

# Football in Burma

## “Caught Offside,” by Shawn Nance

24 July 2003 | As background to the search-and-arrest drama at Rangoon journal *First Eleven* (see the report at [Reporters sans frontières](#)), we reprint an April 2002 article from *The Irrawaddy*. Assistant editor Shawn Nance graciously e-mailed the document, which did not appear on the magazine's website. The Irrawaddy Publishing Group was established in 1992 by Burmese citizens living in exile; the magazine is published monthly in Thailand. "Just as the Irrawaddy River has for centuries supported Burmese civilization," states a website blurb, "the Irrawaddy Publishing Group hopes to contribute to a flourishing culture in Burma based on the free flow of information." The article is used by permission.

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### **Burma's early withdrawal from the 2002 World Cup highlights deeper problems besetting this football-frenzied country.**

In June, as football fans around the globe are glued to the television watching the 2002 World Cup finals—hosted by South Korea and Japan—Burmese football fans may be wondering why their team was booted out of sport's greatest spectacle without ever taking the field.

Once a dominating presence in Asian football, Burma withdrew from the qualifying rounds in November 2000 before playing a single match. Burma had been drawn in Group Two, along with Iran, Tajikistan and Guam. But two weeks before traveling to Tabriz, Iran, for their opening qualifier they sent a fax to world football's governing body, FIFA ([Fédération Internationale de Football Association](#)), stating that they would not be participating in the event "due to the condition of the team" and because "they were facing big economic problems," the FIFA Media Department told *The Irrawaddy*.

For their un-sportsmanlike behavior, FIFA leveled heavy sanctions against the Burmese Football Association, fining them 40,000 Swiss francs (US \$22,550) and blowing the final whistle on their World Cup dreams for this year as well as the 2006 tournament.

Currently ranked 153rd in the world FIFA rankings, nobody at home or abroad ever gave Burma any chance of qualifying for the prestigious 32-team finals—the first ever in Asia. But despite its long isolation and tight media controls, live broadcasts of European football are widely watched and Burma remains a football-frenzied nation. But the indifference shown towards Burma's domestic football and the falling fortunes of the national team provide a revealing cultural index for the dashed hopes of the Burmese people and the decay of the country itself.

"Nobody in Burma cares about domestic football," says **Andrew Marshall**, author of the book *The Trouser People*, an exploration of modern Burma through a dead Victorian explorer who first introduced football to Burma. "Nobody thinks it's real football anymore."

But sports, especially football, have been given greater attention and financial support in recent years. The aim is to recapture the glory days of the 1960s and early 1970s when Burma reigned supreme among Asia's

footballing nations, capturing two Asian Games crowns in 1966 and 1970, four Southeast Asian Peninsular Games (SEAP) titles and numerous other soccer silverwares.

For much of the 1960s, the team was led by the Ghurka-born striker from Shan State, **Suk Bahadur**—the **Pelé** of Burmese football, who was also a dominating tennis and field hockey player as well as the national 100-meter sprint champion. Marshalling the midfield for much of that time was **Maung Maung Tun**, nicknamed "mountain man" for his uncompromising style of play. Their abilities to carve apart defenses earned Burma the status as one of the continent's most-feared football sides.

Historian **John F. Cady** writes in his book *The United States and Burma* that following consecutive victories in international matches in 1970–71, "proficiency in soccer became a significant mark of Burmese identity and prestige."

Indeed, football provided a strong focus for the representation of Burma to the rest of Asia. The list of Burma's football "heroes" meanwhile provides an epic narrative of sorts in which the "beautiful game" has made an important contribution to the construction of the nation.

To restore that sense of pride to Burma's national side, the state-owned press kicked off a small media campaign. A January 13, 2000, article in the English-language daily *The New Light of Myanmar* urged public support. "To reach the Golden Age in soccer again, all media organizations are to provide assistance for development [*sic*] of soccer." A separate article in the same paper stated that football victories bring honor to the state and that the people's "hearts are thrilled with pleasure when they see or learn the [*sic*] victory of their national team. That is the sign of expressing their patriotism."

The main benefactor attempting to resuscitate Burma's football program, however, has been **Aung Ko Win**, chairman of Kanbawza Bank Ltd. According to a January 11, 2000, article in *New Light*, he donated 10 million kyat (or nearly 50 percent of the bank's profits) "for progress of Myanmar soccer, to form Myanmar Football Foundation, financial situation [*sic*] and other matters." But as with most charitable contributions to state-sponsored projects, the motives behind Aung Ko Win's largesse may not be purely driven by the desire to score more goals: sources in Rangoon suspect his endowments to the football team are part of a money-laundering scheme for his flourishing business empire.

In fact, corruption seems to plague all aspects of Burmese football. In 1992, at the Asian Games in Hiroshima, Japan, Burma was trailing 5-0 to the hosts when the team changed goalkeepers. On his way off the pitch, the outgoing keeper removed his gloves and handed them to the new keeper. **Thoung (Ronny) Nyein** blamed the embarrassing moment on the sleight-of-hand tricks played by Burmese football authorities who pocketed too much money to provide the team with two pairs of gloves. He commented on the [www.soc.cult.burma listserv](http://www.soc.cult.burma.listserv), "It made us, Burmese in Japan, nearly cry when we saw it on the television." **Maung Okkar**, famous for his pro-government homilies in cyberspace, explained that the gloves were the team's lucky pair.

Even in the domestic league, selection to one of Burma's 12 premier division teams is not always conducted on a level playing field. Nearly all teams represent the military and government ministries and landing a

place in the lineup usually depends on who has the most money, according to Mr Marshall. "If you come from outside the government and are talented enough, you can buy a job at one of the ministries and get on a team."

As with most countries that will be participating in this year's finals, success on the field often translates into financial and material rewards, and Burma's players can expect promotions in their government jobs if they can turn their luck around. But unlike other countries, the team's poor run of form is subject to strict media censorship.

Less than a year after the media exhortations promoting football and equating the success of the team with national morale, Burma made an early exit from the 2000 **Tiger Cup** in Thailand after losing its first two games by a combined 8-1. The decisive goal in their loss to Indonesia caused the state-run TV Myanmar to go off the air for several minutes and the press was prohibited from reporting the drubbing. Instead, the Press Scrutiny Board (PSB) issued an order: "News about the Burmese national football team must be written in constructive ways." Faced with this Orwellian directive, most journalists simply avoided writing about the tournament at all.

That the government should encourage its citizens to put its support behind the national football team to "return to the Golden Age," while at the same time pulling itself out of the race for football's biggest prize is just one of the many ironies circulating around Burma. For this particular transgression, however, Burma will have to wait until the qualifying rounds of the 2010 World Cup for another chance to compete on the largest stage in sports.

It has been said that the social significance and allure of football lies in its capacity to embody aspects of local culture. Nowhere is this truer than in Burma.

**Editor's note:** A BBC account of the 30 May "Black Friday" incident, in which democracy leader **Aung San Suu Kyi** and her motorcade were attacked—opposition leaders say that 70 people were killed—is available [here](#). The site also links to other background material on Burma.