese players won't be heading to the Qatar 2022 finals after finding bouts against Asian football heavyweights like Japan, Australia and Saudi Arabia a bridge too far. In truth, they only had the longest of odds even after advancing to the final round of qualifiers, and making it to the 2026 edition is a more realistic target for a number of reasons, but realism has never been what's great about being a football fan.

Cheering for an underdog is always intoxicating, as who doesn't love a good David versus Goliath story? But, for me at least, there's something just that bit more special about seeing eleven Vietnamese players triumph against the odds, and not just because I've been lucky enough to call their country home for several years. No, what makes them special to me is that they succeed despite having their hands tied behind their backs by the powers that be, as so many Vietnamese people do.

The Vietnam Football Federation (VFF) is, to put it politely, grossly incompetent. As anyone with an interest in world football will know, that isn't saying an awful lot, but the VFF is a particularly striking example because all the ingredients are in place for a competent federation. There's a successful team and popular coach, a population that is stark, raving football-mad, which means there is no lack of commercial interest in the game, and there are some talented, educated young people who would dearly love to improve the governance of Vietnamese football, if given the opportunity. And yet the national team's star players are still blocked from developing in leagues overseas by anachronistic club contracts, they play on pitches that have (accurately) been compared to cow paddocks, and they have their injuries aggravated by being rushed back into action before being fully recovered.

Despite all this, this team has been the most successful in Vietnamese football history. The term 'golden generation' is overused in football writing the world over, but this group of players truly does have a Midas touch. Despite being given very little to work with, everything they touch has turned to gold.

Football fandom has at times been an ugly thing the world over. From English hooliganism of days past to the creeping fascism in Eastern Europe and drug cartel influence in Latin America today, the worst parts of humanity have glommed on to the beautiful game for their own ends.

Ugly nationalism has also wrapped its tentacles around what was once the working man's game. Just cast your mind back to the scenes of the summer last year, when England played a home European Championship final and the scenes that unfolded in London went from the distasteful all the way up to the thuggish. The boozed-up jingoism on display was enough to turn you off international football.

This is why the pride Vietnamese fans have in their team is so refreshing. I hesitate to use the word pure, because as a cynic I would say nothing is pure, but the love they have for the eleven players who represent them is as pure as the snow that kisses the mountains of Sapa on occasion. For the vast majority of fans, supporting Vietnam isn't about proving their way of life is superior to any others. It's not about singing songs that reference wars from years gone by. It's not about going out to get embarrassingly drunk, even if that does happen from time to time. It's about celebrating the success and hard work of a group of people who, like many of those watching, are fighting to triumph against long odds, and even against the actions of their leaders.

Best of all, for my selfish reasons at least, outsiders like me get to be a small part of it. People are pleasantly surprised to see me and others like me wearing Vietnamese football shirts and talking about the national team; the fact that we're not Vietnamese is irrelevant. Contrast that to the racial abuse England's Black players suffered after the loss of the European Championship final, and you have an idea how restoring it is to follow this team.

Everyone is welcome to the communal experience that makes football what it is in Vietnam, whether that means street-side flag sellers viewing the foreign passers-by as equally valid sales targets, or the fans from Quang Ninh province taking it as a matter of course that the four foreign men who cheered for their club team for just one afternoon are invited to the post-match bia hoi (beer) session.

The simplest way I can put it is that when my Vietnamese boss asks me about the national team, he always says 'when does our team next play?' To me, it's the subtle difference between *chung toi* and *chung ta* in Vietnamese. Both mean we, but in a conversation *chung toi* excludes those listening to the speaker, while *chung ta* includes those listening. Football in Vietnam, then, is a very *chung ta* experience.



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