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February 27, 2006

Rebels put viva-voom into cup

BY MATTHEW WEINER

UNABLE TO GET TICKETS FOR Germany 2006? Fed up with greedy, mercenary managers, players only motivated by cash bonuses and stadiums packed with corporate guests? Then forget the Fifa World Cup and pick up a ticket for its newest rival, the Viva World Cup. Scheduled to take place in the Turkish republic of northern Cyprus in November, it is billed as the first festival of football for nations that do not exist.

This week-long tournament, which features eight "countries" not officially recognised, has provoked considerable anger in both the international community and Fifa. The final list of competitors has not been announced for fear that political recriminations from the Republic of Cyprus could hamper the project, but as well as the host nation, those rumoured to take part include Tibet, Chechnya, Kosovo and Monaco, plus teams representing Western Sahara, Occitania and the Sami people.

Having existed in diplomatic isolation since the Turkish invasion in 1983, northern Cyprus officials are hoping the Viva World Cup could help them to break the political ice with their European neighbours. "Financially we expect nothing from the cup. We just want to give our country a voice," Cengiz Uzun, head of external relations for the Turkish Cyprus Football Association, said. "No one recognises our country, but this gives our people an opportunity to scream: 'We live here!'"

Much of the support for the event has come from countries who, because they are not recognised by the international community, have been excluded from the World Cup. Jean-Luc Kit, the French football statistician behind the Viva World Cup, believes that this ruling is unfair to millions of people across the globe. "Every nation and all the people in the world have the right to play football without interference from politics," he said.

Kit dreamt up the idea in 2000 after learning that Tibet, despite the Chinese occupation, had set up its own football association. In 2003, he and three colleagues, including Luc Misson, the lawyer who represented Jean-Marc Bosman, established the cheekily titled Non Fifa (NF) Board and approached 200 indigenous peoples, occupied nations and minorities to see who fancied coming out to play. The response was phenomenal.

In the summer of 2005, the NF Board hosted a meeting in a London hotel for interested parties. The result was as wildly colourful and unpredictable as a *Star Wars* bar scene. Leif Isak Nilut, representative of the Sami — the ancient circum-polar tribe — was so delighted to have been invited, he spontaneously began to yodel. "A Sami yoiiks when he's happy," Hakan Kuorak, Nilut's second in command, said. Fiercely proud of their footballing pedigree — they boast Morten Gamst Pedersen, the Blackburn Rovers midfield player, as a clan member — the Sami applied for Fifa membership in 1998 but was refused because its people, scattered between Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia, have no nation state.

The other character who made a splash at this meeting was Christian Olsen, national team coach for the Principality of Sealand. Located six miles off the

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Suffolk coast, Sealand is not so much a country as a former Second World War sea fort. Nevertheless, it made headlines in 1967 when a pirate radio broadcaster, the self-styled Prince Roy, declared it a sovereign nation. Remarkably, this went unchallenged by the British government and Sealand now has its own currency, passports and, apparently, a national football team. Olsen, a 47-year-old hotel manager from Denmark, set up the team as an elaborate joke five years ago and has kept the Sealand "royal" family up to date with their progress, even playing the Sealand national anthem before the start of each game. Despite an initial enthusiasm for the Viva World Cup, Olsen has announced that Sealand, who feature a 54-year-old bank manager at left back and a 41-year-old headmaster on the wing, will be unable to attend because of work commitments.

For those taking part, however, the Viva World Cup is far from a joke. Instead, it offers teams such as those from Occitania, the Basque-like autonomy-seeking region in southern France, and Western Sahara, an area living under Moroccan occupation since 1975, the unique opportunity to prove to the rest of the world that they still exist. The star attraction, though, will be Tibet, who, despite expecting to face considerable pressure from China, will be putting out a side drawn from their exile community in India and Nepal.

"The priority is to get media attention for these oppressed and voiceless people," Marino Busdachin, an Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation official, said.



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