

TIBETAN TITANS: Team Tibet players sing their national anthem prior to a friendly against a Delhi selection in the national capital in August.

FIFA Plays Footsie

Who can play in FIFA-affiliated football and who can't? Well, even FIFA themselves won't say who as they keep shifting the goalposts.

By STEVE MENARY

The idea of an international football match seems simple – national teams from two countries playing each other. But is it that simple? Does every national association that applies to join FIFA get welcomed in as the former Yugoslavian republic of Montenegro was in May this year, taking membership of the world game's governing body up to 208 countries?

Certainly not, but finding out what aspiring national teams have been rejected by FIFA is not easy. The world game's governing body has forgotten a good few national sides but prefers not to dwell on who has been rejected. Gibraltar, Greenland, the Sápmi team representing the indigenous people of northern Scandinavia, the Commonwealth of the North Marianas in the Pacific – these are a few of the national teams that FIFA has forgotten. But why?

In some cases, the application is for a team that FIFA just cannot get its head around. The Sápmi – or Lapps as they are more commonly known (a term they reject as derogatory) – are a tribal side. If FIFA accepted tribes, then its membership would disintegrate; although there has been a recent precedent set in lacrosse. The Iroquois tribe from Canada and the US compete in the lacrosse world championship against nations who issue them with visas.

The rejection of most of the other lands that FIFA has forgotten is generally on spurious political grounds that don't stand up to detailed examination. The Tibetan side is run out of Dharamsala in India, where more than 8,000 Tibetans have congregated after the People's Republic of China established its suzerainty over the Himalayan kingdom in 1950.



FAROE FORWARD: The Faroe Islands compete in FIFA-affiliated tournaments despite being an autonomous region of Denmark.

The Tibetan side is taken mainly from the Tibetan diaspora in India and Nepal, but since first playing an 'international' against Greenland in 2001, the side has featured players with Tibetan origins from the US, UK and Switzerland, where Dorjee Dsawa has played professionally for over a decade.

FIFA could not countenance accepting Tibet as China would complain. The Chinese government even threatened trade sanctions against Greenland's biggest industry, the \$25 million export of prawns to China.

The Chinese also tried to intervene when the Tibetans were invited to play in the six-nation 2006 FIFI (Federation of International Football Independents) Wild Cup, a tournament held in Hamburg, Germany, last year for teams rejected by FIFA. FIFA even had to make a humiliating apology to the Chinese government after accidentally calling Tibet a country on the world body's website.

Once again, there is a precedent. The Tibetan team might not play in Tibet, but then neither does Palestine, which FIFA accepted as member in 1994. The team is drawn from the Palestinian diaspora as far away as Chile and the US and, due to the political situation on the West Bank, usually play home games in Qatar.

China's argument that Tibet is part of the People's Republic does not stand up either as the former colonies of Hong Kong and Macau remain full FIFA members despite ownership returning to China in the last few years.

Politics has no place in football says FIFA, which in the last nine years has suspended 10 members, including Greece, Macau and Iran, due to interference by politicians there.

But the Tibetan situation suggests otherwise, as does Gibraltar's experiences with FIFA and UEFA, Europe's governing body.

In the 1990s, membership of UEFA boomed as the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia fractured into smaller states. Around the same time, micro states such as Liechtenstein and Andorra, which had been members for a few years but were mostly inactive, started entering qualifiers for the World Cup and European championship.

This encouraged the Faroe Islands, an autonomous member of the Danish commonwealth, to do the same with stunning results. The Faroes joined FIFA in 1988. In their first competitive international two years later, against an Austrian side that had played at that year's World Cup finals, they amazingly won 1-0.

By this time, the British colony of Gibraltar on the peninsula of Iberia had already applied to join UEFA and FIFA. This produced an immediate reaction in Spain, where the national association threatened to withdraw all national and club teams from international competition if the Gibraltarians were allowed in.

Spain and Britain had been at odds over Gibraltar since the Spaniards reluctantly ceded the Rock to the British in the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713. Gibraltar only wanted to play at an amateur level, but the prospect of Spain lining up against the Rock at any level petrified Spanish politicians, and there was little UEFA could do. Under the then rules, Gibraltar could join.

So UEFA shifted the goalposts. The membership criterion was changed so that all future members of UEFA had to be a country as recognised by the United Nations. As this would have excluded the four members of the United Kingdom – England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales – this rule was not to be retrospective. A by-product was that the Faroes stayed in.

FIFA also tweaked its rules, but kept the criteria vague and decreed that all future members had to be countries as recognised by the 'international community'. Is that the international football community? The political community? FIFA is not saying.

At the same time, Greenland, where an estimated 5,000 of the 55,000 population, play football, had also been in contact with FIFA and UEFA. All the Greenlanders wanted was some help. There are no grass pitches on the world's largest island in the Arctic or even any roads linking the towns there. The Greenlanders had played ad hoc games with the Faroes since 1980 and competed in football at the bi-annual Island Games – a sort of Olympiad for islands – since 1989. But the political tide had turned against the Greenlanders. Despite being in the same political situation as the Faroes, the Greenland association was spurned.

Allowing the Greenlanders to join FIFA and UEFA would probably not offend anyone politically, but admitting the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (winners of the 2006 FIFI World Cup) certainly would.

In 1955, the Turkish Cypriots split off from the Cyprus Football Association. The island's Turkish clubs helped found the CFA with the Greek Cypriots in 1934 and the federation joined FIFA in 1948 – 12 years before Cyprus secured independence from Britain. After independence, the political situation on Cyprus deteriorated badly and inter-communal violence erupted before Turkey invaded the northern half of the island in 1974.

FIFA tacitly accepted the Turkish Cypriots playing friendly 'internationals' against Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Libya and Malaysia but when the TRNC was established in 1983 this all stopped. Only Turkey has ever recognised the TRNC and the UN has had a peace plan on the table for three years.

The Turkish Cypriots are willing to accept reunification but would still like to have their own national team. For decades, FIFA spurned advances from the Turkish Cypriots, but on September 20, this year, invited both sides to discuss football on the island as part of a wider political settlement.

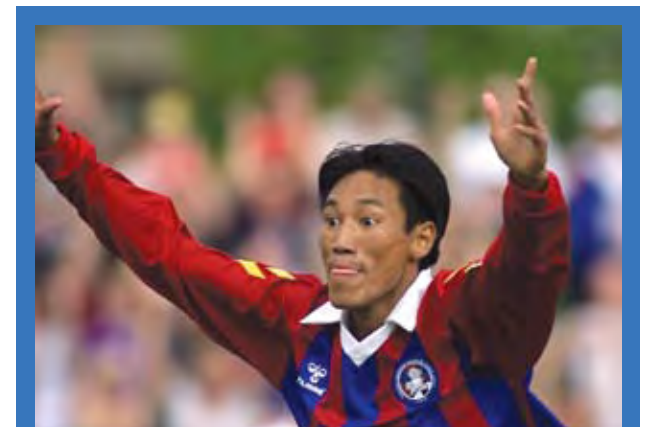
Politics might have no part in football but in the lands that FIFA has forgotten, separating the two is virtually impossible.



FOULED: Greenland, another province of Denmark, enjoys no luck with FIFA.

FIFA Fact File

FIFA Members	208
United Nations members	192
FIFA members not in the UN	23
Associate members of FIFA's six confederations not in the UN	7
Members of the NF Board	13



Quotable Quotes

"What is a country? Recognition by a fellow country? What does it give you? Just a passport to travel and international recognition."

– Karma Samdup, Tibetan footballer

"Sometimes FIFA forgets it does not own football."

– Jens Tang Olesen, Greenland manager

"Spain's behaviour has so far been very unsportsmanlike and it is a terrible shame that decisions about international football have to get politicians and courts involved."

– Neil Parish, conservative MEP for Gibraltar

"The important thing is that people play football and represent themselves."

– Ivar Morten Nomark, Sápmi manager

"How, and in what ideology, does a human not have the right to compete with another nation?"

– Ahmet Esenyel, Northern Cyprus International