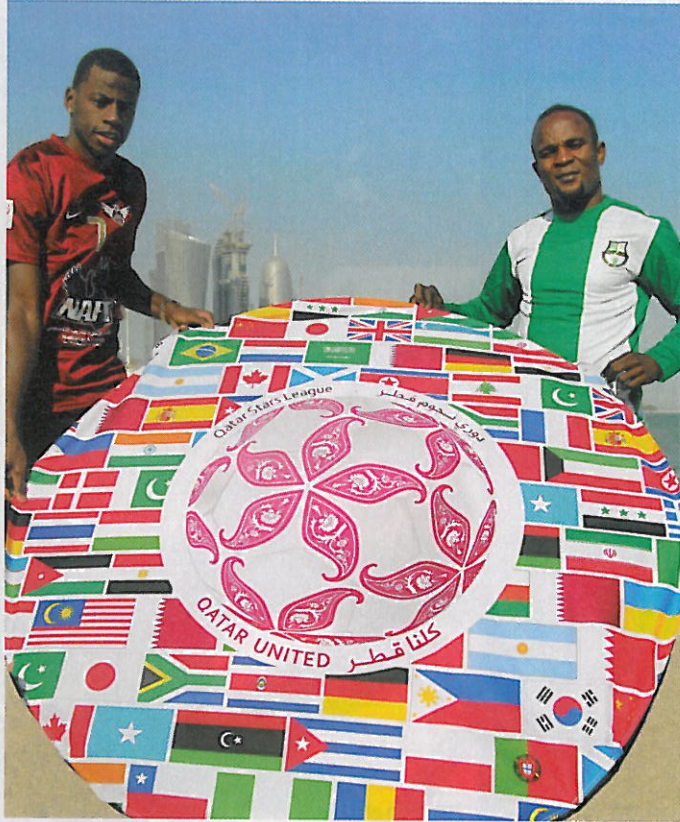


Qatar United Football Festival

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Football rivalry comes to Doha, this month as part of the Qatar United Football Festival. *Christina Maria Paschyn* finds out how Qatar's amateur players are preparing to defend their honour during a special England vs Scotland match.



When this American hears the phrase 'England-Scotland rivalry', images of Mel Gibson in a kilt spring to mind, as do fantasies of dashing men with cute accents, bedecked in medieval attire, ready to fight for their country's honour.

But to the thousands of British nationals living in Qatar, it just means one heck of a football game. Every year they gather to watch this highly competitive match. Each team boasts 16 top players from the Qatar International Amateur Football League (QIAFL), who are also vetted according to national identity. To play for the Scottish side, the person must have been born in Scotland or descended from Scottish grandparents; the same goes for the English, although each side is also allowed three British foreigners (expats from anywhere in the UK or Republic of Ireland). This year, they're going pro-adjacent, as part of the Qatar United Football Festival.

The event, highlighted by a match between the professional Al Ahli and

El Jaish football clubs, this year will also showcase Qatar's amateur expat players facing off on March 9.

The game evokes the passion and intensity of the annual match first played by Scotland and England's national teams in 1872. Seemingly inevitable pre- and post-game violence brought the historic fixture to an end in 1989. But spectators will be relieved to know the Doha version limits brutality strictly to the pitch. Even then, the players don't get too hung up on ancient grudges.

'It's a very friendly rivalry - most of the time,' laughs Simon Joss, the assistant manager and captain of Alba FC, the Scottish expat team in the QIAFL. 'Obviously there's a great relationship between most of the players in the league purely because Doha is such a small place. The expat communities are very, very close knit.'

Joss also heads the difficult task of selecting the Scottish players for the England-Scotland match.

'We're looking for players with passion, people that want to win and

that want to have fun as well, because at the end of the day, it is a sport. We do take it probably a bit too seriously at times, especially being Scottish because we're always the underdogs most of the time [in history and sports],' he says.

Underdogs indeed. England creamed Scotland 4-1 last spring. Adrian Gilleard, Joss' English counterpart and the captain of the QIAFL's FC Ladzio, is confident of another victory this year. But above all, he relishes the camaraderie of the day.

'[The match] brings together the 'Auld enemies' from a bygone era to once again take to the battlefield. And believe you me, when you are out, it's an intense, tough, energy-sapping confrontation every time,' Gilleard says. 'The players love it and the families that come to support their respective countries love it. And for one day, you and everybody involved in the game feels a real sense of patriotism that you just cannot buy.'

But the match doesn't just appeal to Brits; about 1,500 expats of all ethnicities attend each year. And Joss thinks even more would be interested if they only knew about it.

'The problem that we've had years gone by is that we haven't had confirmation of where the game will take place until maybe a week before. So we can't market it,' he explained.

Cue the Qatar Stars League, the hosts of Qatar United, which will feature a multitude of ethnic food and music as well as football. The Al Ahli

and El Jaish match may be headlining attraction, but guess who's the opening act?

It's a dream come true for the England v. Scotland Organizing Committee, which struggles each year to secure a stadium and foot the bill for food and refreshments for so many fans. The QSL is hoping the partnership will prove mutually beneficial as well.

'The QSL's long term vision is to encourage more people from all nationalities within Qatar to attend QSL matches on a regular basis,' a QSL spokesperson explains. 'The England v. Scotland amateur match is something that has taken place in Qatar for several years, and regularly attracts a large audience of Western expats. Combining this match with a regular QSL match offers us the opportunity to create a super event that showcases what a QSL match can truly offer the people of Qatar.'

Qatar United will be held on March 9 at Al Arabi stadium (off D ring road). Tickets start from QR10 for adults; children under 10 get in free. They can be purchased from the Virgin Megastore at Villaggio and Landmark Malls and QSL ticket booth at City Centre Mall until March 8.

The fan zone opens at 3pm and the England-Scotland game kicks off at 3.40pm. The Al Ahli v. El Jaish match follows at 6.15pm; during half time, the England-Scotland trophy will be presented. Food and drink will be available. For more information, check out www.qsl.com.qa

