



Daniel Gordon

A STATE OF MIND

Q – What made you choose North Korea as your subject for your documentaries?

Daniel – My interest in Korea has purely come through football! I'm a football fanatic. I grew up with this knowledge of a North Korean Football team from 1966 that had somehow bonded with the people from Middlesbrough. I'm from the north of England as well. They had beaten the Italians that year in the World Cup and when the Italians got back to Italy they were pelted with rotten tomatoes. But what actually happened to the North Koreans after that point was unknown because they never played at that high level again. I started working at Sky Sports doing documentaries on a much lesser scale. I produced and directed a 15 part series on Premier League clubs, and I was asked what I wanted to do next and I said, "*Definitely to go and find the North Korean football team.*" And everybody said, "*There's absolutely no way that you can get to North Korea.*" I actually studied History and Politics for my degree, but I didn't really know about the politics of North Korea other than the basics. I had no idea of Kim Il Sung or anything like that so I came purely from a football fan angle. The more I looked into it and the more people said it can't be done, the more I thought we're going to do it! It took four years to get the permission.

Q – Most foreign journalists can't get access to North Korea, where did you go to get permission to film there?

Daniel – I went to Nicholas Bonner, my associate producer who's based in Beijing and is an Englishman. He runs this company called Koryo Tours, which has been running cultural exchanges and tourism to North Korea since 1993. He wasn't sure about me initially. Was I a journalist pretending to go and do this doc as a lot of people do? As soon as we met, he kind of realized I was sincere, and that this was going to be a great film and the North Koreans would go for it. They trusted that I wasn't going to go in pretending to do a football story and come saying North Korea is a terrible place. I play football so when we went out with the North Korean players I'd get hold of a ball, juggle, do the various tricks and actually play and they realized that I was genuine. So if they did have their guard up in any way, it soon dropped. The more I went, the more I thought this is like no other country on Earth. *The Game Of Their Lives* is huge in North Korea. It's been on TV ten times. There's only one channel out there so we get 100% ratings every time! So because of our success, we realized that we could get access to the Mass Games. They opened themselves up for us and really wanted to be involved with us.

Q – Why did it take four years?

Daniel – I had to go back and forth with faxes. They'd say, "*Send us your work, so we know that you're genuine.*" So I did. The worst thing was after about three years when they said yes, the independent production company I was working for backed out. So I left them, formed my own company, raised £90k from private investment and went out to North Korea. No broadcasters would back it, no regional film people, no national film people. I had to go and do everything. I met John Battsek in London, who had just produced the Oscar winning doc *One Day In September*. He loved the idea and gave me the best possible advice – just get out there and get the footage. So Nick, the crew and myself went in October 2001 because we were saying we can get in, get out and we can get amazing footage. What we got exceeded our hopes. We did a press conference with the footage and suddenly the phones started ringing. John Battsek came on board fully as our Executive Producer – he has been brilliant in that role for us for all our films since. The BBC gave us completion money and from then on all the films we've done have been with the BBC.

Q – So once they saw that you really did have access they backed you?

Daniel – Yes, and we had amazing archival footage as well. The North Koreans had shot a lot when they were in England. In 1966, they took a four-man crew and spent £3,000 on equipment and £500 on film. They sent their rushes down to the Kodak laboratory to be processed overnight so they could make their film. And I knew that would still exist because one thing that socialists do is keep their archives in really good order. When we first saw it, it was unbelievable. Not only did they show it to us, they printed us a brand new positive from the original negative! They told us they'd pay for the transfer because they wanted us to make the best possible film. That would never happen anywhere in England! Nick and I took 13 cans of film on the train from Pyongyang to Beijing, which is 25 hours. When we arrived in Beijing, we couldn't even carry the thing. But basically they trusted us. It's considered national treasure and it had to go through a hell of a lot of form filling to allow us to actually take it out of North Korea. Again we have a very special relationship. The woman who we deal with, who's like our guide, we've worked with her for the past six years and become friends. She's been to my house in England when we brought the football players back there. It's become very personal.

Q – Who does she work for?

Daniel – The Korea Film Export/Import Company who have been our partners from the very beginning. They're a state film company who have the responsibility for dealing with foreign film companies. If we need more access than they would ordinarily like to give, they understand that and basically fight our battles for us with the necessary governmental people before we arrive.

Q – Do they work as a co-production company or do they get a fee?

Daniel – It's co-production in that they helped to produce it, but not a co-production as in any money. They just get a credit. In *State Of Mind*, we were filming in Kim Il Sung Square. We got there and we didn't have any permission to go and it was on one of the major nights. When we arrived, the official wouldn't let us film because we didn't have the official permit. But they then told them that we were the guys who made *The Game of Their Lives* and suddenly it was like the Red Sea parting. They were like, "These people must come and film". Our guys asked about the permit and the visa, and they said, "Forget the permit, they don't need a permit, they made *Game Of Their Lives*." Suddenly we got the best spot, the state cameraman was moved away and they allowed us to go into the center of the crowd. We realized that we were very lucky and had very special access.

Q – Was there a big difference from filming your first film to the second?

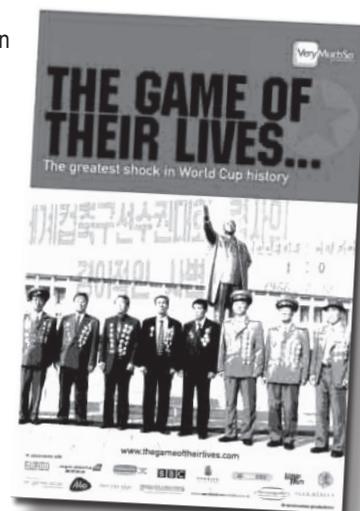
Daniel – The main thing is you start to ignore the blatantly obvious. The first time you go there, all you see is the monuments to the Great Leader. You see all the propaganda murals. You see the fact there's barely any neon lighting and everything looks very similar and grey. Then the second time you go you actually don't notice it anymore. And you don't spend your entire time gawping out of the window.

Q – Did you have any problems filming as a Westerner?

Daniel – No. They've never been funny. The great thing is you don't get a whole crowd of kids interfering, so that's really good. But also we've never been interfered with at a government level.

Q – Did they ever want to see any of your footage?

Daniel – They want to see it more from a creative point of view. There are certain rules with filming that we respect. For instance, if you film the statue of the Great Leader, they don't want you to pan up from the feet up to the head because in



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Asia that's a lack of respect. If there are portraits of the Leader in the background, don't film them cut in half. We respect that as we would if we were making a film in the Vatican and they wanted it filmed a certain way. They know we're mindful of that and they know if that doesn't get adhered to then it won't go in the edit because it would offend them. With *Game of Their Lives* we actually had a big problem when they saw the film on how we turned the Korean War. We got the same complaints from the South Korean Embassy in England too. So they both have a problem with the Korean War as officially the other one started it! For all the films we do on Korea, I'm not bothered who started it. I'm bothered about saying what a brutal war it was and how it affected our protagonists. The team goes from a country that's been completely flattened and thirteen years later, they're at the World Cup. And for *A State Of Mind*, it's three generations. One who was ten years old during the war, one who grew up just after the war, and the youngest is at the same age the granddad was during the war, but has never experienced war.

Q – How big is your crew when you film? Do you hire any locals?

Daniel – No. We had a crew of five - two cameramen and a soundman for the *Game of Their Lives* and myself and Nick. For the first part of *State of Mind*, it was just Nick and myself because we were really recce filming. Then it was just Nick Bonner, Nick Bennett my cinematographer and me on sound. For the latest one, it's four of us, camera, sound, myself and Nick. I like to keep small because it's lighter, obviously less expensive and you can move easier in whatever given situation. But I don't like being shorthanded, which is what we were for *State of Mind*, which actually caused a lot of problems.

Q – Hadn't the BBC come on then?

Daniel – For *State of Mind* they were on board from the beginning and they've been brilliant ever since *Game of Their Lives*, especially our Commissioning Editor Richard Klein, but the finance was a little under half the budget. So we had to get ARTE from France and WNET from America to both come in with the next 55-60%.

Q – So when you first went there you didn't have everything and you had to keep it low?

Daniel – Absolutely. And when we got out there we realized that we budgeted for two, maybe three trips and it ended up being four. We were extremely pushed for everything. Half way through filming, the SARS outbreak happened and we had to get out of North Korea as they were closing down the borders. We had no idea when we'd be able to go back. Even when we did go back and we got as far as Beijing, North Korea was still closed. So we had to kick our heels in Beijing with nothing to do for a week and all we could see was time just ticking by. The country was completely sealed for three months - the only country in the world that did so.

Q – Do you or any of your crew speak Korean or did you have an interpreter?

Daniel – We have an interpreter with us at all times. And that's actually quite useful. Nick and I are both very pigeon at speaking Korean. Every time I've gone I've wanted to learn the basics but I've never had any spare time to learn. But now I can read Korean and Nick can too, although we can't tell you what it means!

Q – This Korean Film Export/Import Company, did they help you find your subjects for your second film?

Daniel – We went back in May 2002 to screen *Game Of Their Lives* to the North Korean football players which was the most nervous I've ever been or since in a screening. It was weird as we only had the English version and had no time to translate it. So they



basically watched the film in English with bits in Korean. The next day we went out and had lunch with the Film Export/Import Company and they told us they wanted to do a feature about Mass Games and a couple of gymnasts who really want to perform, but they're not that good and they have to train and you see the tears and all the problems they have, and it all comes right in the end. It was exactly what we wanted to do, but as a documentary. But we made it very clear from the start that we were after real life. We told them that we were going to come back in September and asked them to find us the best gymnast for the Ball Discipline. They came back saying that they'd take care of it. So we started semi-filming with them in February. We were planning on doing a bit of filming in every season, so we were planning to stay for a year on and off, not for a full year. We suspected that that girl had been chosen because it was a model family and then we met the family and realized it wasn't really the model family. It wasn't the Walton's or anything like that. And while we're filming with the girl, she kind of mentioned that she had this friend who's a bit younger than her who she coaches. She's part of a family, has sisters and we thought it might work. We've got this relationship between a girl who has no family, no sisters, a very adult family and she's got this mate in a block of flats next to them who she goes round to for a bit of loving.

Q – When filming in the girls' homes, how did you make sure that you captured the normality of their lives?

Daniel – The first day we got there was a nightmare. There was a crew of three. Then, my dad had come out just because he likes to go out there for a bit of a laugh. The film company had our two usual guides. A couple of people from the company who were quite high rank came in to see the filming. The woman from the apartment who was in charge of the block came. The woman from the elevator wanted to see the film. Mates were coming round and I was like this is a two room flat! We had 20 odd people there and from that point on we said from now on, it's just Nick the cinematographer and me. So we carried on filming and we had absolutely no idea what they're saying as we didn't even have our interpreter there. They got it pretty straight off that we were just going to film them. For all we knew they could have been saying, "God, these white boys are idiots."

Q – You didn't have your translator with you?

Daniel – No. We had absolutely no idea what we were recording. The family kept wondering why we wanted to film them making dinner or telling their daughter off as it was so normal to them. And we just told them to carry on.

Q – The North Koreans show an open hostility to the US. Did you encounter any of that as a Brit?

Daniel – The British are more welcome than the Americans because we have diplomatic relations and there's a relationship that goes back to 1966 with football and when we took the players back in 2002 where we've become minor celebrities. It's very bizarre to have a random North Korean shout out "Dan," in the street. They don't do autographs, but it's very funny. The only time we're reminded of our nationality is if we're in the war museum or at the border. I think people recognize that if you're in the country and you have the minders there, then you're doing something good. Americans are allowed in on occasion. The North Koreans claim that they make this distinction between the American people and American imperialism.

Q – It seems that they live daily with air raid drills?

Daniel – Yes, that was in 2003. It was a very tense time. The US military build up was happening in Iraq. The nuclear inspectors were there and everyone knew America was going to have a war. And Rumsfeld said as a direct threat to North Korea, "We can fight a war on two fronts." And Bush's State of the Union speech where he named North Korea as part of The Axis of Evil was widely reported there. They were pretty certain the US was going attack and in April when we were there the Saddam statue was toppled in Iraq. We thought North Korea was next and had Iraq gone differently, that may have been the case. They didn't want war, but they were ready to defend their homeland.

Q – Did any of your subjects want to know what life was like outside of Korea?

Daniel – To a degree. They're interested in family life. They're interested in the footballers. We took them a video of what our lives and families were like. I think they contextualize everything in terms of being in North Korea and that is the best

place to be.

Q – Did they ever express anything negative about their country?

Daniel – I never heard a North Korean be negative about the country. Even when the radio is manditorially pumped into their kitchen's all the time – it's just a part of life. News and propaganda movies are on all the time. I stop noticing it after awhile.

Q – Do they show anything from outside of Korea on TV?

Daniel – They show sporting events. The main thing they show is natural disasters. The east coast is prone to flooding. They showed the World Cup in South Korea. I saw some Italian football matches on North Korean TV. All the feature films that are made in North Korea must adhere to the cinematic arts that are demanded by Kim Jong Il. He's written a book called *On The Art Of Cinema* and that's the main text for how films should be made. They need to breed revolutionary consciousness. You can have anything else, action, romance, but it has to have that and a love for the leader. The people seem to genuinely enjoy them when they watch them. The waitresses in this one restaurant that we know are glued to the screen when they come on. I've seen the film five times with them and they still cry at the same spots!

Q – Did you have to do any self-censorship?

Daniel – There's always a sense of self-censorship in any documentary. I got close to the girls and there are times when I don't want them to feel too uncomfortable. It's not as big a deal as you think. The only time I really thought about self-censorship in *A State Of Mind* was when the girl was quite scathing about her granny and how she pushes her. I knew it was true, but whenever we go there that woman was great to us. If I put it in the film, I have to face the granny. Then sure enough a month later we interviewed the granny and she said she had to drive the girl and be brutal on her. That was such a relief! They both went into the film. However, in our latest film we are using some South Korean archival footage and the people who gave it to us don't want us to portray South Korea as a villain. At times, the western broadcasters have wanted us to take a stronger tone with North Korea. So there you see the propaganda from both sides. I told them that the commentary will say what they believe and the audience can make their own mind up.



Q – Has filmmaking in North Korea gotten easier since your first trip there?

Daniel – It never gets easier. We started with a very neutral, feel good story. Then we went into daily life, which no one had ever done before – even North Koreans. Then we went for a political hot potato in talking about defections and life in America, North and South Korea. And yet the cooperation still comes from the North Koreans.

Q – Is this the first time people have talked about defection?

Daniel – Absolutely. There was always this rumor that Americans were living in North Korea, but the information was impossible to get. The North Koreans first said it wasn't true, and then they said it was true, but it would be impossible to film them. I took that as, "Yes, it is possible." But it took two years to do it. These people lived in America, went to South Korea and then defected to the North in the 1960s. It's an amazing story.

Q – Are there movie theaters in North Korea?

Daniel – Loads. We took *Bend It Like Beckham* to North Korea and screened it in a theater that holds 2,000 seats. It was the most bizarre thing you could imagine. 20,000 people saw it. I actually gave a speech that opened that film festival and a man came up

to me and said that he never thought he would live long enough to see an Englishman give the opening speech at the film festival. I was the first one. When you stop to think about it, that's kind of significant. In Pyongyang, there's the International Cinema House, which is the main one and there are half a dozen others in town. Then in the suburbs and every town and village, there's a cinema. They are part of the propaganda machine.

Q – Are there any documentary organizations there to help filmmakers?

Daniel – There's the Documentary Film Studio where we source a lot of our archive. We have a great fixer from there who finds anything and everything. He found the men who arrested the Americans in the 1960s in North Korea for us. He went through an amazing process to do it.

Q – Could you and Nick ever walk around freely?

Daniel – We have done. But it gets a little tiring after awhile. We wanted to walk to an evening meal one time and it took over an hour to walk there. So you don't do it out of practicality. And there's no street lighting. We came back in pitch black. I wished I had a torch (flashlight), but if I had one, everyone would know I was a foreigner. It's an absolutely safe place. I have never felt threatened in North Korea. We've actually lost camera equipment and had it delivered to our door the next day! Not sure that would happen in the UK.



Q – Are things like supermarkets and shops very different?

Daniel – Until recently, it hasn't really existed in a way we would recognize markets and supermarkets. Even now we buy all of our provisions in China and bring them over. We've all had varying degrees of difficulty with the food. Some of it is purely that we're stressed and homesick and the time difference is difficult if you want to talk to anyone back home. It's expensive to call home, too. But now we have it down and know how much chocolate and baked beans to bring over from China. We take our HP sauce to remind us of home. I have a jar of Hendersons Relish, which is particular to Sheffield where I'm from. That's in our hotel restaurant! We would bring jars of peanut butter down to breakfast and people would laugh at us.



Q – Do they have normal leisure activities that we're all used to?

Daniel – Sure. People want to walk in the park and swing on the swings. They want to take boat rides. It's the same as the rest of the world. But it's more like how England was 50 years ago where Sunday, the day of rest is the day of rest. It's very difficult to get anyone to work on that day.

Q – Do you think the outside world has painted a really bad image of North Korea from what it actually is?

Daniel – From a people level, yes. The people have been demonized alongside everything else that is going on in the country. But equally they think everyone in America is bad because of George Bush and that's just as wrong.

Q – What advice would you give a new documentary filmmaker who wants to shoot in a political hotbed country?

Daniel – Have no preconceptions and be very open. But you have to be aware of the country and don't be surprised if you're surprised. Be very open and honest with people. They trust us completely now and we have a lot of fun when we're out there. In fact, when most people go there, they think you have to be serious. The North Koreans are very funny people. They love practical jokes. They're very close to us Brits that way. And of course the biggest advice in documentaries is don't take no for an answer. Everything is possible.