

A perfect fit for Cayman?

FIFA is pushing beach soccer worldwide as the next mega-sport and the Cayman Islands Football Association wants in on the action.



Uruguay's Ricardo Martinez, left, fights for the ball with Ricardo Francisco from South Africa during a match during the first FIFA Beach Soccer World Cup in Rio de Janeiro, Sunday. Uruguay won 7-3. Photo: AP

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Can the world's most popular sport get any hotter? FIFA believes it can and has committed to a new campaign aimed at making beach soccer a global hit.

Sunday saw the launch of the first-ever FIFA beach soccer World Cup in Brazil and proponents believe the sport can't miss with its enticing combination of soccer excitement and beautiful beaches. FIFA envisions global appeal and wants their World Cup on the beach to be an intensely competitive and highly respected addition to the international sports calendar.

The Cayman Islands hopes to hop aboard this train as well.

Jeffrey Webb, Cayman Islands Football Association (CIFA) president, believes the potential for beach soccer here is huge.

"For CIFA this gives us a new market involving football and the beach," Webb said. "With Cayman's pristine beaches and football's legacy as the national sport we see this as a natural fit for the Cayman Islands. Caymanians love football and we have the natural infrastructure to facilitate the game so merging the two for us was just the next step in the development of football as a sport. We are happy to have this new initiative and hope that our members will embrace it not only for competitive purposes but as a fun way to keep their teams active during the off-season."

Bruce Blake, CIFA's general secretary also believes beach soccer's stock will rise fast in the Cayman Islands.

"Given that we are an Island, one of our biggest assets are our beaches, which everyone enjoys," Blake said. "Beach football will be a welcomed addition to the other beach activities. The fans like football and they like going to the beach. We have combined both so there should be a strong turnout."

CIFA already has plans for two tournaments on Grand Cayman. One is scheduled to take place in conjunction with Jet Around Cayman, an annual personal watercraft race, and another one will be held in East End later in the year. The tournaments, however, are only a warmup to what is hoped will

be a permanent league.

"Once we get our feet wet and iron out the kinks, we should be in a good position to launch a beach football league starting in 2006 to run in the summer months," explained Blake.

CIFA believes that a beach league will improve play in the Foster's CIFA National Football League by improving the fitness and athletic abilities of Cayman players.

"It will allow teams to have another pre-season tournament and will allow the players to enhance their fitness prior to the start of the regular football season," said Blake. "Working in the sand is very challenging and will provide great endurance and strength work for players."

Blake says that for the

upcoming beach tournament teams will consist of five players and five substitutes. Games will be 14 minutes long with a one minute halftime.

The big questions Cayman Islands fans want answered, of course, is just how good can a national team be in beach soccer. Blake believes we can be contenders.

"I am of the opinion that this is an area that Cayman can excel internationally due to the fact that the teams are small and the game is played on a surface that is readily available on the Island.

"CIFA will provide the resources, organization and tournaments but it will be the dedication and commitment of the players and teams which will determine how far we

advance internationally."

Not surprisingly, Brazil is the current king of beach soccer. Brazil has won nine of the ten world championships in the sport. FIFA has endorsed beach soccer for years but this year is the first time it has held a World Cup for it. Previous world championships were staged by "Beach Soccer Worldwide".

The World Cup now taking place on Rio's Copacabana Beach includes national teams from France, Argentina, Portugal, Japan, South Africa, Spain, Italy and other soccer-strong nations. Brazil won the Cup's qualifying tournament in March. Uruguay was second and the USA third. According to FIFA, beach soccer is one of the world's fastest growing professional sports.