

The curious case of the Saarland National Team by Stuart Fuller (@theballisround)

The who many of you will probably say. Indeed, up until a few months ago I would have been in that group that would have struggled to place the region on a map of Europe. But thanks to the day job I've become quite familiar with the South-West ish corner of Germany and the Federal State capital, Saarbrücken.

Saarland is the smallest non-city state in Germany and from a footballing point of view has lacked a to-flight team for some years. FC Saarbrücken were actually invited to take part in the inaugural Bundesliga (hence why today they can use the "1" before their name) with some controversy as they weren't seen as one of the better sides or having the historical success that other sides in the region had.

In that first season they finished bottom and were relegated, and bar a two year spell forty years ago, have been yo-yoing between the lower tiers ever since. Today they play in the fourth tier of German football, the Regionalliga SüdWest.

But go back further into the history books and you find a story that is as confusing as it is bizarre in today's current climate.

Due to the post-war partition of East and West Germany, Saarland was separated and handed to the French to administer. The Saarländischer Fußballbund (SFB) was founded on 25 July 1948 in Sulzbach and a new league structure was created under the name of the Ehrenliga (rough translation - The Honour League) with clubs taking part from across the region. That was except FC Saarbrücken who accepted an invitation to join Ligue 2 in 1948. The club won the league at a canter (playing under the name of FC Sarrebruck). In order to compete in the to-flight they needed to become members of the French Football Federation and were put forward for election than none other than Jules Rimet. But the other clubs were having none of it and voted overwhelmingly not to accept them.

Without a league to play in and not fancying the Ehrenliga they thought outside of the box and arranged a tournament where some of the best sides in Europe were invited to play in a knockout tournament in the 1949-50 season known as the Internationalet Saarland Pokel. Unsurprisingly, the home side won the inaugural tournament, beating Stade Rennais 4-0 in the final. They followed that win with high-profile friendliest with the likes of Liverpool (won 4-1), Real Madrid (won 4-0) and a Catalan XI (won).

The tournament only ran for another season but three years later the European Cup was born. Whilst they were now back playing in the German football pyramid, Saarland was still considered a separate state (more of that in a minute) and campaigned UEFA to be given one of the 16 places in the first ever European Cup. Friends in high places perhaps had the final say and FC Saarbrücken were included. Their campaign was short-lived as they lost 7-5 on aggregate to AC Milan.

One reason why Saarland had been able to get a place in the tournament was down to them being officially recognised as a nation by FIFA. After that vote by the French Football Federation to decline their membership back in 1949, they struck up the idea of applying

direct to FIFA to be a member of the world footballing family and surprisingly their application was accepted in June 1950. The twist here was that at the time neither East or West Germany Football Associations were recognised by the world's footballing governing body.

Their first game was played in Saarbrücken in November 1950 when they beat Switzerland 4-2. They played a handful of games in the next couple years but their crowning glory was their involvement in the qualification for the 1954 FIFA World Cup to be played in Switzerland. Irony (or warm balls?) saw them drawn in the same group as West Germany and Norway, with only the group winner progressing to the final tournament.

In the first group match they travelled to Oslo to face the Norwegians and took all two points (as it was back then) coming from 2-0 down to win 3-2. Their positivity was then dampened by a 3-0 defeat in Stuttgart to West Germany and a goal-less draw back in Saarbrücken to the Norwegians. But as there was only two points for a win, West Germany's 5-1 victory over Norway didn't secure them the top spot but instead set up a win or bust game between Saarland and the Germans in Saarbrücken.

The watching world were forced to wait for the long footballing winter break to finish before in March 1954 they faced each other. A win would have made Saarland possibly the most unlikely World Cup qualifier ever, but it was not to be. West Germany won 3-1, progressed to the tournament in Switzerland and four months later won the World Cup for the first time, beating Hungary 3-2 in what became known as the Miracle of Bern.

Saarland continued to play games, mainly against B-sides or willing nations although they didn't fare too well, losing heavily to Uruguay, Yugoslavia, France and Portugal in their next few games. In October 1955 they beat France 7-5 in the Ludwigparkstadion in Saarbrücken in what was to be their final victory and in June 1956 played their final ever game as a Nation, losing 3-2 to the Netherlands in front of 65,000 in the Olympic Stadium in Amsterdam.

Their final record as a FIFA member was: -
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Saarland held a referendum in 1955 as to whether it should rejoin the Federal Republic of Germany or become an independent state under the guidance of a European Commissioner. Over 97% of those eligible to vote did so with 2/3rds rejecting the independent state option and thus starting the wheels in motion for Saarland to once again become a State within the Federal Republic. The date set for that transition was 1st January 1957 meaning that Saarland withdrew from FIFA prior to Christmas in 1956 and became part of the DFB where they remain to this day.

Head coach Helmut Schön went on to manage the West German National side and oversaw their 1966 and 1974 FIFA World Cup campaigns, becoming the first ever international coach to have held the UEFA European Championships and FIFA World Cup honours. He went on to be awarded one of the first FIFA Orders of Merit in 1984.

Saarland's sojourn into International football may have been brief but the impact lasted for decades. They are one of only three national sides (East Germany and South Yemen being the others) where their FIFA membership and international record hasn't been merged into the new national state.