

ConIFA World Football Cup: The story of Ellan Vannin

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Ellan Vannin is the Manx name for the Isle of Man. [They are one of 16 teams at this summer's ConIFA World Football Cup.](#) As they approach their fifth anniversary, we explore the side's journey so far.





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So MIFA formed Ellan Vannin, any player born on the Isle of Man or have parents or grandparents from the island could be called for selection, regardless of where they are based. The 2018 squad features Sligo Rovers defender Seamus Sharkey and Bottesford Town midfielder Alexander Holden.



December 2013, MIFA formed a link with Darfur United, a side representing refugees in Eastern Chad. This was financial support to get Darfur to tournaments and also to create a long-term friendship and for cultural exchange.

Malcolm Blackburn, chief executive of MIFA has maintained this link and hopes it can continue to grow: "It's my aim and our sort of dream that one day, and we actually thought we were close last year, to take the Ellan Vannin team to play a match in the refugee camps on the Chad border."

They eventually entered ConIFA and successfully applied for wild-card status to enter the 2014 World Football Cup.

IOMFA threatened punishments after being informed of the plans: "its non-affiliated football, anybody who either plays or is involved in the management who is registered with them will be sanctioned".

However, it was never made clear what these sanctions were according to Blackburn: "They refused to actually tell us what they were going to be, which was the crazy thing," he explains.

MIFA began a legal battle and Blackburn sent letters to the IOMFA, FA, FIFA and Football Ombudsman. "In my view, they were breaching human rights and freedom of association," explains Blackburn, with MIFA also pointing out IOMFA entered a side into the non-affiliated Island Games.

After some time, FIFA responded to say they will get involved and leave the issue to be sorted out locally, as the FA and IOMFA used FIFA directives to support their decision, MIFA were eventually able to come to an agreement with IOMFA. Ellan Vannin could play every year between 1st June and 31st July plus other dates with permission.

MIFA and IOMFA continue to have a frosty relationship as Blackburn tells us: "We basically just go about our own things in our own ways. We don't talk, it would be nice if the two of us worked together. But they have pointedly refused to do that."

Current manager Chris Brass, successful locally in Manx football was persuaded to become manager. Within two weeks, he created a full management structure and squad.



Despite beating a Principality of Monaco side 10-0 in their first match, their odds of reaching the ConIFA WFC Final were 250-1 according to Nordic Bet.

In their opening game against Nagano-Karabakh, they found themselves 2-0 down in 20 minutes, with Blackburn admitting: "I wondered why I was actually in the competition."

The side, however, won 3-2 thanks to two late goals from Antony Moore and Frank Jones.

"We didn't look back from there", explains Blackburn. In their next game against County of Nice, they raced into a 3-0 lead within 35 minutes thanks to a Calum Morrissey hat-trick. Nice pulled two goals back before Daniel Bell sealed a 4-2 victory.

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Iraqi Kurdistan and Arameans Suryoye were defeated on penalties and 4-1 in the quarters and semi-final respectively. Having reached final they lost to previous opponents County of Nice on penalties but returned home as heroes, having been the only side in the competition not lose a game in 90 minutes.

"What was most significant was the impact it had on the Isle of Man, in that all of a sudden, the island got to notice what we were doing out there and the pubs on the island were heaving, watching the matches on television, and we got all that fed back to the players through social media. It was a very, very proud moment for us all."

The following May, they hosted and organised Niamh's Challenge Cup to raise awareness for and help raise financial support for research into neuroblastoma. By beating Felvidek 3-1 they qualified for the 2016 WFC in Abkhazia but did not travel due to travel advice from the Foreign Office.

"I think myself and the players very much wanted to go," Blackburn confesses. However, they did not wish to generate negative publicity and be accused of "putting people in danger", and thus entered the 2016 Europeada in South Tyrol, a competition for indigenous and national minorities in Europe.

In their first ConIFA European tournament, in 2015 they won bronze. They beat the Romani People 3-1 and lost 1-0 to Padania, thus meeting the County of Nice once more in the semi-finals losing 3-1 before another victory against Felvidek on penalties secured third place.

Later that year, Kieran Tierney, who was born on the island, made his debut for Celtic in a Europa League clash with Fenerbache. He told the Herald in Scotland he would be like to represent Ellan Vannin: "It's a strange one, but it's one I'm proud of. I go back to visit quite a lot and I get a lot of support from people on the island. It's not a FIFA or UEFA team so you can't compete in competitions like that but they have a team that contests the Island Games and things like that. They are part of the ConIFA World Cup. They asked me to be involved in that but I didn't go. You never know. I could end up there. It's something I would like to do."

Tierney, who captained Scotland in a November friendly with The Netherlands, has remained in touch with MIFA with Blackburn noting: "He actively keeps in touch with what we're up to. He still says one day, he'll wear a shirt for Ellan Vannin. I said to him, 'it will probably be the first time in international football that someone could be the captain of two international sides'."



Having entered discussions in 2016, Ellan Vannin could also feature in a league outside the island. Whilst Blackburn has not been able to reveal the identity of the association due to legal reasons, he informs me he hopes to make an announcement in August.



In last year's ConIFA European Football Cup they once again lost out 1-0 to Padania in their opening game before a 1-0 victory over Felvidek. In the deciding tie against Szekely Land, they slumped into a 0-4 deficit, two goals from Ciaran McNaulty was not enough and the side did not progress past the group stage.

Ellan Vannin have had a remarkable journey, so what are Blackburn and MIFA's long-term goals?: "I think it's basically to go on the shirt tails of ConIFA as it grows, and hopefully continue in the vain that we are, and still be seen very much as an intricate part of ConIFA. We are one of the smallest members and often what happens in these types of things is that organisations grow and its smallest members then struggle and then sometimes not take part, because they're not up to the standards of bigger teams, and I hope we continue to develop and keep pace with the way ConIFA develops."

Ellan Vannin's opening group game against Cascadia in Sutton on the 31st May and final group game with Barawa on the 3rd June in Haringey will be featured on The National Student with live Twitter coverage and full match reports after the game.

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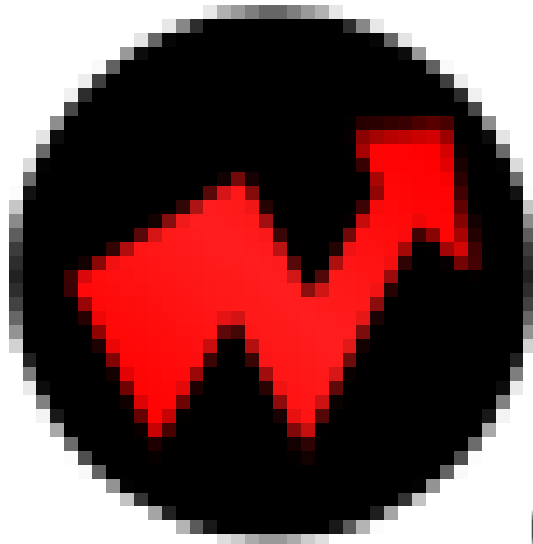
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