

FIFA AND THE GOVERNANCE OF THE WORLD'S (MEN'S) GAME

When representatives from eleven British clubs [met at the Freemasons' Tavern](#) in London in 1863, the intention was to formalize a set of rules to distinguish association football from other forms of the game, including rugby football. The emergent English Football Association (FA) became gatekeepers of this modern (organized, rational) ball game, imposing its British male sensibilities into football's institutional framework – particularly the amateur ideals fostered in British public school “gentleman” training through sport. The game rapidly spread [from the elite schools to the working class](#), with teams representing factories, churches, and social clubs transforming the game into an increasingly [professionalized and ubiquitous presence in \(male\) British society](#).

As the game spread globally concurrent with Britain's empire building ambitions (colonization, trade, military expansion) around the turn of the 20th century, boys and men of all classes fell in love with the simplicity of the “beautiful game”. The emergence of South American teams, as well as increasing interest across Europe, resulted in the first international football tournament – at the second edition of the Modern Olympics in 1900. This led, eventually, to the [formation of the *Fédération Internationale de Football Association* \(FIFA\)](#) by a collection of European elites representing football associations (but not the English FA) in 1904 to govern the rising interest in international (amateur) football competitions. FIFA assumed organizational control of the quadrennial Olympic tournament and the de facto football World Championship.

As the game's global appeal grew, and with the USA – disinterested in such a [“non-American” sport](#) – set to host the 1932 Olympics, [FIFA President Jules Rimet](#) moved to establish an independent, less amateur-regulated World Championship tournament. First held in 1930, two-time Olympic champion [Uruguay won the inaugural tournament](#) as host nation, with only four European nations making the trek to South America for [various economic and political reasons](#).

As football flourished globally, largely aided by evolutions in transportation and media technologies, FIFA's power over the “world's game” simultaneously grew. The Men's World Cup became a global spectacle with [viewership now estimated in the billions](#). Attention in the tournament also grew as the field expanded from 13 in 1930 to 32 in 1938 – with a further increase to 48 teams at the 2026 Men's World Cup in North America. Matched in global popularity only by the Summer Olympics, the FIFA Men's World Cup is one of the [world's most consumed events](#) – sporting or non-sporting – and therefore a tool ripe for political [“soft power”](#), [commercial investment](#), and broader [social attention](#).

To govern this emerging global behemoth, FIFA's organizational structure expanded to include regional bodies to coordinate member FAs: the Asian Football Confederation ([AFC](#)); Confederation of African Football ([CAF](#)); Confederation of North, Central American and Caribbean Association Football ([CONCACAF](#)); Confederación Sudamericana de Fútbol ([CONMEBOL](#)); Oceania Football Confederation ([OFC](#)); and the Union of European Football Associations ([UEFA](#)). FIFA is now comprised of [211 national FAs](#) – more nations are recognized by FIFA than the United Nations identifies as sovereign states (193) – to [govern all aspects of association football](#) (soccer) including men's and women's professional and international competitions on fields, beaches, and gaming systems in 2022. And in a larger sense, FIFA sees itself as a governing body that oversees “[more than a game](#)”:

FIFA is working with governments, global and regional development agencies, human rights groups, international and local non-profit organisations and former players to promote a fairer, more equal society through football. FIFA is working with governments, global and regional development agencies, human rights groups, international and local non-profit organisations and former players to promote a fairer, more equal society through football.

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But FIFA, despite its ambitious sporting and social agenda, has been rocked over the decades by scandal and geopolitical criticism. From bribery and financial impropriety [charges against FIFA Executive Council members](#), to accusations by civil society groups of complicity in human rights violations through football, FIFA has at times been [likened to a cartel](#). Furthermore, FIFA's support of women's football has been slow and at times painful, best exemplified by former President Sepp Blatter's 2004 recommendation [female players wear “tighter shorts”](#). However, the women's game has grown significantly since the first FIFA World Cup played in 1991 – to the point the 2023 tournament co-hosted by Australia and New Zealand has become, perhaps for the first time, an object of global political (beyond sport) interest and tool for “soft power”. As the game's global governing body, FIFA has also made a dedicated attempt to develop the women's game globally, with [Women's Football Strategy](#) introduced in 2018.