



# A Real Kick in the Sand

Beach soccer is exploding across America, with players of all ages filling the sand from New Jersey to Florida and up and down California's coast. What's next? • BY SCOTT FRENCH

The fields stretch out forever; perfect squares of sand, one atop another, extending as far as can be seen. They start at 17th Street and go all the way to 36th, running from the boardwalk to the surf all the way.

It's a breathtaking sight, a mile and a half of nothing but soccer fields filled mostly with kids trying to accomplish what seems impossible: —dribbling and passing a ball as they might on grass while keeping their balance on the hot, shifting sands. Some of them will get it quickly, figure out how this offshoot of the beautiful game works, and those who don't can check out the pros on the stadium field.

When the final whistle blows, the ocean beckons, or the boardwalk, or something else. There's no end to the possibilities.

Welcome to Virginia Beach, home to the most prestigious beach soccer event in North America. Almost a thousand teams are here, a number surpassed only up the coast, at the massive youth gathering in the shadow of an amusement pier in Wildwood, N.J. If this is the epicenter of the sand soccer boom, and it well might be, it's hardly alone.

Head to Huntington Beach or Oceanside,

Clearwater or Ocean City, Vancouver or Chicago, Santa Monica or Santa Cruz, and the story's the same, if the proportion isn't. Soccer's fastest-growing variant is exploding across North America, and millions are finding the sport can be much more than a kick in the grass.

Youth soccer — club soccer — is providing the impetus, using the beach game as an end-of-season party of sorts and fueling the creation of



tournaments up and down the coasts and into the Midwest. There are more than 30 this year, with more scheduled to debut in 2009, and only a handful have been in existence more than three years.

The future seems limitless, certainly for the

youth-driven events, but those most invested in the game — tournament organizers, equipment manufacturers and the most serious players — can't be sure how the landscape will shape as they embark on the next stage of development.

It's the pro game, centered in Europe but with roots in Los Angeles and Miami Beach, that beckons, and there is much work to be done even if there exists disagreement on how that work should proceed. Some of the biggest names in the industry are banding together, hoping to bring unity to a sometimes chaotic culture in the hopes that it will lead to a promised land.

"There's a flashpoint in things like this," says Jed Turman, co-owner of Soccadelic, the Los Angeles-based beach-soccer gear supplier that sponsors nearly two dozen sand events. "You grow slowly, then all of a sudden the fire hits a batch of dry weeds and sticks, and suddenly you're engulfed. That's what's happening here."

The sand game has been around for generations in Brazil, where it was devised on the beaches of Rio de Janeiro and has played a role



in developing the skills for which Brazilian players are celebrated. It's typically a small-sided game played on a compact field, valuing agility and balance, calling for an aerial approach — owing to the difficulties dribbling or passing across the uneven surface — with an essence derived from soccer's most spectacular moments: volleys and bicycle kicks, diving headers and the like.

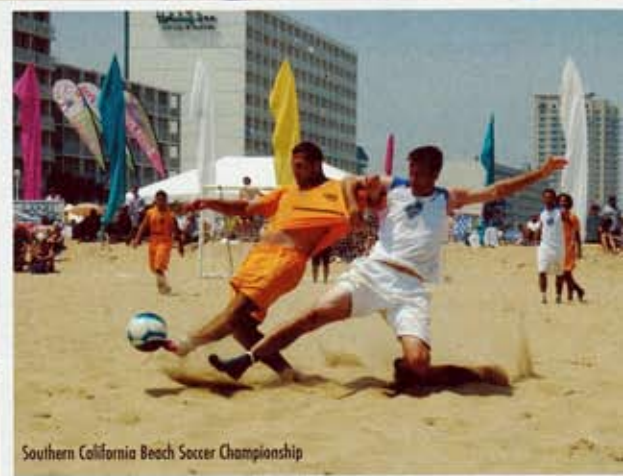
Peter Mellor, the former Fulham and Portsmouth goalkeeper, fell in love with the high-scoring game when he visited Rio's Copacabana Beach in the late 1980s. That triggered beach soccer's American life.

"What really hit me," Mellor says, "was the technical ability of the Brazilians, how they dealt with the beach, with the conditions. Straightaway, I thought: no wonder the Brazilians are the bloody best in the world. If they can play on this, they can play on anything."

Mellor, who would serve as John Ellinger's goalkeeper coach at the U.S. under-17 residency and with Real Salt Lake, received backing from Umbro — he was on the British equipment company's goalkeeper advisory board — and in 1991 staged his first tournament, Soccer On The Beach, in Clearwater, Fla. From there, he constructed youth and amateur events around sand soccer's 1993 pro debut in Miami Beach and this year, Fort Myers to his stable.

"My staff calls me the founding grandfather (of American beach soccer)," Mellor says. "That's what they tell me."

Two more pioneers stepped in soon after. Dick Whalen, a former Naval seaman who ran Beach FC in Virginia Beach, was directed to Mellor by an Umbro rep who thought the local sands would be perfect for the sport. Jeff Benbow brought beach soccer to California,



Southern California Beach Soccer Championship



Southern California Beach Soccer Championship

The North American Sand Soccer Championships in Virginia Beach (top) and played across a mile and a half of beach and features the country's top players (middle). Former U.S. World Cup star John O'Brien (bottom, at left) celebrates with teammates after winning the pro division at the Southern California Beach Soccer Championships in Oceanside.



Southern California Beach Soccer Championship



Southern California Beach Soccer Championship

starting a Huntington Beach event after playing in the inaugural Futbol de Playa in Ensenada south of the border. Both new events kicked off in 1994.

"Those are the giants, no question," Turman says. "Those three guys are the founding fathers of beach soccer in this country."

Whalen, armed with Mellor's plan ("Just a white piece of paper, folded in half") and rules supplied by Umbro ("Very loose, looked like they were written by a couple of Brits in a pub"), debuted his North American Sand Soccer Championships in a Nor'easter with 26 teams. A year later, with better weather, entries jumped to 132 teams. Within five years, it was the most important event on the beach calendar. A cash prize lured the pros in 2001. This year more than 900 teams — youth, men's, women's, coed, military and corporate — hit the sand, spreading out among 61 fields covering 19 blocks of beach.

It's a nonprofit event that supports a 75-acre complex of grass fields used by Virginia Beach youth clubs and draws 100,000 people per day, including boardwalk traffic. Designed as a family-friendly "festival" — a model others follow — it features nighttime play, exhibitions of other sand sports (from rugby to lacrosse), and the centerpiece is the \$25,000 U.S. Open, which draws an international field, including the best players from Brazil and Europe.

"Kids and parents look at ours, and others, as an end-of-season, fun thing to do without the pressure of school or club soccer," Whalen says. "It's a great way to start the summer."

Benbow's Longboard Classic Sand Soccer Tournament has been the biggest adults-only event — he started a youth tournament this year. And while the industry largely follows rules, codified in 1992, calling for a 5-on-5 game played on a field roughly 40 yards long and 30 yards wide, Benbow's preference is 7-on-7 on a larger pitch.

"I prefer to see the ball move around a bit than just shoot it," he says. "I've had teams play 5-a-side (at other events), then came a played mine and said it's so much better playing 7-a-side."

Several tournaments — the Sand Duels in Ocean

City, Md.; Vancouver's Beach Summer Blast; Santa Cruz's prestigious Pro-Am Championships and later Mike Granigan's wildly successful Cape Express Beach Blast in Wildwood — arrived in their wake, but the real explosion has occurred in the past three years.

The recent giants include the Copa Cabana Cup in Santa Monica, which has jumped from 16 to 160 teams in three years — founder Jeff Sundy plans to stage events up the Pacific coast and in Las Vegas next year — and the Southern California Beach Soccer Championships in Oceanside, which has quickly become the No. 2 event in the country. The event is modeled on the Virginia Beach tournament, and founders Marc Koehler and Gino Rossi, who also run a pro beach club, are working from Whalen's game plan.

"We went to Virginia Beach, and that was exactly what we wanted to do," said Koehler, whose

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tournament debuted in 2006. "So I asked Dick what he'd done in year five, when there was this huge explosion in registrations. He said: 'Changed it from a soccer tournament to a festival.' It's not about the soccer on the pitch. It is, but it's the ancillary things — samba dancing, things like that — that makes it an event. The soccer happens inside the festival!"

The SoCal Championships also have a significant professional arm. This year's event, in late May, featured former U.S. grass national-teamers John O'Brien — his golden goal gave the title to Las Vegas' Palms FC — Thomas Dooley, Shannon MacMillan and Joy Fawcett. Koehler is part of a group (American Beach Soccer, headed by PUGG Goals founder and major beach-event sponsor Bob Armel) that is looking to unify the scene and forge a path to bring the U.S. in line with the professional game overseas.

The pro game, featuring grass stars such as Junior, Zico, Romano and Eric Cantona, has grown steadily since a 1992 preview event in L.A. and the '93 debut in Miami Beach. Beach Soccer Worldwide runs a profitable European league and a world pro tour and started the

Youth soccer (above and left) has fueled the beach soccer boom. Opposite, from left: Former U.S. captain Thomas Dooley played in Oceanside; Slammers FC brought two teams to the Longboard.

annual Beach Soccer World Championship in 1994 – Brazil has won 12 of 14 titles; the U.S. was runner-up in the first event and finished third two years later. BSWW partnered in 2005 with FIFA, which has since organized the Beach Soccer World Cup and is transforming the landscape with its involvement.

The American beach soccer community is hoping to bring the world tour to these shores, form a tour similar to AVP's popular beach volleyball events or begin a league. At the forefront is American Beach Soccer (which includes Dooley, U.S. beach stars Austin Roman and Ronnie Silva, and "Survivor: Africa" winner Ethan Zohn on its board), but there are potential rivals. Sundry is drawing up his own business plan for a pro tour – ABS would like him to join its efforts – and the pioneers are ambivalent.

Mellor wants to develop a national amateur championship, to play at a different site each year. Benbow is fine with unity as long as others don't force him to drop his 7-on-7 format. And Whalen's unsure how a unified front would benefit his nonprofit.

"There's dissension in the ranks," says Turman, whose Soccadelic is perhaps the sport's most effective marketing agent. "(Some) want to be in charge of the league or the tour when it comes.



When that will come, I have no idea. No one knows.

"It's fair to say whoever is going to do it is going to have to have deep pockets or find someone with deep pockets."

Arnell, whose Team PUGG brings together U.S. and foreign international players for a handful of pro events, including those in Virginia Beach, Oceanside and Santa Monica, would like to create centers to "develop a core of players to play for the U.S. national team." That, he says, has drawn Brazilian national beach coach Alexandre Soares to ABS's cause.

U.S. beach national-teamer Francis Farberoff



plans to open a beach soccer academy near his Miami Beach home next summer. And U.S. Soccer, according to a spokesman, is watching the game's explosion with interest and gauging in which ways it can best support sand soccer and its national beach team.

When pro sand soccer debuted 15 years ago, organizers thought they had it made. "It was 'Beach Soccer Is Here,'" Turman says. "But there was no beach soccer except right there in the stadium."

Much work needed to be done. Now that work is bearing real fruit.

## 15 BIG Ones

### BEACH 5 SAND SOCCER SERIES (Ocean City, Md.)

Second-year tournament, one of two biggies in Ocean City, drew more than 120 teams this year. *When: June.*

### BEACH SOCCER BLAST (Vancouver, B.C.)

Canada's top tournament, in its 12th year, lures 150 teams to Spanish Banks Beach. *When: August.*

### CAPE EXPRESS BEACH BLAST (Wildwood, N.J.)

World's biggest sand soccer event – with more than 1,000 teams, 50,000 players and spectators – wrapped up its sixth year. *When: Late June.*

### CHICAGO BEACH SOCCER INVITATIONAL (Chicago)

Midwest's No. 1 sand tournament takes over Montrose Beach, which soon will sport permanent goals. *When: Late July.*

### COPA CABANA BEACH SOCCER CUP

(Santa Monica, Calif.)  
Initially a weekend event for the West Coast Soccer Academy, tournament has grown in three years to more than 160 teams, including pros. Up next: events in Las Vegas, up the California coast. *When: Early June.*

### FUTBOL DE PLAYA (Ensenada, Mexico)

West Coast's initial event, on the Baja coast 45 minutes south of the border, is a 7-on-7 tournament in its 15th year. Its progeny includes the Longboard Classic. *When: Late June.*

### LONGBOARD CLASSIC SAND SOCCER

TOURNAMENT (Huntington Beach, Calif.)  
California's oldest tournament, dating to 1994, utilizes 7-on-7 format. Separate youth tournament was founded this year. *When: Youth in late June, adults in August.*

### NORTH AMERICAN SAND SOCCER CHAMPIONSHIPS

(Virginia Beach, Calif.)  
Country's most prestigious tournament debuted in 1994, spread across a mile and a half of beach. Highlight is \$25,000 U.S. Open pro event. *When: Early June.*

### PRO-AM BEACH SOCCER CHAMPIONSHIPS

(Santa Cruz, Calif.)  
Northern California tournament was first to bring pro stars to the West and gain TV contract (with Setanta). Coming up: San Francisco event. *When: June (San Francisco in October).*

### SAND DUELS BEACH SOCCER TOURNAMENT

(Ocean City, Md.)  
Baltimore-based events company ASG Sports produces Maryland's oldest sand event, in its 13th year, plus Baltimore Beach Blast on the Inner Harbor. *When: Early June (Baltimore in July).*

### SEATTLE BATTLE ON THE BEACH (Seattle)

MLS one-game wonder Ricci Greenwood's inaugural event will attract more than 100 teams to the Pacific Northwest. *When: Late August.*

### SOCCER IN THE SAND (San Diego)

One-day event, in its third year at Mission Bay's Mariner's Point, is foundation of Chris Lemay's burgeoning empire. He also has a spring event at Mission Bay's Crown Point Shores. *When: Mid-September (Crown Point Shores in late April).*

### SOCCER IN THE SAND (Grand Haven, Mich.)

Lemay headed home to Michigan, starting two events this year, with more than 60 teams turning out for the Grand Haven tournament. *When: Late June.*

### SOCCER ON THE BEACH (Clearwater, Fla.)

America's oldest beach event, founded by former Real Salt Lake goalkeeper coach Peter Mellor in 1991, has sister tournaments in Daytona Beach and Fort Myers. *When: Mid-July (Daytona Beach in mid-June, Fort Myers in early August).*

### SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA BEACH SOCCER CHAMPIONSHIPS (Oceanside, Calif.)

Fastest-growing West Coast event in Virginia Beach tournament's little brother. Third year attracted 225 teams, with U.S. star John O'Brian deciding U.S. Open pro title. *When: May.*