

The Street Dogs of Manila

The Philippines are rising through the rankings, but are they Filipino enough?

By Javier Sauras and Felix Lill

Three weeks before super-typhoon Haiyan devastated the eastern Philippines, killing thousands of people, the deadliest earthquake in the last two decades wreaked havoc in the middle of the country. The same day the earth trembled with the energy of 32 Hiroshima bombs, the city of Bacolod, 125 miles from the epicentre, was hosting the Peace Cup, a series of friendly games between Taiwan, Pakistan and the Philippines. A tremor woke up most of the Filipino players in the early morning and it became the opening line of every conversation during breakfast in the dining-room of a luxury hotel in the province of Negros Occidental.

Strangely, listening from a distance, the jabber echoing through the walls of the hotel's room did not resemble Tagalog, the most commonly spoken language of the archipelago. It sounded more like an interlingua, with a strong scent of British accents, some northern European words, a pinch of Spanish and a German bouquet. It was nothing like anyone would expect coming from a national football team. There were some blonde, blue-eyed giants, sitting next to small, stocky, dark-haired Austronesian men, some Mediterranean gestures and Middle-Eastern faces... all of them wearing the same blue and white uniform. The mixture made clear why

the team is nicknamed 'the Azkals', 'the street dogs'.

The Azkals had lost their first game 2-1 against Taiwan who, the day before, had been defeated 1-0 by Pakistan. In the final game of the Peace Cup, the Philippines had to beat Pakistan by two goals to retain the title. The hotel was jammed with fans wearing the colours of the Azkals, but there were also Spanish T-shirts, German and Italian flags, and a lot of Premier League merchandising items among the cheering crowd. Everybody was waiting around a balustrade, surrounding the stairs where the players would appear to cross the lobby and get into the bus. A stylish tanned woman in tight jeans and a flashy blouse caught everyone's eyes. She was Dyan Castillejo-Garcia, senior correspondent and sports anchor for ABS-CBN, a major broadcasting corporation. The younger ones were enthralled by her presence and, since the stars were not there yet, soon she was the one signing autographs.

One of the guys in the hotel lobby drew Dyan's attention. He was close to an elevator and was shifting from one foot to the other. Although he was wearing the official Philippines national team clothes, nobody seemed to recognise him. The TV journalist waved goodbye

to the fans and told her camera crew to follow her. She had a hunch. Since she had never seen him before, she thought that guy could be one of the new players. "Are you a player?" asked Dyan. "Yes, I am. My name is Martin," he answered. "And which country do you come from?" asked Dyan again. Only in the Azkals could a question like that make sense. Everywhere else in the world, a footballer joining a national team is supposed to be from the same country as his teammates. Not in the Philippines.

Martin Steuble was born in Switzerland in 1988. He is an attacking midfielder for FC Wil, in the Swiss Challenge League. He admires Thiago Alcántara's game and looks a little bit like him. With a wide smile and sincere surprise, Martin looked at the crowd. "My mum is from Bacolod but I've never been here before. My aunt got tickets; she's going to the game with my nieces. It's crazy!" he said. It's the first time the Switzerland-born player had been to the Philippines and he is excited; he doesn't know what to expect. "I hope I can play as soon as possible," he said. "I've handed in all the possible documents that I could find — certificate of birth, baptism, the marriage of my parents and so on. They have it all now."

The Swiss-Filipino was a fan before becoming part of the squad. "There was this hype about the Azkals among the Filipino community and I was following it through the internet," he said. "A few years ago the team's goalkeeping coach was Pascal Zuberbühler, Switzerland's former national keeper. So I approached him after a game of my team in the Swiss second division, where Pascal was as well. I wanted to be part of it, if I could help. Once Zubi had established

contact, the association immediately invited me over."

Martin admits that he doesn't know much about the country: he knows about the food thanks to his mother's cooking and knows that there are thousands of islands, but that's about it. He is probably unaware that Negros Occidental, the province where they are playing, was the home town of the Barcelona's first professional football player, Manuel Amechazurra. "The Adventurer," as they knew him in Spain, was born in 1884. He played 137 games as a defender for Barcelona and was even capped several times for Catalonia. Had he played for the Philippines then, he would have started the tradition of emigrants returning home to wear the colours of the country.

There are 22 players in the Philippines squad for the Peace Cup. Only five of them were born in the country. Of the others, there are two Germans, two Spaniards, two Dutch, one Italian, one Iranian, one Belgian, one Dane, one American and six Englishmen. There are more English players in the Philippines national team than in Arsenal's squad.

The coach Michael Weiss takes full responsibility for this. Although the idea of bringing 'foreign' players to boost the level of the Azkals was not his, he fully approved it. "There are some people who only want to see pure Filipinos," he said. "They can't accept those that were raised in other countries in the team. But I think such an attitude by some fans is an offence against those boys who want to represent the Philippines, since it is also their home country. And clearly, the local players do not have the necessary level

yet. If we only played with Filipino players we would lose against Pakistan. It would even be hard against Guam.”

Weiss is a globetrotter. Born in Germany in 1965, he took control of the squad in January 2011 after 10 years of coaching all around the world – in Germany, Japan, China and Rwanda. When he arrived in the Philippines, the team was 195th in the Fifa World Ranking. Three years later, when he finished his spell with the Azkals, they had climbed 68 places to their best ever position and had become the strongest football squad in Southeast Asia. “Our potential is tremendous,” he said.

It may be difficult to explain why the most successful manager in the history of Filipino football was sacked a few months before the 2014 AFC Challenge Cup, a major competition that could eventually lead to qualification for the Asian Cup and, in time, raise the Azkals’ chances of making it to the World Cup. Only the manager of the team, Dan Palami, a billionaire in love with the sport, has the answer.

Boss Dan, as everybody calls him, got involved with the national team in 2009 during an Under-19 tournament in China. The players lacked kit and airline tickets, and he paid for everything from his own pocket. The Philippines only won against Guam that time, but the Philippines Football Federation (PFF) asked him to manage the seniors.

“Lots of the Filipinos live overseas and most of my players do,” explained Weiss. “But the government does not support their football ambitions at all, although they are representing their country. For

example, the government has a registry of Filipinos abroad, but we have no access. Pretty much all we do is thanks to the private investments by Dan Palami.”

A high-pitched din broke the conversation. The noise of the fans made clear that the players were walking down the stairs and heading to the bus. There was a colourful and festive atmosphere around the Azkals, an experience most of these players have rarely gone through in professional football. It’s easy to forget that football is still a relatively unknown sport in the Philippines. Even in Bacolod, a city of 500,000 people, a taxi driver may not know that the national team is playing at the local stadium.

All the players and the coaching team got on the bus, but the driver stayed still and the engine didn’t roar. He was waiting for Boss Dan. Palami wore the Azkals’ official tracksuit. He signed as many T-shirts as any other star and had been joking with the fans, posing for the pictures up and down the lobby and talking to the local authorities. The transport tycoon is in his forties. He exudes an air of wealth and power and was self-confident enough to be the last one on the bus. He would sit on the bench next to Weiss when the game kicks off.

“I have spent around US\$2 million from my own pocket,” says Boss Dan. “It’s painful when you look at your bank account. But it doesn’t matter when you see the faces of the players or when you travel abroad and feel the support of the fans.”

Dan Palami is a black swan in the development of football in the Philippines. He was nine years old when

he saw older kids playing with a ball on the street and the game came naturally to him. When he was a teenager, nobody watched football in the country. There were few fans and they had to wait for the Beta tapes of the games. "We could only watch Pelé in films," he said.

"For a time I concentrated on managing my own business. Then I started playing football with the company personnel and friends. Soon, it started to become serious, so I signed players from other provinces and gave them work at my train factory, so they would play in the team. Jerry Barbosa, one of the Azkals, belongs to the accounts department of my company."

Today, Palami not only watches football on TV and from the bench of the national team, he also has a team of scouts who track several foreign leagues and gather intelligence on the emigrants and their offspring. Facebook and Twitter are powerful tools for these scouts: many of the players in the Azkals have been contacted through social media.

He also created a club in Manila, Global FC, to give refuge to the 'foreign' national team players. At least half a dozen of the Azkals play for his club. "Global was set up to help the national team," Palami explained. "One of the key ingredients of the success of the team is to spend more time together. Global FC addresses the situation. It will provide the structure to help the national team. The country comes before the club. We have to change the mentality of football in the Philippines."

Boss Dan has always had one big goal in mind. He has shaped his ambition over

the years and has given it a catchy name: Project 100. Since he took over the Azkals, he has been dreaming of a Filipino squad in the top 100 of the Fifa rankings. Palami rejoiced at the end of 2013, when the national team became a powerhouse in Southeast Asian football but there are still a few steps to climb if he wants to hear a triumphal fanfare at the end of that path, a path that started more than a hundred years ago, when the Philippines were under US jurisdiction.

The history of Filipino football goes as far back as that of those more established football nations the young talent is being drawn from. The Philippines' federation has been in operation since 1907 and it was in 1912 that Paulino Alcántara, who was born in 1896 when the country was still under Spanish control, made his debut for Barcelona. For a short spell in 1951 he also coached Spain's national side.

But Alcántara was to remain a rare star, in fact the only one. As the USA began to dominate the archipelago it was not football the colonialists taught the locals. Basketball and boxing were introduced and adopted as the most popular sports. Even today, few Filipinos could name a player for the Azkals. Everybody could find the capital's notorious Araneta Arena, where in 1975 Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier met in the Thrilla in Manila and would know their way to the basketball arenas, or to the space where they could shoot a few baskets, but football is hardly anywhere to be seen outside a handful of bars where people may be watching the Premier League. All over the world, kids in the slums kick a makeshift ball around, but not here.

There are, though, at least two faces young Filipinos and Filipinas will know. They have lighter skin and thinner noses than the average citizen and regularly appear on the country's television entertainment shows. They are brothers, one of whom became famous for his work as a model, the other by singing. "I'm really not proud of it," said Phil Younghusband with an almost blushing smile as he talks about his stint as a singer. He was sitting inside that hotel in Bacolod, one table away from Boss Dan. His brother James nods next to him, chuckling. His face, in turn, is often seen on advertisements. Phil still makes some extra money having shots taken of himself.

The Younghusband brothers are superstars in the Philippines. "Most will know we are footballers," said Phil. He settled here in 2008, as a 21 year old, having passed through Chelsea's academy and reserve side, and a loan with the Danish side Esbjerg. Phil is one year younger than James, who was also a graduate of Chelsea's academy, before playing for AFC Wimbledon, Staines Town, Woking and Farnborough.

"In the locker rooms during the years in the Chelsea youth team, our mates would joke that one day we'd represent the Philippines," said James.

"And so it happened," said Phil.

In 1985, the Younghusbands' mother Susan went from Manila to South West London, where she met Philip Younghusband, a lawyer she would later marry. "Being raised in a football-crazy country like England, it was obvious we'd be kicking the ball," said James.

A few years ago, the two were contacted thanks to a computer game in which their names were featured. The scout of the national team sensed that with their Filipino roots and their development in one of the world's biggest football clubs, the Younghusbands should be able to raise the Filipino side's level. "We were invited to play for the team pretty much out of the blue," said Phil. And as the country was establishing a national professional football league at the time, having two nationals from abroad seemed an attraction.

It was, but most Filipinos probably know the Younghusbands more for their activities off the pitch than on it, not that that's something the brothers think about too much. "Football is really taking off here," said James. "When we first got here, you'd come to play a game and then find out there were no locker rooms. Or the balls were missing. Coming from Chelsea, you're a bit spoiled. And then you see this."

The football infrastructure today bears no comparison to that of five years ago, he said: "But we still have a long, long way to go." James and Phil Younghusband are doing their share. On the national network TV5 they regularly screen a three-minute show football called FYI, which stands for Football Younghusbands Instruction, to give training tips. They also run their own football academy.

Apart from a one-year hiatus in 2011, when they quit the sport because the national association had repeatedly failed to reimburse the brothers' flight tickets and other costs, Phil and James Younghusband play a crucial role in the

national side. Phil even ascended into the world's top 20 international strikers, at least by one measure. "The *Daily Mail* ranked me among guys like Pelé, Gabriel Batistuta and Didier Drogba because I scored 33 times in 50 caps," he said, turning round with a smile.

Behind him was the lobby window that separated the footballers' relaxation from the numerous excited fans. The brothers knew they would have to pass through there, signing autographs. Even through the closed doors, the cheers were clearly audible, with some fans screaming Phil's name. "It's a great thing that they accept us here as they do," he said.

But that isn't the whole story. Not all of the growing body of football fans is appreciative of players like the Younghusbands as the girls waiting for them outside the hotel, something that is rooted in a national complex as much as in sport and the country's economy.

On the bigger stand of the roughly 12,000-spectator stadium of Bacolod, two hours later, the 19-year-old student Daniel Ramos was not amused. "I think we don't need all the foreigners," he murmured. The youngster and his mates wore green T-shirts that identify them as football talents of a local high school. As he said, the sport is gaining in popularity but Ramos doesn't see that as having much to do with the 'foreigners'. "I think our team would be equally good with real Filipinos," he said. "We have many competitive players."

Weiss's assistant Thomas Roy, also a German, is sceptical. By kick-off, Roy was sitting in the stand with a notebook on his lap, following the game with

pen and paper. It is Roy's task to turn the Philippines into a country where local talents will one day pop up like mushrooms from soil. "We aren't nearly there," was his sober comment, accompanied by a shake of the head as the only local Filipino player on the pitch tried to dribble and lost the ball. "Until local players are better than those with formation abroad, it will take two generations at least," he said. "You need to build proper infrastructure in the whole country, you need to make the sport popular enough, you need good coaches and so on." And of course, he added, you need idols the youth can aspire to: "Currently, you can only find those guys abroad. I don't understand that some people don't accept these boys who represent one of their parents' countries with so much pride."

There are roughly 12 million Filipinos living outside their home country, with political support from the government in Manila. "Sending labour abroad has been part of our economic policy for decades now," said Emmanuel Esguerra, a few hundred kilometres north of Bacolod, in the capital. Esguerra is an economist at the country's most prestigious academic institution, the University of the Philippines, and plays a leading role in a government commission to steer economic development. "Our situation would be far worse without those people abroad," he said. 10% of the Philippines's economy consists of remittances sent from overseas workers who make more money abroad.

Filipinos are clerks, entertainers, carers and nurses in Saudi Arabia, Japan, Great Britain, the USA and elsewhere, and seamen all over the world. "Their

incomes in richer countries are really crucial," said Esguerra. "Knowing this, some people would never come back to the Philippines in order to provide a constant income stream for their families." As a result, many Filipino citizens married and had children abroad.

It's the offspring of those emigrants all over the world who are today beefing up football development in the Southeast Asian country. On the pitch in Bacolod, as the Azkals played Pakistan, all but one player was born outside the country they were representing. Many of them, like the Switzerland-born Martin Steuble, had never been in the Philippines until they became part of the project. "Sure, in some abstract way it is understandable that some fans think we are not true Filipinos," said Rob Gier. "But it's just unfair if you look at how all of us guys try hard to make the country more competitive." The Azkals' captain, born in Ascot to an English father and a Filipino mother, quit his professional football career, which started at Wimbledon and ended in the Philippines in 2009, but he still plays for the national team. Gier's main job today is to find new players for the team and he is looking for them in every nation where football is a major sport.

"There's a young pro in Austria that we are trying to get," he said. "Another is playing in France's Ligue 1." But it isn't always easy to get in touch. Some Azkals were first contacted through Facebook, others through the Filipino community in the country in which they live. "But some others," Gier admitted, "are just out of reach." The most famous example is Bayern Munich's left-back David Alaba, born to a Nigerian father and a Filipino

mother. Alaba chose to represent Austria, where he was born.

Although the Azkals dominated Pakistan from the start, the visitors took a shock lead after a few easily avoidable mistakes in the Filipino defence. Everybody understood the situation: they needed three goals to lift the Peace Cup. Weiss constantly shouted at his players, some of whom were running around with little apparent direction or motivation. There was one clear exception, the Germany-born Stephan Schröck. A winger at Bundesliga club Eintracht Frankfurt, he is the centrepiece of the Azkals' game. Schröck was fighting for every ball and putting order into the chaos of the home team. "Without Stephan today, the Younghusbands wouldn't have got a single ball," said the stressed youth coordinator Thomas Roy at half-time. By then, the Azkals had at least equalised. But that was not nearly enough. The fans, most of whom paid roughly a dollar to see the game, not a small amount in a country in which a third of the population earn about that amount in a day, made clear what they wanted: "Come on, Azkals for victory," said one placard.

Meanwhile, Daniel Ramos, the young fan who was sceptical of the international dominance in this national side, asked, "Why is Stephan Schröck not playing for Germany? He is so strong." Perhaps he could have. Schröck represented the Germans at Under-18, Under-19 and Under-20 level. But one day at his previous club, Greuther Fürth, there was a postcard in the letter box from which he would normally pick up autograph requests. "A scout from the Philippines invited me to play for their national team," Schröck said. "It was a point of no

return. Sure, there was still the theoretical chance that I would have been picked to play for Germany. But if I was being honest with myself that would have been more of a career step to raise my market value." Playing for the Philippines, he said, involved more national pride. "I'm also doing it for my mother a bit. She came to Germany decades ago and started work as a beautician to send money back home: all I am today is thanks to her. At my club Frankfurt, there's not always a great deal of acceptance of this because the Philippines are not a big football nation and many games are outside the Fifa calendar. But that's not my fault."

At his home in the southern German town of Schweinfurt, Schröck never spoke Tagalog, but his mother would sometimes cook Filipino food. Schröck admits he knew little of the Philippines well before he started to play for them. That's one part of his story in which he resembles his teammates. The other is his feeling of nationhood. "I am both, German and Filipino," Schröck said with an earnest, almost defensive, tone.

By the second half Schröck, seemed to be pushing and pulling his team along almost single-handedly. With an hour played, the Philippines were dominant and with 10 minutes to go they took a 2-1 lead. The Panaad Stadium was throbbing. After a few clear chances were missed, it was Schröck who scored the decisive goal, lashing the ball in from a yard after some chaotic Pakistani defending. He ran to the corner, followed by his countrymen of all skin colours to strike a victory pose in front of the fans. It was only the Peace Cup, but to this country, it was a great success.

"I am so relieved," said Weiss, raising his shirt to wipe the sweat from brow. "We didn't play well at all, made way too many mistakes. But it's fine now. We'll have a few drinks later on, I guess." He seemed unemotional as he congratulated his players but, a few moments later, as the Azkals collected the trophy, the coach ventured a smile.

Hours after the victory, hundreds of fans awaited the players in front of the team bus to take pictures and get a last glimpse of their players. With every footballer who walked out of the door, another wave of cheers echoed through the night. "You'll see later today," Schröck had said that morning, alluding to the enthusiasm for football in this country, which had seemed almost non-existent in places. "But people really go crazy for the Azkals. They see us in shopping malls and take pictures. I really don't know where this will take us in a few years, when we may eventually be among the world's top 100."

But do they know what being an Azkal means? Off the pitch, Schröck proved he had done his homework: "Azkal is the Filipino word for those dogs who live on the street, who don't have an owner, you know? They are always around but never really cared for. I think 'azkal' is the perfect term for a football team here. The sport has been here for more than a hundred years, but always in the shadow of other disciplines."

Now, that street dog is rising, slowly but surely. And, the creature is more representative today than ever before. As Schröck said, "Lots of street dogs are mixed race, aren't they?"

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