



Drained Nadi FC's Jolame Vukuvuki at half-time in the match against Vanuatu's Amicale FC in Lautoka.

Dreaming of Morocco

The Champions League in Oceania may not have the global profile of its bigger brother in Europe, but each team taking part still gives the competition their all in the hope of qualifying for the Club World Cup.

Elio Stamm (text) and Mark Kolbe (images) from Lautoka, Fiji

On 1 April 2014, Barcelona were battling against Atletico Madrid in the quarter-finals of the UEFA Champions League. On the other side of the world, in a four-star hotel in Lautoka, Fiji, a group of young men watched the match intently on a TV mounted on the wall of the hotel bar, murmuring with interest as the final whistle sealed the Catalan club's exit from Europe's elite club competition.

Although this group of young men from the Solomon Islands may dream of Lionel Messi, they are no Barça fan club; instead, they dream of playing against him one day. It might be a

distant dream but it is by no means an impossible one, as these men all play for Solomon Warriors and came to Lautoka to make a name for themselves in the Oceania Football Confederation's (OFC) Champions League. Winning the competition would mean getting a chance to line up against Champions League winners from other continents at the FIFA Club World Cup in Morocco in December 2014.

A tall order

However, the road to a place at the Club World Cup to play some of the biggest clubs in the world is still a long one. The winner of the OFC Champions League – New Zealand's Auckland City for the past three years in succession – must first contest a play-off match against the league champions from the host nation and

must eliminate a representative from Asia, Africa or North and Central America in the quarter-finals before they can meet the champion of Europe or South America in the semi-final. An Oceanic side is yet to reach the last four of the competition in ten attempts, and most campaigns have ended in defeat after just one match.

Despite all this, a place at the Club World Cup remains the glittering prize all of Oceania's teams are working towards. "Without that, our Champions League wouldn't make much sense," says OFC spokesman Gordon Glen Watson. Indeed, when the Club World Cup took a break between 2002 and 2004, the OFC's biggest tournament was not held at all.

This year, there have been changes to the format of the 13th edition of the competition,



OFC TV The Confederation is showing all 18 matches live thanks to the support of two local TV stations.

which began life as the Oceania Club Championship in 1987 and has been held at irregular intervals since then. Instead of home and away matches, the group stages were held at the start of April in Fiji as part of a nine-day tournament for the first time. Twelve teams from eight associations have been fighting it out to reach the semi-finals in the island nation's second largest city, Lautoka – often nicknamed the Sugar City because of its large sugar mills – as well as in the footballing stronghold of Ba.

the group stages of the Champions League, while the OFC cannot offer any prize money and simply covers the teams' air tickets instead. Club sponsors, many of them entrepreneurs from each of the island nations, must foot the bill for accommodation and any win bonuses. Only a place at the Club World Cup can fill the coffers; after all, US\$ 500,000 is a lot of money for an Oceanic club, even though part of the prize goes straight to other clubs in the country or to the OFC itself, as agreed with

Zealand, Fiji, Tonga and Samoa. In addition, there are few companies operating Pacific-wide, and as a result the OFC's most notable partnership is with UNICEF, the United Nations Children's Fund, in the fight against dengue fever raging across the region. Before each match, the ballboys lay a banner across the pitch that reads "Kick out Dengue". However, it is the football association's youth programme, not the Champions League, that benefits directly from this initiative.

“The team is in a party mood, but we’ve got to take the Champions League seriously.”

Marama Varihua, midfielder, AS Pirae, Tahiti

Aiming for the FIFA Club World Cup

The new format saves the teams travelling stress and, above all, money, something the OFC lacks in comparison to a confederation like UEFA. The European governing body pays each club US\$ 12 million simply for reaching

the participating club's national football association.

The OFC would be glad to pay clubs more to participate in the Champions League but struggles to find sponsors given football's lack of popularity compared to rugby union in New

Both of the Champions League's host stadiums have seen better days. Paint is flaking off the hard wooden benches on the terraces, although they continue to create an atmosphere, together with the palm trees that sway in the distance. In Ba, two boys relax under the scoreboard and change the numbers after every goal, while the commentary box is located in an old bus drivers' hut. In Lautoka, the stadium announcer sits among the fans and there is no match clock.

None of this bothers the teams out on the pitch, who learned to deal with adversity long ago and give everything in pursuit of their ultimate goal. The teams face a daily balancing act between the professional and amateur game, despite an increase in the standard of play across Oceania in recent years. Players now follow the training regime of a profession-

al team alongside their existing lives as students, office workers or carpenters, even those in New Zealand's two teams, the richest country in the OFC after Australia switched to the Asian Football Confederation in 2006. Samoan side and rank outsiders Kiwi FC, who qualified for the group stages via a preliminary tournament, even have a Japanese player on their books who is completing a voluntary placement on the island.

Former professionals and footballing artists

Many clubs have reinforced their ranks for the duration of the Champions League. Vanuatu side Amicale FC have enlisted four professionals with European experience: Scot Colin Marshall and Serbian trio Milan Matic, Nikola Vasilic and Marko Dordevic. Meanwhile, the midfield of Tahitian club AS Pirae has been dominated by 33-year-old Marama Vahirua, a former France U-21 international who has played at the top level in Nice, Lorient and Nancy.

Vahirua was part of the Tahiti side that competed at the 2013 Confederations Cup. Now he is back in his homeland to see out his playing career and has founded a football school. After experiencing football in Europe, Vahirua admits that life is somewhat different in Oceania. "The team is in a party mood, but we've got to take the Champions League seriously."

Some teams have opted to get an additional boost from the technical skills of international players of other variants of football. As a result, AS Pirae have also augmented their squad with six beach soccer players who finished in a surprise fourth place at last year's Beach Soccer World Cup on home soil. Elsewhere, 22-year-old Micah Lea'Alafa is tying opposition players in knots for Solomon Warriors having fired the Solomon Islands to their first win at a Futsal World Cup in Thailand back in 2012.

This mix of experience makes for interesting matches, even if not all the teams have brought their tactical approaches into the 21st century. Both Fijian teams spurn the notion of a four-man defence, instead opting to play with a sweeper and man-to-man marking. This strategy has had varying levels of success: although Ba qualified for the semi-finals as group winners, Champions League debutants Nadi conceded 14 goals in three games despite the impassioned motivational speeches given by their coach in the dressing room.

Broadcasting across the Pacific

The performances on offer deserve to have been played in front of larger audiences. Despite the availability of moderately-priced tickets costing six US dollars per matchday, matches have played out in front of practically empty stands. Only the Fijian teams have attracted crowds of up to a thousand fans. Nevertheless,



Duelling with legends Naea Bennett (in blue for AS Pirae) goes up against Kiwi FC's Andrew Setefano.



No sign of Lady Luck Kiwi FC goalkeeper Masi Toetu during their 0-8 defeat by AS Pirae in Lautoka.



Champions League in the South Seas Spectators in celebratory mood.



Coming to you live from a bus driver's hut in Ba
 OFC spokesman Gordon Glen Watson in his element.

the Champions League has been able to reach the audience it deserves thanks to the hard-working OFC team's progressive approach to technology. The Confederation established its own TV production department just two years ago to enable it to be less dependent on national television broadcasters, and OFC TV is now broadcasting all 18 matches of this year's competition live with the support of two Fijian TV companies. Six cameras follow proceedings while OFC spokesman Gordon Glen Watson, once a semi-professional footballer himself, lends his voice to the television commentary as two of his colleagues cover the matches for radio in English and French.

In the future, this footage will form a video library that the OFC can use to offer previously unimaginable new possibilities for training new coaches. The OFC currently provides TV images to the various broadcasters across the Pacific islands for a small and largely symbolic fee, enabling almost four million people in Papua New Guinea – almost half the population – to cheer on Hekari United as they cut their teeth against their group opponents.

Anyone unable to watch the games live can use the OFC's official YouTube channel to catch up on the exploits of teams such as Vanuatu's Amicale FC, who kept their Club World Cup dream alive by narrowly qualifying as the best

second-placed side for the semi-finals, where they will be joined by AS Pirae from Tahiti, Fiji's Ba FC and defending champions and favourites Auckland City. With another click you can discover the fate of Solomon Warriors, who will be forced to watch FIFA's global club competition on television in December after conceding a goal in the 86th minute of their final match.

The semi-finals will be played across two legs before the final on 11 May decides once and for all who will travel to Morocco. 🏆

FIFA supports the OFC TV Project

All 18 matches of the Oceania Football Confederation's Champions League are being broadcast live on OFC TV. The project has a budget of US\$ 383,000, of which FIFA has contributed US\$ 250,000.



Oceania Football Confederation

Founded

15 November 1966

Confederation headquarters

Auckland, New Zealand

Members

14 national associations, 3 of whom are FIFA associates rather than full members

Homepage

oceaniafootball.com