South Koreans express pride, heartbreak after Germany win

By Kim Tong-Hyung
The Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — South Koreans spoke of pride and heartbreak after watching their national soccer team knock off defending champions Germany in the biggest upset of this year's World Cup, but one that still failed to qualify them for the next round.

The dense apartment complexes that shape the capital of Seoul shook with roars an hour after midnight when South Korea scored two stoppage time goals to stun Germany 2-0 in what became the final match in Russia for both teams.

Many Seoul residents, including thousands of screaming fans gathered in front of jumbo screens in downtown Gwanghwamun, stayed up late cheering for the team even after it became certain they would not qualify for the round of 16.

South Korea needed to beat Germany and then have Mexico defeat Sweden to have a chance at advancing from the group stage. But Sweden killed all hope with three unanswered goals that sealed the game midway into the second half in the other Group F final.

After momentarily celebrating their win, South Korean players dropped to the grass, several of them shedding tears, apparently after learning that Mexico lost.

But for many fans, beating Germany was as good as a moral victory could get.

"Honestly, I had no expectations at all, but the players did well as they overcame crisis after crisis to seal the win," said Lee Shin-young, a 39-year-old office worker in Yongin, near Seoul, who watched from home. "It didn't look good after two straight losses, but I think we restored some of the pride in Asian soccer by finishing with a win."

AP Photo/Frank Augstein

Photo/Maxim Tumanov/Kommersant/Sipa USA (Sipa via AP Images)

DEFENDING CHAMPS KNOCKED OUT. *Kim Young-gwon (top photo) of South Korea celebrates scoring a goal during his squad's Group F match against defending champion Germany at the 2018 World Cup in Kazan, Russia. In the bottom photo, South Korean goalkeeper Cho Hyun-woo (#23) watches the ball during his team's contest against Germany in Kazan, Russia. South Korea scored two stoppage-time goals to stun Germany 2-0 in what became the final match of the tournament for both teams.*

Kim Hyun-tae, who was South Korea's goalkeeper coach for the World Cups in 2002 and 2010, the only times the country made it to the knockout stages, said the win over Germany was crucial because it restored confidence in the future of South Korean soccer.

South Korea has a relatively young core, with key players in their early and mid-20s. They can now build off the counterattacking identity they established during the Germany match, Kim said. In goalkeeper Cho Hyun-woo, who Kim rated as "tremendous," South Korea may have also found a world-class player who is capable of keeping them in any game.

"This is how South Korea should always play — build a solid defense first and attack with pace and purpose on the counters," said Kim, now a scouting director for South Korean club FC Seoul. "It's so frustrating and mind-boggling that we didn't play like this against Sweden and Mexico. We needed a miracle entering the Germany match and we nearly pulled it off."

The next major tournament for South Korea is the Asian Games in August, where several young players will be chasing a gold medal that would exempt them from military services that are mandatory to able-bodied South Korean males.

"Advancing to the best-of-16 was a long shot in the first place, but beating Germany is still something special," said Choi Ji-hye, a 40-year-old office worker in Seoul. "The players had been heavily criticized and it would have been painful to live through all that. So it was heartbreaking to see them crying and embracing each other after the match."

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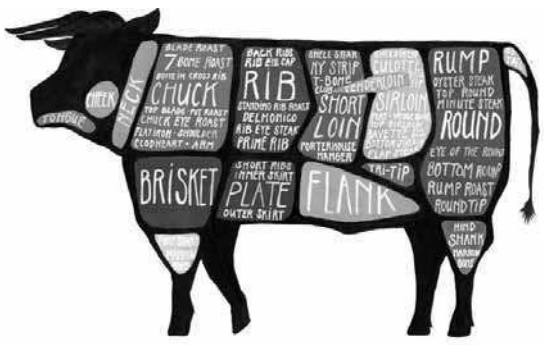

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