



THE PAN-AMERICAN DREAM

Football in the Americas is on the brink of a revolution following merger discussions between the two major federations CONMEBOL and CONCACAF. Owen Evans looks at how this could result in the creation of a footballing mega-event: the Copa Panamericana.

CORINTHIANS' VICTORY OVER Boca Juniors to claim this year's Copa Libertadores crown could prove to be historic in more ways than one.

Not only was it the first time Brazil's richest club had won South America's premier club competition, it was also the backdrop for a meeting between North and South America's most influential football leaders.

CONCACAF (the Confederation of North, Central American and Caribbean Association Football) president Jeffrey Webb was the special guest of CONMEBOL (the South American Football Confederation) president Nicolas Leoz as the two - joined by CONCACAF vice-president Justino Compean, who is also president of the Mexican Football Federation - took in the match as part of series of discussions about merger opportunities between the two bodies.

The official line at the time was that the executive committee members were meeting

to "explore the potential for collaborative opportunities". Afterwards, CONCACAF said these opportunities included the staging of a special Copa Panamericana in 2016 to celebrate the 100th anniversary of CONMEBOL that would require CONCACAF's partnership and participation. The two would also join forces for referee development, technical programmes and other synergies.

Despite the federations expressing interest in the proposal, not to mention broadcasters such as Spanish-language US network Univision queuing up for the media rights, the final contracts have yet to be signed, however the event would change the landscape of football in the Americas.

The Copa Panamericana tournament would take the best parts of each continent's flagship tournaments - the Copa America (CONMEBOL) and the Gold Cup (CONCACAF) - and create a product to surpass the commercial appeal of

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The Copa Panamericana would combine the best of the Copa America and the Gold Cup - Getty Images Sport

UEFA's European Championships. It would be made up of ten CONMEBOL nations, the US and Mexico, and four other national teams from the CONCACAF region.

Either the US or Mexico are favourites to host the proposed tournament. The US in particular would make sense given the infrastructure already in place to comfortably host a tournament of its size, with excellent stadia and a unique racial demographic that would create demand for tickets from each of the participating countries. The country would also be an attractive sponsorship platform for US-based multinational brands.

Political Influence

From CONCACAF's perspective, the Copa Panamericana can add value by increasing the number of competitive match-ups its members play - as well as the standard of football - and

move away from the predictable Mexico-US finals that have taken place in the last three editions of the Gold Cup.

From CONMEBOL's perspective, the benefits are clearly financial and the access to the US media market in particular is a very lucrative avenue for the Brazilian and Argentinean federations. An example of that was seen in June when a 82,000 crowd packed into New York's Meadowlands stadium to see Lionel Messi score a hat-trick in the money-spinning 4-3 friendly between Brazil and Argentina.

Add to that Mexico's status as a regular invitee to the Copa America - in no small part influenced by the weighty sponsorships by Mexican companies activated in South America - and you have a fairly convincing argument for the new tournament.

There are doubts, however, as to whether CONCACAF has the same financial incentive. For instance, if a new merger between the two federations does indeed lead to the shiny new Copa Panamericana tournament, how would that affect the number of qualification places FIFA would award to the new 'combined' federation as a knock-on effect?

For the respective national federations, broadcasters and sponsors of Mexico and the US, their dominance of the CONCACAF region is not a problem; they are quite happy to see their nations qualify easily for every FIFA World Cup and the financial bounties that come with playing at The Beautiful Games' biggest tournament. Whether they would be keen to give up that privilege is thought to be one of the major barriers to any full-time merger.

Marcelo Campos Pinto, executive director of Brazilian media giant TV Globo, has helped change the landscape of domestic football in his country through lucrative TV deals allowing clubs like Corinthians to financially compete with their European counterparts. Could he see the Copa America in 2019 - which will be played in his own country - morphed into an iteration of the proposed Copa Panamericana tournament?

"I have difficulty imagining the Copa America becoming a future tournament which involves both CONMEBOL and CONCACAF, as I think the political interests of each federation will get in the way," he told *Sport Business International*.

"If they keep it to a restricted number of teams, how will national federations who are used to taking part in the Gold Cup or Copa America feel about missing out?

"Of course it will be interesting to see how the 2016 Copa Panamericana tournament works

and it is a good way to celebrate CONMEBOL's 100th anniversary. We have had a number of guest nations in the past, such as Japan, the US, Canada and Mexico. However, I think politics will stop it from becoming the new format of the Copa America."

Campos Pinto believes another avenue may lie away from national duty, and suggests that CONCACAF's top club sides could join in South America's major club competitions, which would prove an avenue for the same cross-continent commercial benefits.

"I do see potential in a pan-American club competition that would be the equivalent of our Copa Libertadores in South America," he adds. "I think it would make sense to introduce a couple of champions from the MLS (Major League Soccer in the US) into the Libertadores."

"That way it would still be possible to open up South American football to the major media markets of the US and Mexico, without the politics of national football. If you are a team in Brazil or Argentina and you have to fly to Central America to play a match, it makes no difference to fly straight to Miami."

Fan Power

While the Copa Panamericana is still in the planning stages, any ramifications of a future CONCACAF/CONMEBOL merger are hypothetical. However, the proposed tournament in 2016 could prove the starting point.

Aaron Davidson, CEO of the second-tier US soccer league NASL (North American Soccer League) and vice-president of sales and marketing at soccer event management company Traffic Sports USA, believes the merger of CONCACAF and CONMEBOL is an inevitability due to fan demand and the need to realise the commercial potential of international tournaments across the Americas.

"If we were to start all this from scratch today, there would only be one federation," he says. "But once you are dealing with the legacy of the federations and the politics of each country, there is no question that it becomes more difficult."

Davidson adds that North American soccer fans have been asking for one unified tournament for years, and that the Copa Panamericana tournament needs to become a permanent fixture from 2016 in order to maximise the commercial value through cross-border marketing.

"The only way to develop the Copa America in stature is to start targeting multinational, or at least pan-regional, companies' budgets," he says.