

We're by far the greatest team the world has ever seen...



It's official (well, unofficial): Scotland are the best team in the history of football. But not the current champs – that's Angola. Welcome to the Unofficial Football World Championships

It's a story particularly familiar to all Scottish football fans: in April 1967, 30,000 members of the Tartan Army travelled down to Wembley to see their side take on World Cup holders England. Famously, thanks to a legendary performance from Jim Baxter and goals from Denis Law, Bobby Lennox and Jim McCalliog, Scotland won 3-2. Scottish fans danced across the pitch, digging up fistfuls of Wembley turf to take back across the border as souvenirs of the win. But this was much more than a victory over the auld enemy. In defeating the world champions, Scottish football fans reasoned that they had also taken their crown. In 1967, Scotland were the Unofficial Champions of the World.

Fans of other nationalities unsurprisingly dismissed the Scottish fans' claim as idle terrace banter. But then a man with too much time and no social commitments checked the statistics. After a trawl through hundreds of international results spanning the entire breadth of footballing history, the truth was finally revealed. Not only were Scotland the 1967 unofficial champions, but they were also,

according to the statistics, the best team in the world... ever. Full stop.

Consider if World Cups, continental championships, FIFA rankings and the like had never been invented. Consider if football's world championship was decided like boxing's world rankings. Consider if every match involving the world champion was automatically a title match, with the championship being retained or passed on depending upon the result. This is the philosophy behind the Unofficial Football World Championships, or UFWC for the short-of-breath, the only international football competition you've never heard of.

According to the UFWC, it all began 132 years ago, with the very first international football match: Scotland against England in Glasgow on November 30 1872. The winner of the match could safely claim to be the best international football team in the world – in the absence of any other challengers. Predictably, the game finished goalless, so the bragging rights were passed up. But, on March 8 1873 at London's Kennington Oval,



The Unofficial Football World Championship kicks off between England and Scotland



Never mind Jules Rimel, in 1966 England also snatched the UFWC title back from the Germans



Above: Scotland fans haven't had much to celebrate in recent years - but at least their team's still the best in the world

England and Scotland met again, and this time there was a victor. England won 4-2, with a brace from Kenyon-Slaney and one each from Bonsor and Chenery. England were the first international football team in the world, and by default became the very first unofficial world champions.

The following year, Scotland beat England 1-0. As a result the UFWC title passed to the Scots, who carried the title as holders into their next match, and so it continued.

Identifying the current UFWC champions required tracing this long lineage of title holders from 1872 right up to date. Among the first brave souls to undertake this mammoth task was Pete Tomlin from Leamington, a self-confessed anorak.

Pete and other dedicated statists were eventually prompted into action by discussions about football's unofficial champions on radio talk-shows and in newspapers. After much tinkering, their research was combined to produce a definitive set of UFWC stats, and in the early years the UFWC, like football in general, was dominated by the home nations.

England regained the UFWC title in 1879, Scotland retook it in 1880, and the title passed back and forth between the two until the beginning of the 20th century. Then Ireland and Wales entered the fray. In 1903, England beat Scotland 2-0 to take the title, and it passed between England, Scotland,

Ireland and Wales for the next 25 years. Northern Ireland won the UFWC for the first time in 1927, and the home nations continued to scrap it out until European and world tournaments meant sides from all around the globe began to play each other.

The first World Cup tournament didn't take place until 1930, 58 years after the first international had been played. In a frankly preposterous oversight, England, reigning UFWC champions, did not compete. In their absence hosts Uruguay took the honours, and so became the first official world champions. But because Uruguay had never played nor beaten England, England remained the unofficial champions - until they were beaten the following year by Scotland, that is.

Then, in May 1931, something funny happened. Scotland lost 5-0 away to Austria, and the UFWC title left the British Isles for the first time. It didn't stay on the continent for long, though - England brought the title back the following year, before the home nations passed the title amongst themselves

once more until 1939. Then England lost to Yugoslavia, and the title was subsequently passed between Italy, Switzerland, Hungary, Germany and Sweden before England regained it in 1947. But football was now a world game, and in 1950, England were famously humbled 1-0 by the United States. The UFWC crown made its first trip to the Americas, where the baton was subsequently passed between newly-powerful footballing nations like Brazil and Argentina.

To date, 42 nations from across the globe have held the UFWC title, including most major European and South American teams. Of the current top 20 FIFA-ranked sides, only Turkey and Cameroon have yet to taste unofficial glory.

Unlikely nations who have held the title include the Dutch Antilles islands - located off the coast of Venezuela - who beat Mexico 2-1 back in March 1963, and Israel, who beat Russia 4-1 in February 2000.

After losing the title in 1950, England's long-awaited chance to grab it back came on July 30 1966. The title holders were West Germany, and, for the first time in footballing history, two teams contested both the World Cup and the Unofficial Football World Championships. Geoff Hounson's legendary 120th-minute hat-trick strike saw England win the World Cup and, perhaps more importantly, the UFWC. ♦

'It's obvious the UFWC comes from a disgruntled Scot in an anorak,' moans Englishman D Plant

THE UFWC

The UFWC title was again contested alongside the World Cup in 1974, 1978, 1986, 1994 and 1998. Then Euro 2000 saw the title pass between four teams within 12 days. During that tournament, England again faced UFWC title-holders Germany. The Germans had knocked England out of the 1974 and 1990 World Cups and out of Euro 96, but England had taken the UFWC title from Germany in 1966 and 1975. On this occasion, Alan Shearer headed the only goal of the game, though given that the title exists only on paper, there was no trophy for the England skipper to hold aloft. In any case, celebrations would have been short-lived, with England surrendering the title to Romania three days later in a hapless 3-2 defeat.

In the knockout round, Italy beat Romania, then France beat Italy in the final. Post-Euro 2000, Spain beat France and held the title for exactly a year through to March 2002. Then the Netherlands beat Spain, meaning the UFWC title was not contested at the 2002 World Cup finals, as the Dutch failed to qualify. Holland managed to retain the title for a full 18 months, before losing to the Czech Republic in the qualifying stages of Euro 2004. The Czechs then looked to be taking the title to Portugal, until they lost a friendly match to the Republic of Ireland in March of this year. Ireland held off Poland and Romania, but then lost the title to Nigeria – the first time in its history that the UFWC title had gone to an African nation.

So at the time of writing, the unofficial world champions are... Angola. Yes, lowly Angola, listed 78th in FIFA's flawed world rankings, and perhaps better known for civil warfare than for footballing prowess. But Angola are champions on merit – they took the title in June when they beat Nigeria 1-0 in a World Cup qualifier.

While some will say the very notion of lowly Angola being crowned champions devalues the entire competition, others will celebrate the excitement of a tournament that allows an underdog to nip in and steal the title. Shock results occur in boxing title fights, so why should football's version be any different? And official football tournaments are not exactly immune to upsets, as Greece proved at Euro 2004.

Even bigger shocks may yet be in store for the UFWC. Minnows Angola play veritable tadpoles Rwanda on September 4 as the



'Yeeeeeeeeeeeee, we're the unofficial world champs'
Shearer sinks Germany again



The current (unofficial) World Champions: Angola. Bring on Brazil, eh boys?

Better known for civil warfare than footballing prowess, the unofficial world champions are now Angola

qualifying stages for World Cup 2006 continue. Should the champs hold off that challenge, Zimbabwe and Algeria are up next. Previous holders Nigeria seem best equipped to deprive Angola of the title, but the two sides don't play each other again until next June...

In the meantime, Angola remain unofficial champions – even if you fudge the rules. UFWC statistician Stefan Georg from Bonn, Germany, used the 1930 World Cup finals as the starting point for his research, but the outcome was the same. "Angola still come out as champions," he confirms. "This might raise a few eyebrows, more so than if the Netherlands or the Czech Republic were still champions, but I still think this is a great way of calculating the real world champions."

The UFWC also operates an all-time ranking system, in which sides are awarded

one point for every title Scotland top the rankings ahead of second-placed England well clear of the rest by dominance of international years that preceded the first (indeed, Scotland have not won their victory over England). Detractors say this isn't fair weren't around to challenge football's formative years. Winton said, you've got to win and Scotland top the rankings on merit.

"What a piss-take!" complains Englishman D. Plant on the UFWC website. "It's obvious that the UFWC came about thanks to a disgruntled Scot clinging to a set of statistics and an anorak!"

In fact, none of the UFWC originators are Scottish. UFWC statto Daniel Tunnard is an English teacher living in Argentina. He began the project while twiddling his thumbs during the school holidays. "I thought it might be a bit of fun," he says, "but it did take ages." As for the rankings, he says, "I'm happy that Scotland are the best team ever, as long as England stay above Argentina!"

The UFWC remains very much, well, unofficial, but it does now have some sort of organisation via the website www.ufwc.co.uk. But what does the future hold for the tournament that claims to be the home of international football's real champions? Sepp Blatter has long been touting a new international tournament to fill in the gaps between World Cups and Continental Championships, and the UFWC has the welcome bonus of not requiring any additional matches to be played, which would no doubt find favour with club managers across the world.

So what do FIFA think of the Unofficial Football World Championships? "As long as people have fun with football and it's played in the spirit of respect for all involved, the non-violation of the Laws of the Game and the ethics of sport, FIFA is more than happy," says a FIFA suit. "We wish the UFWC has a lot of fun!"

And let's not lose sight of the fact that FIFA-sanctioned fun is what it's all about, right? The UFWC clearly isn't going to usurp FIFA or supplant the World Cup any time soon, but there is a good enjoyment to be had in watching an apparently meaningless international friendly with the knowledge that the victor will become the latest title holder in an illustrious lineage that stretches back 132 years. And anything that makes meaningless international friendlies fun should be grasped with both hands.

All that remains now is for some budding statistician with far too much time on his hands to work on a club version of the UFWC. "Now you're talking," says Daniel Tunnard. "But what would be the starting point? And who has a list of every club match ever played?"

Consider the game-let thrown down, and let the arguments begin.

UNOFFICIAL FOOTBALL WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS STATISTICS

LAST 10 TITLE MATCHES

18/07/04 Angola 1-1 Botswana
(Angola win 5-3 on penalties)
03/07/04 Gabon 2-2 Angola
25/06/04 Angola 1-0 Nigeria
05/06/04 Nigeria 2-0 Rwanda
31/05/04 Jamaica 0-2 Nigeria
24/05/04 Rep of Ireland 0-3 Nigeria
23/05/04 Rep of Ireland 1-0 Romania
28/04/04 Poland 0-0 Rep of Ireland
31/03/04 Rep of Ireland 2-1 Czech Rep
16/02/04 France 2-2 Czech Republic

LAST 10 TITLE HOLDERS

From 20/06/04 Angola
29/05/04 Nigeria
31/03/04 Republic of Ireland
10/09/03 Czech Republic
27/03/02 Netherlands
28/03/01 Spain
02/07/00 France
24/06/00 Italy
20/06/00 Romania
17/06/00 England

TOP 10 ALL-TIME RANKINGS

1 Scotland 102 points
2 England 89
3 Argentina 63
4 Russia 45
5 Holland 41
6 Brazil 37
7 Germany 36
8 France 34
9 Italy 26
10 Sweden 26

More statistics and information can be found at www.ufwc.co.uk