

## **Kyu Nam Park announces: South Korea's Unification Church to Sell Seongnam Soccer Club**

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SEOUL - After South Korean soccer club Seongnam Ilhwa Chunma's final home game of the season, its chief executive Kyu Nam Park joined the players and staff in the center circle, turned to face the stands and sank to his hands and knees in a deep bow.



*Unification Church leader Sun Myung Moon handing over the Peace Cup trophy to Hamburger SV players after their victory against Seongnam Ilhwa Chunma in Gyeonggi-do, South Korea, July 22, 2012. European Pressphoto Agency*

"Seongnam Ilhwa Chunma is vanishing into history," he told the crowd Saturday. "But Seongnam FC will be established. I will support it along with your love to be the best team."

For Mr. Park, it was one of the final symbolic acts of handing ownership of the club from the Unification Church to the city of Seongnam, an affluent satellite town of Seoul that will run the team under the new name.

The history of Seongnam Ilhwa Chunma is one of success on the field and controversy surrounding it. The team, set up in 1989 as part of Tongil Group, an umbrella organization for businesses and other entities run by South Korea's

Unification Church, has won seven domestic titles and two regional championships. It is the country's most successful soccer club.

Yet because of its links to the religious group, headed by Rev. Sun Myung Moon until his death in September 2012, Seongnam Ilhwa Chunma has been shunned by many people in its hometown and consistently has some of the lowest attendances in the top flight of South Korea's professional soccer league.

Better known as the "Moonies," the Unification Church is famous for its mass weddings and is considered by many to be a cult organization set up by a man who saw himself as the second coming of the Messiah. The church says it has around three million members.



*Seongnam Ilhwa Chunma FC Chief Executive Kyu Nam Park tosses balls into the crowd along with the team following the final home game of the season on Nov. 23. Alastair Gale/The Wall Street Journal*

Sports in general and soccer in particular were a personal interest of Rev. Moon, who was a keen fisherman. He created the Peace Cup in cooperation with Brazilian soccer legend Pele. The friendly tournament is held every two years and involves high profile European clubs such as Italy's Juventus as well as Seongnam. One of Rev. Moon's last public appearances was at the Peace Cup tournament near Seoul in July last year.

When not attending games, Rev. Moon was said to watch Seongnam play via a special television feed set up at his home by the club. But following his death and his wife's moves to take control of operations, the church's interest in sports has waned. As well as moving to sell

Seongnam, the church has suspended the Peace Cup.

"We decided that our group will be church-centered and so we're reducing other activities," said Tongil

Group spokesman In Yong Ryu. The church also owns two professional soccer clubs in Brazil's lower leagues but says it doesn't have plans to sell them at the moment.

Connections to the church are clear at Seongnam's home ground, where many of the sponsored billboards advertise other businesses in the Tongil Group. While there is no obvious religious imagery, the club name "Ilhwa Chunma" is a combination of the word for harmony and "heaven's horse," a winged stallion that is also the mascot of the club.

Seongnam City plans to drop those words from the club name as part of the breakaway from church ownership. Negotiations over the deal are ongoing but are expected to be completed later this year.



The acquisition has faced local opposition because of the religious associations of the club and concerns over the cost. Seongnam Mayor Jae Myung Lee has said shares in the club will be offered to the public as it aims to generate a better relationship with the local population and pull in larger crowds.

Despite finishing this K-League season mid-table, Seongnam has the second-lowest average attendance at home games. One match, only 749 people showed up, the lowest in the league all season. But more than 20,000 were there for the final home game, a 0-0 draw with Daegu FC.

People at the game expressed hope that the club will turn a corner under the new ownership. "We will always be here supporting Seongnam," said Maeng Tae-ho, a supporter for eight years.

Following Saturday's game, Mayor Lee and Mr. Park, the chief executive, embraced on the pitch and both were given a warm reception by fans.

"I will pray every day so things will go well," Mr. Park said.

—Min Sun Lee contributed to this article.