

SPORTS

SOCCER

Zibo's rise millennia in the making

Soccer's ancient birthplace finally tasting success in the modern-day game



Zibo Cuju FC fans cheer on their team during last season's promotion-winning campaign that saw the little club from Shandong province reach the second tier of China's professional ranks for the first time in its history. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

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Locals in Zibo, Shandong province, will proudly tell you that their city is the birthplace of soccer. Now Zibo Cuju FC's promotion to China League One has put the city on the modern game's map, with fans and the team eager to write a whole new chapter of history on the pitch.

The ancient Chinese game of cuju, which has been traced back to the Linzi district of Zibo, was in 2004 acknowledged by FIFA as the earliest form of soccer. The word "cu" means to kick, while "ju" refers to an ancient type of leather ball filled with feathers.

The sport emerged during the Warring States Period (475-221 BC). Back then, cuju was used to train military cavaliers due to its fierce nature. It flourished during the Song Dynasty (960-1279) and remained popular until the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644).

Cuju was listed among the first batch of China's "intangible cultural heritages" in 2006.

Despite this rich history, success in China's professional ranks had proved elusive for Zibo, a relatively small city with a population of 4.7 million. Now, however, Zibo's soccer fans can dare to dream of mixing it with the nation's big guns after earning promotion to China League One, just one tier below the top flight where the likes of Guangzhou Evergrande, Shanghai SIPG and Beijing Guo'an all dwell.

"Zibo is considered the place where soccer originated, and now we finally have a soccer team to play in the second-tier league. This is a dream come true for the city. It has special meaning for us, and it's a great honor," said Zibo Cuju's head



The ancient Chinese sport of 'cuju' originated in Zibo during the Warring States Period (475-221 BC) and is considered a precursor to modern-day soccer. XINHUA

coach, Hou Zhiqiang.

"Even among the second-tier league clubs, there are very few teams that are based in small cities like us. Most of them are based in big cities like Chengdu, Wuhan or Qingdao. We are really proud that a team from a third-tier city like us has managed to reach China League One."

Hou's players are raring for the step up in quality next season, which will reportedly kick off in March.

"My goal now is to give my best performance playing in China League One," said Zibo Cuju's 19-year-old midfielder Xie Wenneng. "I need to

learn more and gain more experience from the veterans and know how to read the game. I still have big room for improvement."

Cuju certainly don't seem content to just make up the numbers, with coach Hou instilling a steely determination in his troops that was much in evidence as it beat the odds to finish second in the third tier and earn promotion last month.

"From the sixth round, we knew we had to win every game to break through the group stage. No draw or defeat could be tolerated. That was truly huge pressure for everyone in the team," said Hou.

"We are very united. And I always believed we

had the best quality of training among all the third-tier teams. We believe in ourselves and that's why we made it."

As well as facing tougher rivals on the pitch, Zibo Cuju is also braced for bigger tests off it — especially in financial terms.

"We finished the first step, but we are about to face many more challenges," Hou admitted. "We have to meet the standards for registration — so, for example, we need to establish our club's first training base, and we are required to have five youth teams. We also need to fix many problems we've had for years."

Even in the best of times, it can be tough for small clubs to stay afloat. However the COVID-19 pandemic has made surviving on a tight budget even more precarious, with everything from ticket sales to investment affected.

Last May, 11 teams were thrown out of 2020 season's pro leagues in China due to wage arrears. Another five clubs voluntarily fell by the wayside due to money troubles, including Tianjin Tianhai, then of the Chinese Super League.

However, thanks to China's successfully containment of COVID-19, fans were gradually allowed back in the stands during the second half of last season, with the outlook for the 2021 campaign a lot brighter.

"In the most difficult times, Zibo's local government and sports bureau helped us to survive. That was the only reason why we were able to finish last season," said Hou.

"I always believe the fans are the foundation of a club. I want to thank all our fans who supported us. I'm confident in our future development. It will benefit the sports industry and economy of our city."

INDUSTRY

China's resilient fitness sector rolls with the punches

The year 2020 was a mixed bag for China's sports industry.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the sector was on a fast track of steady growth. According to statistics from the General Administration of Sport of China, the industry grew at an average annual rate of 15.9 percent from 2015 to 2018, with its added value growing at an average annual rate of 22.4 percent for the same period.

More gains had been expected this year, but no one could have foreseen the coronavirus outbreak's impact. Almost all major domestic and international sporting events were rescheduled or canceled in the first half of the year. People were reluctant to go outside, and most sports companies struggled to do business. Some didn't survive.

According to a report on the resumption of business by the Jiangsu Province Sports Bureau, all of the 116 sports venues it surveyed closed for nearly three months, 125 fitness and training companies closed for three and a half months, while sports supplies manufacturers closed for about a month and a half.

All seven ski resorts in Chongli

district of Hebei province closed their doors at the beginning of 2020.

Nie Ningning, vice-president of Thaiwoo Ski Resort, described the shutdown as one of the biggest crises the complex has faced since its opening.

"Before January 18, we had an average daily income of two million yuan (about \$306,000), an 80 percent increase over the same period last year," said Nie.

However, those good days didn't last long and the huge maintenance costs added severe pressure to the business.

Several local governments provided support measures to help sports companies survive. Some provinces and regions issued sports consumption vouchers to boost the recovery process.

Chongli District's support measures included tax cuts, and water and electricity subsidies. Some resorts even managed to claw back some of their losses in the summer, with Thaiwoo successfully staging a series of activities from July to October.

"Although the summer operation period was three months shorter than usual, our summer revenue is basically the same as last year," said Nie.

The new snow season also enjoyed a good start, with the number of visitors and revenue in



After lean times during the COVID-19 epidemic early last year, China's sports and fitness sector is bouncing back strongly, with ski resorts reporting an encouraging start to the winter season. XINHUA

November increasing by more than 50 percent compared with the same period from the previous year.

"Everything is in order, and I believe the new snow season will be a good turnaround," said Nie.

The epidemic also sparked a renewed focus on healthy living, to

help boost sales of fitness equipment.

According to the 2020 Research Report on Public Fitness Behaviors and Consumption, published in September, fitness behaviors and consumption related to home sports goods all increased significantly.

Profits from home fitness equipment sales totaled 610 million yuan from January to May, up 50 percent year-on-year, according to statistics from relevant institutions.

"According to the Suning platform, sales of dumbbells, hula hoops, and yoga mats increased by more than 300 percent over the same period of 2019," said Liu Fumin, director of the department of sports economics at the General Administration of Sport of China.

Liu also voiced optimism for the future, adding: "The sports industry has been affected by the pandemic, but at the same time, the Chinese economy is still moving ahead, and the Chinese sports industry is still developing."

"I'm sure that the sports industry will play a more important role in the Chinese economy in the future."