

Silver lining on the Solomon horizon

The Solomon Islanders are the biggest football enthusiasts in the South Pacific, but rather than investing in young talent, their Football Federation recently descended into financial meltdown. Now though, the nation is on the up again and dreaming of a place at the U-20 World Cup.

Elio Stamm (text) and Rachel Skeates (pictures) in Honiara

The Solomon Islands have never taken part in a FIFA World Cup at any level. In 2015, the South Pacific islanders are determined to make up for lost time by qualifying for the U-20 tournament in New Zealand. On a fine spring evening in the capital city of Honiara,

the young, fresh-faced members of the squad are being put through their paces on the national federation's only training pitch.

On paper at least, the odds would appear to be in their favour. Australia, the biggest of the football nations in the South Pacific, are now part of the Asian Football Confederation, while New Zealand qualified automatically as hosts. Since the Oceania Football Confederation have

been allocated two qualifying places for the first time in World Cup history, the winners of the OFC Championship in Fiji at the end of May will earn the right to compete in the tournament in New Zealand. The Bonitos simply have to finish above five other Pacific Island nations to qualify.

Those who have been following the training sessions have their doubts, however. Head coach Commins Menapi, a 37-year-old former professional in Australia and New Zealand and record goal-scorer for the Solomon Islands national team, is forced on several occasions to repeat basic tactical exercises with his players, whose technical ability is undermined by a lack of tactical awareness. After a step-over or two, the pacey wingers often fail to pick out a teammate with the right pass – and they're not the only ones.

Lack of organised football

It does not take a genius to work out where these shortcomings might originate. The team has only been training together since the beginning of March. The Solomon Islands have a



Saving grace
Australian Ian Shaw helped steady the ship at the SIFF.

population of just 500,000, and of the 56 players originally named in the U-19 squad, 17 have played in the domestic league, but failed to pass through any youth academy scheme. Aside from the semi-professional Telekom S-League, which is largely made up of teams based in the capital, there is barely any organised football in the Solomon Islands.

Most of the 20 players gathered on the training pitch learned their trade on the streets, in a jungle clearing or, at best, with an amateur club. They were selected for the U-19s during a trial open to the general public – much like a reality TV show – and are all from Honiara, located on the island of Guadalcanal. A scouting system to scour the remaining 300 inhabited islands for available talent is not yet in place.

The former heads of the Solomon Islands Football Federation (SIFF) have to shoulder the majority of the blame for this sorry state of affairs. The association pockets US \$250,000 from FIFA every year – a hefty sum for one of the poorest nations in Oceania, in which 80 per cent of the population live self-sufficient lives

without the need for state benefits. Nonetheless, the development of football in the Solomon Islands has ground to a halt in recent years.

An Australian steadies the ship

The initial situation was far from unfavourable. In 2000, the FIFA Goal Project helped finance the renovation of the Lawson Tama stadium in Honiara, which was built under British rule in 1978 to celebrate the Islands' forthcoming independence. A further Goal Project funded the construction of a youth academy and a training pitch, as well as the headquarters of the SIFF.

However, the following years saw the federation plunge deep into chaos. Youth leagues are unheard of in the Solomon Islands, and youth tournaments, too, soon became a thing of the past. Rather than put their new youth

academy to good use, those in charge allowed it to decay. Faint glimmers of hope, such as the successful organisation of the 2012 OFC Nations Cup, could not disguise the problems facing the SIFF.

In August 2013, FIFA stepped in. At the behest of football's world governing body, OFC President David Chung flew to Honiara and personally removed the heads of the SIFF from office "due to mismanagement of FIFA funds". FIFA subsequently appointed a normalisation committee to restore the proper administration of the game in the Solomon Islands between now and the end of the year, when new elections will take place.

For the past ten months, the committee was chaired by Australian coach Ian Shaw, until local politician Barnabas Anga took his place two weeks ago. Fifty-four-year-old Shaw, a laid-

"We've finally got to realise our huge potential."

Ian Shaw, former coach



National pride
The Solomon Islands national team at the OFC Champions League in 2012.

back character by nature, refuses to be drawn on speculation regarding the cause of all the turmoil. Whether the money was squandered on gambling, as is rumoured, or the damage was the result of sheer incompetence, it's clear that things have gone badly wrong. "It's time we finally realised the huge potential [of football in the Solomon Islands]," he said.

Impressive futsal results

Considering their lack of footballing education, the standard achieved by these players is extraordinary. Despite many defeats during their most recent World Cup qualifying campaign, the full national team managed to hold New Zealand, who had been unbeaten since the 2010 World Cup in South Africa, to a draw at the 2012 OFC Nations Cup on home soil, before going on to reach the semi-finals.

The Solomon Warriors, champions of the S-League, only just missed out on qualification for the last four of the OFC Champions League after missing several goal-scoring opportunities in the group stage, while club sides from neighbouring countries have recently begun to

strengthen their ranks with players from the Solomon Islands. New Zealand outfit Waitakere United, for example, rely on the pace of striker Benjamin Totori, one of the stand-out performers of the OFC's premier club competition, who has played professionally in Australia and the USA.

Perhaps even more astonishing is the success of the Solomon Islands in futsal and beach soccer. Despite there being just one hall suitable for the game in the entire country and no

bona fide league, the Solomon Islands national futsal team managed to win four consecutive Oceanian Futsal Championships between 2008 and 2011 and triumphed 4-3 over Thailand in their first ever World Cup match in 2012. The national beach soccer team, meanwhile, have qualified for the World Cup on five occasions. At the most recent tournament in Tahiti, the Bilikiki beat Holland 2-0 and only just missed out on qualification for the quarter-finals after narrowly losing their other two group matches.

Problems in paradise

The Solomon Islands are one of the poorest nations in the Pacific. Their infrastructure, destroyed during the ethnic tensions in the late 90s, is proving a particularly big obstacle to their economic revival. The Islands remain a popular destination for divers and fishermen, although a number of devastating tsunamis have resulted in further problems.

More than 90 per cent of the population are Melanesians, with Polynesians and Micronesians, as well as Chinese, Indian, Australian and European immigrants making up the rest. Football and futsal are the two most popular sports in the Solomon Islands. The national football team's biggest achievement came in 2006, when they managed to beat New Zealand – a country six times its size – during their qualifying campaign for the World Cup in Germany. The low point came in 1994, when they lost to non-FIFA members Nauru. ⚽



After the flood
Having a kick-about among the wreckage.

Rachel Anna Skeates (4)



World Cup trials Players in Honiara are trying to make the step up to elite level.



Former star, current coach Commins Menapi is forced to work under difficult circumstances.



Inconsistent Technical genius and a lack of tactical awareness go hand in hand.

Players from the Solomon Islands are known as the “Brazilians of Oceania” in the Pacific. Not even the devastating flash floods, which left thousands without a home in Honiara at the beginning of April, can stop the street footballers of the Solomon Islands, who have simply resorted to playing between fallen trees or washed-up wreckage.

Former interim president Shaw waxes lyrical when talking about the enthusiasm for the game and hidden talents in the area. Studies have shown it would take 10,000 hours to reach the technical standard of today’s professionals. “The majority of the children on the Solomon Islands have already played 4000 hours of football by the age of 12, far more than in my homeland,” enthused the Australian.

FIFA lifts ban on funding

Before these youngsters’ talents can be channelled effectively, however, the committee has more clearing up to do. The top priority for Shaw’s successor Anga and Interim Secretary General Neil Poloso is to rid the SIFF of its debts and to re-establish confidence among the institutions, airline companies and hotels that provided services without receiving a penny in return. Last week, the SIFF sought help from the national government to settle its debts.

On the administrative front, the SIFF has already provided a glimpse of light at the end of the financial tunnel by laying out plans for the future. A trust agency is reviewing all payment orders before they are implemented, resulting in FIFA lifting the ban on financial support which it was forced to impose last year.

Slowly but surely, the Solomon Islands are turning a corner. The U-19s are the first youth team to take to the field since the financial crisis and will now get the chance to showcase their talents at this month’s qualifying tournament in Fiji. Doubt had been cast on their participation in the competition in April when the SIFF received just 60 per cent of the US \$25,000 promised to the U-19s at a charity evening. The SIFF has since stepped in and is now paying more than originally envisaged. “The team have trained well and have deserved the chance to compete at the U-19 World Championships,” said Secretary General Poloso.

The team certainly appear to learn quickly from their mistakes. After losing 7-0 in a friendly against a select XI from the S-League, the U-19s beat the same side 4-1 the following week. ⚽