

# LIFE'S A BEACH

*Tournaments Held on Sand Are Great Fun But Offer a Different Set of Challenges for Players, Coaches and Parents*

Some teams enter faraway tournaments to prepare for the upcoming season. Others do so to give their players a taste of higher-level competition. And still others hope that, by winning a prestigious regional tournament, they can raise the profile of their club and aid their recruitment cause.

But if your team is looking for a fun alternative to a traditional grass field tournament, entering one of the growing number of beach soccer tournaments may well be the answer. Beach Soccer is a fun, fast-paced game with lots of scoring in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere.

Dick Whalen is the Director of the North America Sand Soccer Championships that has taken place in Virginia Beach, VA every

June for the past 22 years. When he first started the tournament in 1994 it had just 26 youth and adult teams, and took place in a Nor'easter. Now it attracts over 1,000 teams from over a dozen US states and several foreign countries.

"We now get about 200,000 people who experience our event over three days of the festival," says Whalen. "That's 11,800 players, 35,000 coaches and fans, 1,500 from our "SideKick" venues on the sand and the remainder as Virginia Beach Boardwalk spectators who observe over 25 city blocks of the event."

Whalen's event may be the biggest, but arguably the first to bring beach soccer to the United States was English native and Florida resident Peter Mellor, the owner of Major Beach Soccer, which first started promoting beach soccer tournaments in Clearwater Beach, FL in the 1980s.

"The history of Major Beach Soccer dates back about twenty-eight years," says Mellor. "I was at the Copacabana Beach in Rio with a soccer team back in 1985 and what I saw was the whole beach just playing soccer. I thought, "You know, this could work in the U.S." I was living in Florida, and we have beautiful beaches there,



so I considered bringing it back to the US.”

Mellor had ties to Umbro from his days as a professional player in England and was able to persuade the soccer equipment manufacturer to sponsor the inaugural event. He now runs three events between June and August, as well as a National Championship in December. California-based Soccer in the Sand, which runs beach soccer events across the country, is affiliated with Major Beach Soccer and also feeds teams into Mellor’s National Championship event.

By the early 1990s, other soccer entrepreneurs were starting to see beach soccer’s potential. In 1992, Connecticut native Giancarlo Signorini and his partners founded Beach Soccer Worldwide, a company which oversees Pro Beach Soccer, its trademarks and events. Pro Beach Soccer became a big success, promoting events and leagues all around the world, featuring some high-profile players and garnering significant television and media coverage.

In 2004, FIFA embraced the sport and a year later, the inaugural Beach Soccer World Cup was played in Brazil, and won by a French team coached by Manchester United legend Eric Cantona. Now, even mountainous, land-locked Switzerland has a successful Pro Beach

Soccer team. Not bad for a country that has neither the weather nor the coastline normally associated with the sport.

The success of the sport on the professional level has led to an explosion in the popularity of sand soccer as a youth participation sport, offering participants a backdrop of sand and surf to go along with the usual trappings of tournament play.

## PREPARING THE BEACHES

Gino Rossi could be considered Dick Whalen’s west coast counterpart. Like the NASSC, the two tournaments he runs in Oceanside, CA are affiliated with Beach Soccer Worldwide, and his first major task of the tournament season is getting the beach prepared for tournament play.

“The biggest challenge to running a tournament at the beach is that we’re at the mercy of the tides and changes in weather patterns,” he explains. “Sometimes the waves will come into shore much further than anticipated. Oftentimes there are things that are left over from wintertime so we have to do some juggling and move sand around to put it back to where it belongs.

“That can sometimes take a full day of work and it’s something that we have to execute on very quickly and effectively otherwise it can delay our entire set-up timeframe.”

Rossi’s tournament takes 40-50 people two full days to set up 32 fields, two small stadia and all the ancillary equipment. He also relies on city help for, among other things, a mechanical beach cleaner that picks up debris, such as sharp rocks, driftwood and glass.

But given the estimated \$5million economic impact his event has, Rossi seldom has





trouble getting the city to work with him to make the tournament a success.

“Ours is a calendar event in the city of Oceanside,” he says. “We fill up all the hotels within a ten-to-fifteen mile radius so it’s a good trade-off for the city to host our event.”

## A WHOLE NEW BALLGAME

Another big challenge participants at beach tournaments face is the change to the format

of the games themselves. Jason Merola, Group Sales Event Specialist at Morey’s Piers, which runs the Cape Express Beach Blast on the Jersey Shore, notes that slight modifications to rules and equipment are necessary for soccer to work on sand.

“Playing on the beach completely changes the way the sport is actually played,” he explains. “So one of our beach tournaments is going to be completely different

from any other tournament the players have been to.”

In fact, one of the core skills of the game – dribbling – is almost non-existent when the sport is played on sand. Instead, the most successful teams in beach soccer tournaments are the ones who can keep the ball elevated. This takes quite an advanced level of technical skill, but is great fun to watch and leads to an abundance of spectacular goals from volleys,

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headers and bicycle kicks (see video).

Peter Mellor can remember how tough it was for players in the early days.

“People got on the beach and it was all brand new to them,” he recalls. “People were saying, ‘Wow, I can’t dribble. It’s difficult to shoot, to run, do this, do that.’ So in those early days, it became very physical, people just knocking one another off the ball because the ball got stuck under your feet. But the real game of beach soccer is all about finesse. It’s flicks, deft touches and bicycle kicks. Technically, the players have had to evolve. And it’s not just how you play the game in possession of the ball. What’s equally important is how you play the game when you’re defending it without possession.”

Mellor believes that it’s not just players who have had to evolve into the beach version of the game, but coaches, too.

“The tactical aspect of the game is very different to the grass game,” he explains. “You’re dealing with the smaller numbers, but you’re dealing with a very fast, direct type of game. For coaches, from a tactical point of view, they’ve got to start thinking of different ways to work out of the back. The goalkeeper, who has got a very limited time to get the ball back into play, is looking to penetrate down the field as far as possible, and you need good supporting players and the right tactics for that kind of approach.”

That said, the learning curve is relatively short and most participants quickly pick up the nuances of the sand version of the beautiful game. But it is also important to recognize



the specific challenges that beach players face, particularly in a grueling tournament setting where they play several games in such a condensed period of time.

With the sun and the heat, the athletes have to be smart in how they prepare their bodies for the next game. It is vital for coaches and parents to educate athletes prior to the tournament to make sure they’re hydrated, the know what types of food they should be eating and that they understand the importance of rest and shade between games.

Players have to be much more disciplined in how they take care of their bodies. And, of course, just the fact that they’re playing on sand already takes quite a toll on their bodies.

## FANS AS WELL AS PARTICIPANTS

While a typical tournament played on fields or in indoor centers across town might attract participants and



coaches, plus a few friends and family, beach tournaments have a captive audience of beach goers, who are already there for the express purpose of having a good time. So it's not unusual for these people to form a vibrant crowd of fans to watch the games and cheer their favorite teams on.

And entertainment options besides the fun of actually playing are often a big component of the most successful beach tournaments. Morey's Piers, which also runs a number of amusement parks in the immediate Jersey Shore vicinity, sees this as being a huge draw for participating teams at their beach tournaments.

"Anything we do here at Morey's always includes a wristband for the weekend," says Merola. "So with any of our tournaments, participants get a wristband good for all three of our piers and both of our waterparks included with their registration. Then we also offer additional wristbands at a discounted rate for any friends and family members that are coming along, as well."

So with all the fun of a day at the beach combined with the fierce competition of tournament play and a mini-vacation rolled into one, beach tournaments look like they'll be a growing subset of the soccer tournament landscape for many years to come.

## The Rules

- Games are divided into three 12-minute periods
- Teams are 5v5 (four field players plus the goalkeeper).
- There is no offside
- No tackling allowed
- Players substitute on the fly for short shifts. Unlimited substitutions
- Shoes are not allowed but socks are
- Fields are 25 yards by 30 yards (larger for some of the adult divisions)
- Goals vary in size depending on age-group, from 6' x 8' to 7' x 18'.
- Throw-ins are taken from the sidelines, and can be taken with either hands or foot.
- Any fouls committed lead to a free kick on goal, which has to be taken by the player who was fouled.
- If the kick is awarded for handball, any player can take it.
- No goal kicks. Keepers have to put the ball back into play with a throw.