

CHOLLIMA TACTICS: ANALYZING NORTH KOREAN NATIONAL TEAM STRATEGY  
AT THE 1966 FIFA WORLD CUP

By Brendan Kent

*“Our Great Leader stressed that to be an excellent footballer you must run fast and kick accurately.”<sup>1</sup>*

- Myong Rye Hyun, North Korean Head Coach, 1966 World Cup

In very few nations does politics become entangled with everything else so much as in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. Political ideology manifests itself in film, music, cultural celebrations, and just about anything else the regime can control. So it should come as little surprise that North Korean political ideology has had an impact on soccer as well. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the impact of politically driven on-field tactics in North Korea’s surprisingly successful run in the 1966 World Cup. This will involve historical analysis of common tactics at the time, as well as analysis of North Korea’s four matches in the World Cup. Through this, I intend to shed light on North Korean National Team tactics, their mechanism, and their impact.

### **Pathway to England**

Circumstances were peculiar when North Korea qualified for the 1966 FIFA World Cup to be held in England. Sixteen teams were to compete at the tournament, yet through FIFA qualification rules, Asia, Oceania, and Africa combined were only allowed to send one team. In protest of this slight, the African nations and South Korea withdrew. Only North Korea and Australia remained to compete for the opportunity to go to England.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Game of Their Lives*, Directed by Daniel Gordon (2002: BBC), online.

<sup>2</sup> *Game of Their Lives*, Daniel Gordon.

The North Koreans met the Australians in a two-legged tie,<sup>3</sup> but this tie was rather unusual. Australia and North Korea did not recognize each other at the time, so the traditional two-legged tie where one match is played in each country was not feasible. Both legs of the tie were, therefore, played in the Cambodian capital, Phnom Penh. The Australians, most of whom were actually British, came into the tie with little preparation and maximum confidence. They severely underestimated the North Koreans and paid dearly for it. The North Koreans, for their part, had spent months training together and had even toured the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the buildup to the tie. North Korea won the first leg 6-1 and the second leg 3-1. They were through to the World Cup.<sup>4</sup>

## **Chollima**

Chollima, a winged horse of Korean mythology, symbolizes speed. It also symbolized the rapid reconstruction of North Korea after the Korean War. Following the war, which saw the destruction of most of the DPRK's infrastructure, DPRK leaders attempted to rally the people behind the goal of building a socialist utopia and building it quickly.<sup>5</sup> Chollima saw initial success and North Korea's economy far outgrew the South Korean economy in the years after the war. This, undoubtedly, was a point of pride for the DPRK, and it follows that North Korea sought to apply this economic tactic beyond the economy.

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<sup>3</sup> In general, a two legged tie involves the teams playing one game at each team's home ground. The team that scores the most between those two games wins. If the teams are still tied, several things can happen: If the tie is being played under the "away goals" rule, the team that scored the most goals in its away leg. wins. If the two teams are tied after the second leg on both goals and away goals, the game goes into extra time and if no winner is decided in extra time, a penalty kick shootout. If the game is not being played under the away goals rule, the game will simply go into extra time if the score is tied at the end of the second leg, and go into penalties if the score is still tied after extra time.

<sup>4</sup> *Game of Their Lives*, Daniel Gordon.

<sup>5</sup> *Game of Their Lives*, Daniel Gordon.

When North Korea's head coach at the 1966 World Cup, Myong Rye Hyun, was interviewed decades later for Daniel Gordon's documentary on the 1966 squad, *Game of Their Lives*, Myong explained the importance of incorporating Chollima values into the national team:

“To compete with the West, we believed we had to be mentally determined, physically fit, fast and full of energy. Our Great Leader stressed that to be an excellent footballer, you must run fast and kick accurately... People in North Korea were working all day and all night. As sportsmen, we could only train in the morning and afternoon. But we did so intensively. In this way, we could follow the Chollima movement like everyone else.”<sup>6</sup>

Theoretically, Chollima tactics involve an emphasis on speed and energy. It is my intention to analyze the four matches played by the DPRK in the 1966 World Cup to determine the ways in which Chollima manifested itself tactically and the success of this style.

### **The Formation**

In all four matches of the World Cup, the DPRK set up in a 4-2-4.<sup>7</sup> The 4-2-4 was developed independently in both Hungary and Brazil. Early stirrings of the Hungarian 4-2-4 came with Hungary's legendary defeat of England at Wembley<sup>8</sup> by a score of 6-3. The Hungarian manager at the time, Gusztav Sebes, altered what was the popular formation of the era, the W-M,<sup>9</sup> to create what looked more like an M-M. The M-M included two central forwards flanked on either side by a winger, with a withdrawn forward (or attacking midfielder)

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<sup>6</sup> *Game of Their Lives*, Daniel Gordon.

<sup>7</sup> In soccer, formations are notated by listing the number of players in each line, starting for the back. So a 4-4-2 would have four defenders, four midfielders, and four forwards. A 4-2-3-1 would have four defenders, two defensive midfielders, three attacking midfielders, and one forwards.

<sup>8</sup> England's national stadium, located in London.

<sup>9</sup> The W-M refers to a 3-2-2-3 formation that when looked at resembles a W at the back and an M at the front. In contrast, the M-M refers to roughly a 3-2-3-2.

slightly behind and in between the two central forwards. At the back was a center half<sup>10</sup> operating in a quasi-midfield role, two other center halves operating in defensive capacities, and attacking fullbacks on either side.<sup>11</sup> As soccer historian Jonathan Wilson explains in his essential history soccer tactics, *Inverting the Pyramid*, “the Hungarian system was a hair’s breadth from 4-2-4.” The Hungarian 4-2-4 was further developed under Béla Guttmann.<sup>12</sup>

Guttmann claims to have brought the 4-2-4 to Brazil, however, as Wilson points out, the 4-2-4 was developed by the time Guttmann arrived to manage São Paulo. Wilson speculates that Brazilians took to the 4-2-4 “because the rigidity of the W-M, with its tight marking structure, did not sit easily with local demands for flair and self-expression.”<sup>13</sup>

There are several reasons why the North Koreans may have adopted the 4-2-4. For one, it was one of the common formations at the time—Germany would play 4-2-4 in its 1966 World Cup Final loss to England at Wembley. One can also speculate that the influence of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Bloc on the DPRK may have played a role. The North Koreans toured the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe prior to their World Cup Qualifying tie against Australia.<sup>14</sup> It is certainly possible that the tactics seen on this tour influenced the tactics used by the North Koreans in World Cup, as the Soviets, like the Hungarians, had begun to move towards a 4-2-4 in the years leading up to the World Cup.<sup>15</sup> But these speculations may, in fact, not be giving the

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<sup>10</sup> Center-half can be a somewhat confusing term. In the early years of soccer, a center half was a central midfielder but as tactics evolved, the center half dropped deeper. Because of this, in modern times we often refer to a central defender as a center half. For clarity, from this point on I will not use the term center half and will use the terms “defender” and “midfielder” to make the distinction. For more on the evolution of this role, see Wilson’s book cited below.

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Wilson, *Inverting the Pyramid: The History of Soccer Tactics* (New York: Nation Books, 2013) 86-91.

<sup>12</sup> Wilson, *Pyramid*, 91-97.

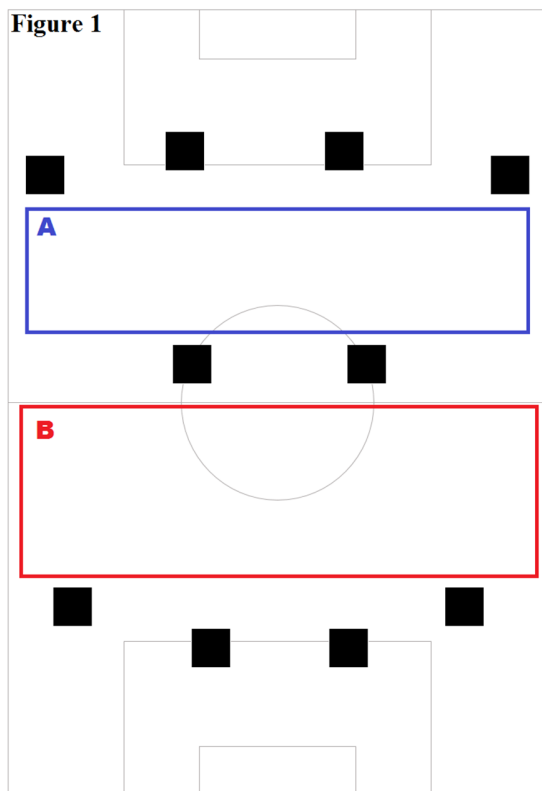
<sup>13</sup> Wilson, *Pyramid*, 96-98.

<sup>14</sup> *Game of Their Lives*, Daniel Gordon.

<sup>15</sup> Wilson, *Pyramid*, 81-82.

North Koreans due credit for independently choosing a system that best suited their tactics. And there is certainly a case to be made that the 4-2-4 was very well suited for the Chollima system.

The 4-2-4 packs eight of ten field players in two lines, one at the front and one at the back. This leaves considerable space in the middle of the field, shown by zones A and B in Figure 1. This ample space in the middle of the field can be held in contrast to the lack of space



in the 4-2-3-1, a popular tactic today, shown in

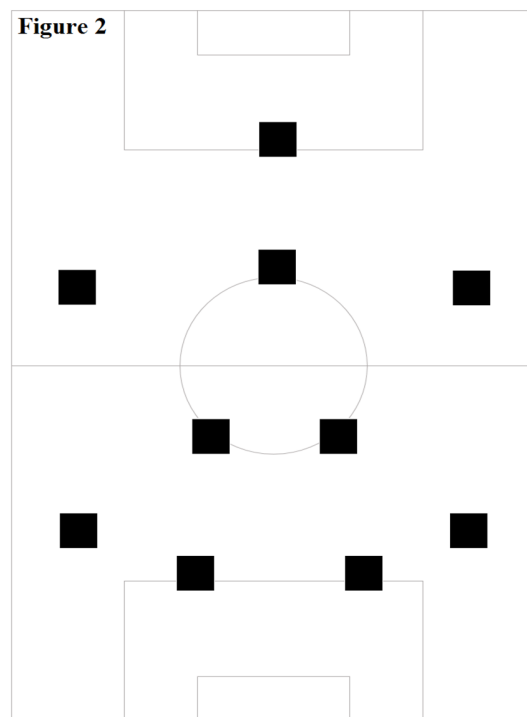


Figure 2. There are, of course, benefits to both systems, and for teams that hope to possess the ball, the 4-2-3-1 is a much better choice. In the game of possession, the five-man midfield would dominate the two man midfield. But the North Koreans did not focus on possession, they focused on speed. To run with the ball you need space, and the 4-2-4 provides space in ample quantities. So whether or not Myong Rye Hyun chose the 4-2-4 because of its popularity at the time, the influence of fellow communist countries, or because he simply thought it was best, the 4-2-4 is certainly a reasonable formation around which to structure a Chollima tactical system.

## **The World Cup**

Under the 1966 format, the World Cup began with a Group Stage in which each of the sixteen teams at the tournament was drawn into a group of four. Each group member would play each other group member once. Two points would be awarded for a win, one for a draw, and no points for a loss.<sup>16</sup> The top two teams in each group would advance to the quarterfinals. From here, the format was a one-game knockout tournament.

The North Koreans were drawn into Group 4 with communist ally, the Soviet Union, powerhouse Italy, and Chile. Despite a resounding qualifying victory over Australia, the DPRK was an afterthought and was not expected to find success in the tournament, especially given the strength of their opponents.<sup>17</sup>

The DPRK's Group 4 games were set to be played in Middlesbrough at Ayresome Park, which at the time was the home ground of Middlesbrough F.C. And while the general British populous greeted the North Koreans rather coldly at first, their perception would change dramatically over the course of the tournament.<sup>18</sup>

### **Group Match: Soviet Union**

For most of the world, the first Group 4 match against the Soviet Union was the first glimpse of the DPRK National Team. Ultimately, the North Koreans lost 3-0, but the Chollima system shone through at times.

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<sup>16</sup> This point system, where two points are awarded for a win, one for a draw, and none for a loss, has changed since the 1966 World Cup. As an incentive to attack and go for a win, a win is now worth three points, while a draw is still worth one. This point system holds in most domestic leagues around the World as well as in the group stages of tournaments.

<sup>17</sup> *Game of Their Lives*, Daniel Gordon.

<sup>18</sup> *Game of Their Lives*, Daniel Gordon.

The North Koreans lined up in their 4-2-4 featuring the lineup in Figure 3. It should be



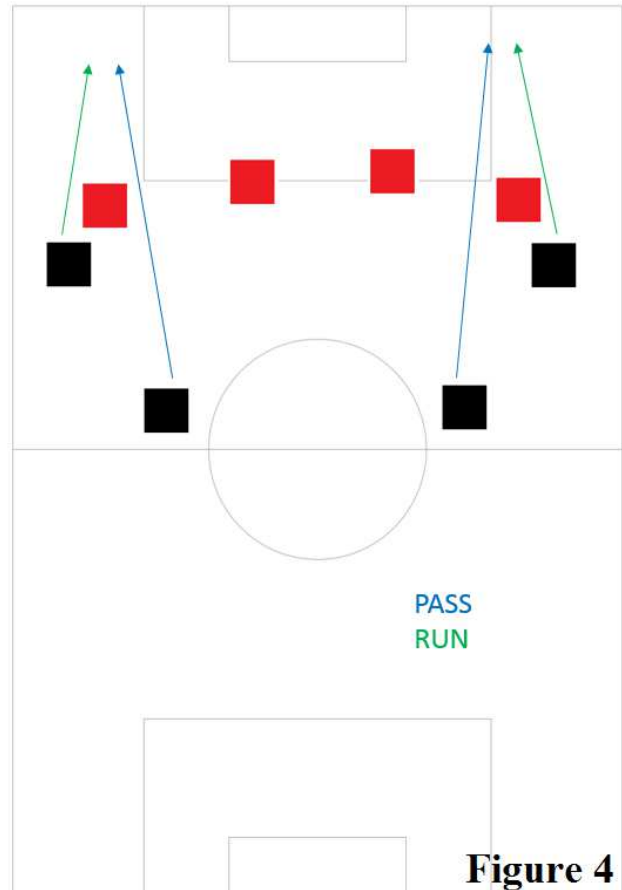
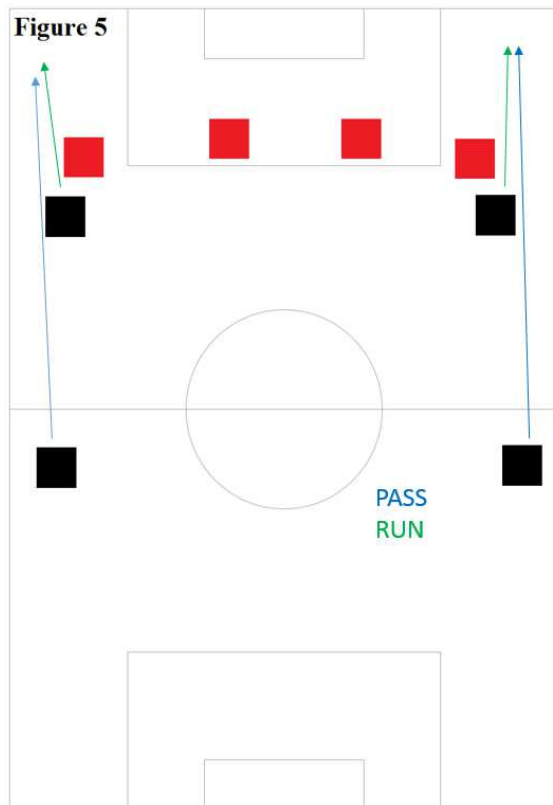
noted that often times, center forward Pak Doo-Ik would drop back into the midfield to retrieve the ball. This means that from time to time, the formation would look more like a 4-3-3, with Pak Doo-Ik in the midfield alongside Im Seung-Hwi and Pak Seung-Zin. In fact, the broadcast announcer at one point called Pak Doo-Ik a left half and stated that the North Koreans were playing a 4-3-3<sup>19</sup>. Pak Doo-Ik, however, was a forward by position and made his midfield escapades to assist a midfield contingent lacking in numbers.

In the early minutes of the match, the North Koreans had very little possession and spent most of the time fending off Soviet attacks. But then the DPRK began to see a little bit more of the ball and soon enough, small glimpses of Chollima tactics could be seen.

<sup>19</sup> YouTube film of North Korea vs. Soviet Union, 1966 World Cup.  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P0csKoQN\\_1s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P0csKoQN_1s)



The speedy play of Chollima tactics centers around through balls<sup>20</sup> played up the sides of the pitch. In most cases, a midfielder (Figure 4) or a fullback (Figure 5) would play a long through ball past the Soviet back line and let either the outside right or outside left use their blistering pace to race to the ball.



The speed-based tactics employed by the North Koreans can be held in contrast to the more

physical tactics of the Soviet Union. Unafraid of contact, the Soviets often outmuscled the DPRK and dominated in the air. Generally speaking, the DPRK was the most threatening off of the counter-attack, however, in the 31<sup>st</sup> minute it was the USSR that drew first blood off a counter. Malfeev put in a short cross as a result of a blistering Soviet counter through the center of the park. Moments later, the Soviets netted again, but this time using their clear aerial advantage.

<sup>20</sup> A through ball is a pass behind the defense for another offensive player to run on to. Similar to a back-door in basketball.

The North Koreans conceded a free kick on the right side of the pitch, several yards outside the box. From here, the Soviets played in a lofted cross that was met by the head of Banichevski.

The score-line held at 2-0 until the several minutes before the end when Sabo brought down a lobbed through ball with his chest and slotted past Lee Chan-Myung to make it 3-0.

Despite bright spots, especially the through balls described above, the North Koreans perhaps underwhelmed in their execution of Chollima tactics as the game progressed. This let-off was partly due to very high expectations for North Korean pace. In the opening minutes of the game, the broadcast announcer stated from his experience watching the North Koreans in practice, that they “have a high-gear type of play... they go go go in a kind of hasty fashion.” Yet by the final minutes of the match, the same announcer said that he “expected more bustle and more haste from the Koreans, they haven’t really injected any sort of pace into the game at all.”<sup>21</sup>In other words, Chollima tactics had not completely manifested against the Soviet Union. But this was only the first game, and there was plenty more to be seen of the speedy North Koreans.

### **Group Match: Chile**

The second group stage match was against Chile, who had finished 3<sup>rd</sup> at the previous World Cup that was, in fact, held in Chile.

By this time, the population of Middlesborough had taken to the North Koreans and generally cheered for the feisty underdogs. “The crowd support for the Koreans enormous” remarked the broadcast announcer in regard to North Korea’s new English fan base. This may have, in fact, been very advantageous to the North Koreans. Home advantage is a very well

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<sup>21</sup> YouTube film of North Korea vs. Soviet Union, 1966 World Cup

documented phenomenon in soccer. In an article for Nate Silver's renowned data-analysis site *FiveThirtyEight*, Oliver Roeder and James Curley discuss the impact of home advantage in English soccer. Of course, the World Cup is not specifically English soccer, but the crowd and atmosphere was very much English, and very much in support of the North Koreans. Roeder and Curley show that home field advantage has decreased over time. This, however, means that in 1966, home field advantage was greater than it is today. A fact such as this may not matter for the purposes of a World Cup in England if the main advantage of playing at home was familiarity with the field. But data has shown that the clear advantage of playing at home is referee bias. And as Roeder and Curley write, "A single official can have an enormous influence on a game — an influence rarely rivaled in other sports. One reason is that soccer games are low-scoring."<sup>22</sup> Presumably this referee bias comes from an unconscious (because it is difficult to imagine that many referees are deliberately biased) desire to please the home fans. This means that if the English fans at Ayresome Park were, for the most part, supporting North Korea, the DPRK may have gained an edge over their Chilean opponents.

Both the DPRK and Chile were entering the match at Ayresome Park hoping to recover from a loss in the first match, Chile having lost 2-0 to Italy. North Korea started off on a relatively strong note against Chile, providing the first real chance of the match after a good dribble from Pak Seung-Zin was followed by a wide shot by Lee Dong-Woon. Early on the expected speed and quickness began to reemerge following the relatively slow second half against the Soviets. Following a typical Chollima-style attack down the left wing—that is, a through ball to a sprinting winger—early in the match, the broadcast announcer remarked that “even in the

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<sup>22</sup> Oliver Roeder and James Curley, "Home-Field Advantage Doesn't Mean What it Used to in English Football," *FiveThirtyEight*, October 8, 2014, accessed on May 3, 2015, <http://fivethirtyeight.com/features/home-field-advantage-english-premier-league/>.

opening minute or two it seems that the Koreans have learned a lesson or two from their stay in Britain already, they are looking very much livelier than they did against the Russians.”<sup>23</sup>

Despite a good start, however, the North Koreans found themselves down 1-0 in the 26<sup>th</sup> minute after they conceded a penalty for foul in the box, which Chile’s Marcos converted even though Lee Chan-Myung dove to the correct side. Following the goal, the game remained an



open, attacking affair, conducive of Chollima tactics. In the 88<sup>th</sup> minute, North Korea was awarded a free kick in their attacking half, just inside the center circle because of a Chile hand ball. As most teams would do from a losing position in the 88<sup>th</sup> minute, the free kick was launched into the box. Twice the

ball was cleared, but on the second occasion, it fell to right-half and captain, Pak Seung-Zin on the edge of the box and he fired it into the back of the net (Figure 6). The goal was not necessarily a result of Chollima tactics, in fact, it was a result of what almost any team would do in that situation: bring men forward and launch the ball in. The crowd, according to the announcer, was “absolutely delighted.”<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> YouTube film of North Korea vs. Chile, 1966 World Cup, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X7\\_Q3VfMj0I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X7_Q3VfMj0I).

<sup>24</sup> YouTube film of North Korea vs. Chile, 1966 World Cup.

## Group Match: Italy

North Korea went into its third group stage match against Italy needing a win to advance to the knockout round. Italy, a soccer superpower at the time, was dominant in the opening stages, but as soccer often goes, they could not convert. In *Game of Their Lives*, one of the Italian players discusses how “The goal seemed to be jinxed against us—none of our shots went in.”<sup>25</sup> The North Koreans, for their part, had some opportunities in the early going and would play the wide through ball characteristic of Chollima tactics.<sup>26</sup>

33 minutes into the game, the North Koreans had a massive stroke of luck when Bulgarelli, who captained the Italians, slid in on North Korean right half Pak Seung-Zin and injured his leg. Bulgarelli was stretchered off the field and did not return to the game. This was the era before substitutes were allowed, so Italy was forced to play the remainder of the game with one less player than the North Koreans.<sup>27</sup> Following the injury, the DPRK continued with Chollima tactics, attempting several through balls down the side before a cleared ball was headed back into the box. Forward Pak Doo-Ik positioned himself so that once the ball had landed, he

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<sup>25</sup> *Game of Their Lives*, Daniel Gordon.

<sup>26</sup> YouTube film of North Korea vs. Italy, 1966 World Cup, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=josC0YUtVLQ>.

<sup>27</sup> *Game of Their Lives*, Daniel Gordon.

only needed one touch to put the ball in the back of the net (Figure 7)<sup>28</sup>. Pak Doo-Ik's goal was the only goal of what is still one of the greatest upsets of all time.

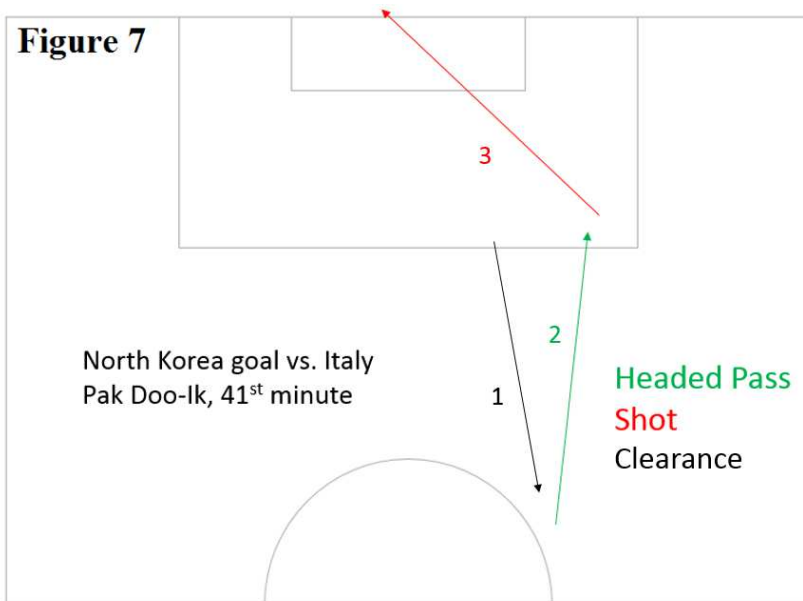
With North Korea's win over Italy, the final group table had the Soviet Union in first with six points, North Korea in second with three points, Italy in third with two points, and Chile

in fourth with one point.<sup>29</sup> This meant that the Soviet Union and North Korea would advance the quarterfinals, the first of the knockout rounds.

#### Quarterfinals: Portugal

In the quarterfinals, North Korea was matched up with Portugal, who had played a perfect tournament to that

point, winning every group game. Once again, however, North Korea would have a fair bit of



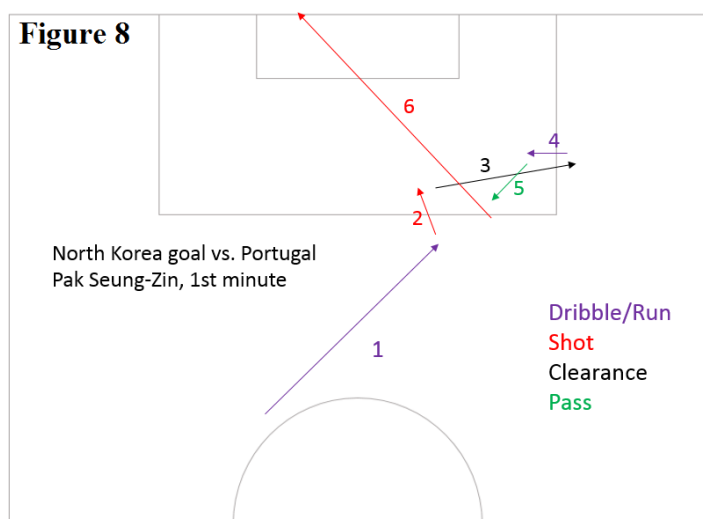
<sup>28</sup> YouTube film of North Korea vs. Italy, 1966 World Cup.

<sup>29</sup> "World Cup 1966 Finals", Rec Sport Soccer Statistics Foundation, accessed May 3, 2015, <http://www.rsssf.com/tables/66full.html#grd>.

support in the stands, as 3,000 fans from Middlesbrough traveled to the match, which took place at Goodison Park in Liverpool, the home of English club side, Everton.<sup>30</sup>

It took the North Koreans less than a minute to score their first against Portugal. The move started with a run through midfield. The ball found its way to the right wing where it was eventually passed back to Pak Seung-Zin on the edge of the box, who rifled a shot into the top left corner of the goal (Figure 8).<sup>31</sup> It is fair to say that unlike the first two goals that North Korea had scored in the tournament, this first goal against Italy was at least partially due to Chollima tactics. The play began on a quick fast break which scrambled the Portuguese and allowed Pak Seung-Zin to take the shot, which ultimately was a fantastic strike.

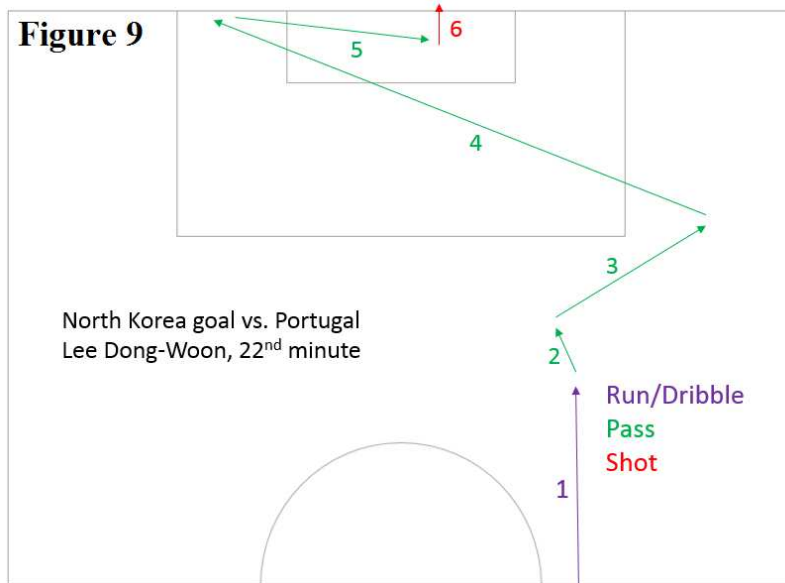
This first goal highlighted the advantages of the 4-2-4 for the North Korean Chollima system. The available space in the middle of the pitch, depicted by Figure 1, allowed for the mazy run that sprung the counter that eventually led to the goal. These midfield dribbles, made possible in part by the North Korean



<sup>30</sup> *Game of Their Lives*, Daniel Gordon.

<sup>31</sup> YouTube film of North Korea vs. Portugal, 1<sup>st</sup> Half, 1966 World Cup, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4m3noVQB-X4>

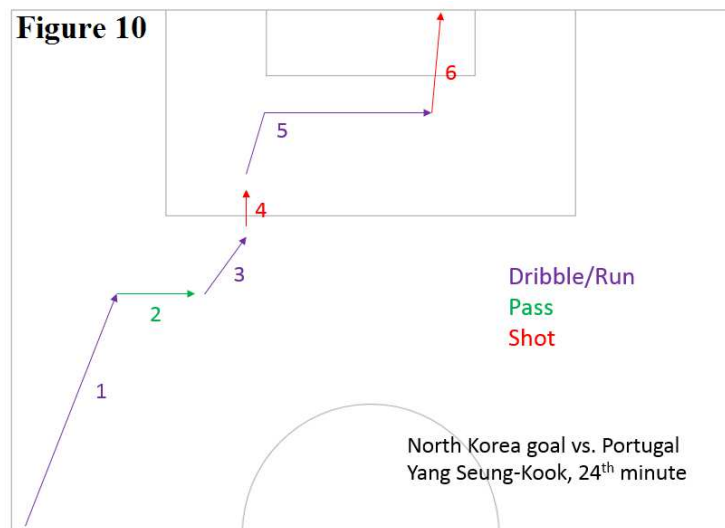
pace and the ample space in the middle of the field are another key characteristic of the Chollima system.



The second North Korean goal came off a counter as well. In Chollima fashion, the North Koreans broke very quickly down the right side of the field before a cross was put into the box that went through to the other side of the pitch. The ball was recovered

on the end line and crossed into the box again, this time finding the run of Lee Dong-Woon who put it in the back of the net (Figure 9)<sup>32</sup>.

Two minutes later, the North Koreans struck again on the counter after a run down the left side led to a shot from outside the box, which when blocked set up forward Yang Seung-Kook who crossed the mouth of the goal on the dribble and finished (Figure



<sup>32</sup> YouTube film of North Korea vs. Portugal, 1<sup>st</sup> Half, 1966 World Cup, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4m3noVQB-X4>



10)<sup>33</sup>. Another goal resulting from Chollima-style quick, counterattacking soccer. The Koreans were up 3-0 against one of the best teams in the world. But despite the early success, the Portuguese stormed back behind their star, Eusebio, who scored four goals as Portugal came back to beat the North Koreans 5-3<sup>34</sup>. The DPRK's unlikely run was over.

### **Chollima Tactics Analyzed**

Analyzing the North Korean performance in the World Cup as a whole, we see that Chollima-style soccer generally manifested in two ways: speed-based wing play built on through balls for quick forwards to run on to, and dribbles through the middle of the pitch where the 4-2-4 formation allowed for ample space.

North Korea's first two goals in the group stage, however, were not a result of Chollima tactics. Rather, they were well-taken individual efforts that came about during more settled play. This does not mean that Chollima soccer did not pose a threat in these games. In fact, the North Koreans looked most dangerous when attacking with speed down the wings. On the other hand, the three goals scored against Portugal came directly from Chollima-style attacking moves where the North Koreans used their speed in transition to create chances.

Chollima soccer was, therefore, a successful tactic, especially given the qualities of the North Korean players. They were not big and were not likely to win many aerial battles, so they

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<sup>33</sup> YouTube film of North Korea vs. Portugal, 1<sup>st</sup> Half, 1966 World Cup, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4m3noVQB-X4>

<sup>34</sup> "World Cup 1966 Finals", accessed May 3, 2015, <http://www.rsssf.com/tables/66full.html#grd>.

used their speed. This put defenses on their back heels and created opportunities that the North Koreans may not have had otherwise.

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