
FIFA Beach Soccer World Cup:

History

Over the past decade, beach soccer has journeyed from the beaches of Brazil to the hearts of millions of fans all over the globe. The participation of internationally renowned players such as the Brazilian Junior Negao, Portugal's Alan and Madjer and the Spanish star Amarelle has helped to expand television coverage to large audiences in over 170 countries worldwide, making beach soccer one of the fastest growing professional sports in the world and converting it into a major source of international commercial opportunity.

Beach soccer had been played recreationally all over the world for many years and in many different formats, but it was not until 1992 that the Laws of the Game were envisaged and a pilot event staged in Los Angeles. The following summer, the first professional beach soccer competition was organised at Miami Beach, with teams from the USA, Brazil, Argentina and Italy taking part in what would turn out to be a historic event.

In April 1994, the first event to be covered by network television was held on the Copacabana Beach in Rio de Janeiro and the city hosted the inaugural Beach Soccer World Championship a year later. The competition was won by the host nation, making Brazil the first ever world champions of beach soccer. The success of the tournament saw international interest begin to match developments on the pitch and growing demand for the sport around the world gave rise to the Pro Beach Soccer Tour in 1996.

The first Pro Beach Soccer Tour included a total of 60 games in two years across South America, Europe, Asia and the USA, attracting major names both on and off the pitch. Interest generated by the tour in Europe led to the creation of the European Pro Beach Soccer League (EPBSL) in 1998, providing a solid infrastructure that would increase the professionalism of the spectacle at all levels. The EPBSL, now known as the Euro BS League, united promoters from across the continent and satisfied the demands of the media, sponsors and fans. Only four years on from its creation, the successful first step in the building of a legitimate worldwide competition structure for the sport of pro beach soccer had been taken.

The next four years would see this growth consolidated by further progress both on and off the pitch, with the Euro BS League emerging as the strongest pro beach soccer competition in the world. By 2004, some 17 nations had entered teams, and by 2005 this had risen to 20, leading to more than 70 countries looking to stage events. In 2005, beach soccer became a part of the FIFA family, and the first-ever FIFA Beach Soccer World Cup was staged on Copacabana Beach in Rio de Janeiro. To everyone's surprise, France defeated Portugal in the final, while hot favourites Brazil fell in the semis.

However, the following year, at the first tournament to feature 16 nations, the *Auriverde* avenged the previous year's loss. In the final of the competition, they were never in any real trouble against Uruguay as they proceeded to claim their first FIFA Beach Soccer World Cup. Eric Cantona's *Bleus*, meanwhile, triumphed in the third-place play-off, again at the expense of Portugal.

Brazil were the big winners at the FIFA Beach Soccer World Cup Rio 2007. The hosts and title holders swept all before them, not only winning the tournament at a canter but also coming away with all of the other trophies on offer.

Marseille is a long, trans-Atlantic journey away from the Copacabana beach on which Brazil won the FIFA Beach Soccer World Cup in 2006 and 2007, but the formidable *Seleção* undid Italy to emerge atop of the podium once again on Prado beach in 2008. Bronze went to Portugal, who edged an enticing duel with Spain to return home with their heads held high.

In general terms, the quality of play on offer was of a noticeably higher standard than last time out, continuing the upward trend that has been evident each year since 2005. Brazil's troubled route to glory was in itself sufficient evidence of that, with Italy providing courageous opposition in the showpiece match, Portugal proving unlucky in the last four and even Russia coming close to upending the beach soccer kings in the quarter-finals. The competition's first voyage beyond Brazilian shores must go down as a remarkable success. Little by little, it has forced its way into the reckoning as one of the most significant events in the sporting calendar since its inception four years ago – to the extent that the growing army of beach soccer enthusiasts can hardly wait to watch the world's finest talents reconvene in Dubai in 2009.

(Source: <http://www.fifa.com>)