

# Out of Africa

by Jonathan Wilson



Beneath the bougainvillea, a crowd about 2,000 strong snakes along the touchline. On the other side of the pitch, beneath the corrugated iron roof of the solitary stand, the dancers who have provided the pre-match entertainment relax alongside the local dignitaries. On the pitch the football is far better than conditions should allow, as Keta Sandlanders, the home team, draw 1-1 to Junior Stars. In truth, the Sandlanders are unlucky. They had much the better of the game, got sloppy and conceded a last-minute equaliser, but nobody was too disappointed.

This, after all, was simply a pre-season friendly put on for the benefit of their obruni (white) visitors – that is, me, another journalist, and three football-tourists. The remarkable thing is that as many as 2,000 bothered to turn out for a game that meant nothing, and the fact they did is indicative both of how little entertainment there is in the town, and of the depth of their feeling for the local club.

Yet it is not your traditional football club. The original club in the town was Keta FC, but they slipped into bankruptcy as

Billing themselves, with commendable chutzpah, as the “Barcelona of Ghana”, Keta Sandlanders operate an internet multiple ownership system which could revolutionise the way football clubs are run right across the continent of Africa. fsf’s intrepid explorer, Jonathan Wilson, went to the Volta region to investigate.

their ground, London Park, slid into the sea, a victim of coastal erosion. Some land has been reclaimed, and a series of groins and tightly-packed bags of stones now protect the coastline, but standing on what remains of London Park – a flattened area roughly the size of half a football pitch bordered on one side by a dilapidated stand - it is hard to believe that the shore once extended more than quarter-of-a-mile beyond the banking and sea-wall that now interrupts what was the playing-surface.

Keta was once, the locals say, Ghana’s second city, but the erosion, which began in earnest about 60 years ago, has put paid to that. The port that once dominated the economic life of the city has now all but disappeared, and there are fears the decline could be chronic. There is talk of a beach village to draw in the tourists, but most visitors these days are African-Americans investigating their heritage in the stock-books in the old slave fort.

And that is where the Sandlanders come in. Among British fans, the response to Will Brooks’s vision of a football club run by members drawn from across the internet has been broadly ambivalent. Most seem to see it as an amusing idea, but nobody really wants it to happen to their own club. In Keta, they were desperate for any kind of investment.

Paul Jones is a Liverpool lawyer, but after graduating he lived for a few months in Keta. There he became involved in the establishment of a new club and now, alongside the day job, he acts as its vice-chairman. Realising that local investment was improbable, the club decided to open up to the internet – although without the interactive element that is proving so controversial at Ebbsfleet.

“I got involved after spending four months working for a law firm in Ghana in 2004. The family I was staying with included the Chairman and Team Manager of the Sandlanders, we went out to watch the team on several



occasions and I was impressed by the talent of the players and commitment of everyone involved - but surprised by the lack of resources available to develop such talent”, Paul Jones told The Football Supporter.

“Since then we have been working on ideas to run the club on a more professional basis, always with the idea that a successful club could be used as a catalyst for development in the community as a whole.

“The website ownership model is a unique idea for a club in the developing world and will allow members to follow the development of their team and the associated community projects through video highlights and reports, articles on club development and interactive votes. In the long term, we aspire to market and develop the Keta Sandlanders brand in the same way that other successful clubs in Europe are promoted, the talent is available and the internet now provides a platform for supporters all over the world to view and nurture this talent.”

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Membership itself is cheap - £5, of which £4 goes to the club, 50p to the Afrikids charity, and 50p to projects in

the town – but given most locals live on around £3.50 a week, it is significant enough. The players themselves are given board and lodging and a salary of around £7.50 a week – big money in terms of the Ghanaian second division.

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“Despite the growing number of influential African footballers today, players are too often drained from the continent with few long term benefits to the clubs and communities where they start out. The Sandlanders hope to redress this balance a little and place more emphasis on the development of grassroots Ghanaian football”, Jones said.

All things, though, are relative. Sandlanders play on the local school pitch, which is so sandy and rutted that the attempts of both sides to play passing football seems pointlessly idealistic. There are no dressing rooms, either, the players changing on a basketball court at one end of the ground. There is, though, plenty of hope and enthusiasm.

“We are proud to play for the people of Keta, they are our people,” says the 19-year old club captain, Philip Tanasi. “And we will also be proud to play for our fans around the world. We want you to help us, and to join us.”

Foreign ownership, it seems, isn’t all bad.