

World Soccer Competition

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Introduction

Most of us grew up with Major League Baseball, the NFL, the NBA, and the NHL. They all operate along the same lines- a season long competition to determine who qualifies for the championship playoff series. We know how it works, and are comfortable with the format.

But if you are new to soccer, you will find a variety of exciting competition formats used by the rest of the world. Because the origins of the modern game date back to the late 19th century (older than baseball), soccer has evolved into a highly sophisticated and commercial (!) series of tournaments and league play. Unlike US sports leagues, the end of the major soccer leagues has much more at stake for more teams, not just the few top teams in the standings.

Today the game is governed by the international organization called FIFA (FEE-fa). FIFA oversees play between nations, regulates player transfers between clubs in different countries, and establishes and enforces the laws of soccer. It also monitors each country’s national governing soccer body (e.g., the United States Soccer Federation), which sets guidelines for all organized play within its borders.

Soccer competitions can be broken into two categories- international competition and club competition. *Club* competition involves club teams composed of players who may be from different countries (like baseball, basketball, or hockey in the US). *International* competitions involve teams composed of players from a single country (like Olympic Basketball or Hockey).

Note- this guide cites mainly European examples, and men's teams. Europe is where you will find most of the money along with a disproportionate number of great players. Regardless, you can find great soccer in South America, Africa, and elsewhere, and the competitive formats discussed below apply to non-European nations as well.

Before reviewing the major leagues and tournaments, let us go over the primary forms of game competition, and discuss tiebreakers.

Game Format, Home and Away, Group Play, and Tiebreakers

Games consist of two 45-minute halves of continuous action: no time-outs, no commercial breaks during play. The referee usually adds extra time to the end of each half, to account for stoppages in play due to injuries and substitutions. The actual game time is kept by the referee, who typically ends the game following a goal kick or when the ball is in mid-field and a score is not imminent. The referee often keeps the game going on a corner kick or if the team that is behind has a scoring chance.

In a game that is as low scoring as soccer, the home field advantage takes on great significance. To make competition fair, many leagues use the "home and away" method for scheduling games. That is, every team in a league plays two games against each opponent, one at home and one at the opponent's site.

Leagues consist of around 20 teams, which mean an August to May season consists of 38 games. To determine the league champion, the league uses a point system, with three points awarded for a win, one point for a draw, and zero points for a loss. The point system came about to encourage teams to always play for a win.

Group play is a favorite organization of tournaments and World Cup qualifying rounds. Teams are often organized into groups of four or more, and they play each other once or twice (using the home and away format). Again, the one or two teams with the most points advance to the next round.

With so few games played, it is not surprising that teams end up tying on points. For group play, goal differential is usually the first tiebreaker. This is simply the goals the team has scored ("goals for") less the goals the team has given up ("goals against"). A second tiebreaker is often the "goals for", to encourage goal scoring. Each league or tournament has its own set of tiebreakers.

One very intriguing tiebreaker is "away goals", or goals scored at the opponent's field. This is usually invoked in home and away elimination play involving two teams. (E.G.,

two teams play, and there has to be a winner). In this type of match, the winner is the team that scores more goals in aggregate over the two games. If the aggregate score is tied, the first tiebreaker is “away goals”.

This makes for very dramatic play. For example, a team could win its home game 1-0, be losing its away game 2-0, when late into the game they score a goal to lose by a score of 2-1. The teams are tied on aggregate 2-2, but the team that scored the only “away goal” wins the aggregate match based on the away goals tiebreaker (1-0). This tiebreaker rule places a premium on scoring at the opponent’s home field, and encourages attacking play at all times.

International Competitions

Earn your Cap

An individual playing for his or her country in an international competition is “capped”. This term dates back to the days when national team players received a cap when they played. Most players feel honored playing for one’s country, although this certainly adds to their credentials and the salary they can command.

A note on national team players: once a player has been “capped”, he or she can no longer play for another country, even if the player maintains dual citizenships.

World Cup Finals

The crown jewel of all soccer competition is the World Cup Finals, held once every four years. This month-long event involves the top 32 national teams that have survived a grueling two-year series of qualifying tournaments and playoff matches. Over 150 nations start the competition, but only 32 end up competing for the World Cup trophy, a symbol of being best in the world.

To qualify for the World Cup Finals, national teams compete in many rounds of group play scheduled for each of the world’s five major soccer regions. These regions generally correspond to the world’s continents. At different points during qualification, both head-to-head and home-and-away play may be involved.

It is a major accomplishment for most national teams just to qualify for this tournament. Before 1990, the U.S. men had not qualified for this tournament since 1950. Since then, we have appeared in every World Cup Final, despite the lack of a professional US soccer league until 1996. In Korea 2002’s WCF, the U.S. surpassed all expectations by making it to the quarterfinals, losing to, but not being outplayed by the WCF finalist Germany.

For women, the World Cup Final is a relatively new phenomena (it dates back to only 1990) and involves fewer countries. Unlike the men, the U.S. women have always been a strong contender for the championship final.

During the World Cup Finals, competition begins with group play, where each team plays each other once, following by single game elimination competitions until there is a single winner.

European Championships

Also held every four years are the European championships, which pits national teams from different countries in a tournament format similar to the World Cup Finals. Like the WCF, national teams have to qualify. Scheduled to fall mid-way between World Cup Finals, this tournament is the most important competition for European national teams. The next European Championship is scheduled for the summer of 2004.

Both the qualifying and championship round competition format is similar to the World Cup format. Early rounds consist of group play followed by single game elimination matches.

Regional Tournaments

Smaller tournaments are held, sometimes annually, between countries in the same or neighboring continents. One example is the Gold Cup, sponsored by the US, and usually involves teams from countries in North America and the Caribbean. These tournaments are often by invitation only, and involve group play and single game elimination matches.

Inter-Regional cups: the Confederations Cup

This is an 8-team tournament involving the top national teams from each region or continent, and takes place every two years. The North American representative (from the region known as Concacaf) is the winner of the Gold Cup. Because teams qualify based on a single (and often minor) tournament, and each region has only one representative (not truly representing the over strength of the region), this tournament does not have anywhere near the same significance as the World Cup Finals.

International Friendlies

These matches pit national teams in a game for which there is nothing at stake- they simply provide an opportunity to get the team together, practice under game conditions, and experiment. These often occur just before a tournament or other major competition.

Olympics

And where do the Olympics fit in all this? FIFA and the International Olympic Committee have never been on the best of terms, especially since the Olympics are, in theory, direct competition to the World Cup Finals. Not only does FIFA not want to lose their billions associated with the WCF, but they don't want attention for the sport diluted by the other competitions that take place during the Olympics.

Given the amateur roots of the Olympics, FIFA and the IOC have struck a compromise. Olympic teams are comprised of “under 23” players- tomorrow’s stars, along with 3 “senior” or “over-age” players. So, for most soccer fans, the Olympics are important, but do not carry anywhere near the same weight as do the WCF’s.

The competition format is similar to the World Cup. There are a series of competitions to qualify for the Olympics. During the Olympics, there is a combination of group play and single game matches to determine the winner.

Club Competitions

There are two types of club competitions- one involves club teams from a single country and the other involves club teams from multiple countries. Club teams are analogous to Major League Baseball’s New York Yankees, or Boston Red Sox.

National or “Domestic” Leagues

Unlike baseball, club teams competing in a national or domestic league typically play each other only twice during the year in a “home and away format”. Like the U.S., there is always a major league and a series of minor leagues (think “Major League”, “AAA”, “AA”, etc. for baseball.)

Promotion and Relegation

Unlike the U.S., most domestic leagues subscribe to the Darwinian concept of “promotion and relegation”. This means that at the end of each season, the bottom teams are “relegated” to a lower league, and the top teams from the lower league are “promoted” to the upper league. This guarantees that with time, the best teams always make it to the top league, and the worst teams end up in lower and lower leagues.

Big dollars are at stake- clubs who are promoted are rewarded with increased revenue and a cash bonus, in theory to help them stay competitive in the higher league by affording stronger players. For the relegated club, it is a disaster, since these clubs can no longer afford the players they carried in the higher league.

This makes the end of the season very dramatic, at both ends of the standings. Who will come in first? Who will qualify for a place in a financially lucrative international league for the following year? Who will be demoted to a lower division? The tension for the fans of the affected teams can be quite high.

Tiebreakers do come into play at times, with goal differential and goals for being the most popular in determining who wins or stays in the league, and who loses or becomes relegated to a lower division.

Top Leagues of Selected Countries

US: Major League Soccer (April – October)

England: The English Premier League (EPL) (August – May)

Spain: Primera Liga (August – June)

Italy: Serie A (August – May)

Germany: Bundesliga (August – May)

Netherlands: Ere Divisie (August – May)

Argentina: Primera Division de Argentina (Futbol Argentina) (Feb – July, Aug – Dec)

Brazil: Série A (January – March, August – December)

Note: some of the world's strongest leagues are found in England, Spain, Italy, Germany, Argentina and Brazil. Most people feel that the U.S.'s Major League Soccer teams would be competitive in Division 1 in England, the division below the EPL and analogous to AAA baseball.

The U.S. and Major League Soccer

Major League Soccer is the top domestic league in the U.S., followed by the “A League”, and the D3 leagues. MLS originated as a condition for the U.S. to sponsor the 1994 World Cup, and although it took a little longer to get off the ground, the league has seen an increasing improvement in play and reputation throughout the world.

MLS structure is unique in the world, based on a “single entity structure” concept. The league negotiates and holds all players' contracts, not individual clubs. This has allowed it to control costs and ensure competitiveness- two major problems for the predecessor and failed North American Soccer League. All clubs have a team salary cap, and while this cap is extremely modest by most world standards, the level of play continues to improve.

MLS is also different in other ways. Having only ten teams, the home and away format isn't sufficient to fill out the ~30 game season, which runs from April to October. MLS will be adding more teams in the near future, along with “soccer specific” stadiums- stadiums with seating scaled to current attendance levels and fields with proper soccer dimensions.

Last, MLS follows the American sports business models in many ways. There is no promotion or relegation. Unlike European leagues, there is a playoff system to determine the MLS champion at the end of the regular season.

Domestic Cup Competitions

Each country typically has a “Domestic Cup Competition”, which is open to ALL teams in the country, from the least competitive league to the most competitive league. This tournament consists of a series of “home and away” competitions and single elimination games.

This tournament lasts a year, and because the format lends itself to upsets, there is often a “David and Goliath” quality to the championship final, where a minor league club has a chance to knock off a major league club. The final usually coincides with the end of the domestic league season.

National Cup Tournaments of Selected Countries

US: Open Cup

England: F.A. Cup

Spain: Copa del Rey

Italy: Coppa Italia

Germany: DFB Cup (Deutscher Fussball-Bund)

Netherlands: Amstel Cup

International Club Leagues

It is natural to wonder who has the best club in Europe, or in South America. Club owners correctly surmised that there was money to be made in setting up a competition between the best clubs from each of the major soccer countries in a geographic area.

This has led to the formation of two major international leagues in Europe: the Champions League and the UEFA Cup. The Champions league is the more prestigious of the two.

The European Champions League

To qualify for the Champions League, a club must be one of the strongest clubs in their domestic league. For the stronger national leagues (English Premier League, the Bundesliga, Serie A, La Liga), more than one team qualifies. In the weaker national leagues, only one team may qualify or need to win a playoff match to qualify. But teams who do qualify, earn a lot of money.

Some maintain that the European Champions League winner is the de facto best team in soccer, surpassing even the World Cup Final winner. There are three arguments for this:

1. Club teams are not restricted by national borders in acquiring their players. Usually, only money is the constraint.
2. Club teams play together all year, and know each other intimately. National teams get together for 5 to 15 games a year and really cannot be expected to function as well as a club team.
3. Europe significantly outspends the rest of the world when it comes to player salaries. The top players from Brazil and Argentina often find their way to Europe, and contribute to a level of play that is not found elsewhere.

The competition format involves a combination of home and away elimination matches and home and away group play. The championship game is a single game event, played in what is usually a neutral site.

The league lasts from August to May, and scheduling has to fit in with each club's domestic league. Between the two leagues, a club can end up playing over 60 games in a year. Add in international play, and certain players may be involved in 70 matches a year; which many feel is far too much for the health of the players and for the sport.

The South American equivalent is the Copa Libertadores, open to the best club teams from the various domestic leagues in South America. The Intercontinental Club Cup matches up the European and South American club champions for what has long been considered the unofficial world club championship.

The UEFA Cup

Teams that don't qualify for the Champions League, or get knocked out of the competition early, often end up in the UEFA Cup, which is basically open to club teams that have won certain tournaments. While the UEFA cup is analogous to college basketball's NIT tournament, it is a major source of revenue for the participating teams, not to mention pride, should they win.

The competition format is a series of head to head matches.

The Intercontinental Cup and the FIFA Club World Championship

As mentioned before, many people argue that the best club teams are in South America and Europe. So it is natural to wonder who had the best club team from these two continents. The Intercontinental Cup originated as a competition between the European Champions League and the Copa Libertadores winners. While started in 1960, it has evolved into a one game event, played in Tokyo each year, to crown the "unofficial world club champion".

Due to the remote location, the timing (off-season, during the summer), and the one game nature of the event, this cup competition doesn't carry that much significance, particularly with European clubs.

FIFA wants to replace the Intercontinental Cup with the FIFA Club World Championship, perhaps as early as 2005. Scheduled to be an 8 day tournament, all six confederation winners qualify with the European Champions League and Copa Libertadores winners getting a bye for the first round of the competition.

European clubs are balking, though, as they have too many tournament and league competition games as it stands. While FIFA hopes to raise the value of this cup with the new format, they face an uphill battle.

For one thing, too much time exists before this tournament takes place. For example, say a team finishes first in their national league for the 1997-1998 season, qualifying them for the 1998-1999 Champions League. Then sometime in 2000 organizers schedule the World Club Championship. It is very hard to maintain the quality of team or interest over that long a period.

Comments and Corrections

Please direct all comments, corrections, or suggestions to this article via the "General Feedback/Comments" link on Wayland Youth Soccer's web site:

www.WaylandSoccer.org. Thank you.