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Formula

While professionals are now allowed in the men's tournament, rules restrict teams to players no older than 23 years with the exception of three overage players.

History

In 1900 and 1904, football was introduced as an exhibition sport and became the first team sport to be included in the Olympic Games.

Great Britain dominated the first Olympic Football Tournaments, contested mainly by European nations. Before winning the first FIFA World Cup™, the great Uruguayan generation led by Jose Leandro Andrade, won two Olympic tournaments in Paris 1924 and in Amsterdam 1928. Only in Los Angeles 1932 was football not part of the Olympic programme.

The growth of professional football after World War II meant that some of the best players were not eligible to compete in the Olympics.

In 1952, Hungary's great generation with players such as Grosics, Hidegkuti, Puskas and Kocsis won the tournament in Helsinki. After that and until Moscow 1980 all the Olympic titles went to Eastern Europe.

For the first time, professionals were allowed to play in the Olympic Football Tournament in Los Angeles in 1984. Players from Europe and South America who had performed in the World Cup could not take part in the tournament, which helped teams such as Canada and Egypt, who reached the quarter-finals.

When the Olympics moved into their modern open era, FIFA was obliged to reconsider its position for the Barcelona 1992 tournament which then was opened up but basically limited to players under 23 years of age.

General

Football will feature at the Olympics for the 22nd time in Beijing in summer 2008. Apart from the war years in 1916, 1940 and 1944, and in 1932 when the IOC and FIFA failed to agree on amateur regulations, football has been an Olympic sport at every Games since 1908, the very first Men's Olympic Football Tournament run under FIFA auspices.

A total of 81 associations have sent teams to the men's Olympic Football Tournament. For some of them, it has marked a rare appearance at an official FIFA final competition. Ireland Republic, for example, were present in 1924 and 1948, while the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania took part in 1924, but have yet to appear in a FIFA tournament since regaining independence in the early 1990s. India competed at every Games from 1948 to 1960, while the 1952 tournament featured the Netherlands Antilles for the first and only time. Indonesia appeared at the Olympics in 1956. The 1972 Games in Germany FR saw a duel between two teams making their first (and to date only) finals appearances: Burma (now Myanmar) beat Sudan 2-0 after narrow defeats to Mexico and the Soviet Union to end with a highly commendable goal difference of zero. Venezuela made a single appearance at the Moscow Games in 1980, as did DPR Korea in 1976, Chinese Taipei in 1960, Afghanistan in 1948 and South Africa in 2000.

For close on four decades, the Olympic Football Tournament was the zenith of amateur football. Professionals of all nations were permitted to take part from 1992 onwards. The rules state that players must be aged under 23, with the exception of three so-called over-age players.

This momentous change in 1992 led to a decisive shift in the balance of power. Poland's silver in Barcelona was the last medal won by the previously dominant East European associations.

Italy lead the way with 14 appearances, but they have claimed gold only once, in 1936.

Hungary is the most successful nation in the history of the Olympic Football Tournament with three gold medals, in 1952, 1964 and 1968, a silver in 1972 and bronze in 1960. Few observers doubt that there would have been a medal in 1956 to complete an unbroken run lasting two decades had it not been for the tragic circumstances of the 1956 uprising.

Three nations boast a brace of tournament triumphs: Great Britain claimed gold in 1908 and 1912, Uruguay in 1924 and 1928 and the Soviet Union in 1956 and 1988.

Denmark and Yugoslavia have earned a reputation as perennial runners-up: both have collected silver on three occasions, while the Netherlands and the Soviet Union have three bronze medals apiece.

At the second tournament in 1912, Great Britain, Denmark and the Netherlands took to the podium – exactly the same three teams in exactly the same order as at the first-ever contest.

In contrast to the FIFA World Cup™, European nations have dominated the Olympic Football Tournament, claiming 16 of the 21 gold medals awarded to date.

Uruguay and Argentina are the only South American representatives to have won gold (Uruguay in 1924 and 1928, Argentina in 2004). However, since their second triumph in 1928, Uruguay have failed to qualify for the final tournament for 80 years now.

Olympic football is the only official FIFA trophy still missing from Brazil's collection. Brazil have silver medals from 1984 and 1988 and bronze from 1996 to show for 10 attempts at the title – and the 11th will have to wait until Peking 2008 at least.

Just as African nations began to shine in FIFA youth tournaments, the continent's representatives benefited from the 1992 change in age regulations. Nigeria claimed gold in 1996 against Argentina before Cameroon defeated Spain in 2000.

The hosts have only triumphed on three occasions: Great Britain in 1908, Belgium in 1920 and Spain in 1992.

Belgium's victory in 1920 was overshadowed when Czechoslovakia walked off the pitch after 39 minutes in protest at what they saw as biased refereeing. Czechoslovakia are the only team to be disqualified in the history of Olympic football.

1928 remains the sole occasion on which a replay was necessary to decide the destination of the medals. Uruguay and Argentina drew 1-1 after extra time, before the Uruguayans battled to a 2-1 victory three days later.

Cameroon's triumph in 2000 was the first and only time the winners have been decided in a penalty shoot-out. Athens 2004 saw another first-ever achievement when Argentina won gold without conceding a single goal.

Fate has been unkind to the host nation in the three most recent tournaments. The USA (1996) were knocked out at the group stage, while Australia and Greece finished last in their group in 2000 and 2004 respectively.

The record attendance at an Olympic football match remains the third place play-off between Mexico and Japan at the Azteca stadium in 1968 (105,000), although the 2000 final at Sydney's Stadium Australia fell not far short with some 104,000 packed into the ground. The final between France and Brazil in Pasadena in 1984 and the bronze medal match between Yugoslavia and Italy in the same venue also saw a little more than 100,000 spectators.

Matches, players, victories, goals

Italy, the nation with the most appearances, have also played the most games, winning 30, drawing 5 and losing 22 of their 57 matches.

With 27 wins, Hungary come a close second to Italy, although the East Europeans proved considerably more effective, claiming three gold medals, a silver and a bronze between 1952 and 1972.

Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro since 2003 and Serbia since 2006) are the most prolific scorers in tournament history with 118 goals, one more than Italy.

The 2004 final, Argentina v. Paraguay, was the first all-South American final in the Olympic Football Tournament since 1928. Athens also bore witness to the first Asian team (Iraq) to qualify for the semi-finals since Japan took bronze in 1968.

Denmark's Nils Middleboe scored the first-ever Olympic football goal against France on 9 October 1908. Denmark's 9-0 victory included the first Olympic hat trick as Vilhelm Wolfhagen ran up a total of four goals.

Wolfhagen scored another four goals in the second match of the 1908 tournament and is the first player to have scored two consecutive hat tricks at Olympic Games. However, this achievement is overshadowed by that of fellow-countryman Sophus Nielsen who scored no fewer than 10 times on the same day, a record at the Olympics and any FIFA final competition, and one he shares with Germany's Gottfried Fuchs who struck 10 times against Russia in 1912.

The matches in question, Denmark's 17-1 defeat of France and Germany's 16-0 triumph over Russia, are the biggest margins of victory and highest scoring matches in tournament history.

In 1928, Domingo Tarasconi from Argentina scored three consecutive hat tricks. To date, Tarasconi is the only player to have scored three hat tricks at the Olympic Games.

Two players share the accolade of leading scorer at an Olympic Football Tournament: Sophus Nielsen (Denmark) and Antal Dunai (Hungary) lead the way with 13 goals. Dunai's fellow-countryman, Ferenc Bene, scored 12 goals in the 1964 tournament, paving the way for Hungary's march to the gold medal.

Eleven players from the Uruguay squad (Olympics 1924 and 1928, FIFA World Cup™ 1930) and four players from the Italy squad (FIFA World Cup™ 1934 and 1938, Olympics 1936) won both Olympic gold and the Jules Rimet trophy. England's 1966 FIFA World Cup™ triumph came more than half a century after Britain's Olympic football gold, and France also added a FIFA World Cup™ title to Olympic glory, the 1998 triumph on home soil following gold at the 1984 Los Angeles Games. The 1954 "Miracle of Bern" prevented the majestic Hungarian side of the fifties from achieving the feat. Argentina also won both titles after winning gold in Athens 2004.

Hungary's Dezső Novak is the single most successful player with three Olympic medals: bronze in 1960, and gold in 1964 and 1968.

Famous top scorers in Olympic Football Tournaments before the 1980s were Petrone (URU) in 1924, Nordhal (SWE) in 1948, Deyna (POL) in 1972 and Szarmach (POL) in 1976.

However, no striker has finished leading scorer at both the Olympics and the FIFA World Cup™. Some of the goal-getters at the Olympics since 1988 have gone on to become some of the biggest stars in world football: Romario (top scorer 1988), Crespo (top scorer 1996), Zamorano (top scorer 2000), Tevez (top scorer 2004), Dobrovolski, Mikhailichenko, Klinsmann, Bebeto, Ronaldo, Kanu, Gilardino.

Tenema Ndiaye, who scored three goals against the Korea Republic in Athens 2004, and tournament top scorer Carlos Tevez are in good company: in the last 20 years, only eleven players have managed to score a hat trick in an Olympic game, among them Juergen Klinsmann, Bebeto, Romario and Zamorano.

Four players share the distinction of scoring at least once in five consecutive games: Igor Dobrovolski (URS, 1988), Ottmar Hitzfeld (FRG, 1972), Milan Galic (YUG, 1960) and Adolfo Baloncieri (ITA, 1928), although only Dobrovolski and Galic ended up with a gold medal.

No fewer than 12 players have scored in the very first minute of a match. Domingo Tarasconi (ARG) was the first in the 1928 encounter between Argentina and Belgium, while the Brazilian, Flavio Conceicao, was the most recent with his early strike against Nigeria in 1996. In between, the roll of honour reads: Wilkes (NED 1948 v. France), Puskas (HUN, 1952 v. Sweden), Uribe (PER, 1960 v. France), Galic (YUG, 1960 v. Denmark), Osim (YUG, 1964 v. Hungary), Frenzel (GDR, 1964 v. Yugoslavia), Streich (FRG, 1972 v. Colombia), Semenov (URS, 1972 v. Morocco), Bommer (FRG, 1984 v. Yugoslavia), Reyna (USA, 1996 v. Argentina).

Of the 24 own goals, three have gone against Spain, the most recent proving pivotal. In the 2000 final, Spain were leading 2-0 but Ivan Amaya's unlucky own goal offered Cameroon a way back and the Africans duly equalised before claiming the title on penalties. The most recent own goal in the Olympic finals came from Portugal's Fernando Meira in the 68th minute of his country's group match against Costa Rica. The Central Americans went on to win 4-2.

The youngest ever medallist is Ghana's Sammy Kuffour, not yet 16 when he collected bronze in 1992. Idris Kameni, Cameroon's outstanding goalkeeper in 2000, won gold at the age of 16 years and seven months, whereas Sweden's 1952 bronze-medal winner, Erik Nilsson, was more than twice as old at nearly 36. Before the war, Nilsson had appeared against Brazil at the 1938 FIFA World Cup™.