Strategic Human Resource Management of Foreign Players in Professional Soccer: A Case of the Korean Professional Football League (K-League)

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Introduction
The increasing influx of world-renowned soccer players (e.g., David Beckham, Steven Gerrard, Gio and Jonathan Dos Santos) into Major League Soccer (MLS) captures the shifting trend and essence of modern professional soccer. While the desire to win is still regarded as the most important pillar, more emphasis is placed upon attaining economic gains and creating values through extensive marketing initiatives that utilize players as the core brand. Scouting players from outside of the domestic league is one of the popular management strategies for the majority of professional teams as such scouting directly contributes to the enhanced level of competitiveness for individual domestic teams. Also, with the increasing focus on the business and entrepreneurial sides of sport, possessing valuable foreign players opens up a wide array of possibilities to embrace and benefit from the international marketplace. While this fluidity of the labor market in professional sport has widened the spectrum of research opportunities, the discovery and deployment of human capital in sport are areas that are often overlooked (Radaelli et al., 2017). Thus, the current study investigated the dynamics of player management from a human resource management (HRM) angle to scrutinize the necessary conditions for the successful integration of foreign players and the effectiveness of transfers.

Literature Review
Sport organizations represent people-oriented operations (Sawyer & Smith, 1999), where human resources are regarded as the most crucial managerial consideration (Chelladurai, 1999). In a sport organization, the human resource function ranges from the simple maintenance of employee records to planning complex personnel training and development systems, negotiating remuneration, and dealing with grievances (Slack, 1997), from which the professional sport teams are not exempt. In the context of professional soccer, the recruitment, development, and management of the sport’s players are the integral parts of attaining desired outcomes. Despite its significance, only limited scholarly attention has been given to the topic of strategically managing players and analyzing their performance. For instance, Besters et al. (2017) investigated the effectiveness of in-season managerial changes across several years in the English Premier League (EPL). Specifically, they found that internal resources (i.e., British head coaches) performed better than external (i.e., non-British recruitments). However, a manager change in season had no significant impact on team performance. They suggested that replacing a head coach in season is inefficient. By focusing on foreign player recruitment, the current study extends the work of Besters et al. (2017) by investigating the impact of the recruitment source (i.e., transfers within a league, transfers within continental leagues, and transfers from all other leagues) on the levels of individual performance and the efficacy of the mid-season transfer of foreign players. Based on the literature above, two hypotheses were established:

H1: Performance levels of foreign players will significantly differ according to their previous league experience.
H2: Performance levels of foreign players will significantly differ according to their contract status.

Methods
This study utilized secondary data collected from 215 foreign soccer players active in the Korean Professional Football League (K-League) over the past five seasons (2013-17). Individual performance data (which were traced on all the league’s foreign strikers and midfielders) were comprised of critical variables such as total games played and an
array of individual statistics (i.e., goals, assists, and shots) obtained from each match in which the foreign players participated. Then, the individual statistics were divided by the total games played. The K-League was selected as it is one of the top-two premier professional soccer leagues in Asia according to the AFC Club Competitions Ranking (AFC, 2017). Also, the uniqueness embedded in the financial structure and turnover ratio of the K-League teams deserves close attention. Combined salary of foreign players in K-league comprises around 20% of the entire spending on roster management and 10% of the overall budget. Lastly, despite the significant monetary commitment in securing foreign players, their mid-season turnover ratio is extremely high (34%) in the K-League.

Results
Data analyses were done by a 3 (Recruitment sources: transferred within K-League, transferred within in other Asian league, transferred from all other leagues) x 3 (Contract status: played a full season, transferred-out during a season, transferred-in during a season) MANOVA. The results revealed that levels of performance were significantly influenced by recruitment source (H1) at the multivariate level, Wilks’ λ = .915, F(6, 404) = 3.07, p < .01, η² = .04. Both univariate and multiple comparisons tests showed players with previous K-league experiences outperformed those from other leagues in Asia and beyond in terms of goals-per-game (p <.001), assist-per-game (p <.01), and shots-per-game (p <.01). Also, the results supported H2 such that the multivariate effects of contract status on levels of performance were significant, Wilks’ λ = .915, F(6, 404) = 2.97, p < .01, η² = .04. Both univariate and multiple comparisons tests revealed that players who spent an entire season had better performance records such as goals-per-game (p <.01), assist-per-game (p <.05), and shots-per-game (p <.05). However, there were no significant differences in terms of performance from the players who left during the season and those who joined mid-season.

Discussion
This study calls for the development and utilization of HRM strategies in the context of professional soccer. As the findings of this study indicate, a foreign player’s previous league experience should be taken into consideration in the talent identification stage. Such findings support previous HMR literature that values internal resources over external recruitment to attain positive outcomes (DeVaro & Morita, 2013). Thus, for a sport manager, a domestic league should be a prime consideration in a recruitment process to find valuable assets. Moreover, it should be noted that unlike the managerial intentions and expectations of the mid-season transfers, the analysis found no statistical significance with most mid-season cases. Therefore, more refined transfer strategies are needed to avoid ineffective mid-season transfers, which necessitate additional financial and physical commitments. Based on the findings of this study, future studies should examine the current practice of player management in the K-League to observe the rationale behind the recruitment and release of players.