

Matt Riley

THAI

Football Tales

A Beautiful Madness



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Lost Connections: A Love Letter to Thai Football

THAI FOOTBALL is maddening. Breweries and media giants control several clubs, fixing up fixtures where they essentially play themselves, while staccato matches of foul play and time-wasting tomfoolery are overseen by barely competent officials swivelling fearful eyes to powerful shadows in the VIP boxes. Dark money and franchise clubs on wheels roll across the kingdom, leaving forgotten fans to forlornly fall back into the welcoming arms of the English Premier League. It seems a saddening spiral of diminishing returns. And yet. And yet. There is something about Thai football that infects your blood.

I grew up in the ‘Democratic Republic’ (always run for cover when a country uses the word ‘democratic’ in its title) of Malawi. The former British colony was allegedly ruled over by the eccentric Doctor Hastings Banda. I say allegedly because, officially born in 1898 – although even by his own admission this was a guess –

it was whispered (it was never a wise policy to say it out loud) that the remarkably sprightly flyswatter-waving murderous dictator was a lookalike. But, looking back on our life in this barely functioning but beautiful country, there is a contradictory magnetic pull that the head repels but the heart embraces.

This leads me nicely to Thai football. Since returning to England I've been building bridges with my local club, Exeter City, using the same networking and leveraging skills that eventually opened Thai football doors. As a lecturer in Business Management at Exeter University I cunningly adapted the course to include the Grecians as a case study and visited the club with my students. Officially it was to give them insight into their forthcoming exam, but I was on a scouting mission of my own. As a fan-owned club, they exist on financial fumes, so I could see plenty of opportunities to help them and develop new revenue streams. This came to nought.

I then contacted the chairman. Over an amenable breakfast in the city centre, I laid out my business strategy. The ideas were well received but they also came to nought. I even offered my services to fill the vacancy of matchday programme editor as a foot in the door, but the trend continued. I came to realise that, in English football, arriviste intruders will be forced out by the weight of history. Whatever I can offer, someone else whose whole family heritage has been steeped in the club's history can do with more authority. In Thailand I was often in a job application cohort of one

and, even if other westerners were looking to compete, I had the twin unique selling points of being time-rich and cheap (often free).

I enjoy standing on the Big Bank terrace at St James Park with my friends and often wonder what it is that stops me from enjoying it more (apart from the quality of football that's sometimes on display) and why I am often scanning around the stadium to catch the chairman's eye or see a process in need of my input. Without Thai football, I would not have briefly lifted the stage curtain and seen the mechanics of what went on behind. I would not have the confidence to know how to do the jobs my terrace friends feel awe towards.

Don't get me wrong. My time working in Thai football was financially ruinous and, at my ripe old age, I shouldn't be contemplating another financial meltdown. I have a sensible job and responsibilities. But there is something about the beautiful madness of football in general (and Thai football in particular) that makes people feel, quite simply, more alive. Securing an interview with a former AIA CEO in Bangkok's business district I expected to be squeezed into the amenable Dutchman's busy schedule before being briskly shown the door. Instead, a man whose day was taken up with loss adjustment and asset allocation became animated and emotional about the game he loved. His company was a big sponsor of Thai football at the time and he ended the (far longer than I had expected) meeting with a commitment to sponsor

Thai League Football, the website I was working for at the time.

We met for lunch a few weeks later. Here I was with the CEO of a multibillion-dollar company eating an Italian meal under the Asok BTS train station. He told me how he was being nudged out of the company with a three-year, full-salary package golden parachute if he didn't work for anyone else. At the time, I was bringing in precisely zero to the family coffers. And yet, the feeling I got was that he wished he was doing my job. That's the drug right there. For all the financial sacrifices and time away from the family, I was building my dream, not following it. I always knew that it wouldn't last and we would have to come home one day, which gave each surreal experience an extra potency. In my mind, I imagined during each bizarre experience that this would be my last day in Thailand so that, when that day came, I had taken in every little detail of the time before and stored them away in my mental filing cabinet.

Would I throw in my stable and sensible career to pursue a highly speculative and insecure position if I had my time again? Was I right to avoid the oceans of money to be made as an unlicensed agent of ill repute? It's a yes from me. For my wife and bank manager, well, that's a different story.