

THE BEGINNING OF NEW DAYS

AFTER AN EIGHT YEAR EXILE, PARK EUN-SUN RETURNED TO THE INTERNATIONAL SCENE AT THE 2014 AFC WOMEN'S ASIAN CUP TO LEAD KOREA REPUBLIC TO FOURTH PLACE AND A TICKET TO THEIR SECOND APPEARANCE AT THE FIFA WOMEN'S WORLD CUP FINALS.

By: Daniel Pordes Photos: World Sport Group/Getty Images

Tattooed across Park Eun-sun's inner forearm is the date "12.5.13" and the phrase "The beginning of new days", a permanent reminder of the turbulence the 27-year-old has faced in her career and the faith that she has of better things to come.

Growing up in a poor family in Seoul as the youngest of three children, Park was first introduced to football by her older brother Park In-eui, although it was in fact basketball that was her first interest.

"But back then, when I was younger, I wasn't that tall so never thought about sports or joining any team or considering it as a future profession," says Park, who is now comfortably one of the most physically imposing players in the

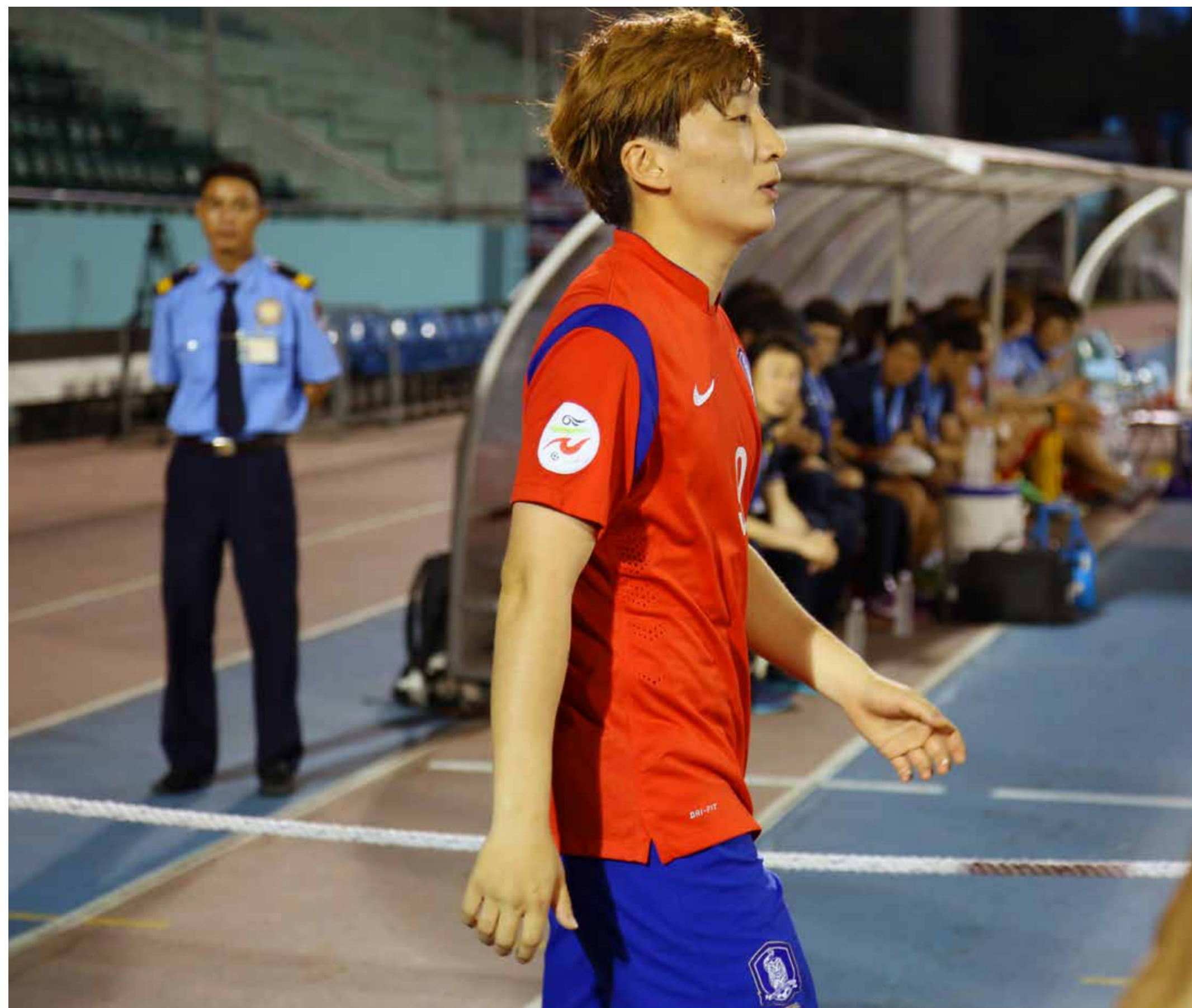
Asian women's game standing at close to 5'10".

"It was between the last year of middle school and first year of high school that I started to get taller. I did grow constantly, of course, but it was those two years that I really experienced a growth spurt.

"When I first started sports I was below 4'9" but by the end of high school, I was one of the tallest in the class."

Park's first taste of playing in a team was not until her final year at Changdeok Girl's Middle School. But soon after, in her first year of high school, she was taking on the boys in the Wirye Information Industry High School playground and her ability - and increasing inches - soon caught the eye of her teacher.

And from that point on Park's rise in the Korean women's game shot up





even faster than her height as she was called up to the national team for the 2003 FIFA Women's World Cup three months shy of her 17th birthday.

The tournament in the United States, though, came too early as the Taeguk Nangja's lost all three games to finish bottom of their group on their inaugural appearance at the finals.

A year later, though, the 2004 AFC U-19 Women's Championship was a huge success as they posted a 100% record in the competition, beating Vietnam and Thailand in the quarter-finals and semi-finals before recording a 3-0 victory over hosts China in the final.

And not only was it Korea Republic's maiden Asian title, but it was the first announcement of Park's talents on the continental scene.

Despite then playing as a centre-back for the national side, Park was given a licence to push forward, and she did so to devastating effect in the competition, with her crowning performance in the final where she scored all three goals.

"It was the first time we'd won a tournament on an international level outside of Korea and even thinking about it now it just makes me proud. It's one

of the tournaments that always make me smile when I look back on it," she says.

The 2005 EAFF Women's Cup, hosted in her homeland, was also a personal success with Park scoring in the 2-0 win against China before playing key roles in the subsequent matches against DPR Korea and Japan as the young side, filled with high school and university students, took the title as the first East Asian women's champion.

This was also the first time Park had been played as a striker with the powerful forward now fully grown and causing consternation in the backlines of the traditional Asian powerhouses.

But with the world of women's football there for the taking, things took a sharp downward turn for Park shortly ahead of her 20th birthday when she was faced with a dilemma: go professional and spend the required two years in a university team first, or give up the game altogether.

"By that point I was already a big name so I decided to try to go straight from high school into the professional teams. Because of my family's poor background I couldn't afford not to. I wanted to earn money as quickly as possible. That's

one of the reasons I got into football, so I could support them," says Park.

"This was a problem, though, and I was suspended. It made me very demotivated and so I felt there was no longer any point in continuing to play."

Turning her back on football, Park began working part-time in an attempt to make money and over a five year period her exile from the game included stints selling coffee, electronics and sports merchandise.

Flat-sharing with friends, Park did at times try to rekindle her relationship with football, but it was a stop-start process.

"Sometimes people recognised me at these jobs and said to me, 'Aren't you Park Eun-sun? Why aren't you playing football instead of selling these items?'" says Park.

"I would say "No, I'm not that person. I'm not a football player." But even if they insisted I just told them I had quit playing and I liked this job."

But the call of the game was impossible to resist, and after a short-lived return in 2010, Park came back permanently into the domestic football scene in time for the 2012 season with Seoul City Hall Amazones and she netted 10 goals in 20

Top Left With coach Yoon Deok-yeo in Vietnam.

Bottom Left Park was named top scorer at the 2014 AFC Women's Asian Cup.

Left Park helped Korea Republic finish fourth at the 2014 AFC Women's Asian Cup.

Above Park represented Korea Republic at the 2003 FIFA Women's World Cup.

games.

The next year Park was even better and topped the scorers' table with 19 goals, helping her team to a second place finish.

But instead of celebrating her return to the top of her game, Park was forced to defend her achievements after accusations about her gender from six rival teams' coaches in the WK-League who threatened a boycott if she continued to play.

Park was defended not only by her coach and the general public but also by lawmakers at the government-run Seoul City Spots Council who filed a human rights violation lawsuit.

Despite the widespread support, Park, who had already passed gender testing ahead of the 2003 FIFA Women's World Cup amongst other tournaments, suffered during the controversy and needed a visible reminder to help her to get through the period and on the fifth of December 2013, she headed to the tattoo parlour.

"I was in the middle of this controversial situation as this point which is why I decided to get the tattoo to help motivate

me to get through the bad days," says Park.

"The date is written there because it's the day I decided that from now on I'm going to go on, on my own way."

In March, Korea's human rights commission recommended that the six coaches be punished according to the league regulations and two have since resigned.

Park's form continued to suffer, though, and she was not called up for the Cyprus Women's Cup.

However, just a few months later, Park announced her return to the continental scene in the most emphatic style at the 2014 AFC Women's Asian Cup.

With a performance of punishing power the forward showed Asia's finest defences that eight years away had dulled neither her ability nor eye for goal.

The only outfield player in a youthful Korea squad to have experienced the 2003 FIFA Women's World Cup, Park scored five goals in the group stage to take the Taeguk Nangja into the semi-

final and with it secure a place in the 2015 FIFA World Cup.

But despite another goal from Park, defending champions Australia were deserved 2-1 winners in their semi-final.

And more disappointment followed in the third-place play-off as Park's unfortunate own-goal helped China to a 2-1 victory.

Nevertheless, the tournament was a success for Park as she earned the top scorer award and the praise of coach Yoon Deok-yeo who tipped her as a player who would "light up the international scene" in Canada next year.

"The last World Cup I played in I didn't achieve much, so I really want to do more in the second World Cup in my lifetime. That's the big goal now. So I will be preparing for that, if I am selected," she says.

"I also want to continue to improve as a player and in the future I'll want to become a coach, something I'd be really interested in, so I can help raise the level of the women's game in my country."

But before that day comes, Park's rollercoaster career is set to swerve in another direction after she agreed to join Russia's Rossiyanka WFC in July.