

# The unlikely success story of football on the massive island of Greenland

The weather is tough, transport is expensive and the population is tiny, but football is flourishing on the world's largest island



*A football field in Qeqertarsuaq, one of Greenland's biggest towns. Photograph: Veronique Durruty/Gamma-Rapho/Getty Images*

Tomos Knox for These Football Times, part of the Guardian Sport Network

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Greenland is normally associated with ice and blisteringly cold temperatures. Despite being the world's largest island, it is the least densely populated country on Earth, with just 57,000 inhabitants. The inhabitants, primarily Greenlandic Inuit but also Greenlandic Danes, speak Danish or Greenlandic. Based in the North Atlantic, it is part of the Danish Commonwealth, like the Faroe Islands, a group of islands west of Scotland. There are barely any roads in Greenland, due to the sheer distance between the sparse collection of settlements. This makes football very difficult – which makes the fact that over 10% of the island's population plays the game all the more impressive.

Indeed, football is Greenland's national sport. The first championship was contested in 1958 and the Greenland Football Association (GBU) was formed in 1971. In recent years, with an artificial turf pitch built in Qaqortoq, football has progressed steadily. The Greenland national team have been competing at the [Island Games](#) since 1989. They crashed out of the tournament in the semi-finals in their first appearance, but have improved in recent years. They finished second in the 2013 edition of the Games, losing in the final to hosts and approved Fifa members Bermuda. Achievements like these reinforce their dream of international football at a higher level.

However, just playing football in Greenland is more difficult than it may appear. Ice blankets the country for most of the year and football can only be played for roughly three months annually. The sheer distances players must travel – by plane or boat – to reach other settlements in Greenland makes national team training

extremely expensive. Adding Greenland's remote location to the already lengthy list of obstacles presents yet another problem: the average plane ticket costs around £1,000.

These complications partly explain Fifa's continued refusal to allow Greenland a place in their collection of national football teams. That said, Greenland's national side did play a high profile match in 2001 that managed to attract the attention of football's global governing body, although, in Fifa's case, not for the right reasons.

A young Dane going by the name of Michael Nybrandt contacted the GBU to ask if their national side would be interested in facing the Tibet national football team. The Tibetan squad, of course, was not made up of players from the region itself, but of footballers with Tibetan heritage. The Greenlanders accepted and a match was arranged to be played in Copenhagen.

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China, infuriated by this, threatened to embargo Greenland's shrimp exports, a major industry on the island unless the game was to be cancelled. The Greenlandic government, under enormous pressure, decided to let their football association decide. The GBU sanctioned the match and Tibet versus Greenland, hosted in the Vanlose Arena, took place. In a largely one-sided affair, the Greenlanders proceeded to win 4-1. Despite the Chinese government's threats, nothing materialised, and shrimp exports have continued.

Greenland also competed in German club [St. Pauli](#)'s alternative World Cup in 2006, which was held around the same time as the Fifa World Cup took place in Germany. The competition, ingeniously titled the "[Fifi Wild Cup](#)", featured teams such as Northern Cyprus, Zanzibar, [now-Uefa members Gibraltar](#), Tibet and the Republic of Sankt Pauli. Unfortunately, Greenland were unable to make an impact in the tournament, losing 1-0 to eventual winners Northern Cyprus, and 2-4 to Zanzibar. Although the tournament received a fairly high level of attention, crowds were disappointing, with an average of just 400 people turning up to watch games. Sadly, the inaugural edition of the Fifa Wild Cup was also the last.

But, just a few months later, Greenland travelled to Northern Cyprus to contest the [ELF Cup](#), which was contested by Crimea, Gagauzia (an autonomous region of Moldova), Fifa members Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, Tibet, Greenland, and, of course, Northern Cyprus. Greenland fared relatively well, but failed to make it beyond the group stages, overcoming Gagauzia by a comfortable 2-0 scoreline, losing 1-0 to Kyrgyzstan and mustering a 1-1 draw with Zanzibar.

Although they left in disappointment yet again, defender Teller Mortensen managed to reach the Golden Team, an all-star XI made up of the best players in the tournament, which injected a little pride into the heart of the dejected Greenland team. They had performed well and only just missed out on the knock-out stages. Yet again, Northern Cyprus emerged as victors, beating a side that included Denys Holaydo, a four-time Ukrainian international, by three goals to one.

The national football championship in Greenland can only be contested over a series of days as distances between the clubs are too great. Regional qualifiers are played before one large tournament is contested. If Fifa granted Greenland membership, perhaps the money that would bring in could be used to improve the league and help the national team. Greenland should be as eligible for membership as the Faroe Islands, who currently reside within the global governing body's auspices.

There has been no recent push for Fifa membership from the GBU. Whether that is because they are happy with their current situation or because they have decided to concentrate on the Island Games – due to be held next year in Jersey – is debatable.

With the likes of Niklas Kreutzmann and Joorsi Skade playing in Denmark's respected professional leagues rather than in their home league in Greenland, it remains to be seen how football will fare on the island. There has been a campaign for a team from Greenland to play in the Danish leagues in the way that Guernsey FC compete in the English league system, but this seems unlikely. After all, if Greenland struggles to send a

team to the Island Games, there is little hope of a Greenlandic club sending an 18-man squad to Denmark every fortnight.

In a country where football is impossible for most of the year due to extreme weather conditions that mean grass cannot even grow, the game's influence is quite astonishing. Not only do they boast a national tournament, but they also have a national football team. Football has a long way to go in the far-flung Greenland but it has at least begun its journey.