



2026  
**FIFA WORLD CUP**  
UNITED STATES | CANADA | MÉXICO



The Daily  
**Herald**

SUPPLEMENT OF THE DAILY HERALD | JUNE 10TH, 2024

# France to edge out Spain for World Cup glory, economists predict

**BENGALURU**--France will beat Spain to lift the World Cup trophy on July 19 and five-time winners Brazil are expected to be the biggest flops, according to a Reuters survey of

economists who said football was still harder to call than inflation.

For 160 respondents from nearly every continent, this poll conducted once every

four years is a welcome break from their macroeconomic forecasting in an era of wars, energy shocks and revived "transitory" versus persistent inflation debates. Their brief this time is the

biggest World Cup yet - a 48-team tournament spanning 104 matches across the United States, Canada and Mexico - the first staged across three countries.

Les Bleus drew 35% of the vote in the May 11-June 5 poll to add a third star to their badge, edging Spain on 31% - broadly in line with betting platforms like Polymarket - a result that would return Europe to the pinnacle of international football. France's Didier Deschamps would become the first coach since Italy's Vittorio Pozzo in 1938 to win two World Cups - and the only one to do so after also lifting the trophy as a player in 1998.

Argentina, reigning champions and top of the current FIFA world rankings, Portugal and England rounded out the top five choices.

"After the disappointment of the 2022 final, France looks well equipped to go one better this time," said Cathal Kennedy, senior economist at RBC and based in London. "The squad retains a number of members of the team that reached the final who are now reaching the peak of their careers, complemented by the emergence of some members of the Paris St Germain side."

"Added to that, they should have a well-rested Kylian Mbappe to call on for the tournament."

Mbappe, who just finished another prolific season at Real Madrid, was the poll's pick for both the Golden Ball, awarded to the tournament's best player, and the Golden Boot for top scorer. He only just pipped England captain Harry Kane, the European Golden Shoe winner after a career-best 61-goal season with Bayern Munich.

There's likely another milestone within reach for both. Mbappe and Kane, on 12 and eight World Cup goals respectively, are among those chasing German great Miroslav Klose's all-time record of 16, along with Lionel Messi on 13.

## Basic Instinct

There were the dreamers. Two respondents picked Japan, one Mexico and one Morocco - any of which would make for a World Cup fairytale - among the 8% who said loyalty

had guided their choices. An overwhelming 73% said they went with gut feeling.

"As with any model, the forecast was adjusted with a heavy dose of gut feel!" quipped Shannon Bold, senior economist at the Bureau of Economic Research in Johannesburg.

Around 20% relied on data and models for their predictions. "The macroeconomists sat around together and created a house view," said Claudio Govender at RMB.

But for Brazil, the poll view was bleak. Even Carlo Ancelotti's arrival as coach has failed to lift confidence, with nearly a third picking the Selecao - quarter-final losers to Croatia in 2022 - as the biggest football powerhouse likely to disappoint, followed by England and Germany.

Norway, powered by Manchester City striker Erling Haaland, may supply the drama - picked by 21% as the underdogs most likely to surprise, ahead of Japan on 15%.

The search for breakout stars was wide open. Respondents scattered their votes across 46 names but Spain's 18-year-old forward Lamine Yamal topped the list.

France's Mike Maignan, Argentina's Emiliano Martinez and Spain's Unai Simon were among the favourites for the Golden Glove, awarded to the tournament's best goalkeeper.

## Costly Cup

Off the pitch, organisers face a daunting logistical task as millions of fans prepare to descend on North America, with affordability already a flashpoint.

Expensive tickets, accommodation and cross-country travel have raised fears this could be the costliest World Cup yet for fans. So much for the break from inflation. Over 60% said 2026 inflation was still easier to forecast than football's biggest prize - though recent years have made that a low bar.

"We know when the World Cup is going to end," said Ozan Can Turkmen at Turkey's Sekerbank. "On the other hand, the energy supply crisis..."



**Iconic FIFA World Cup moments**

**2022 Legacy Complete**  
Dec 18, Lusail  
**Argentina 3 France 3 (Penalties 4-2)**  
Lionel Messi finally achieves dream of winning World Cup for his beloved Argentina - emulating hero Diego Maradona in breathtaking final

**1930 The First Crown**  
Jul 30, Montevideo  
**Uruguay 4 Argentina 2**

Inaugural tournament sees **Lucien Laurent** score first goal in World Cup history for France. Hosts Uruguay defeat Argentina in final to lift trophy presented by **Jules Rimet**

**1950 Maracanã Blow**  
Jul 16, Rio de Janeiro  
**Uruguay 2 Brazil 1**

Possibly greatest upset in World Cup. Uruguay defeat hosts Brazil in decisive match at Maracanã, - **Alcides Ghiggia** scoring winner in front of estimated 200,000 stunned spectators



**1958 Birth of a Legend**  
Jun 15, Gothenburg  
**Brazil 2 Soviet Union 0**

World Cup debut for 17-year-old **Pelé**, who announces himself with an assist, before becoming youngest player to appear in final as Brazil beat Sweden to clinch first title



**1966 They Think It's All Over**  
Jul 30, London  
**England 4 W. Germany 2**

Iconic moment in English football culture, **Geoff Hurst** scores hat-trick in dramatic extra-time victory - feat later matched by **Kylian Mbappé** in 2022 final



**1974 Cruyff Turn**  
Jun 19, Dortmund  
**Netherlands 0 Sweden 0**

Famous moment of superb skill by **Johan Cruyff**. The Dutch master feints to cross, turns 180 degrees, and swerves past helpless Swedish defender

**1986 Divine Inspiration**  
Jun 22, Mexico City  
**Argentina 2 England 1**

**Diego Maradona** scores controversial 'Hand of God' goal after punching ball past Peter Shilton in clash with England



**1990 The Beautiful Aria**

Italy hosts World Cup in tournament forever associated with **Luciano Pavarotti's** rousing rendition of 'Nessun Dorma', which becomes anthem of modern game

**1998 Dutch Masterpiece**

Jul 4, Marseille  
**Netherlands 2 Argentina 1**

**Dennis Bergkamp** scores iconic goal from superb long-range pass by **Frank de Boer**, taking three sublime touches to control ball and volley past goalkeeper

**2006 The Final Act**

Jul 9, Berlin  
**Italy 1 France 1 (pens 5-3)**

**Zinedine Zidane** becomes fourth player sent off in World Cup final after red card for headbutting **Marco Materazzi** in chest, ending international career

**2014 A Nation Silenced**  
Jul 8, Belo Horizonte  
**Germany 7 Brazil 1**

Germany record historic semi-final victory over Brazil, equalling host nation's heaviest defeat. **Miroslav Klose** becomes all-time World Cup top scorer with 16 goals



**2018 A Different Russia**

Entertaining tournament, shock results, set-piece goals galore and introduction of **Video Assistant Referee**. Viewed differently after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022

**2026 Make Football Great Again**

**United States, Canada and Mexico co-host an expanded 48-team showpiece, amid rising global tensions and domestic challenges, mounting pressure on FIFA President Gianni Infantino (below)**



# Local footballer Garcia predicts France will lift the World Cup

**CAY HILL--Sandro Garcia is a footballer. He also watches the games.**

Actually, he does more than watch. He studies the game. He studies the players and their moves. He looks at the team as a machine. Is it well oiled? Is the timing correct?

Is the team fluid and what tactics do they use. And, more importantly, does the team adjust during the game.

Then he takes this knowledge to the pitch. He not only watches games, he plays football. He coaches football. Some say he lives football.

His teammates call him the tactician. He dissects defense and then looks for ways to break it down.

Sandro has a day job. He is the Financial and Operational Director of the St. Maarten Mental Health Foundation located in Cay Hill.

Coach Garcia has been a certified coach/trainer since 2008 with a UEFA B/C License. He has spent most of that time working with the St. Maarten U13, U15 and Futsal teams.

"Football is my passion, so I honestly plan to watch as many games as possible to feel the

vibe and excitement of the World Cup," said the coach. "This time around we are in a good time zone to watch many live games. My favorites to follow are Brazil, Netherlands, Spain, Curaçao and Portugal."

Yet Sandro believes it will be France lifting the trophy this year. "The team that won the last World Cup had the best tactics. As we speak Argentina is the cup holder," explained the coach. "In my opinion, Whatever formation is chosen, a tactical plan has to be in synch with the quality of the (best) players. Successful execution will then depend on how well prepared and adoptable the squad is to the changing circumstances during the games. On paper all can look good, but how do you change the momentum in your favour when things don't go according to plan?"

Sandro studies each game. He looks at the depth of the team, managing team spirit, the mentality within the squad, quality of the coaching staff. He concedes that there is also a bit of luck involved in curing the ball just enough to hit the back of the net.

"Nowadays and very important, there is more focus on set pieces (free kicks, corners, etc.) as part of the overall tactical plan," explained Sandro.

He looks at a team like Brazil. "Brazil is reknown for their 'jogo bonito' style of play, some call it samba football," said the tactician. "Joga bonito is a Portuguese phrase that translates to 'play beautifully.' Deeply rooted in Brazilian soccer culture, it represents a philosophy that prioritizes creativity, flair, individual expression, and joy on the pitch over rigid, win-at-all-costs tactics."

The coach believes Brazil has produced real exciting players in the past. However, in recent years they are somewhat in a downfall. "Nevertheless don't count them out."

"I am curious to see how Norway and Ecuador will perform during this World Cup. Within their respective continents, these teams have had surprising results in the qualifying phase."

He explained Norway has a very direct attacking way of play. They outscored Italy amongst others in several games and rely on endurance and strength. He continued, Ecuador is very resilient and difficult to defeat. Their defense is tight and strong with the ability and agility to overrun opponents in transition during the entire match.

The coach believes Lamine Yamal from Spain is the most exciting player in the



**Sandro Garcia (Front row, seated in center with yellow shirt) is seen with one of the Sint Maarten national youth teams he has coached.**

competition. "This Barcelona winger has magical moments in games; he can produce (assists), dribble past opponents like they are a statue and score brilliant goals himself. The ball seems to be glued to his cleats at times. Even though he is probably one of the youngest players in this tournament (18 years old), expectations are high."

Looking at the groups, Sandro believes the toughest group in the competition in the sense of equality and therefore unpredictable is Group A: Mexico, South Africa, South Korea, Czech Republic.

"Perhaps the same can be

said of Group D, although I expect that the USA can lean on their home advantage," said the coach. "The overall best teams at the moment are without a doubt: France and Spain."

He believes France has the most depth in the team and attacking power of all countries. Spain has a very strong starting 11, their possession based tactical plan consist of quick ball movement and dynamic runs. They are a well-oiled machine with players knowing each other and playing together from a young age.

"If these two teams reach the final, it will be a battle

of physical strength and speed versus technical ability and versatility." He continued, "I will off course root for Dushi Korsou and 'Oranje', hope they will stretch this tournament beyond expectations.

"Especially Curaçao is in a very tough group, so every goal and hopefully every point should be celebrated to the max by everyone within the Kingdom and beyond! I will for sure."

He concludes by saying, "France will disappoint if they don't win this World Cup."

## ST. MAARTEN FOOTBALL PRESIDENT PREDICTS BRAZIL WINS WORLD CUP

**PHILIPSBURG--Brazil will win the World Cup. That is the prediction of St. Maarten Football Federation President Johnny Singh.**

According to Singh this World Cup will be something to watch. "This will be an exciting World Cup. It will be the last World Cup for some of the world great players including Messi and Ronaldo."

Singh goes on to say, "All

teams are evenly matched."

The one player to watch according to Singh is Brazil's Vinicius Junior. He is the most exciting player and he just reconnected with former Real Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti.

Singh believes the toughest group of the competition is Group F. Singh calls it the Group of Death. Group F consists of Netherlands, Japan, Sweden and Tunisia.

## Not to be excluded

*The FIFA World Cup 2026 in the US, Mexico and Canada is again taking place during the summer as normal. Four years ago the event was moved to November/December due to the climate of then host country Qatar.*

Local favourites the Netherlands and France, but also holders Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Germany, Spain, England and Portugal will compete at this edition of the most-watched sports tournament on earth. Matches take place in the afternoon and evening hours, so local bars and other establishments showing them

may expect good spectator crowds.

This time the "Blue Wave" of Curaçao qualified for the first time and is representing the Caribbean along with Haiti. That country failed to get past the group stage in 1974, as did the "Reggae Boys" of Jamaica in 1998 and the "Soca Warriors" of Trinidad & Tobago in 2006, although Cuba made it to the quarter finals back in 1938.

Curaçao's internationally experienced Dutch coach Dick Advocaat hopes to reach the next phase, despite a tough draw with Germany, Ecuador and Ivory Coast. For the obvious underdog preventing goals

will no doubt be priority, so a defence of five as seen in the recent friendly against Scotland seems likely.

Holding the ball up front when possible could be key to such a scenario of playing mostly on their own half, with use of a physically strong so-called "target man" in attack to alleviate pressure by the opponents. If the team shows tactical discipline in executing its strategy and an optimal work rate under



those difficult circumstances, surprise results are not to be excluded.

**Paul De Windt  
Publisher**

## GROUP A

# Mexico's World Cup 'curse' faces the ultimate test on home soil

**MEXICO CITY**—Mexico will become the first country to host three World Cups when the renovated Estadio Azteca again takes centre stage from June 11, but beneath the historic milestone lies a national team still wrestling with decades of disappointment and instability.

The weight of "la maldición del quinto partido" — the failure to reach the quarter-finals since 1986 — has haunted Mexican football for generations. Since 1994, Mexico had re-

peatedly advanced from the group stage only to painfully fall in the round of 16 and at the 2022 World Cup in Qatar they found a way to make the curse worse by not making it to a fourth match for the first time since 1978.

The fallout triggered promises of structural reform across Mexican football, with federation officials speaking about reviving the promotion and relegation league system, reducing foreign players in the Liga MX and improving youth pathways. Critics

and fans believe little has really changed. Instead, the national team has lurched through another cycle of turmoil.

Argentine manager Diego Cocca lasted just seven matches in 2023 before Jaime Lozano took over and briefly restored optimism by winning the Gold Cup, only to be dismissed after Mexico crashed out in the 2024 Copa America group stage.

Javier Aguirre, now in his third spell as coach, was brought back to steady



Mexico players pose for a team group photo.

the ship before the home World Cup. His results have been more consistent, underpinned by two recent CONCACAF trophies, but doubts remain about the team's identity, lack of top-tier players and a growing rift with fans, who boo the team at home matches after years of frustration.

Mexico, drawn alongside South Africa, South Korea and the Czech Republic

in Group A, are expected to make the most of home advantage and progress as group winners. That could hand the hosts a manageable last-32 tie before a possible clash with England or Croatia later in the tournament.

The iconic Estadio Azteca, which staged the 1970 and 1986 finals, offers hope as Mexico did not lose a match there in those tour-

naments. Former Mexico midfielder Leonardo Cuellar recently told Reuters he believes this could finally be the year Mexico break the curse, helped by home support and Aguirre's experience.

Yet for a football-obsessed country that measures World Cups in heartbreak as much as victories, belief alone has rarely been enough.

## OCHOA REMAINS MEXICO'S TALISMAN AS COACH AGUIRRE BALANCES GENERATIONS

**MEXICO CITY**—Mexico goalkeeper Guillermo Ochoa has spent two decades turning World Cups into personal theatre but the veteran has now become something more complicated — not just a member of the squad but a symbol of a team caught between nostalgia and renewal.

Co-hosts Mexico open their Group A campaign against South Africa at the Azteca Stadium before facing South Korea in Guadalajara and the Czech Republic back in Mexico City.

The schedule adds weight to every selection call and puts coach Javier Aguirre's transition project under scrutiny.

Ochoa's case is built on more than sentiment. His breakout saves against Brazil at the 2014 tournament and his penalty stop against Poland in Qatar eight years later helped to make him one of the country's defining figures on the global stage.

He has been part of five finals squads, started at the last three editions and re-

mains one of El Tri's few active players with proven authority at the highest level.

Aguirre's veteran core gives Mexico structure. Edson Alvarez, now with West Ham United, anchors midfield and provides leadership; Fulham's Raul Jimenez offers experience and a penalty-area reference point; while defenders such as Johan Vasquez and Cesar Montes give Mexico a tested base.

But the more revealing part of the squad debate is the group pushing from below.



Mexico's Guillermo Ochoa in action.

The 17-year-old Tijuana attacking midfielder Gilberto Mora has become the clearest symbol of Mexico's future. Meanwhile, Armando 'Hormiga' Gonzalez, a 23-year-old striker with Chivas, brings domestic momentum and a different attacking profile.

Obed Vargas, a 20-year-old midfielder with the Seattle

Sounders, offers another option from outside Liga MX. That mix gives Mexico's build-up its central tension. Ochoa and the veterans can help to absorb the noise of a home tournament; the younger players can inject pace, ambition and the sense that 2026 is more than a farewell tour for a familiar generation.

For Aguirre, the challenge is balance rather than sentiment. Too much caution risks another predictable campaign. Too much youth could expose players still adapting to internationals.

Mexico's best outcome may depend on connecting both eras: the experience to manage the occasion and the fresh talent to change it.

**volté**   
nos batteries, votre énergie

During the World Cup,  
keep your energy. We'll do the rest!

CALL US : +590 590 776 060

# PHYSICAL CZECHS WILL LOOK TO WIN UGLY TO QUALIFY FROM GROUP A

**PRAGUE**--Lacking the kind of big-name stars who led the Czech Republic at their last World Cup appearance in 2006, this time around the team will rely on winning ugly with combative, physical play aimed at grinding out results against more technical opponents.

Coach Miroslav Koubek stamped his authority on the team after taking over following a shock qualifying loss to the Faroe Islands and guided the Czechs through the play-offs to reach this year's tournament in the U.S., Canada and Mexico.

One of the 74-year-old's first decisions was benching West Ham United midfielder Tomas Soucek, who had already lost the captain's armband in November after the players failed to thank the fans following a 6-0 qualifying win over Gibraltar.

Koubek's pragmatic approach of defending deep and utilising height at set pieces will be a mainstay as the Czechs return for their first World Cup since 2006 when they featured

creative players such as Tomas Rosicky and Ballon d'Or winner Pavel Nedved.

"I don't expect an attractive style of play from the team but rather disciplined and combative play focused on quick counter-attacks and set pieces," former national team player, sporting director and soccer expert Stanislav Levy told Reuters. "That approach isn't pretty to watch but it could be the key to advancing out of the group."

The Czechs kick off their World Cup campaign against South Korea on June 11 before facing South Africa and tournament co-host Mexico in Group A. While organisational discipline and outmuscling opponents will feature heavily, a handful of players led by Bayer Leverkusen striker Patrik Schick -- who finished Euro 2020 as joint top scorer -- can provide attacking threats.

Hoffenheim striker Adam Hlozek, who is back from injury, offers another experienced option up front while attacking midfielder Pavel Sulc -- who has 11 goals and three assists in



Czech Republic players pose for a team group photo.

Ligue 1 for Olympique Lyonnais -- is peaking at the right time.

Soucek's return to the starting lineup for their playoff final win over

Denmark gives Koubek a reliable option in central midfield along with 35-year-old Vladimir Darida, who earned a recall after impressing in the Czech top tier this season.

Wolverhampton Wanderers centre back Ladislav Krejci anchors a rugged backline that features Hoffenheim defender Vladimir Coufal and PSV Eindhoven goalkeeper Matej Kovar.

"The Czech style won't enrich the world of football but a pragmatic approach is the key to advancing," Levy said.

## Let them SCORE!

### Introducing: the Kompa Leon Gift Card

A single-use prepaid XCG card accepted at more than 4,000 merchants across St. Maarten, Curacao, and Aruba.

Also available: the **limited-edition Blue Wave Card**, celebrating Curacao's historic World Cup qualifications. Limited supply only.

#### Express Lane Gift Card Purchase

All WIB Branches • June 11 & 12

Visit any **WIB branch** or go to [wib-bank.net/giftcard](http://wib-bank.net/giftcard)



# Goals dry up for South Korea's favourite Son ahead of World Cup

**SEOUL--South Korean fans have long wondered who will provide the goals when Son Heung-min hangs up his boots, but if the 33-year-old striker's scoring slump continues heading into the World Cup some may feel now is the time to let someone else lead the line.**

Son has plenty of credit in the bank after carrying the national team on his shoulders for years and is likely to be the first name on coach Hong Myung-bo's team sheet for Korea's opening Group A game against the Czech Republic on June 11. His international performances, as well as for Tottenham Hotspur in the Premier League, earned him superstar status back home but after swapping Spurs for Los Angeles FC in 2025 there have been signs that his sharpness in front of goal may be fading.

Son failed to score in 13 straight league games to start the 2026 season and while he continues to pro-

vide assists for LAFC South Korea rely heavily on his goals. With 56 international goals he trails only Cha Bum-kun (58) on South Korea's all-time scoring list. The next highest scorer in Hong's squad is Hwang Hee-chan with 17 but the Wolverhampton Wanderers man tends to play as a wide forward rather than a central striker.

Son looked more like his old self with a double in South Korea's 5-0 rout of Trinidad and Tobago in a friendly on Saturday but if the goals do not start to flow more regularly, Hong may look to play him in a support role with Oh Hyeon-gyu leading the line. The former Celtic forward has made an immediate impact since joining Besiktas and would offer a more physical presence.

Son was close to ending his international career after Korea's semi-final exit at the Asian Cup in 2024 and it is unlikely he will stay on after the World Cup. His exit will leave Korea short on leadership and star power with



South Korea's Son Heung Min.

only Lee Kang-in at Paris St Germain and Bayern Munich defender Kim Min-jae plying their trade at elite-level European clubs.

The Koreans know they

must take something from their group opener against an experienced Czech side if they are to advance, with co-hosts Mexico sure to prove a tougher test on home soil in their second

match. They close out their group campaign against South Africa.

Most pundits give the Koreans little chance of going beyond the round of 16

but in their 11th straight World Cup appearance they are more than capable of springing a surprise and few will forget their run to the semi-finals on home soil in 2002.

## South Africa hope for World Cup boost after failing to capitalise as hosts on

**CAPE TOWN--South Africa failed to generate momentum after hosting the World Cup in 2010 but following a long period**

**of stagnation they have a chance to become consistent competitors on the global stage.**

Hopes that the first World Cup on the African continent would help to turn South Africa into a continental powerhouse fizzled

out due to a succession of mediocre coaches and a steady stream of administrative controversies. South Africa failed to qualify for

three successive World Cups after 2010 and also missed out on three Africa Cup of Nations thanks to some poor performances on the field and stunning mistakes off it.

A disastrous error by then-coach Pitso Mosimane, who failed to read the rules, botched their chances of reaching the 2012 Cup of Nations after he played for a draw instead of going for a win in a decisive qualifier. In the latest World Cup qualifying campaign, South Africa were docked three points for fielding a suspended player because they failed to keep an accurate tally of cautions received.

That turned a comfortable lead over Nigeria in their group into a scramble for points at the end of the campaign last October before South Africa finished one point clear. However, the fact that they pipped Nigeria to automatic qualification despite the sanction points to the potential of their playing group.

They draw most of their

players from clubs in the country, notably Mamelodi Sundowns, who were African Champions League winners last month. The South African league is widely regarded as the most competitive on the continent which means there is less incentive for players to seek a move to Europe.

But there could be interest in several of their top players if South Africa impress at the June 11 to July 19 World Cup in North America. They play Mexico in the tournament opener on June 11 before facing Czech Republic and South Korea, and coach Hugo Broos thinks they could spring a surprise or two in Group A.

"When we are at our best level, with the quality in this team, then we can make some surprises in the World Cup," said Broos, who played for Belgium at the 1986 World Cup in Mexico. "We are also a team that not too many people know, so that could be good for us."



South Africa players pose for a team group photo.

## GROUP B

# CANADA TARGET WORLD CUP BREAKTHROUGH ON HOME SOIL

**TORONTO**--Canada return to soccer's biggest stage not yet among the elite but determined to redefine their place in the global game as co-hosts of the World Cup.

The nation's appearance in the 2022 tournament snapped a 36-year absence from the finals and when Alphonso Davies headed Canada in front with their first-ever World Cup goal, albeit in a 4-1 loss to Croatia, it sparked country-wide celebrations. But despite still looking for their first World Cup win after losing all three matches in 1986 and 2022, a side led by American coach Jesse Marsch -- who steered Canada to the Copa America semi-finals in

2024 -- and boasting internationally recognised talent have their sights set on the knockout rounds.

"We're a team that has grown so much over the past few years under a new coaching staff with Jesse Marsch. I think he's brought this team to a totally different level," said Canada winger Tajon Buchanan, who assisted on the Davies goal with a perfect cross. "On our day, I think we could beat anybody."

Standing between Canada and new World Cup territory is what appears a winnable Group B. Canada open their World Cup on June 12 against Bosnia & Herzegovina in Toron-

to followed by games in Vancouver against Qatar (June 18) and Switzerland (June 24).

Buchanan, fast and skilful, established himself as Canada's best player at the 2022 World Cup and his presence on the right flank will be crucial given their lack of depth in the position.

However, the 25-year-old Davies, who was named captain in June 2024, has suffered a number of in-

jury setbacks that have seen him miss a full year of international duty. The speedy left back suffered an ACL tear with Canada in March 2025. He returned for Bayern Munich that December but tore muscle fibre in his right hamstring in February before a hamstring strain in March kept him out of two Canada friendlies.

The unfortunate Davies then injured his left hamstring in May, dealing a

potential blow to Canada's World Cup build-up.

Up front, Canada's all-time men's leading scorer Jonathan David will be counted on to lead the way and the Juventus forward is eager to change how people view his team. "First, we need to make sure we score. And then to win a match would be momentous for Canada," said David. "After that, the aim is obviously to go as far as possible in the competition."



Canada forward Jonathan David (10) celebrates with forward Tani Oluwaseyi (12) after scoring a goal against Guatemala during a quarterfinal match of the 2025 Gold Cup.  
(Matt Krohn-Imagn Images/File Photo via Reuters)

**NAGICO**  
INSURANCES

Experience a **World Cup** full  
of emotions with us.

*Are You  
Ready?*

**Let's support the teams of France, Holland, Curaçao and Haiti!**

Steun de teams van Frankrijk, Nederland, Curaçao en Haïti! | Allez l'équipe de France, de Hollande, de Curaçao et d'Haïti!

# Qatar seek to move beyond the shadow of 2022 disappointment

**CAIRO--**Qatar will arrive at the World Cup seeking to redefine themselves after a disappointing tournament in 2022 when they

became the first host nation to lose all three group matches despite heavy investment and lofty expectations.

Since then, the Gulf team have quietly reasserted themselves on the continental stage. They retained the Asian Cup in 2023 and

secured qualification for the World Cup on merit for the first time after automatically qualifying as hosts in 2022.

In North America, they will face Canada, Switzerland and Bosnia & Herzegovina in Group B.

Preparations, however, have been mixed. Qatar suffered a surprise group-stage exit at the Arab Cup on home soil in December, while planned friendlies against Serbia and world champions Argentina in March were cancelled because of the war on Iran, denying coach Julen Lopetegui a chance to test his side against top-level opposition.

Qatar's squad remains built around a domestically developed core shaped through the Aspire Academy system that underpinned their rise over the past decade. Many of the squad have progressed through the same development pathway, giving Qatar continuity and cohesion, though questions remain over whether a group drawn largely from the domestic league has the depth and experience required to compete consistently with

elite opposition.

Veteran Hassan Al Haydos, Qatar's most-capped player and a central figure in both of their Asian Cup triumphs, came out of international retirement at Lopetegui's request and was in the preliminary World Cup squad, adding leadership and experience.

Much will again depend on the long-established partnership of Akram Afif and Almoez Ali. Afif, the creative force and Asian Player of the Year in 2024, remains Qatar's main source of invention and goals, while Ali — the country's all-time top scorer — continues to offer a cutting edge in major tournaments.

Qatar no longer carry the scrutiny that surrounded the 2022 finals, and the pressure may be lower than it was on home soil, but a favourable group and back-to-back Asian Cup titles have raised fresh expectations that they can translate their continental success to the global stage.



Qatar players pose for a team group photo.

## RESURGENT SWISS SEEK NEW STORY TO BREAK WORLD CUP HOODOO

**GENEVA--**After having a stellar Euro 24 run and going unbeaten in qualifying, Switzerland have reason to believe 2026 can be their breakthrough World Cup - if they can banish a hoodoo hanging over them for three decades.

Contesting their sixth successive World Cup, Switzerland's consistency in qualifying is matched only by the predictability of their exits, vexed by the hex of round-of-16 eliminations in five of their past six tournaments. Their second-round curse set lasting World Cup records in 2006, as the only team eliminated without conceding a goal in open play, and the ignominy of being the only side not to convert a single penalty in a shootout.

But 72 years after their last quarter-final appearance, the Nati approach this World Cup oozing confidence, unbeaten in competitive matches since November 2024 and rid-

ing momentum from a standout Euro 2024, where a shootout miss against England denied them an historic semi-final place.

Coach Murat Yakin said that with expectations rising, Switzerland were keen to finally make their mark on the tournament. "We want to play the best World Cup that a Swiss team has played," he told news portal Nau.ch. "We want to show why we deserve to be there and write a new story at this World Cup."

Switzerland are perennial underdogs difficult for any team to beat, with a steadfast rearguard that leaked only two goals in qualifying, among the fewest conceded worldwide. Drawn favourably in Group B with Qatar, Bosnia and hosts Canada, a Swiss advance should be straightforward, with a squad largely intact since their Euros run.

Captain and playmaker Granit Xhaka contests his fourth World Cup as the fulcrum in an experi-



Switzerland's Granit Xhaka in action with Slovenia's Danijel Sturm.

enced midfield alongside Remo Freuler, with Manuel Akanji the key defensive pillar in his third tournament. The attack is set to include Brel Embolo and Ruben Vargas, young Premier League talent in Dan Ndoye and Noah Okafor,

plus exciting 20-year-old Johan Manzambi from the Bundesliga.

The astute tactics of coach Yakin will be critical for Switzerland to reach the quarter-finals as they did in 1954, in what has proven a

Herculean feat to replicate. They qualified for only two of the next nine tournaments, before their return from the World Cup wilderness in 1994 kicked off the streak of round-of-16 stumbles.

And if 2026 will be Switzerland's breakout World Cup, Yakin is not going to jinx it. "We're taking it step by step," he said, when asked about a quarter-final berth. "I don't want to think that far yet."

# Veteran Dzeko the talisman for Bosnia's new generation

**LONDON--Edin Dzeko was already establishing himself as one of Europe's most lethal strikers before Kerim Alajbegovic was even born, but the cross-generational talents will join forces to fuel Bosnia & Herzegovina's hopes at this year's World Cup.**

The 40-year-old Dzeko is one of only two remaining players from Bosnia's debut World Cup appearance in 2014 and will be captain and father figure to a youthful squad who are being tipped to make a big impression at the tournament.

Alajbegovic, 18, meanwhile has emerged as the new poster boy for Bos-

nian football and after a standout season for Red Bull Salzburg has signed a five-year contract with Bayer Leverkusen.

While different in style -- towering Dzeko, the archetypal target man with a deft touch and Alajbegovic a nimble and creative left winger -- the chemistry between the duo was a factor in Sergej Barbarez's side's qualifying campaign. It was Alajbegovic's corner which was headed in by Dzeko for Bosnia's equaliser against Wales in the playoff semi-final before Alajbegovic calmly slotted in the decisive penalty in the shoot-out.

Alajbegovic also scored

in the penalty shoot-out victory over Italy that secured Bosnia their place in the finals, as did PSV's highly-rated 21-year-old playmaker Esmir Bajrak-tarevic.

There is genuine excitement about the new wave of Bosnian talent -- but in Dzeko they have an old master whose vast experience will be crucial as Bosnia attempt to qualify from a group containing Canada, Switzerland and Qatar. Only once previously has an outfield player appeared at a World Cup finals past his 40th birthday -- Cameroon striker Roger Milla in the United States in 1994.



**Bosnia and Herzegovina's Edin Dzeko celebrates scoring a goal with Kerim Alajbegovic and Dzenis Burnic.**

Dzeko, Bosnia's all-time leading goalscorer with 73 goals in 148 appearances, is set to add his name to that elite group which by the end of the tournament could also include Croatia's Luka Modric and Portugal's Cristiano Ronaldo. While that will be another notch in the career of a player still banging in the goals for Schalke, Dzeko

says leading the country's new brigade is motivation in itself.

"I'm happy that I could help the youngsters go to the World Cup, it's great for them and they have a great future," he said. "Those last two games, against Wales and Italy, it will change their lives for sure. They may not know,

but it will.

"If you asked me like 10 years ago if I was still playing at 40, I would have said no. But I am still feeling good and, more importantly, I still feel I can help the team," he said, before adding: "I am happy because I am the captain of this great generation."

## GROUP C

# HAITI END 52-YEAR WORLD CUP WAIT AND AIM TO LIFT NATION IN TURMOIL

**LOS ANGELES--Haiti return to the World Cup after a 52-year absence, having played all their qualifiers at neutral grounds due to gang violence at home and facing long odds in a group featuring five-times champions Brazil, Morocco and Scotland.**

The Caribbean side, known as Les Grenadiers, are appearing at the men's World Cup for only the second time, their previous outing coming in 1974. That campaign ended at the group stage but Haiti left a mark when Emmanuel Sanon scored against Italy, ending Italy goalkeeper Dino Zoff's 1,142-minute clean-sheet record.

At this year's finals, Haiti are the outsiders in Group C, but their involvement will be enough to delight fans back home in a coun-

try overwhelmed by humanitarian and security crises. "We are not scared of anybody," Duckens Nazon, Haiti's record goalscorer, told Reuters.

"We come humble, but also proud because we are Haitian," added the 32-year-old, who scored six of his 44 goals for his country in qualifying.

During the 2026 qualifying campaign, Haiti hosted all "home" matches in neutral venues, primarily in Curacao. The team have not played a senior home international on their own turf since 2021, when Haiti was consumed by gang violence following the assassination of President Jovenel Moise. In March 2024, armed gangs took over the national stadium, the Stade Sylvio Cator.

Haiti's coach, Frenchman Sebastien Migne, a former

manager of several African national teams, has never set foot in the country. Migne, who was an assistant coach for Cameroon at the last World Cup in Qatar, has worked hard to add to the squad with players with Haitian roots from overseas.

Striker Nazon plays for Esteghlal in Iran and made a dramatic escape from Tehran on the day the United States and Israel began a bombing campaign earlier this year.

In midfield, Jean-Ricner Bellegarde, 27, brings European experience as a regular with Wolverhampton Wanderers in the Premier League. Veteran goalkeeper Johny Placide, 38, captains the side and plays for Ligue 2 club Bastia in France.

Haiti topped their final CONCACAF qualifying group to secure a World Cup place ahead of Honduras, Costa Rica and Nicaragua.

Nazon hopes his team can bring some joy to their troubled home in the coming weeks. "It gives me goosebumps," he said. "This emotion is unbelievable."



**Haiti starting eleven pose before a group stage match against Trinidad and Tobago in the 2025 Gold Cup at Shell Energy Stadium, in Houston, Texas. (Troy Taormina-Imagn Images/File Photo via Reuters)**

# Ancelotti gambles on fading Neymar as Brazil chase elusive sixth crown

**RIO DE JANEIRO--Brazil head to the World Cup under the great Carlo Ancelotti with hope in their hearts and doubts at their heels, as the Italian seeks to end their 24-year wait for a sixth global title with a squad short on glitter and long on questions.**

Ancelotti's late call-up of 34-year-old Neymar raised eyebrows across the footballing world. The forward had not featured in any of the Italian's previous squads since he took charge a year ago and has not worn Brazil's shirt since suffering a serious knee injury in 2023.

Since then, Neymar has endured a subdued spell in Saudi Arabia and returned to boyhood club Santos in an attempt to revive his career, only to struggle for form amid injuries and controversies. Problems returned last week when scans revealed Neymar had a grade-two calf injury that could put him out of action for two to three weeks, though Ancelotti said on

Saturday he believed the forward could be ready for Brazil's opening Group C game against Morocco on June 13 in New Jersey.

Neymar's recall to the squad feels like a blend of faith and necessity as Brazil's resources seem to have been thinned everywhere. Chelsea winger Estevao and Real Madrid forward Rodrygo were left out of the squad due to injuries, along with Real defender Eder Militao, who had been expected to fill in at right back in a side vulnerable on both flanks.

For a nation that redefined the role of attacking full-backs through Nilton Santos, Carlos Alberto, Junior, Jorginho, Cafu, Roberto Carlos and many others, the shortage is striking. Ancelotti has turned to Danilo and Alex Sandro, now at Flamengo and some way from their Juventus pomp, to plug the gaps.

There are concerns between the posts too. Alis-

son's year at Liverpool was disrupted by injury, while his understudy Ederson has left Manchester City for Turkish football.

Midfield responsibility rests heavily on Casemiro, who enjoyed a fine season at Manchester United at 34.

In attack, however, Brazil can still boast enviable depth in Vinicius Jr, Matheus Cunha, Raphinha and Endrick. The puzzle is how Neymar would fit into that quartet if he recovers. Ancelotti told Reuters in early May that his side must press high and run relentlessly - a demanding brief for a player battling to rediscover sharpness.

After taking on a formidable Morocco, Brazil face Haiti and Scotland. The first test may reveal whether the Selecao's blend of experience and fading stardom can deliver.

Ancelotti, who recently extended his contract until 2030 citing faith in a tal-

ented young generation, has selected 15 players who were also present at the 2022 World Cup in Qatar - the highest number of returnees in the history of

Brazil, the only nation to have played at every World Cup.

It is a squad rich in experience, though they have

largely been disappointing. Should Ancelotti fail to conjure up one more triumph, Brazil will face the longest title drought in their history and a long road to 2030.



Brazil head coach Carlo Ancelotti with Casemiro during training.

## Neymar aims for final World Cup bow as Brazil put faith in stricken talisman

**RIO DE JANEIRO--For Neymar, the World Cup would be less like a new beginning and more of a curtain call - one last spin on soccer's grandest stage after a career of soaring brilliance and stubborn setbacks.**

Now 34, Brazil's all-time top scorer has been recalled by Carlo Ancelotti after almost three years away from the national side, though his participation was already hanging in the balance at the team's first training session last week, which he missed for scans that showed a calf injury. He last played for Brazil in 2023 when he suffered a devastating knee injury against Uruguay in a World Cup qualifier.

Since that October night, Neymar has been sidelined for more than 600 days with a string of injuries between his time playing in Saudi Arabia and Brazil, where he returned to his boyhood club Santos last year in an attempt to revive his career. Instead, more injuries and fresh controversies have accompanied a struggle for rhythm and sharpness. This year he has six goals



Brazil's Neymar scores a goal against Croatia at the 2022 World Cup in Qatar.

and four assists in 15 matches, carefully managed and never playing more than four consecutive games since returning from more knee surgery in February. His inclusion in Ancelotti's squad has sparked fierce debate in Brazil. When the Italian stepped

up at Rio de Janeiro's Museum of Tomorrow on May 18 to announce his squad, the tension hung heavily in the air until Neymar's name was called and the crowd exploded as though a last-gasp goal had been scored.

Ancelotti, who said on last

week he believed Neymar could be ready in time for Brazil's first game on June 13, has opted for romance as much as reason by calling up the country's long-time talisman as he shapes a high-intensity side for the five-times world champions.

Team mates have publicly supported Neymar's return, yet supporters remain divided between loyalty and concern over whether his body can still match his imagination. It would be his fourth World Cup - a tournament that has defined his turbulent journey.

In 2014, on home soil, he scored four goals in five matches before a back injury after a clash with a Colombian opponent ruled him out of the 7-1 semi-final defeat by Germany. In 2018, arriving with fitness doubts after a foot injury at Paris Saint Germain, he could not stop Brazil falling to Belgium in the quarter-finals.

In 2022, buoyed up by strong club form at PSG, hopes were high again, only for an ankle injury against Serbia to disrupt his campaign before a penalty loss to Croatia ended Brazil's run again in the quarters.

Now, Neymar is far from his peak and facing a tactical dilemma. Ancelotti told Reuters in early May that his side must press high and run relentlessly - a demanding brief for a player rebuilding his body and confidence. Whether Neymar plays a central role or serves as an emotional lightning rod, his presence alone alters the mood. For better or worse, Brazil's story in 2026 will carry his name once more.

# Heavy burden of expectation could hamper Morocco's hopes

**CASABLANCA--Morocco's heroics at the last World Cup mean they carry a heavy burden of expectation into this month's tournament in Canada, Mexico and the U.S., which threatens to hamper their chances.**

The North African nation, who will co-host the 2030 World Cup with Portugal and Spain, thrilled their supporters and upset the established order with a mazy run to the semi-finals of the 2022 tournament in Qatar. It was the first time an African nation had reached the final four in the tournament and proved a heady boost to both African and Arab football.

Morocco continued to deliver on the increased expectation by winning all of their World Cup qualifiers, which formed part of a world record run of 19 successive wins, eclipsing the old mark of 15 set by Spain set over a 12-month period from 2008 to 2009. It made Morocco run-away favourites for the Af-

rica Cup of Nations finals, which they hosted at the turn of the year, but nervy performances were largely unconvincing.

Supporters turned on the team and, although they reached the final, failure to win a controversy-filled decider against Senegal led to Walid Regragui quitting as coach, no longer willing to put up with the barracking from fans. His successor, Mohamed Ouahabi, who won the Under-20 World Cup last year but is untested at senior level, will face similar pressure with a squad that still has elements of the successful side from four years ago but has also undergone substantial change.

Former Spain international Brahim Diaz has emerged as the team's talisman, although he has much redeeming to do after botching a Panenka-style penalty that would have won the Cup of Nations final. They have since been awarded the trophy by a decision of the Confederation of African Football's disciplinary



Morocco players pose for a team group photo before the match against South Africa at the 2026 Africa Cup of Nations in January.

committee, but it is under appeal.

Morocco do not have an easy start at the World Cup

finals, against Brazil in New York on June 13, but can still expect to advance from Group C which also includes Haiti and Scotland.

Four years ago, they rode a wave of passionate support and had the element of surprise on their side as they beat Spain and Portugal on

their way to the last four, but it is likely to prove hard to replicate those heroics this time round.

## Scotland aim to end first-round hoodoo

**LONDON--Scotland and their raucous Tartan Army of fans head to their first World Cup since 1998 determined to reach the knockout phase of a**

**major tournament for the first time after glorious but heartbreaking near-misses in the past.**

Scotland have appeared at

eight World Cups, qualifying for five in a row between 1974 and 1990 when their rivals across the border, England, had a patchier run. But the Scots

have never made it beyond the group phase at a World Cup or a European championship.

Three of their first-round

World Cup exits have been on goal difference, including in 1978 when Scotland beat eventual finalists the Netherlands 3-2 - a goal by Archie Gemmill remains one of the best at a World Cup - but fell short of qualification. In 1982, Scotland needed a win in their last group game against the Soviet Union and took an early lead but were held to a 2-2 draw that knocked them out on goal difference again.

Ending the decades of frustration will be the focus of coach Steve Clarke who is hoping to banish the memories of a limp performance at Euro 2024.

His squad includes Napoli playmaker Scott McTominay - scorer of a brilliant scissor-kick goal against Denmark in a decisive qualifier - Aston Villa midfielder John McGinn and, pending his recovery from injury, Heart of Midlothian goalkeeper Craig Gordon who would be the second-oldest player at a World Cup.

"It's the first time in 28 years that we've reached

the World Cup, so we don't want that alone to be enough," Scotland midfielder Kenny McLean - who scored a goal from the half-way line in the Denmark qualifier - told CBS Sports. "We feel we've got a real chance of getting out of the group. That's the goal, and that's the ambition for everybody."

This looks like Scotland's best chance of advancing beyond the first phase because of the introduction of a round of 32, doubling the number of teams going into the knockouts, after the World Cup's expansion to 48 teams. An opening game in Boston against Haiti, playing at only their second World Cup, offers the prospect of a win.

Morocco, semi-finalists in 2022, pose a bigger challenge when Scotland return to the Gillette Stadium, and few Scots will be expecting much from the final group game against Brazil in Miami.

Even if Scotland get only three points, however, it is likely to be enough to get into the round of 32.



Scotland's Scott McTominay scores a goal against Denmark in World Cup 2026 qualifying.

## GROUP D

# US FACE DEFINING WORLD CUP ON HOME SOIL

**LOS ANGELES--The United States head into the World Cup facing perhaps higher stakes than any other team, with a deep run likely to accelerate the sport's growth in the country and an early exit from a favourable group threatening to stall years of progress. Put simply, it may be the most important World Cup in U.S. soccer history.**

As co-hosts, the Americans were spared the grind of qualifying, leaving questions over the readiness of Mauricio Pochettino's squad heading into the tournament. What is not in doubt is the pressure on the Stars and Stripes.

Reaching the knockout rounds is the minimum expectation for a team that advanced to the last 16 in

Qatar in 2022, four years after the humiliation of failing to qualify for the 2018 tournament in Russia.

The U.S. are the highest-ranked side in Group D, which includes Turkey, Australia and Paraguay. Winning the group is a realistic target and would provide a more favourable route through the knockout rounds.

Potential opponents in the last 32, should the U.S. top the group, would be a third-place team from groups B, E, F, I or J - and could be Canada - a path that would give the U.S. a chance of reaching the quarter-finals for the first time since 2002.

U.S. soccer has spent decades trying to earn lasting

credibility on the international stage in a country where most of the best male athletes are drawn to American football, basketball or baseball - sports that offer greater visibility, richer professional pathways and deeper cultural roots. That has often left the men's national soccer team fighting for relevance at home as much as respect abroad.

A deep run at a home

World Cup, however, could reshape perceptions. Even a place in the latter stages would energise a new generation of fans, strengthen the team's standing and provide a major lift to Major League Soccer, which continues to seek a larger place in the North American sporting landscape.

Christian Pulisic, the U.S. team's most recognisable player, believes the current squad is the strongest the

country has produced and expects home support to provide a major lift. "The energy in the stadiums is going to be great," Pulisic told Reuters. "We want to take that motivation and push to make the American people proud."

The U.S. open their campaign on June 12 against Paraguay in Los Angeles.



United States Mens National team starting eleven before an international friendly against Uruguay at Raymond James Stadium, in Tampa, Florida, November 2025. (Nathan Ray Seebeck-Imagn Images/File Photo via Reuters)

## TURKEY'S NEW GENERATION EYES IMPACT AFTER 24-YEAR ABSENCE

**ISTANBUL--Turkey return to the World Cup for the first time in 24 years buoyed up by gifted young players -- including Real Madrid midfielder Arda Guler -- and by memories of their run to the 2002 semi-finals, but doubts over consistency and big-match temperament persist.**

Coach Vincenzo Montella guided Turkey through qualification with a series of narrow victories and restored optimism after an encouraging Euro 2024 campaign, with Guler emerging as the face of a team many Turkish fans believe could become the country's strongest in decades.

The squad also features Juventus forward Kenan Yildiz and several Europe-based players who have raised expectations that Turkey can finally build on the legacy of the side that finished third at the 2002 World Cup under Senol Gunes.

Yet Turkey's qualification campaign also exposed familiar weaknesses. A 6-0 home defeat by European champions Spain in Konya last September was a defining reality check, suggesting deficits compared to the world's elite sides despite the growing excitement around the team's attacking talent. The loss reinforced a reputation that has long followed Turkey: capable of upsetting stronger opponents on their day, but equally vulnerable to emotional collapses and defensive disorganisation.

Montella has sought to bring greater tactical discipline and calm to a squad that has often struggled with inconsistency over the past two decades. Turkey impressed at times during Euro 2024 with their aggressive pressing and technical quality, but they also relied heavily on moments of individual brilliance and rode their luck in several matches.

Turkey are in Group D alongside hosts the United



Turkey's Arda Guler scores a goal against Bulgaria.

States, Paraguay and Australia, and will be based in Mesa, Arizona, for the tournament. Much of Turkey's hopes are expected to rest on the creativity of Guler, whose rapid rise at Real Madrid has made him

one of the country's biggest sporting talents and raised expectations that he can lead a new era for the national team.

Guler and several other squad members were not

even born in 2002 when Turkey made their run to the semi-finals, an achievement which still features heavily in the country's football folklore. Whether this generation can create its own history, however,

may depend on whether Turkey can finally overcome the volatility that has repeatedly prevented talented squads from delivering consistently on the biggest stage.

# Workmanlike Australia eye another trip to World Cup knockout rounds

**MELBOURNE--Short on star power but always up for a fight, Australia head to the World Cup eyeing another trip to the knockout rounds but dogged by the usual questions about whether they have the attacking quality to trouble the top teams.**

The Socceroos have made a habit of qualifying for the global soccer showpiece, making it to the last six tournaments and reaching the last 16 for a second time in Qatar four years ago. Despite a dearth of world-class players, they broke new ground in Qatar under former coach Graham Arnold, winning multiple matches for the first time after scraping through qualifying via an intercontinental playoff.

With the benefit of an expanded 48-team tournament, qualifying for North America was a relative breeze under coach Tony Popovic and left staff with

plenty of time to plan. Home fans are expectant but Australia find themselves in a tricky group with co-hosts the United States, a resurgent Turkey and 2010 quarter-finalists Paraguay.

Popovic's squad is no more blessed with elite-level players than Arnold's was, but it carries a similar swagger. "We're not hoping, we are really believing that we can go further than any Socceroos team ever before," veteran midfielder Jackson Irvine told Reuters.

Since replacing Arnold midway through the World Cup cycle, Popovic has cast the net wide in search of talent. While relying on old hands such as goalkeeper Mat Ryan, his roster is laden with World Cup debutants and rising talents such as full back Jordan Bos and winger Nestory Irankunda.

A late entrant to the squad

was former Italy under-20 international Cristian Volpato, who plays for Serie A side Sassuolo and, as a dual citizen, switched allegiance to Australia last week.

The Socceroos retain the same physicality and doggedness they had under Arnold but are even more wedded to structure and defensive organisation under Popovic. That may serve them well as they negotiate the group stage but could prove less effective in the knockout rounds when goals tend to be harder to come by.

Australia have made do without a notable target man since Tim Cahill was in his pomp and lack top-shelf midfielders to serve their limited forwards. There is plenty of excitement around 20-year-old Irankunda and 22-year-old striker Mohamed Toure, who have impressed for their clubs in England's second tier.

Expecting them to fire Australia into the last 16 with a flurry of goals may be a bit much but former Socceroos striker Archie Thompson reckons the African-born

duo can make a name for themselves.

"These young players are an X-factor," Thompson, who scored 28 goals in 54 in-

ternationals, told Reuters. "They could come on to the world stage and dominate. Or it may take another World Cup when they're more hardened."



South Korea's Hwang Hee-Chan shoots at the Australian goal during their 2024 AFC Asian Cup Quarter Final in Qatar.

## Paraguay bank on Alfaro's psychology-driven approach

**ASUNCION--Gustavo Alfaro is being hailed in Paraguay as the key figure behind the rapid turnaround of a team who had struggled in South American qualifying and are now World Cup-bound, with many crediting a strategy rooted in psychology.**

Since taking over in August 2024, the 63-year-old Argentine manager has won over both players and fans with results and a motivational style, often drawing on authors and historical figures to reinforce soccer-related ideas.

Alfaro led Paraguay to a sixth-place finish in the South American qualifiers, securing the continent's final automatic World Cup berth and the country's first appearance on international soccer's biggest stage since 2010.

Alfaro has said he keeps a notebook of reflections to use when he wants to strengthen a concept within the group, having cited the likes of Albert Einstein and five-times Formula One world champion Juan Manuel Fangio. Quotes such as "We triumph and



Paraguay's Gustavo Gomez in action with Brazil's Vinicius Junior.

fail less than we think," by Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges, are among those he has used during a career that has included spells with Ecuador, Costa Rica and Boca Juniors.

Alfaro urged players to rediscover the "grit" long associated with Paraguay and to believe they can compete with powerhouses such as Brazil and Argentina, echoing their historic 2010

campaign in South Africa, when they reached the quarter-finals before losing to eventual winners Spain.

He brought a psychologist into his coaching staff for

individual sessions tailored to each player and forged a strong connection with fans as results improved - the coach was once hugged by a supermarket worker in tears and had his face tat-

tooded by another fan.

Paraguay's remarkable qualifying campaign under Alfaro included climbing from the bottom of the standings, a nine-match unbeaten run and victories over Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay. After defeating Brazil, Alfaro told reporters: "All I had to do was shake the tree a little so the spiders would fall off and we could realise the tree was full of fruit." He described the win over Uruguay as "the mother of all battles".

Results dipped later in qualifying and friendlies, raising questions over whether his approach will be enough on the global stage, as Paraguay prepare to debut against co-hosts the United States in Los Angeles on June 12.

Also facing Australia and Turkey in Group D, the South American team will rely on a solid defensive system led by 33-year-old captain Gustavo Gomez to reach the knockout stage, after conceding only 10 goals in 18 qualifying matches.



# Four-time winners Germany out to restore tarnished reputation

**BERLIN--Germany have set their sights firmly on a fifth World Cup trophy but not many at home share coach Julian Nagelsmann's optimism.**

The Germans go into the tournament co-hosted by Mexico, Canada and the United States after shock first-round exits in 2018 and 2022. The four-times champions have not tasted international success since winning their last World Cup title in Brazil in 2014.

For Nagelsmann it is time to restore Germany's dented international reputation and turn the team into a tournament powerhouse once more. Under Nagelsmann, who took over in September 2023, Germany reached the last eight at Euro 2024 on home soil but they have never managed to convince their fans they will be among the small group of genuine title contenders this year, along with teams such as Spain, France and defending champions Argentina.

"It hurts, also that we now have to wait two years to be World Cup winners," Nagelsmann said following their Euro 2024 loss to Spain. He has never changed his goal since, repeating at every opportunity that his team are going all the way.

Despite qualifying comfortably with five wins and one defeat, Nagelsmann's side have been far from impressive in recent friendlies -- a 4-3 comeback win over Switzerland and a last-gasp 2-1 victory over Ghana.

It is not that Germany lack talent, with Kai Havertz, Florian Wirtz and Jamal Musiala forming a formidable front line when fit. But constant changes to the lineup, injuries and a string of off-pitch Nagelsmann faux-pas, including having to apologise to his striker Deniz Undav for negative comments about his performance despite him scoring a last-minute winner against Ghana, have not endeared him to fans.



Germany coach Julian Nagelsmann.

"If Germany manage to become a cohesive team, even though the coach has never managed to field the same starting 11 twice in a row, then we have a chance," said Bayern Munich supremo Uli Hoeness, a World Cup

winner in 1974. "I blame Julian for that and I've already told him that personally."

Former Bayern coach Nagelsmann has faced considerable criticism in recent months for decisions in-

cluding his U-turn to name 40-year-old Manuel Neuer as his starting World Cup goalkeeper despite him not representing his country since 2024. But the coach has stuck to his guns, backing his own plans to pay off

on the biggest stage.

"If he's successful, I'll be the first to congratulate him," Hoeness said. "If not, then things will be tough for him."

## Wirtz eyes title and international recognition

**BERLIN--Only two years ago Florian Wirtz was completing a dream season with Bayer Leverkusen, winning a German league and Cup double**

**undefeated while also reaching the Europa League final. With Euro 2024 awaiting, the attacking midfielder was hailed as Germany's next**

**big star, destined for success.**

Fast forward to 2026 and the 23-year-old has just wrapped up what has been

a frustrating first season at Liverpool for him after his 125-million-euros move last year. He had to endure a slow-burning period of adjustment and struggled to

find his footing for months.

It was 16 Premier League matches before his first direct goal involvement for the club and he initially showed little of the creativity and pace that made him one of the most exciting prospects of his generation and a fan favourite back home. Wirtz netted just five times and delivered three assists in 33 Premier League matches, failing to live up to his price tag.

He did gradually improve midway through the campaign and Germany fans are hoping it is the start of a rise in form that will peak at the World Cup in North America. Success has eluded Wirtz on the international stage with a quarter-final spot at Euro 2024 in front of a home crowd his best record with Germany so far.

As a 19-year-old, Wirtz was set for his first World Cup in 2022 but a cruciate ligament tear meant he missed out. Germany suffered their second consecutive first-round loss at the tournament in Qatar for their worst record at the finals.

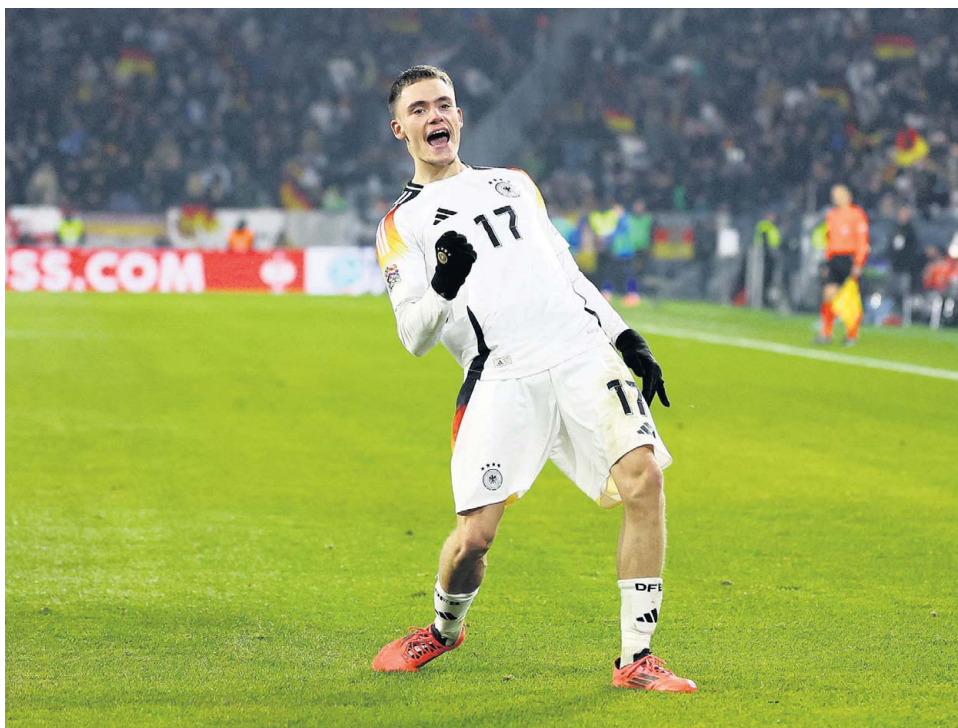
When it comes to this year's World Cup, however, Wirtz

is very clear about what his and the team's goals are. "We are a big nation and we don't need to make ourselves small for anyone," he told reporters in March after his stunning double earned a 4-3 comeback win over Switzerland in a friendly.

"It does not matter if we are favourites, if you reach the final... and this is our goal. Obviously we want to reach the final and bring the trophy home. We don't have to hide from anyone so I am positive," he said.

Few in Germany share his optimism given their disappointing international record since their 2014 World Cup victory. But if there is one source of hope it is the Wirtz-led attacking trio that includes Jamal Musiala and Kai Havertz. In a constantly changing starting 11 under coach Julian Nagelsmann, those three are arguably the only automatic starters.

Capable of dismantling any defence with his quick-passing, speed and lethal finish, Wirtz will now need to lead by example if he is to leave his mark at the World Cup.



Germany's Florian Wirtz celebrates scoring a goal.

# Humble roots fuel Ecuador's hopes

**QUITO**--Dusty pitches tucked amid poverty and childhood dreams of wearing Ecuador's jersey shaped the early steps of several national team players who will now fulfil their ambition of representing their country at the World Cup.

Jordy Caicedo, Joel Ordonez and Nilson Angulo are some of the players sharing similar back stories marked by hardship and perseverance.

Caicedo, 28, grew up in a marginal and dangerous neighbourhood in the southern city of Machala. "I'm a kid from the streets of Ecuador who basically had to cling to soccer to help my family move forward," he told ESPN in January.

Ordonez, 22, lived in a suburb of Guayaquil. He now plays for Club Brugge, and media reports have linked him with a post-World Cup move to Juventus. His family made sacrifices so that he could swap improvised street pitches for a training centre an hour away.

The most emblematic rise,

however, is that of Chelsea midfielder Moises Caicedo, 24, who will play at his second World Cup after starting out on a humble pitch known as "El Hueco" in Santo Domingo. "Moises was among the kids who always had their goals very clear," said Galo Rodriguez, a former youth coach of Caicedo at Independiente del Valle who also managed Paris St-Germain defender William Pacheco and Arsenal's Piero Hincapié.

"The kids who succeeded were those who always thought big, were very disciplined and worked for it," Rodriguez told Reuters.

The dreams of Pacheco and Sunderland forward Angulo were forged in Quininde, near the Colombian border, where soccer represents a path out of poverty. "It's a dream. I'm achieving things I once saw in other players," said Pacheco, who wears number 51 in tribute to his mother, who died on the day he made his professional debut.

Playing in their fifth World Cup, Ecuador hope to surpass their last-16 finish at Germany 2006. Coach Sebastian Beccacece has cred-



Ecuador players pose for a team group photo.

ited the players' humility and family support for their historic second-place finish in South American qualifying, behind world champions Argentina.

"Reaching this level reflects remarkable strength of spirit," said the 45-year-old Argentine.

Ecuador reached the 2024

Copa America quarter-finals but were eliminated by eventual winners Argentina in a penalty shootout. The South American side start their Group E campaign

against Ivory Coast on June 14 in Philadelphia before facing Curacao in Kansas City and Germany in New Jersey.

# Attack-minded Ivorians bullish ahead of World Cup return

**YAMOUSSOUKRO**--Ivory Coast will take a team laden with attacking talent to the World Cup and

are hoping to make a big impact in their first appearance at the tournament since 2014.

Coach Emmerse Fae has said that his squad have the potential to succeed at the tournament in Canada, Mexico, and the United States.

"My goal is to go far in this

competition with my team. We are not going to the U.S. for a vacation," Fae said. "I believe Ivory Coast has the potential to achieve something exceptional. Why not aim for the final?"

That might be slightly ambitious but not many sides will fancy playing against the Ivorians, who will face Curacao, Ecuador and former world champions Germany in the group stage. Ivory Coast have won two Africa Cup of Nations titles since their last World Cup finals appearance in Brazil, which marked the end of a golden generation of players including Didier Drogba, Gervinho and Toure brothers Kolo and Yaya.

There is not the same profile of players now but plenty of ability in the squad, not least teenager attacker Yan Diomande, plus Simon Adingra and Amad Diallo of Manchester United. Fae has persuaded two former France Under-21 internationals — Ange-Yoan Bonny from Italian champions Inter Milan and Nice's Elye Wahi — to switch alle-

giance, and the recall of former Arsenal striker Nicolas Pepe adds to the competition in the forward department.

Defender Ousmane Diomande, who has been linked with a move to the Premier League, is also a stalwart and a workmanlike midfield marshalled by captain Frank Kessie, previously at AC Milan and Barcelona, and Nottingham Forest's Ibrahim Sangare add to the team's balance.

The Ivorians showed much fortitude two years ago when they won the African title on home soil after almost being eliminated in the first round and changing coaches midway through the tournament. That is when Fae took over, promoted from assistant coach and given his first senior job. Around 30 months later, he is not only a continental champion but heading to the World Cup, in which he played in 2006.

"Our mindset is to show that we can make history at a global tournament," Fae said.



Ivory Coast's Ibrahim Sangare in action with Burundi's Frederic Nsabiymva.

# GROUP F

## Netherlands aim for World Cup glory despite lack of star power

**AMSTERDAM--The Netherlands consider themselves World Cup contenders but head for the 2026 finals with a squad that contains few of the outstanding individual stars and little of the overall quality that has marked their previous appearances at the tournament.**

The Dutch have been runners-up three times, most recently in 2010, and at the last finals in Qatar in 2022 were eliminated in the quarter-finals on penalties by eventual winners Argentina. This time they have set themselves the minimum goal of a semi-final place.

"If that could happen, everyone would be happy to sign up for it," said former Netherlands international Nigel de Jong, now technical director at the country's FA, in an interview with the Dutch daily Algemeen Dagblad last month.

But coach Ronald Koeman has already made clear his ambition. "Our goal is to win the World Cup," he said during the March international window.

Whether Koeman has the necessary tools to deliver remains to be seen. The Dutch will rely heavily on midfield playmaker Frenkie de Jong, whose injury woes at Barcelona have continued this season, and still see Memphis Depay as their lead striker, even if his club career has been rapidly stalling at Corinthians in Brazil.

There are also doubts about the form of other key players such as Tijjani Reijnders, who had a promising start to the season after signing for Manchester City but is no longer a regular, and captain Virgil van Dijk, whose dip in form was reflected in a disappointing campaign with Liverpool.

Injury has ruled out Tottenham Hotspur attacker Xavi Simons and there are doubts over the fitness of defender

Jurrien Timber, whose groin injury curtailed his season at Arsenal.

Koeman feels, however, that he has a core of players who have been together for several years and this could be a key factor in their favour. "We have such a good feeling within the squad right now that I think we can get everything out of this tournament," he said.

The Dutch qualified comfortably enough at the top of their group, three points

ahead of Poland and unbeaten. Their World Cup begins in Group F with a game against Japan on June 14 in Dallas followed by Sweden in Houston and Tunisia in Kansas City, where they will be based during the tournament.

Critics have accused Koeman of being too predictable in his tactical approach. But the coach has adapted his formations when necessary in recent years, upsetting the purists who insist on the traditional 'Hollandse

school of football'.

That put the emphasis on dominant, attacking football in a 4-3-3 formation that their great player and coach Johan Cruyff perfected and most Dutch coaches slavishly follow. "I've always admired Cruyff for his vision of the game and his desire to play attractive football but I was a defender; I had to solve problems and that influenced my ideas," said Koeman, who must be flexible to achieve his target.



Netherlands' Tijjani Reijnders celebrates scoring a goal with Memphis Depay.

## Fit De Jong offers an extra dimension to the Dutch

**AMSTERDAM--For the Netherlands, doing without talismanic midfielder Frenkie de Jong has become a regular occurrence over the last two years,**

**but they are always a better team with him in the lineup.**

The 29-year-old has battled with a succession of nig-

gling injuries, notably an ankle complaint that kept him out of Euro 2024 and more recently a hamstring tear that meant he missed the last two internationals

in March.

His tally of 64 caps could have been a lot more had it not been for the setbacks, and the Dutch will be keen-

ly awaiting a fit De Jong for the World Cup in Canada, Mexico and the United States. He is the engine of the side, dictating the tempo of play and directing the flow and direction from his deep-lying role in the heart of the midfield. His incisive passing adds an extra dimension to the Netherlands' attacking prowess.

It was no wonder that when he missed a handful of games for Barcelona as they retained the La Liga title last month concern over his availability heightened again, although Netherlands coach Ronald Koeman moved quickly to quell any angst. "We are not worried, although it would have been better had he played," Koeman said.

De Jong has been to two major tournaments but missing Euro 2024 in Germany proved a major blow. His ankle injury meant he spent almost a half year out of action.

"For someone like me, that is eternity. It was the toughest period of my life," he said. "I missed some games at Ajax in 2018, which was when Ronald Koeman was

about to call me up for the national team. He was actually at the training when it happened.

"I tried to block a ball and landed wrong, and I tore my ligaments in my other ankle. But that was nothing compared to this one," he said.

De Jong returned to help the Netherlands qualify for the World Cup and last month became the Dutch player with the most appearances for Barca (293), which revealed his worth to the club, who have had a long succession of such greats from Johan Cruyff and Johan Neeskens to Patrick Kluivert and Koeman.

This World Cup is a chance for De Jong to carve out another place for himself among his country's leading footballers.

"You have got even more desire to be there and to get the most out of it. Since my time with the Dutch team, I think we now have the squad with the most potential. But we also need to make sure we become the best team," he told The Guardian.



Netherlands' Frenkie de Jong in action with Argentina's Lionel Messi during the 2022 World Cup in Qatar.

# Japan aim for breakthrough after high-profile wins

**TOKYO--Japan travel to their eighth successive World Cup finals on the back of several high-profile victories and with coach Hajime Moriyasu bullish about their chances of reaching the tournament's latter stages.**

The four-times Asian champions secured friendly wins over Brazil and England during the last eight months but in four appearances in the World Cup knockout rounds they have failed to register a single win, crashing out in the last 16 each time.

Defeats to Turkey in 2002, Paraguay in 2010, Belgium in 2018 and Croatia four years ago leave Moriyasu and his team with a psychological hurdle to tackle in the coming weeks. For his part, Moriyasu is confident that his players have the work ethic and humility to remain level-headed in the pursuit of a ground-breaking result for the country.

"The players have consistently shown a strong desire to improve themselves," said Moriyasu, who will be leading Japan at a second World Cup in a row. "Even when we beat opponents we had never defeated before — like Brazil last year or England this March — the team was of course happy, but then immediately shifted focus."

"I sense that there is joy but also a calm and steady awareness that there is another goal beyond that," he added.

Moriyasu will be looking to build on the team's performance in 2022 when Japan registered wins over Spain and Germany to top their group, despite a surprise 1-0 defeat by Costa Rica. The loss to Croatia came in a penalty shootout and ended a campaign that had promised so much.

But with the core of the squad from four years ago still in place, Moriyasu believes the team can build on their previous performances, starting with group-



Japan players pose for a team group photo.

phase matches against the Netherlands, Tunisia and Sweden.

"The players, especially since so many are now ac-

tive in Europe, teach me many things," said Moriyasu. "I learn from them how they are used tactically at their clubs, what roles they are given, and what coach-

es are teaching them.

"In that sense, I have learned a great deal from the players about global standards. More than any-

thing, the players are full of ambition — they want to break through their limits and keep going as far as possible."

**THE TAP & STILL SXM**

**FIFA WORLD CUP**

**WORLD CUP HEADQUARTERS**

**BIG SCREEN PROJECTOR**

**5 TVs THROUGHOUT THE BAR**

**\$10 BURGER FRIES SODA OR BEER DURING ALL MATCHES**

**\$15 BUCKET OF BEERS**

**GOOD FOOD. COLD DRINKS. GREAT VIBES.**

THETAPANDSTILL\_SXM | SIMPSON BAY, SINT MAARTEN | THE TAP & STILL SXM

**Replay RESTAURANT & BAR**

**FIFA**

**WATCH FIFA WORLD CUP 2026 MATCHES!**

**ALL BEERS \$3 USD**

**BEST PROMOS BEST GAMES BEST PLACE**

**ALL WORLD CUP LONG!**

**\*PROMO VALID FROM JUNE 11 TO JULY 19, 2026**

**OPEN EVERY DAY FROM 12 PM UNTIL THE GAME IS OVER!**

**BIG SCREEN TVS - INDOOR & OUTDOOR SEATING**

**RESERVATIONS: +1 721 544 2503 EXT. 5513**

**Billy Folly Road #37, Simpson Bay Resort Marina Plaza**

**@ReplayRestaurant @replaystaarten**

# Sweden seek redemption after grabbing World Cup lifeline

**STOCKHOLM--**After a disastrous qualifying campaign in which they finished bottom of their group before grabbing a playoff lifeline provided by Nations League performance, Sweden travel to the World Cup aiming to show the world that rumours of their demise as a footballing nation are greatly exaggerated.

Quarter-finalists in Russia in 2018 when they lost to England, the Swedes missed Qatar four years ago and flirted with disaster again for this year's event. Englishman Graham Potter came to the rescue in October 2025, replacing sacked Danish coach Jon Dahl Tomasson and steering them to playoff victories over Ukraine and Poland.

Their reward was a spot in Group F with Tunisia, the Netherlands and Japan, and fans have gone from the hopelessness of Tomasson's reign to remembering the



Sweden's Viktor Gyokeres scores against Azerbaijan in a Nations League encounter.

side who came third at the 1994 World Cup and hoping for a repeat.

"We know that it's not easy winning games in interna-

tional football, but at the same time, you have to have a belief that you can win any game," Potter told Reuters after selecting his 26-man squad for the tournament.

"It's trying to find that balance, it's trying to have that humility and that belief, and then within that, there are things that you need to do to win the game."

The key to Potter's success has been taking a one-game-at-a-time approach while simplifying the messages communicated to players.

Tottenham Hotspur's Dejan Kulusevski will miss the tournament through injury, so much of the attacking burden will likely fall on the shoulders of strikers Viktor Gyokeres and Alexander Isak, and midfield playmaker Lucas Bergvall.

With their opener against Tunisia in Mexico on June 14 followed by a trip across the border to Texas to face the Dutch and Japan, getting off to a strong start will be key for the Swedes if they wish to progress to the knockout stage.

Having been at the helm for only a handful of games, Potter is keenly aware of how little time he has had to work with his players as they head into arguably the biggest challenge of his coaching career. "Are we together as a team, and then are we helping the individuals show their best quality? I think, if we can do that, then we've got a chance to be successful," Potter said.

## Tunisia seek fresh spark from new generation

**CAIRO--**Tunisia carry quiet momentum into the 2026 World Cup after cruising through qualifying without conceding a single goal, but familiar doubts remain over whether their disciplined approach can trouble the game's elite on the global stage.

Drawn alongside the Netherlands, Japan and Sweden in Group F, Tunisia once again look set to rely on defensive organisation and tactical consistency, qualities that have long made them one of Africa's most resilient sides.

However, recent performances have reinforced concerns about their lack of attacking edge against stronger opposition, with Tunisia continuing to depend more on collective discipline than individual brilliance. Coach Sabri Lamouchi has responded by beginning a cautious reshaping of an ageing squad ahead of the finals, leaving out established veterans including midfielder Ferjani Sassi and defender Yassine Meriah as he looks to refresh the team.

"These decisions were not



Tunisia players pose for a team group photo.

easy; on the contrary, they were extremely difficult," Lamouchi was quoted as saying by FIFA.com after naming his squad. "But I am not looking to make simple decisions, nor am I looking to select players to please anyone other than the Tu-

nisian people - neither now nor during the tournament."

Instead, Lamouchi has turned to new faces and younger profiles as he attempts to inject greater energy without sacrificing the

defensive solidity that underpinned Tunisia's qualification campaign. Among the notable additions is Union Berlin midfielder Rani Khedira, the 32-year-old brother of former Germany international Sami Khedira, who switched alle-

giance earlier this year after spending his entire professional career in Germany.

The French coach has also recalled several younger players, including Paris St Germain striker Khalil Ayari and Canada-based

forward Rayan Eloumi, signalling a gradual transition rather than a complete rebuild.

Still, Tunisia's hopes may depend heavily on Burnley midfielder Hannibal Mejbri, one of the few players capable of producing moments of creativity and unpredictability in the final third. The 23-year-old, who came through Manchester United's academy before moving to Burnley, is expected to shoulder much of Tunisia's attacking responsibility during the tournament.

Tunisia's pragmatic style has often made them difficult opponents in African competition, but their World Cup record remains modest. They have appeared at six previous World Cups but never advanced beyond the group stage.

Navigating a group containing the Netherlands, Japan and Sweden may ultimately reveal whether Lamouchi's gradual rebuild has given Tunisia enough quality and dynamism to compete beyond their traditional role as stubborn outsiders.

## GROUP G

# Belgium's new generation no longer bear burden of expectation

**BRUSSELS**--For a decade, Belgium's 'golden generation' offered the promise of a major title without any return but now that a new-look squad have shaken off the past's burden of expectation, they could prove World Cup spoilers.

Belgium's squad for the tournament in Canada, Mexico, and the United States does boast remnants of the group that sat at the top of the year-end FIFA rankings four times between 2018 and 2021 and reached the World Cup

semi-finals in Russia in 2018.

This month's tournament will be a fourth straight World Cup for goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois, record scorer Romelu Lukaku, talisman Kevin De Bruyne and veteran midfielder Axel Witsel, but Belgian hopes rest more with a crop of emerging players. Courtois and De Bruyne remain key elements and automatic names for the starting lineup, but Lukaku has been battling with injury all season and was included in the 26-man

squad only on the basis of reputation and a gamble on a return to fitness, while Witsel has been brought back as experienced cover.

Instead, Belgium look to the likes of Aston Villa duo Amadou Onana and Youri Tielemans, who has taken over from De Bruyne as captain, and the dribbling skills of Manchester City's Jeremy Doku, who has increasingly been a match winner for his country. They have become important parts of the backbone on which the team rely for success.



Belgium players pose for a team group photo.

Belgium suffered an ignominiously early departure from the last World Cup in Qatar and at Euro 2024 in Germany stumbled through the group stage, only to meekly exit in the last 16. It saw their world ranking drop to ninth and there is no longer a heightened expectation around the team, with players such as Eden Hazard, Vincent Kompany and Jan Vertonghen long retired.

That could be just the tonic for the side coached by Frenchman Rudi Garcia, who took over at the start of 2025. Belgium had an impressive World Cup qualifying campaign, unbeaten in their eight matches and two points clear of runners-up Wales. They also have arguably the easiest draw of any European team with Egypt, Iran and New Zealand in their group.

That presents the opportunity to coast under the radar and go into the knockout stage relatively fresh, offering up the possibility to advance far into the tournament. It is ironic that while Belgium's 'golden generation' were always heavily fancied at major tournaments but did not succeed, this squad could prove to be more successful.

## EGYPT CHASE FIRST WIN WITH SALAH STILL KEY

**CAIRO**--When Egypt's all-time leading scorer Hossam Hassan headed the winner against Algeria to send his country to the 1990 World Cup, frenzied celebrations erupted

across the soccer-mad nation.

Nearly four decades later, the 59-year-old has guided Egypt to the 2026 finals as coach but qualification this

time was met with far less emotion, with supporters already looking ahead to how the team might perform on the global stage.

Egypt's previous three

World Cup appearances were celebrated as achievements in themselves but with Africa now allocated almost double the number of places it had in 2022, simply qualifying no longer sat-

isfies expectations. Hassan now faces pressure to deliver Egypt's first-ever World Cup victory and erase memories of first-round exits in 1934, 1990 and 2018 — a modest return for a nation holding the record for the most Africa Cup of Nations titles with seven.

Cup appearance in 2018 following a sensational debut season with Liverpool. While Salah is no longer at the peak of his powers after an underwhelming final campaign at Liverpool, the 33-year-old remains Egypt's main attacking threat and sits two goals shy of Hassan's national scoring record.



Egypt's Mohamed Salah shoots at goal against Cape Verde.

The Pharaohs have been drawn in Group G alongside Belgium, Iran and New Zealand, with realistic hopes of reaching the knockout stage for the first time. "I see the ambition in the players. They want to achieve more than what Egypt did in past World Cups," Hassan told CAF's official website. "We need to perform better at the World Cup. This is my main goal."

Mohamed Salah was 26 when he scored Egypt's only two goals at their last World

Cup appearance in 2018 following a sensational debut season with Liverpool. While Salah is no longer at the peak of his powers after an underwhelming final campaign at Liverpool, the 33-year-old remains Egypt's main attacking threat and sits two goals shy of Hassan's national scoring record.

Egypt will also rely on Manchester City forward Omar Marmoush for firepower, with the Premier League pair carrying the hopes of a squad largely made up of locally based players.

Hassan has also handed a surprise call-up to 18-year-old striker Hamza Abdelkarim, who is on loan at Barcelona's U19 side, at the expense of Nantes frontman Mostafa Mohamed. "I trust my players because their level is very high, whether it's Mohamed Salah, Marmoush, or the players in the Egyptian league. They have great ambition," Hassan said.

Egypt open their campaign against Belgium on June 15 before facing New Zealand a week later and Iran on June 27.

## Estadio BBVA

FIFA: Estadio Monterrey, Guadalupe  
Type: Fixed cantilever canopy with permanent natural grass pitch

Opened: 2015

Capacity: 53,500

Set beneath 1,800m **Cerro de la Silla**, Monterrey combines one of tournament's most dramatic settings with hottest conditions



Temperature: 36°C  
(Avg. daily Jun high)



Matches: June All dates Eastern Time (GMT-4)

|                     |                               |
|---------------------|-------------------------------|
| 14 Sweden - Tunisia | 24 South Africa - South Korea |
| 21 Tunisia - Japan  | 29 Round of 32 match          |

Source: FIFA

Picture: Getty Images

© GRAPHIC NEWS

## Estadio Akron

FIFA: Estadio Guadalajara, Zapopan  
Type: Cantilevered "floating" roof with permanent natural grass pitch

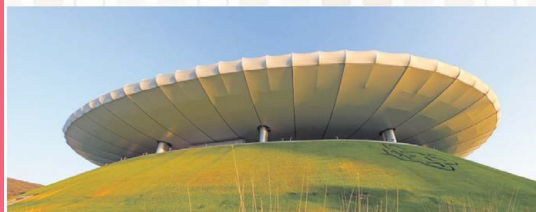
Opened: 2010

Capacity: 48,000

Set more than 1,600m above sea level, altitude and wet-season conditions could prove factor during tournament



Temperature: 31°C  
(Avg. daily Jun high)



Matches: June All dates Eastern Time (GMT-4)

|                          |                        |
|--------------------------|------------------------|
| 11 South Korea - Czechia | 23 Colombia - DR Congo |
| 18 Mexico - South Korea  | 26 Uruguay - Spain     |

Source: FIFA

Picture: Getty Images

© GRAPHIC NEWS

## Estadio Banorte

FIFA: Mexico City Stadium  
Type: Football cauldron, partial canopy with permanent hybrid grass surface

Opened: 1966

Capacity: 83,000

Affectionately known as **Estadio Azteca** - will become first stadium to host matches at three FIFA World Cup tournaments



Temperature: 25°C  
(Avg. daily Jun high)



Matches: June June / July All dates Eastern Time (GMT-4)

|                          |                      |
|--------------------------|----------------------|
| 11 Mexico - South Africa | 30 Round of 32 match |
| 17 Uzbekistan - Colombia | 5 Round of 16 match  |
| 24 Czechia - Mexico      |                      |

Source: FIFA

Picture: Getty Images

© GRAPHIC NEWS

## BMO Field

FIFA: Toronto Stadium, Ontario  
Type: Three-sided cantilever canopy with permanent hybrid grass surface

Opened: 2007

Capacity: 45,000

Hosts opening match for Canada - upgraded capacity during tournament with 17,000 temporary seats added at each end of stadium



Temperature: 30°C  
(Avg. daily Jun high)



Matches: June June / July All dates Eastern Time (GMT-4)

|                                |                     |
|--------------------------------|---------------------|
| 12 Canada - Bosnia-Herzegovina | 23 Panama - Croatia |
| 17 Ghana - Panama              | 26 Senegal - Iraq   |
| 20 Germany - Côte d'Ivoire     | 2 Round of 32 match |

Source: FIFA

Picture: Getty Images

© GRAPHIC NEWS

## Mercedes-Benz Stadium

FIFA: Atlanta Stadium, Georgia  
Type: Retractable eight-petal roof system with movable natural grass tray pitch

Opened: 2017

Capacity: 75,000

Built at reported cost of \$1.6bn. Features 360-degree wrap-around "halo" video screen - 327m long and uses over 37 million LEDs



Temperature: 30°C  
(Avg. daily Jun high)



Matches: June June / July All dates Eastern Time (GMT-4)

|                           |                          |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| 15 Spain - Cabo Verde     | 27 DR Congo - Uzbekistan |
| 18 Czechia - South Africa | 1 Round of 32 match      |
| 21 Spain - Saudi Arabia   | 7 Round of 16 match      |
| 24 Morocco - Haiti        | 15 Second semi-final     |

Source: FIFA

Picture: Getty Images

© GRAPHIC NEWS

## BC Place

FIFA: BC Place Vancouver  
Type: Retractable cable-supported roof with temporary natural grass pitch

Opened: 1983

Capacity: 54,000

Hosted opening and closing ceremonies for 2010 Winter Olympics and 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup final



Temperature: 21°C  
(Avg. daily Jun high)



Matches: June June / July All dates Eastern Time (GMT-4)

|                         |                          |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| 14 Australia - Türkiye  | 26 New Zealand - Belgium |
| 18 Canada - Qatar       | 2 Round of 32 match      |
| 21 New Zealand - Egypt  | 7 Round of 16 match      |
| 24 Switzerland - Canada |                          |

Source: FIFA

Picture: Getty Images

© GRAPHIC NEWS

# STADIUMS



# FIFA World Cup 2026 match schedule

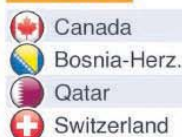
The 39-day tournament launches with the opening match in Mexico City on June 11, and reaches a climax with the showpiece final at the MetLife Stadium on July 19

Top two from each group plus eight best third-placed teams progress to **knockout stage**

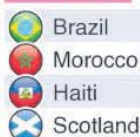
## GROUP A



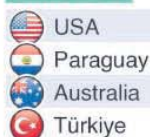
## GROUP B



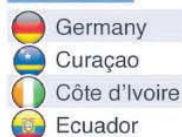
## GROUP C



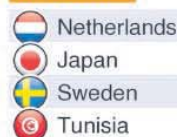
## GROUP D



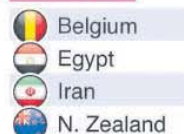
## GROUP E



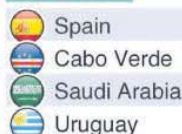
## GROUP F



## GROUP G



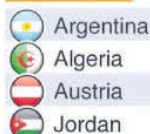
## GROUP H



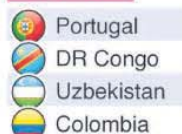
## GROUP I



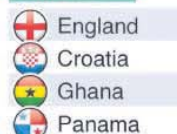
## GROUP J



## GROUP K



## GROUP L



## Group stage

All dates: June

All kick-off times Eastern Time (GMT-4)

|                                         |                                           |                                         |                                        |
|-----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| <b>A</b> 11 Mexico - South Africa 15:00 | <b>J</b> 16 Argentina - Algeria 21:00     | <b>G</b> 21 Belgium - Iran 15:00        | <b>D</b> 25 Türkiye - USA 21:00        |
| South Korea - Czechia 22:00             | <b>K</b> 17 Austria - Jordan 00:00        | New Zealand - Egypt 21:00               | Paraguay - Australia 21:00             |
| <b>B</b> 12 Canada - Bosnia-Herz. 15:00 | <b>L</b> 18 England - Croatia 16:00       | <b>H</b> Spain - Saudi Arabia 12:00     | <b>E</b> Curaçao - Côte d'Ivoire 12:00 |
| <b>D</b> USA - Paraguay 21:00           | Ghana - Panama 19:00                      | Uruguay - Cabo Verde 18:00              | Ecuador - Germany 18:00                |
| <b>B</b> 13 Qatar - Switzerland 15:00   | <b>A</b> 18 Czechia - South Africa 12:00  | <b>I</b> 22 France - Iraq 17:00         | <b>F</b> Japan - Sweden 18:00          |
| <b>C</b> Brazil - Morocco 18:00         | Mexico - South Korea 21:00                | Norway - Senegal 20:00                  | Tunisia - Netherlands 18:00            |
| Haiti - Scotland 21:00                  | <b>B</b> Switzerland - Bosnia-H. 15:00    | <b>J</b> Argentina - Austria 13:00      | <b>G</b> 26 Egypt - Iran 21:00         |
| <b>D</b> 14 Australia - Türkiye 00:00   | Canada - Qatar 18:00                      | Jordan - Algeria 23:00                  | New Zealand - Belgium 21:00            |
| <b>E</b> Germany - Curaçao 13:00        | <b>C</b> 19 Scotland - Morocco 18:00      | <b>K</b> 23 Portugal - Uzbekistan 13:00 | <b>H</b> Cabo Verde - S. Arabia 12:00  |
| Côte d'Ivoire - Ecuador 19:00           | Brazil - Haiti 20:30                      | Colombia - DR Congo 22:00               | Uruguay - Spain 18:00                  |
| <b>F</b> Netherlands - Japan 16:00      | <b>D</b> USA - Australia 15:00            | England - Ghana 16:00                   | <b>I</b> Norway - France 19:00         |
| Sweden - Tunisia 22:00                  | Türkiye - Paraguay 23:00                  | Panama - Croatia 19:00                  | Senegal - Iraq 18:00                   |
| <b>G</b> 15 Belgium - Egypt 15:00       | <b>E</b> 20 Germany - Côte d'Ivoire 16:00 | <b>A</b> 24 Czechia - Mexico 21:00      | <b>J</b> 27 Algeria - Austria 13:00    |
| Iran - New Zealand 21:00                | Ecuador - Curaçao 20:00                   | South Africa - S. Korea 21:00           | Jordan - Argentina 18:00               |
| <b>H</b> Spain - Cabo Verde 12:00       | <b>F</b> Netherlands - Sweden 13:00       | <b>B</b> Switzerland - Canada 15:00     | <b>K</b> Colombia - Portugal 18:00     |
| Saudi Arabia - Uruguay 18:00            | <b>21</b> Tunisia - Japan 00:00           | Bosnia-Herz. - Qatar 15:00              | DR Congo - Uzbekistan 18:00            |
| <b>I</b> 16 France - Senegal 15:00      |                                           | <b>C</b> Scotland - Brazil 18:00        | <b>L</b> Panama - England 18:00        |
| Iraq - Norway 18:00                     |                                           | Morocco - Haiti 18:00                   | Croatia - Ghana 18:00                  |

## Knockout stage

If scores level after 90 mins plus 30 mins of extra-time, match is decided on penalties

### Round of 32

|                                        |              |
|----------------------------------------|--------------|
| Jun 29 <b>E1 - A-B-C-D-F3</b>          | Round of 16  |
| Boston, Gillette Stadium               | Jul 4        |
| Jun 30 <b>I1 - C-D-F-G-H3</b>          | Philadelphia |
| New York / New Jersey, MetLife Stadium | Jul 4        |
| Jun 28 <b>A2 - B2</b>                  | Boston       |
| Los Angeles, SoFi Stadium              | Jul 4        |
| Jun 29 <b>F1 - C2</b>                  | Houston      |
| Monterrey, Estadio BBVA                | Jul 6        |
| Jul 2 <b>K2 - L2</b>                   | Dallas       |
| Toronto, BMO Field                     | Jul 6        |
| Jul 2 <b>H1 - J2</b>                   | Dallas       |
| Los Angeles, SoFi Stadium              | Jul 10       |
| Jul 1 <b>D1 - B-E-F-I-J3</b>           | Los Angeles  |
| San Francisco Bay Area, Levi's Stadium | Jul 6        |
| Jul 1 <b>G1 - A-E-H-I-J3</b>           | Seattle      |
| Seattle, Lumen Field                   |              |





# STADIUMS

## Gillette Stadium

FIFA: Boston Stadium, Massachusetts

Type: Open-air NFL bowl with artificial playing surface

Opened: 2002

Capacity: 65,000

Home to six-time Super Bowl winners **New England Patriots**. \$250m renovation in 2023 added 66m lighthouse heritage feature



Temperature: 24°C (Avg. daily Jun high)



Matches: June

13 Haiti - Scotland

16 Iraq - Norway

19 Scotland - Morocco

23 England - Ghana

June / July

26 Norway - France

29 Round of 32 match

9 First quarter-final

All dates Eastern Time (GMT-4)

Source: FIFA

Picture: Getty Images

© GRAPHIC NEWS

## AT&T Stadium

FIFA: Dallas Stadium, Texas

Type: Retractable roof with sliding panels and artificial playing surface

Opened: 2009

Capacity: 94,000

Home to five-time Super Bowl winners **Dallas Cowboys**. Futuristic \$1.2bn stadium renovated at cost of \$295m ahead of showpiece



Temperature: 33°C (Avg. daily Jun high)



Matches: June

14 Netherlands - Japan

17 England - Croatia

22 Argentina - Austria

25 Japan - Sweden

27 Jordan - Argentina

June / July

30 Round of 32 match

3 Round of 32 match

6 Round of 16 match

14 First semi-final

All dates Eastern Time (GMT-4)

Source: FIFA

© GRAPHIC NEWS

## MetLife Stadium

FIFA: New York New Jersey Stadium

Type: Open-air NFL bowl with artificial playing surface

Opened: 2010

Capacity: 82,500

Round-trip 18-mile (29km) journey from Penn Station in Manhattan to New Jersey has increased 11-fold - now costing \$150



Temperature: 27°C (Avg. daily Jun high)



Matches: June

13 Brazil - Morocco

16 France - Senegal

22 Norway - Senegal

25 Ecuador - Germany

June / July

27 Panama - England

30 Round of 32 match

5 Round of 16 match

19 FIFA World Cup Final

All dates Eastern Time (GMT-4)

Source: FIFA

Picture: Getty Images

© GRAPHIC NEWS

## Lincoln Financial Field

FIFA: Philadelphia Stadium, PA

Type: Continuous NFL bowl with open corners and artificial pitch

Opened: 2003

Capacity: 69,000

Home to the **Philadelphia Eagles**. Features more than 10,000 solar panels, offsetting approximately third of stadium's annual energy usage



Temperature: 29°C (Avg. daily Jun high)



Matches: June

14 Côte d'Ivoire - Ecuador

19 Brazil - Haiti

22 France - Iraq

June / July

25 Curaçao - Côte d'Ivoire

27 Croatia - Ghana

4 Round of 16 match

All dates Eastern Time (GMT-4)

Source: FIFA

Picture: Getty Images

© GRAPHIC NEWS

22:00

a 22:00

oire 16:00

/ 16:00

19:00

ds 19:00

23:00

gium 23:00

abia 20:00

20:00

15:00

15:00

22:00

22:00

il 19:30

istan 19:30

17:00

17:00

Round of 32

- F2 Jun 29

NRG Stadium

2 - I2 Jun 30

AT&T Stadium

-H-I3 Jun 30

Radio Banorte\*

J-K3 Jul 1

Benz Stadium

- H2 Jul 3

Rock Stadium

- G2 Jul 3

AT&T Stadium

-I-I3 Jul 2

ver, BC Place

-J-L3 Jul 3

head Stadium

GRAPHIC NEWS

## STADIUMS

## NRG Stadium

FIFA: Houston Stadium, Texas  
 Type: Fully retractable roof with two sliding panels – artificial turf  
 Opened: 2002  
 Capacity: 72,000

Built for \$352m, features full climate control, designed for extreme heat and humidity. Hosted *Copa America* in 2016 and 2024



Temperature: 32°C  
 (Avg. daily Jun high)



| Matches: June            | June / July All dates Eastern Time (GMT-4) |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| 14 Germany - Curaçao     | 26 Cabo Verde - Saudi Arabia               |
| 17 Portugal - DR Congo   | 29 Round of 32 match                       |
| 20 Netherlands - Sweden  | 4 Round of 16 match                        |
| 23 Portugal - Uzbekistan |                                            |

Source: FIFA

Picture: Getty Images

© GRAPHIC NEWS

## GEHA Field at Arrowhead Stadium

FIFA: Kansas City Stadium, Missouri  
 Type: Horseshoe-style NFL bowl with artificial grass  
 Opened: 1972  
 Capacity: 73,000

Home to four-time Super Bowl winners *Kansas City Chiefs*. Renovated in 2010, at cost of \$375m



Temperature: 30°C  
 (Avg. daily Jun high)



| Matches: June            | June / July All dates Eastern Time (GMT-4) |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| 16 Argentina - Algeria   | 27 Algeria - Austria                       |
| 20 Ecuador - Curaçao     | 3 Round of 32 match                        |
| 25 Tunisia - Netherlands | 11 Fourth quarter-final                    |

Source: FIFA

Picture: Getty Images

© GRAPHIC NEWS

## Levi's Stadium

FIFA: San Francisco Bay Area Stadium  
 Type: Partial cantilever solar shading canopy with hybrid-reinforced natural grass  
 Opened: 2014  
 Capacity: 71,000

Home to five-time Super Bowl champions *49ers*. \$200m renovation improved drainage, ventilation and pitch configuration



Temperature: 19°C  
 (Avg. daily Jun high)



| Matches: June          | June / July All dates Eastern Time (GMT-4) |
|------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| 13 Qatar - Switzerland | 22 Jordan - Algeria                        |
| 17 Austria - Jordan    | 25 Paraguay - Australia                    |
| 19 Türkiye - Paraguay  | 1 Round of 32 match                        |

Source: FIFA

Picture: Getty Images

© GRAPHIC NEWS

## Lumen Field

FIFA: Seattle Stadium, Washington  
 Type: Cantilever canopy designed for acoustic enhancement and artificial pitch  
 Opened: 2002  
 Capacity: 69,000

Temporary grass pitch performed poorly during 2025 FIFA Club World Cup, drawing criticism over inconsistent ball behaviour



Temperature: 22°C  
 (Avg. daily Jun high)



| Matches: June                 | June / July All dates Eastern Time (GMT-4) |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| 15 Belgium - Egypt            | 26 Egypt - Iran                            |
| 19 USA - Australia            | 1 Round of 32 match                        |
| 24 Bosnia-Herzegovina - Qatar | 6 Round of 16 match                        |

Source: FIFA

Picture: Getty Images

© GRAPHIC NEWS

## SoFi Stadium

FIFA: Los Angeles Stadium, California  
 Type: 90,000m² translucent canopy with mobile natural grass pitch system  
 Opened: 2020  
 Capacity: 70,000

Most expensive stadium ever built, at reported cost of \$5.5bn. Canopy held up by 37 earthquake-resistant columns, promoting air flow



Temperature: 26°C  
 (Avg. daily Jun high)



| Matches: June                 | June / July All dates Eastern Time (GMT-4) |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| 12 United States - Paraguay   | 25 Türkiye - United States                 |
| 15 Iran - New Zealand         | 28 Round of 32 match                       |
| 18 Switzerland - Bosnia-Herz. | 2 Round of 32 match                        |
| 21 Belgium - Iran             | 10 Second quarter-final                    |

Source: FIFA

Picture: Getty Images

© GRAPHIC NEWS

## Hard Rock Stadium

FIFA: Miami Stadium, Florida  
 Type: Open-air NFL bowl with fixed canopy and natural grass surface  
 Opened: 1987  
 Capacity: 65,000

Lack of climate control exposes stadium to challenging conditions, with extreme heat and humidity in June and July



Temperature: 30°C  
 (Avg. daily Jun high)



| Matches: June             | July All dates Eastern Time (GMT-4) |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 13 Saudi Arabia - Uruguay | 3 Round of 32 match                 |
| 21 Uruguay - Cabo Verde   | 11 Third quarter-final              |
| 24 Scotland - Brazil      | 18 Bronze final                     |
| 27 Colombia - Portugal    |                                     |

Source: FIFA

Picture: Getty Images

© GRAPHIC NEWS

# Amid disruption of war, Iran's aging squad eye progress

**TEHRAN--The build-up to Iran's fourth straight World Cup appearance has been heavily disrupted by the conflict with the United States and Israel, leaving coach Amir Ghalenoei little time to raise fitness levels and develop match sharpness in his aging squad.**

All but six of Ghalenoei's squad are based in the country's Persian Gulf Pro League, which has been suspended for weeks as a result of the hostilities. The coach acknowledged that the World Cup will be the last time many of the senior players represent the side.

"We hope to put on acceptable performances at the World Cup, and then prepare for the Asian Cup, because after the World Cup we will also undergo a generational change," he said recently.

Iran are grouped with New Zealand, Belgium and Egypt at the June 11 to July 19 tournament, which repre-

sents a final shot at success for many in a squad that had previously been expected to reach the knockout rounds for the first time but came up short. In each of Iran's six appearances at the World Cup, stretching back to their debut in 1978, the country has exited the competition at the end of the group phase, achieving only three wins in 18 matches.

The most agonising of those eliminations have come in the last two editions, with Iran picking up wins over Morocco in 2018 and Wales in 2022 only to miss out on the last 16. Many of the key performers from those two tournaments, when Iran were coached by Carlos Queiroz, remain in the squad and 16 are at least 30, including defenders Shoja Khalilzadeh (37) and Ehsan Hajsafi (36).

Another member of the old guard is striker Mehdi Taremi, once a potent scorer in the UEFA Champions League with Porto but who, at 33, lacks some



Iran's Sardar Azmoun scores a goal against United Arab Emirates.

of the threat of the past. Taremi has been denied his regular strike partner Sardar Azmoun, who has not

been selected, while captain Alireza Jahanbakhsh will be playing at his fourth finals.

Despite the creaking limbs of many within the squad, the Iranians will be confident of reaching the last 32

at the expanded tournament, with a third-place finish in the group possibly enough to secure progress.

## Captain Wood key for New Zealand

**AUCKLAND--Captain Chris Wood will carry New Zealand's hopes on their long-awaited return to the World Cup as the unfancied All Whites target a breakthrough win and a first trip to the knockout phase.**

The 34-year-old striker is coming off an injury-blighted season for Nottingham Forest but he remains New Zealand's attacking spearhead and emotional leader as they prepare for their third World Cup and first since South Africa in 2010.

Wood also provides a vital link to the All Whites' past as a member of the Ricki Herbert-coached 2010 squad who bowed out at the group phase but won acclaim after drawing matches against Slovakia, Italy and Paraguay. With only two players remaining from that squad, the other being 36-year-old defender Tommy Smith, that experience will be important in a roster of World Cup debutants who are easily the lowest-ranked in Group G against Iran, Egypt and Belgium.

With 45 goals from 88



New Zealand players pose for a team group photo before the match REUTERS/Clodagh Kilcoyne/File Photo

matches, Wood is New Zealand's all-time leading scorer and their only player in a top European league. His World Cup was

in doubt until recently, though, following surgery on a chronic knee injury in December. The knee will require careful manage-

ment at the World Cup, said former All Whites boss Herbert.

"Chris's time on the pitch

is going to be incredibly important, so hopefully he can manage his body through the whole three games," Herbert told Re-

uters. "Then it's a matter of who you put around him."

Like nations such as Curaçao and Haiti, the expanded 48-team World Cup has been a blessing for Darren Bazeley's All Whites, with the Oceania region granted an automatic berth at the finals for the first time. Previously, New Zealand had to win an intercontinental playoff to qualify and fell at that hurdle for the last three tournaments in Qatar, Russia and Brazil.

Their armchair ride to this year's finals, patchy lead-up form and fitness clouds over a slew of players have few backing them to make much of an impression. The squad lacks a genuine midfield game-breaker and will struggle to cover for Wood if injury strikes.

But unlike many mid-tier nations, New Zealand know who they are and what they stand for: discipline, defence and dogged commitment. Those qualities alone have frustrated more talented opponents. Throw in a goal or two from a semi-fit Wood and New Zealand might spring a surprise.

# GROUP H

## Spain hope teenage tornado Yamal is fit to light up football's biggest stage

**MADRID--Lamine Yamal has spent the last two years treating football's age records like training cones, with the 18-year-old swerving past them with a grin, a drop of the shoulder and that wicked left foot Spain hope will be fully loaded at the World Cup.**

The Barcelona winger may be the most exciting player in the most thrilling team heading to the finals but Spain's excitement comes with anxiety after his season was complicated by groin trouble and a serious hamstring injury sustained in April.

Yamal exploded into view

at 16 and became an integral part of Spain's record fourth European Championship triumph in 2024. His curling long-range strike against France made him the youngest scorer in the tournament's history and helped Spain to reach the final, where they beat England in Berlin.

By then, "Lamine Fever" had already taken hold. His father had caused a stir by posting a 2007 photograph of baby Yamal in the arms of Lionel Messi, who was then a 20-year-old Barca forward posing for a charity calendar.

His dad called it "just a life coincidence" on Spanish

television. When a reporter suggested Messi may have somehow blessed the baby with his talent, Yamal's mother replied: "What if it was the other way around? Can you imagine if they face each other in a hypothetical final in New Jersey?"

Born in Spain to a Moroccan father and a mother from Equatorial Guinea, Yamal is the latest gem from a country that has become one of European football's richest production lines. Following Barcelona academy graduates Gavi and Ansu Fati, Yamal quickly became central for club and country.

At Euro 2024, he led Spain

in assists, key passes and clear chances created, tormenting defenders down the right with pace, technique and vision. After his semi-final stunner against France, Spain coach Luis de la Fuente said: "We have seen genius from a genius."

That triumph sparked a dazzling 2024-25 campaign in which Yamal helped Barca to win a La Liga-Copa

del Rey double and finished second to Paris St Germain's Ousmane Dembele in the Ballon d'Or voting, becoming the youngest player to reach that position.

This season was bumpier but still productive. Yamal helped Barcelona to retain their LaLiga crown, became the first player to win the league's Player of the Month award three times in one

season and finished as the club's top scorer with 16 goals and 11 assists before injury cut him down.

Spain start Group H against Cape Verde in Atlanta on June 15 before facing Saudi Arabia and Uruguay. Their fans are holding their breath. If Yamal is fit, so will rival defenders.



Spain's Lamine Yamal scores a goal from the penalty spot.

## European champions Spain are the team to beat

**MADRID--Spain have spent the last two years making international football look like a problem someone else has to solve and as the World Cup looms the question for the other 47 teams is blunt enough -- who can stop Luis de la Fuente's red machine?**

The European champions arrive at the tournament with a record fourth continental title behind them, a dazzling collective identity and the air of a side who have discovered the rarest of tournament ingredients -- style with steel.

Their Euro 2024 triumph in Germany was not built on

one irresistible individual but on a swarm of them. Spain won every match, played fast, direct, fearless football and repeatedly found answers from the bench when matches began asking awkward questions.

The final against England told the story neatly. Substitute Mikel Oyarzabal be-

came the 10th Spain player to score at Euro 2024 when he helped to craft and then finished the 86th-minute goal that sealed a 2-1 win. It was Spain's 15th goal of the tournament, the most by any team at a Euros.

At the centre of it all is De la Fuente, once mocked online as "Luis de la Who?"

after his appointment in 2023 following more than a decade working in Spain's youth system. Nearly four years later, the joke has aged about as well as a banana left in a gym bag.

De la Fuente's strength is that this group has not been hastily assembled. He has worked before with many of the players travelling to North America, including Rodri, Mikel Merino and Fabian Ruiz, who were part of his success with the Under-19 and Under-21 sides.

Nobody, though, has flourished more spectacularly than Lamine Yamal. The Barcelona winger exploded into global view as a 16-year-old and was an integral part of the Euro 2024 triumph.

That launched him into a remarkable 2024-25 season, when he helped Barca to win a LaLiga-Copa del Rey double and finished close to Paris St Germain's Ousmane Dembele in the Ballon d'Or voting. This season has been less smooth but still successful, as he was Barcelona's MVP in their successful LaLiga title defence.

Now 18, Yamal has dealt with a lingering groin problem and is racing to recover from a serious hamstring

injury sustained in late April, leaving Spain anxiously waiting to see whether he will reach the World Cup in peak condition.

De la Fuente has other problems too. Merino has been sidelined for months with a broken foot, Barca attacking midfielder Fermin Lopez will miss the tournament with a similar fracture and Nico Williams has also struggled with groin and hamstring issues.

Yet Spain's great trick has been continuity through disruption. They keep the same shape, tempo and bite whoever plays, retaining their essence without a traditional number nine and with attacking threats scattered across the pitch.

Their shootout loss to Portugal in last year's Nations League final was a rare sting. Otherwise, De la Fuente's Spain have rattled through 33 matches with 28 wins, three draws and two defeats.

The World Cup will test whether that rhythm can survive heat, travel, injuries and expectation in Group H against Cape Verde, Saudi Arabia and Uruguay. For now, Spain look less like hopefuls than the team everyone else must chase.



Spain players pose for a team group photo.

# Third time lucky? 'Toxic' Bielsa chases elusive glory with Uruguay

**MONTEVIDEO**--Marcelo Bielsa heads to another World Cup seeking a breakthrough with Uruguay, after a disappointing 2002 campaign in charge of his native Argentina and a positive but trophy-less spell with Chile, in a

tenure already marked by renewal and controversy.

Appointed in 2023 after Diego Alonso's departure, the much-travelled 70-year-old coach has driven a generational overhaul at the twice world champions, imposing

his trademark high-pressing, high-intensity attacking style.

Bielsa was tasked with moving Uruguay on from a generation led by the likes of forwards Edinson Cavani and Luis Suarez, who

guided them to a World Cup semi-final in 2010 and the 2011 Copa America title but could never replicate those achievements. With players such as Real Madrid midfielder Federico Valverde, Al-Hilal forward Darwin Nunez and Barcelo-

na defender Ronald Araujo, Uruguay quickly recaptured their competitiveness under Bielsa, raising expectations among fans.

Early results supported the project, including a Copa America semi-final appearance in 2024. Performances, however, have sometimes been inconsistent, exposing tactical and physical limits.

The side finished South American qualifying in fourth place, having defeated powerhouses Brazil and Argentina but drawing with last-placed Chile. Recent friendlies included a draw with England at Wembley and a 5-1 defeat by the United States.

Off the pitch, tensions have been stoked. Public criticism from the team's all-time leading scorer Suarez, now playing for Inter Miami, and internal disagreements have raised questions about squad management and the human cost of Bielsa's methods.

"I'm toxic. Being around me makes people worse," Bielsa told a press conference after the U.S. game in November when he said he would re-

main in charge in one of the most tense moments of his tenure. He has since added that his job ends after the World Cup.

Bielsa left a strong mark on Argentina, guiding an impressive qualifying campaign but carrying the burden of failure at the 2002 World Cup, where his side exited in the group stage despite being among the favourites.

In Chile, he helped to transform the national team, returning them to the World Cup in 2010 and laying the foundations for the country's "golden generation", but departed before their 2015 and 2016 Copa America triumphs.

Uruguay will now seek to prove whether Bielsa's demanding approach can turn early impact into cohesion and results on the biggest stage, or repeat a pattern seen throughout his career. The 1930 and 1950 winners open their Group H campaign against Saudi Arabia on June 15 in Miami before facing Cape Verde at the same venue and Spain in Guadalajara.



Uruguay's Federico Valverde celebrates scoring a goal with Darwin Nunez.



**Join us anytime for  
WORLD CUP action!!!**

**Watch all  
the games on  
5 big screen  
TVs!!!**



**GAME SPECIALS!**

**Half price on all  
Beers & mix drinks**

**Breakfast Special  
\$7.00**

**Lunch Special  
\$12.00**



cappuccinosxm



cappuccinorestaurant st. maarten

**TEL: 544-3331**

**Welfare Rd. # 83, Simpson Bay**

# Cape Verde's progress is much more than fairytale

**LONDON--Cape Verde are the only African newcomers in this year's World Cup and with a population of around 600,000 are the third smallest nation to qualify in the tournament's long history.**

But with a squad drawn from the island nation's large diaspora, they have been competitive for more than a decade and their progress to the finals is less of a fairytale than portrayed. They will kick off against European champions Spain on June 15 followed by Uruguay (June 21) and Saudi Arabia (June 26).

Cape Verde's team are drawn from the communities dotted around Europe, a legacy of centuries of migration from the arid, windswept islands on the west coast of Africa and, dipping into this talent pool, have seen their side rapidly advance from being minnows on the African continent to earning a World Cup berth.

Two decades ago they had

barely played any international football, averaging two games a year from 1986 when they joined world governing body FIFA, to 1990 when they competed in World Cup qualifiers for the first time, ranked 182nd in the world. But they progressed rapidly after that, boosted by the quality of players born, or who grew up, in former colonial power Portugal and others from France and the Netherlands. A disproportionate number of players from the Delfshaven neighbourhood in the Dutch port city of Rotterdam have made a strong contribution to the cause.

In their debut Africa Cup of Nations finals appearance in 2013, Cape Verde reached the quarter-finals, prompting their coach to burst into song at the post-match press conference. They did so again at the 2023 edition in the Ivory Coast, unlucky to be eliminated on penalties.

They also came close to qualifying for the 2014 World Cup in Brazil but were deducted points for erroneously fielding a sus-



Cape Verde players pose for a team group photo.

pended player, thereby missing out on the play-offs where they would have been two games away from reaching the finals.

Finishing in the qualifying group for the 2026 finals

ahead of Cameroon, whose eight previous World Cup appearances are an African record, is further testament to Cape Verde's place among the continent's top teams.

"We've always been aware of our talent but we haven't always believed that it could take us much further than we had achieved up to that point," said manager Bubi-sta, named African Coach of the Year in 2025, of the

start of the qualifying campaign. "Therefore, it took courage to face any opponent. The first step in our success was truly believing in our potential. In other words, we changed the players' mindset."

# Saudi Arabia's World Cup hopes clouded by late coaching change

**CAIRO--Saudi Arabia head to the World Cup facing renewed questions after sacking Herve Renard, the coach who engineered one of the greatest upsets in tournament history by leading them to victory over eventual champions Argentina four years ago.**

The Frenchman was dismissed in April, less than two months before the finals in North America, after a disappointing run of results raised concerns over Saudi Arabia's readiness for the expanded 48-team tournament.

Renard's place in Saudi football folklore was secured in Doha in 2022, when Salem Al-Dawsari's stunning winner sealed a 2-1 victory over Lionel Messi's Argentina in one of the World Cup's biggest shocks. Saudi Arabia brought Renard back in 2024 after a brief and unsuccessful spell under Italian Roberto Mancini, hoping he could restore the discipline and intensity that defined their 2022 campaign despite their group-stage exit.

Instead, the team struggled for consistency, highlighted by a 4-0 thrashing by Egypt and a 2-1 defeat by Serbia in pre-World Cup friendlies, prompting the Saudi federation to make a late managerial change before a daunting Group H

campaign featuring European champions Spain, Uruguay and Cape Verde.

Saudi Arabia turned to Greek coach Georgios Donis in an attempt to steady the ship. The former Blackburn Rov-

ers and Sheffield United midfielder arrived with extensive coaching experience in Saudi football, but this marks his first foray into international management.

Saudi Arabia's dip in form has also reignited debate over the impact of the Saudi Pro League's rapid transformation. Since Cristiano Ronaldo's move to Al-Nassr in late 2022 triggered an influx of global stars, the domestic league has become one of the region's highest-profile competitions, with clubs allowed to register up to 10 foreign players.

The spending spree has boosted attendances, television audiences and international visibility, but critics say it has come at a cost to the national team, with Saudi internationals increasingly losing playing time at club level.

Captain Salem Al-Dawsari remains the team's talisman and one of Asia's most dangerous attacking players, but Saudi Arabia arrive at the tournament with far less momentum than they carried into Qatar four years ago. They can, though, draw inspiration from the tournament's return to the United States, where the Saudis enjoyed their finest World Cup run by reaching the last 16 on their debut in 1994.



Saudi Arabia's Salem Al-Dawsari in action with Australia's Jason Geria.

# GROUP I

## Last dance for Deschamps as France chase glory again

PARIS--For France's Didier Deschamps, the 2026 World Cup is not just another tournament, it is the closing chapter of one of international football's most successful managerial reigns.

Midas touch has already confirmed that he will step down after the finals in the United States, Canada

and Mexico, ending a tenure that began in 2012. It has seen Les Bleus become world champions in 2018, win the Nations League in 2021 and reach a second straight World Cup final in 2022. He also captained them to a first global crown in 1998, making his place in French football history secure.

What remains to be defined is the size of the statue. Deschamps has never been universally loved in France. His football has often been described as pragmatic, his selection choices conserva-

tive, his instinct for control sometimes at odds with the attacking talent available to him.

The criticism grew after Euro 2024, when France reached the semi-finals but looked laboured, short of fluency and overly dependent on moments rather than rhythm. Yet Deschamps's answer has always been the same: tournament football is about survival, balance and winning the key moments. Few have done that better.

France start this year's finals with Kylian Mbappe at the centre of the project and a squad to make most rivals envious. Players such as Ballon d'Or winner Ousmane Dembele and Paris St Germain teammates Desire Doue and Bradley Barcola give France the unpredictability that has defined the Deschamps years.

Mike Maignan has authority in goal, William Saliba, Ibrahima Konate and Dayot Upamecano provide elite defensive options, while Aurelien Tchouameni and Adrien Rabiot offer power and control in midfield.

But this campaign carries a different emotional charge as Zinedine Zidane's name already hangs over the managerial succession, a reminder that even before a ball is kicked France are

preparing for life after Deschamps. The draw has also given his final mission an edge. France are in Group I with Senegal, Norway and Iraq, a lineup with awkward history and real danger.

Senegal's 1-0 win over champions France in the opening match of the 2002 World Cup remains one of the tournament's great shocks, while Norway arrive with Erling Haaland and a qualification campaign that restored them as a serious threat.

For Deschamps, that may suit the narrative. His France team have rarely needed romance to thrive. They are built for pressure, knockout tension and the cold management of risk. The question is whether that formula still has one last surge left.

If France fall short, Deschamps will still leave as a transformative figure who restored his country as a permanent World Cup power. But if he wins the title again, the 57-year-old will move beyond a national great into something closer to football immortality even if his team have never won the Euros, falling at the last hurdle at home in 2016.

This is his last dance and, for once, even Deschamps cannot make it feel routine.



France players pose for a team group photo.

## OLISE'S RISE GIVES FRANCE ANOTHER POTENTIAL STAR

PARIS--France forward Michael Olise arrived at Bayern Munich a year ago as one of Europe's most gifted dribblers. Heading towards the World Cup, he increasingly looks like a player capable of becoming one of the tournament's defining figures.

France have no shortage of attacking talent but few players in the squad combine improvisation, control and efficiency quite like the 24-year-old, whose rise in Munich has altered his club status and place in the national team hierarchy.

At Crystal Palace, the London-born Olise was admired for elegance and unpredictability, a left-footed winger capable of producing moments others could barely imagine. However, at Bayern, he has learned to dominate elite matches regularly, under pressure that can suffocate less mature attacking players.

A craftsman who plays at his own tempo, capable of slowing the pace at chaotic moments before suddenly accelerating it again with a disguised pass, a feint or a change of direction, Olise has what it takes to be the star of the World Cup. He no longer looks like a luxury winger drifting through games on inspiration alone but has become one of Bayern's focal points - a player through whom attacks increasingly breathe.

France manager Didier Deschamps has traditionally been cautious with gifted attacking players, demanding balance and defensive discipline before granting complete trust, but his praise for Olise has steadily grown.

"He has a lot of ease, technically," the France coach said after one of Olise's early international appearances. "And he has the ability to make the right choices."

That decision-making may ultimately separate Olise from many other spec-

tacular wide players. Where Kylian Mbappe overwhelms opponents with strength and directness and Ousmane Dembele with trickery and acceleration, Olise manipulates games more subtly, drawing defenders into spaces they realise too late they should never have entered.

Former Palace manager Roy Hodgson once described Olise as possessing "special quality", while Bayern coach Vincent Kompany has praised his calmness and football intelligence. There are still details to refine before the World Cup, and Deschamps



Michael Olise of France celebrates after scoring a goal later disallowed.

remains obsessed with collective balance. Yet Olise increasingly appears built for tournament football. He has the qualities modern tournaments reward most - the ability to bypass defenders

one-on-one, survive pressure in tight spaces and unlock matches that are tactically paralysed.

When France arrive in North America, the man

most capable of seizing the imagination may be Olise, who plays as if the game is moving half a second slower for him than for everyone else.

# Norway dream big but defensive doubts cloud potential fairytale

**OSLO--Norway will arrive at the World Cup carrying the weight of a golden generation and the anxiety that comes with it.**

After a dominant qualifying campaign powered by some of Europe's biggest names, Stale Solbakken's side look equipped to turn long-held promise into a national fairytale. But for a country with decades of tournament disappointment and a reputation for stumbling when expectation peaks, belief is still

mixed with hesitation.

At the centre of their transformation is Erling Haaland. The Manchester City striker enters the tournament in his prime at 25, having torn through the qualifiers with 16 goals, including five against Moldova and a decisive double in the final qualifier against Italy.

For a nation starved of World Cup memories, Haaland gives Norway not just hope but a reason to

dream bigger. The attacking cast around him is no afterthought. Atletico Madrid's Alexander Sorloth offers a powerful foil alongside Haaland, while RB Leipzig winger Antonio Nusa brings incision and unpredictability from wide areas.

Oscar Bobb, Andreas Schjelderup and Jorgen Strand Larsen could give Solbakken further options, making Norway's forward line one of the most imposing and dangerous at the tournament.

Yet the key may be Arsenal's Martin Odegaard. The Norway captain is the offensive glue, the player who connects mid-field control to the team's devastating firepower. If Odegaard is not fully fit, Norway's brilliant qualifying run may prove a false dawn once the tournament begins.

For all their attacking prowess, Norway's ceiling may be determined by whether the backline hold up. Bologna defender Torbjorn Heggem, who



Norway players pose for a team group photo.

became a mainstay in the qualifying campaign, has been managing fitness issues in the build-up, leaving his match sharpness for June in question.

Solbakken must also contend with a lack of rhythm among other key defensive pillars. David Moeller Wolfe has played limited minutes at Wolverham-

pton Wanderers, leaving experienced Borussia Dortmund defender Julian Ryerson to anchor the back line.

Norway's goalkeeping situation remains problematic. Experienced first-choice Orjan Nyland, who will soon be a free agent after confirming his departure from Sevilla, is expected to

start, backed up by Hamburg SV's uncapped Sander Tangvik and Watford's Egil Selvik in the squad's weakest area.

With France, Iraq and Senegal waiting in a tricky group, Norway's return will be a trial by fire. The talent is real. So is the fear of another letdown.



Norway's Erling Haaland in action with Estonia's Karl Hein before he scores their first goal.



## FIFA WORLD CUP MENU







**Limited edition**

**Collect all 5 cups\***

© 2026 McDonald's Corporation. RCS FORT-DE-FRANCE TMC 499 346 307. Serving suggestion.

\* Get a free collector's cup with your 10 piece chicken McNuggets Medium Meal or Big Mac Medium Meal.

# Senegal offer Africa shot at World Cup glory

DAKAR--Senegal might have been stripped of their African title but they offer the continent its best hope of success at the World Cup.

Senegal beat Morocco in January's controversial Africa Cup of Nations final to be crowned champions for a second time but were later sanctioned for walking off the pitch in protest at a penalty decision against them on the cusp of full time. The opportunity was missed by their opponents and Senegal went on to win 1-0 in extra time, though the Confederation of African Football later awarded the title to Morocco.

Senegal are now challenging the CAF decision but a ruling on their appeal is not expected until after the World Cup, where Senegal have high hopes of making an impact. Few previous African World Cup qualifiers have had a stronger and more expansive squad than Senegal's 2026 selection, offering the real possibility of

another breakthrough for the continent at the tournament.

Morocco struck new ground in Qatar four years ago by becoming the first African side to reach the final four, but Senegal feel they can go further. "We have nothing to fear from other nations," said former African Footballer of the Year El Hadji Diouf. "Before, people always said African countries would not get past the first round, but now the gap is getting a lot smaller, and Senegal has every chance to go on and win it."

Diouf was the star performer in 2002 for Senegal, who upset the odds and reached the quarter-finals in their World Cup debut at the tournament co-hosted by Japan and South Korea. That included a shock 1-0 win over defending champions France in the opening game in Seoul and more than two decades later they resume that rivalry in their first Group I encounter in

New York on June 16.

There is the narrative of colonial master against former possession hanging in the air. The spicy edge to the contest is enhanced by the fact that Senegal could have as many as 12 French-born players in their squad, including midfield kingpin Pape Gueye, goalkeeper Edouard Mendy and captain Kalidou Koulibaly.

"It's always a pleasure to play against France. It's a country we know well," said coach Pape Bouna Thiaw, who moved to France aged



Senegal's Sadio Mane in action with Morocco's Oussama Targhaline during the CAF Africa Cup of Nations final at the Prince Moulay Abdellah Stadium, Rabat, Morocco in January, 2026.

17.

"For me, it's my second country. In 2002, we did well, but this won't be an easy match," he predicted.

But if Senegal prove able to again surprise the French, they will be looking to build on that momentum and progress deep into the tournament, giving Afri-

can football a fresh boost. "If I lose even a second of my belief that I can win the World Cup with Senegal, I will step down," added the coach.

## Arnold undaunted as Iraq face tough assignment on return

**BAGHDAD--Iraq return to the World Cup for the first time since making their debut 40 years ago, having taken a lengthy route to the finals under a coach who is no stranger to the tournament.**

Graham Arnold navigated the Lions of Mesopotamia through the latter stages of a 21-match qualifying campaign that ended with victory over Bolivia in the intercontinental playoffs. The Australian, who replaced Jesus Casas at the helm in May last year, instantly assumed national hero status when he led Iraq to the finals despite the disruption caused to his team's preparations by the conflict in the Gulf.

Arnold is well versed in dealing with the challenges of the playoffs before excelling at the helm of an underdog nation, having done both while in charge of his homeland in 2022. His Soccerroos qualified for Qatar through the back door before going on to reach the knockout rounds, an achievement that saw him rated by L'Equipe as the tourna-



Iraq's Mohanad Ali celebrates scoring a goal with teammates.

ment's best-performing coach.

The 62-year-old has delivered on the nation's

long-held promise – Iraq reached the Olympic Games semi-finals in 2004 and won the Asian Cup in 2007 – but successive

generations have fallen short of Iraq's World Cup dream. The country lost all three of their matches in their previous World Cup

appearance in Mexico in 1986 and face the daunting prospect of Group I clashes against France, Norway and Senegal.

"For me it's a group of excitement because a lot of the players have never played against a player of the calibre of (Kylian) Mbappe or (Erling) Haaland or (Sadio) Mane, so being on the park with them is a privilege," Arnold said of the draw. "But, at the same time, it's 11 human beings against 11 and we go out there and as long as you go out there not scared to play, that you're excited to play, then let's shock the world."

Talismanic striker Aymen Hussein scored the goal that qualified Iraq for the finals and the 30-year-old leads the line for a side trying to find the balance on and off the pitch between locally-born players and those raised overseas.

Zidane Iqbal, currently in the Netherlands with Utrecht, provides attacking thrust in a squad that features players contracted to clubs in a diverse range of leagues, including Scotland, Poland, Uzbekistan, the United States and Thailand.

# GROUP J

## With legacy intact, 'liberated' Messi can enjoy last hurrah

**BUENOS AIRES--**When a euphoric Lionel Messi lifted the World Cup at the Lusail Stadium in Qatar at around 9 p.m. on December 18, 2022, he finally had nothing left to prove.

Argentina's captain already had every possible accolade at club level, including eight Ballons d'Or as the world's best player. Yet until that night the World Cup had eluded him and kept him in the shadow of Diego Maradona in Argentine eyes.

Now, as a world champion, Messi heads into the 2026 tournament at peace. Whatever his body - ageing by footballers' standards - manages this time round, his legacy is intact.

"You see the happiness that Leo has: he's liberated," said

Jorge Valdano, a former Argentina striker who played in the Maradona-inspired team that won the World Cup in 1986.

Messi turns 39 this month and has had plenty of physical niggles in recent years. Yet he could still play a big role, potentially as a game-changing substitute if unable to manage full games but certainly as an inspiration and father figure within the squad.

"From a physical standpoint, things change, not only for Messi but for everyone," said Argentina coach Lionel Scaloni, who is realistic about his prized asset. "The fact that he has won (a World Cup) won't change his innate competitiveness. But it's true that

it has given him complete fulfilment.

"There can be no doubting him now. He did it, and from here on in he can look at things with a fresh perspective."

Messi has continued to impress at MLS team Inter Miami in the twilight of his career. He has guided them to three trophies, become their all-time top scorer and was the first player to win MLS Most Valuable Player in consecutive seasons.

During Argentina's World Cup qualifying campaign, he finished as the group's top scorer with eight goals in 12 games.

At World Cups, he is Argentina's youngest scor-



Argentina's Lionel Messi celebrates scoring a goal.

er aged 18 and all-time top scorer with 13 goals to Maradona's eight. His 26 World Cup appearances are the most in the tournament's history.

However, muscle injuries have reduced his explosive

bursts and few expect him to play throughout the tournament.

Inevitably, Messi will once again be compared with Portugal striker Cristiano Ronaldo, who is 41. The peerless pair are set to be-

come the first players to appear in six World Cups. Yet whatever happens during this tournament, for many the debate over who is the greatest was settled on that night at the Lusail Stadium four years ago.

## Argentina seek to emulate Italy and Brazil as back-to-back champions

**BUENOS AIRES--**Dripping talent and forged by success, Argentina aim to become the first men's team to retain the World Cup since Brazil in 1962 and the only nation to do so entirely outside their own region.

Lionel Scaloni's men have kept the core of the squad that won at Qatar 2022,

went on to retain the Copa America in 2024 and then topped South America's qualifying group with ease.

Preparations have not been ideal, though. Since Qatar, they have not faced European opponents. A planned "Finalissima" game against Spain was cancelled due to the Iran war with the gap filled by modest opponents

Mauritania and Zambia.

Furthermore, captain Lionel Messi, who turns 39 this month, may retain match-turning capacity and elder-statesman influence but no longer has the stamina and speed that made him such a driving force. And as illustrated in Qatar - including in the wildly brilliant 3-3 draw in the final with

France before penalties - Argentina's defence can be vulnerable. Other favourites such as Spain, France and Brazil may relish testing a rearguard with a few more years in their collective legs.

Should Argentina triumph again, they would be only the third country to win back-to-back World Cups

after Italy (1934 and 1938) and Brazil (1958 and 1962). Doing so outside their own South American region would be unprecedented.

Argentina kick off against Algeria in Kansas City on June 16 before facing Austria and Jordan in what looks, on paper, a relatively comfortable Group J for them.

included Venezuela, Puerto Rico and Angola, with Honduras and Iceland lined up for friendlies in June.

Scaloni's record as Argentina's all-time most decorated manager - two Copa Americas (2021 and 2024), a World Cup and a Finalissima (2022) - gives him credit in the bank. His message is clear: "The World Cup that we won is in the past."

South American football expert Jordan Florit said Messi's U.S. connection could be vital. "I don't think this World Cup could have been the same without Messi in tow. He's not just the poster boy for MLS, he's a core component of its functionality right now," said Florit, who is also Chief Scout for U.S. side Phoenix Rising. "And topping their group would mean a round-of-32 game in Miami - Messi's back garden for the past few seasons."

"That'll most likely be against Uruguay, who beat Argentina in La Bombonera during qualifying, or Spain, who have Messi's heir to the Barcelona throne (Lamine Yamal). The location could prove a vital, convenient edge for Scaloni's men."



World Champions Argentina pose for a team group photo.

# Austria back from exile and aiming for knockout success under Rangnick

**VIENNA--**After 28 years in the World Cup wilderness, Austria return to the global stage with a golden generation shaped by Ralf Rangnick's tactical overhaul and intent on building upon an impressive showing at the last Euros.

In Germany two years ago, Austria entertained with their fluid, attacking style, and surprisingly topped their group ahead of France and the Netherlands before bowing out to Turkey in a frenetic, thrilling tie.

That loss left Austria still without a knockout match win at a major tournament since 1954. Now, Rangnick's men are aiming to put that record right, and prove their Euros performance was no flash in the pan.

They face a challenging group at the finals but few opponents will relish meeting a side built on intensity and cohesion.

Austria will want to open strongly against debutants Jordan before taking on defending champions Argentina, and their final Group J match is against Algeria.

Rangnick, a pioneer of gegenpressing, transformed Austria into a high-octane side, deploying aggressive, attacking counter-pressing football and intent on getting the ball forward with speed and precision.

Rangnick had one of the youngest squads at the Euros but for many of the Austrian players, this may well be their only World Cup chance. Marko Arnautovic, Austria's all-time top scorer and most capped player, may be in the twilight of his career but the 37-year-old striker brings experience and presence in attack, where his main competition comes from 32-year-old Michael Gregoritsch.

David Alaba will relish this opportunity even more having missed the Euros through injury. The



Austria players pose for a team group photo.

33-year-old Real Madrid defender typified Austria's team spirit by joining the squad in Germany as a non-playing captain.

Rangnick's two youngest players are both recently naturalised midfielders,

20-year-old Paul Wanner and 22-year-old Carney Chukwuemeka. Austria are driven by Marcel Sabitzer and Christoph Baumgartner, whose direct passing repeatedly puts them on the front foot, and the midfield is boosted by Xaver

Schlager's inclusion after he too missed the Euros.

"If everyone stays fit, we're very satisfied, and with this squad I believe we're capable of a lot," Rangnick said when naming his squad. "We want to go further

than we did at the Euros. That means we want to progress from the group and then at least win the first knockout game.

"We want to show what this team is capable of and go as far as we can."

## Algeria hope to turn talent into results on World Cup return

**CAIRO--**Algeria return to the World Cup for the first time since 2014 carrying the familiar mix of promise, pressure and unpredictability that has long defined one of Africa's most gifted footballing nations.

Drawn in Group J alongside holders Argentina, Austria and tournament debutants Jordan, the Desert Foxes face a stern test of whether their gifted squad can finally deliver on the biggest stage.

The years since Algeria's 2019 Africa Cup of Nations triumph have brought more frustration than fulfilment. Failure to qualify for the 2022 World Cup after a dramatic playoff defeat by Cameroon still lingers, while the 2025 Nations Cup ended in disappointment despite a perfect group-stage campaign. Algeria looked among the favourites before a quarter-final loss to Nigeria revived doubts over their ability to deliver in decisive moments.

Captain Riyad Mahrez remains the team's creative focal point. The former Manchester City winger, now

playing in Saudi Arabia, still dictates Algeria's rhythm with his composure and technical quality, but the side are increasingly looking

to a younger generation to ease the burden.

Wolfsburg striker Mohamed Amoura has

emerged as one of Algeria's main attacking threats, offering pace and directness alongside Mahrez's craft. Manchester City defender

Rayan Ait-Nouri brings energy and attacking thrust from left back, while young winger Adil Boulbina has added to the growing sense

of long-term promise around the squad.

Yet uncertainty continues to shadow Algeria. Coach Vladimir Petkovic has struggled at times to mould the side's attacking talent into a cohesive unit, while defensive inconsistency has repeatedly undermined their progress in major tournaments.

A goalkeeping crisis has added to the concerns. Anthony Mandrea has been ruled out, while Luca Zidane and Melvin Mastil have both been called up despite injury problems, prompting Algeria to turn to Oussama Benbot despite his recent international retirement.

Benbot stepped away from the national team after being an unused substitute at the Nations Cup in Morocco earlier this year, but the USM Alger goalkeeper has been recalled to the squad. His reputation has risen after helping his club to win the African Confederation Cup with a shootout victory over Egypt's Zamalek in May.



Algeria's Riyad Mahrez celebrates scoring with teammates.



# Bring the World Cup Home

Elegant Kitchens Designed for Hosting & Sharing

## STONE & STYLE

### Visit Our New Showroom

Kitchen Design / Kitchen Countertops /  
Outdoor Furniture

Sint Maarten, Red Plum Three Drive 15, Cole Bay

[www.stoneandstylesxm.com](http://www.stoneandstylesxm.com) / +590 690 779 797

# Ambitious Jordan out to make their mark on World Cup debut

*AMMAN--Jordan are enjoying a golden age in their football fortunes after runs to the 2023 Asian Cup and 2025 Arab Cup finals and have no intention of just making up the numbers at their first World Cup.*

The Al-Nashama, or the "noble ones", have developed into a significant force in the Arab footballing world since Moroccan Jamal Sellami took over as coach in June 2024 and built on the work of his predecessor, compatriot Hussein Ammouta.

Sellami believes the team he has built can deliver a shock similar to Algeria beating Germany in 1982, Cameroon stunning reigning champions Argentina in 1990 and Senegal repeating the feat against holders France in 2002. "These results open horizons of hope and ambition for the fans,

so they can dream," Sellami, who played for Morocco at the 1998 World Cup, told Arabic sports channel TFK.

"And we too have the right to dream and to strive to be a strong team and present ourselves well," he added. "Right now, people are asking: 'Who are Al-Nashama? Where are they from?' So this is a chance for them to show their capabilities, to stand out in a big way."

The 55-year-old former midfielder has built a well-structured, disciplined team that utilises their wealth of creative forward talent to hit opponents on the break with a lightning-quick transition. They will be without Yazan Al-Naimat at the tournament, however, after the dynamic forward, who scored eight goals in qualification, suffered an ACL injury in the Arab Cup quarter-finals last December.

"Yazan is a player who cannot be replaced," conceded Sellami. "But we will find a combination for the team that can still be dangerous to the opponent, and that also gives us balance in our defensive performance."

Al-Naimat's likely replacement, Ali Olwan, has recovered from an Achilles injury sufficiently to take his place in Sellami's extended squad, and skipper Musa Al-Taamari will be around to torment defenders on the right wing.

The Jordanians have been handed a tough group and will take on Austria and Algeria in San Francisco before moving on to Dallas to face reigning champions Argentina.

While familiar with the style played by Algeria, a friendly against Switzerland in late May will prepare Jordan for Austria and they will finish their warm-up schedule against Colombia in early June to get a feel for South American opposition. Sellami believes the Austria match will be crucial to the success of Jordan's campaign - "it sets your path" - and is hoping to have garnered something from the first two games before facing Argentina.

"We hope that by then we will already have earned points, and that this match will be a step toward continuing in the World Cup," he said.



Jordan's Ali Olwan scores from the penalty spot.



Jordan players pose for a team group photo.

# GROUP K

## Ronaldo heads for sixth World Cup with unfinished business

**LISSABON-- Cristiano Ronaldo has bent football's record books into so many shapes that another landmark can almost feel routine but a sixth World Cup at 41 would be extraordinary even by his standards.**

The 2026 tournament is set to add another stop to Ronaldo's long and often bruising World Cup journey, one that began in Germany in 2006 and has wound through South Africa, Brazil, Russia and Qatar without delivering the prize he has chased.

Only Lionel Messi is poised to match him for appearances at six World Cups, another twist in a rivalry that has stretched from Real Madrid v Barcelona to Ballon d'Or ceremonies and now into football's deepest archive. Messi has eight Ballon d'Or awards, Ronaldo five. Both are still making room for new chapters in their amazing stories.

For Ronaldo, the World Cup has been the one stage that has never fully bent to his will. His best run came in 2006, when Portugal reached the

semi-finals before losing to France. Since then there have been two round-of-16 exits, a quarter-final defeat and a grim group-stage departure in Brazil in 2014.

This time they face Democratic Republic of Congo, debutants Uzbekistan plus Colombia in Group K.

Across five tournaments, Ronaldo has played 22 matches and scored eight goals — fine numbers for most mortals but modest for the standards set by a forward who made remarkable achievements look normal at club level.

Qatar 2022 looked like the end of his World Cup journey. Ronaldo arrived amid the noise of his Manchester United exit, scored and was dropped by then-coach Fernando Santos for the knockout win over Switzerland after a 2-1 loss to South Korea.

Instead, he has returned under former Belgium manager Roberto Martinez with the persistence of a man who treats Father Time as just another marker to shrug off. Portugal now have a glittering supporting cast, including Vitinha,

Joao Neves, Bruno Fernandes and Nuno Mendes, but Ronaldo remains the headline act.

After their disappointing quarter-final exit at Euro 2024, Portugal roared back to beat European champions Spain in the Nations League final last year and arrive in excellent form in North America with Ronaldo as their leader.

Martinez says the evidence still shows Ronaldo's importance: 25 goals in 30 games under his management -- more goals per game than under any of his previous national managers -- and plenty of work that does not fit neatly into a scoring column. "He is fantastic at those movements, those runs, opening spaces, splitting centre halves," Martinez told Reuters in May.

"Somebody that has won everything has the hunger of somebody that hasn't won a trophy yet," he added.

For Ronaldo, 2026 may be his last dance on the world stage. Then again, that has been said before.

## PORTUGAL CARRY HOT STREAK AND BAGGAGE

**LISSABON--Portugal will roll into the World Cup with Cristiano Ronaldo still grabbing the spotlight, a midfield glittering like a jeweller's window and a familiar question lurking behind all the sparkle: Is this finally the year they stop underachieving?**

The tournament in Canada, Mexico and the United States is expected to be Ronaldo's record-breaking sixth World Cup, an astonishing feat for a 41-year-old who has spent two decades turning the improbable into routine.

Yet for all the attention Ronaldo is afforded, Portugal's engine room may be the real headline act. Paris St Germain duo Vitinha and Joao Neves set the rhythm behind Manchester United playmaker Bruno Fernandes, giving manager Roberto Martinez a midfield that can make a convincing claim to be the best in the world.

There is quality almost everywhere else too, but Portuguese talent is hardly a novelty. Benfica, Sporting, Porto and Braga have long

supplied Europe's biggest clubs with polished players.

The trouble is Portugal have too often taken fine squads to major tournaments and returned with a suitcase full of regrets. They won their only Euros title in 2016 and reached the World Cup semi-finals in 2006 but their last four campaigns on the world stage brought frustration: two last-16 exits, one quarter-final loss and a grim group-stage departure in 2014.

Qatar in 2022 was another bruising chapter. Portugal were eliminated by Morocco in the quarter-finals, Ronaldo scored only once and was dropped by then-coach Fernando Santos for the knockout win over Switzerland after a 2-1 loss to South Korea in the final group game.

Santos departed and Martinez arrived in January 2023, bringing the experience of leading Belgium's gilded generation to the 2018 World Cup semi-finals and Euro 2020 quarter-finals. The change has refreshed Portugal. They reached the quarter-finals of Euro 2024

and beat European champions Spain in last year's Nations League final, sharpening belief before their trip across the Atlantic.

Martinez's record has been close to spotless. In 36 matches, he has posted the highest win percentage of any Portugal manager at 69.4%, a figure that rises to 70.9% in competitive games.

His side have also been prolific, averaging 2.66 goals per match, while his tenure has included Portugal's longest winning streak of 11 matches. Martinez has also squeezed fresh life from Ronaldo, who has scored 25 goals in 30 appearances under him, a better goals-per-game return than for any of his previous national team coaches.

Portugal begin their Group K campaign against Democratic Republic of Congo before facing Uzbekistan and Colombia. On paper, they have the form, firepower and midfield to go deep in the tournament. The hard part is proving this golden cast can finally turn promise into the biggest prize of all.



Portugal players pose for a team group photo.



Portugal's Cristiano Ronaldo celebrates scoring a goal.



# EAT. CHEER. CELEBRATE.

# SUPER U

**Howell Center Hope Estate**

Open Mondays to Saturdays & Holidays from 8:00am to 8:00pm  
Sundays from 8:00am to 12:45pm

# Diaz fuels Colombia's hopes

**BOGOTA--Colombia return to the World Cup after an eight-year absence counting on forward Luis Diaz to meet high expectations following a season in which he was directly involved in more than 40 goals for Bayern Munich.**

After failing to qualify for the 2022 tournament in Qatar, Colombia appointed Nestor Lorenzo for his first international head-coaching job, tasking the 60-year-old Argentine with building a physically strong, attack-minded side centred on Diaz.

They secured third place in the South American qualifiers, scoring fewer goals only than reigning world champions Argentina, with Diaz netting seven times in the campaign, one behind top scorer Lionel Messi. The "Cafeteros," as they are nicknamed in the nation known for its high-quality coffee, defeated both Brazil and Argentina in qualifying and finished runners-up to Argentina at the 2024 Copa America - their best result since winning it in 2001.

Their home win over Brazil in late 2023 came at an

especially delicate time for Diaz, who scored twice in the match played shortly after his parents were kidnapped by a local guerrilla group in the still violence-marred country. While his mother was released the same day, Diaz's father remained in the rebels' custody for 12 days. The National Liberation Army (ELN) said at the time the kidnapping was a "mistake."

"It was the most difficult moment of my life," said the striker, who was then playing for Liverpool.

He found immediate success after signing for Bayern for an estimated 75 million euros (\$86.95 million) in July 2025, winning the Bundesliga title and helping them to reach the Champions League semi-finals. Bayern manager Vincent Kompany described him as a "machine" with a "kind of chaotic creativity," while Colombian great Carlos Valderrama said Diaz had already surpassed his own achievements.

Colombia head to North America this month hoping to leave behind memories of their 1994 campaign



Colombia forward Luis Diaz (7) controls the ball against Argentina in the first half during the Copa America Final at Hard Rock Stadium, in Miami, Florida, July 2024.  
(Nathan Ray Seebeck-USA TODAY Sports/File Photo via Reuters)

in the United States, when the Valderrama-led team were tipped as favourites by soccer great Pele but ended up eliminated in the group stage. The South American

side debut in Group K on June 17 against Uzbekistan in Mexico City, before facing Portugal and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Diaz will have support from 34-year-old James Rodriguez, who inspired Colombia's run to the quarter-finals in 2014 but has had underwhelming club spells

in recent years, and Sporting forward Luis Suarez.

"We have a great team. I'm really excited for my first World Cup," Diaz said.

## DR Congo determined to put aside poor image left half century ago

**KINSHASA--After a 52-year wait, the Democratic Republic of Congo return to the World Cup determined to expunge the image of naivety and folly left behind on their only previous appearance.**

It was when the country was still known as Zaïre and competed at the 1974 finals in West Germany - the first African side from south of the Sahara to go to the World Cup. As reigning continental champions, there was hope that they could boost the fledgling status of African football but instead they left behind a dopey and tatty image after losing all three games, including a 9-0 thumping from Yugoslavia.

DR Congo, Africa's second largest country by landmass, has since gone through frequent political and economic upheaval which has had a marked effect on the football team and left them playing for decades far below their rich potential. But by dipping into the growing diaspora, they have put together a solid squad who



Democratic Republic of Congo's Arthur Masuaku in action with Nigeria's Samuel Chukwueze.

were able to qualify for the 2026 finals, albeit needing to come through two playoffs to do so.

First, the Congolese com-

peted in a continental playoff in November for the best four runners-up across the nine African groups and eliminated powerhouse Cameroon and Nigeria

to win. That earned them a place in the inter-confederation playoff in March where they edged Jamaica in extra time in Mexico to become the second-last country to

book a berth at the World Cup in Canada, Mexico, and the United States.

It was a reward for persistence and perseverance in a

gruelling campaign where they narrowly lost out to Senegal in their original group before travelling thousands of miles to ensure qualification.

"Those experiences have made us stronger and more resilient, and they've led us to this. After all the hard work the players and the staff have put in over the last three years, they've thoroughly earned it," said their French coach, Sebastien Desabre, who has kept a consistent team selection and made much of the team spirit developed in his almost four years in charge.

Most of his squad are European-born, either in Belgium, France or Switzerland, plus the London-born Aaron Wan-Bissaka, previously called up by England but who missed out on a cap through injury.

"We are extremely proud because a whole generation hasn't been able to see its national team in the World Cup but now they will see them there," added Desabre.

# Uzbekistan reach first World Cup as government investment pays off

**LONDON--Uzbekistan's qualification for their first World Cup marks the high point to date of a steady climb to the upper reaches of the global game in the 35 years since gaining independence from the former Soviet Union.**

Since January last year, Manchester City's Abdurkadir Khusanov has become the internationally recognised face of the nation following his move to the Premier League, boosting the profile of one of Asia's growing powers. The 22-year-old central defender embodies the impact a series of government-backed initiatives have had on the sport in the country, yielding a growing crop of talented players ready to perform on the biggest stage.

"Uzbekistan's qualification for the FIFA World Cup is a defining moment not just for football, but for sport and national identity across our country," Otobek Umarov, the first vice president of Uzbekistan's

Olympic committee, told Reuters. "As the first Central Asian nation to reach the World Cup, this achievement unites 38 million people in shared pride and joy."

Khusanov and his Uzbekistan team mates have benefited significantly from government investment in footballing infrastructure, with mini pitches constructed across the nation and around 15,000 school grounds undergoing renovation. A network of dedicated football schools has also been established that supports the development of more than 65,000 young players while plans are in place for a new 55,000-capacity stadium, the largest in the country.

"Every Uzbekistani som spent has been part of a coherent, long-term strategy, and the results speak for themselves," said Umarov. "From World Cup qualification and a Premier League player in Abdurkadir Khusanov, to a 13th-place finish at the Paris 2024 Olympics." Coached by World Cup winner Fabio Cannavaro,



Eldor Shomurodov of Uzbekistan in action with Omar Fayed of Egypt.

Uzbekistan will begin their maiden campaign against Colombia before facing DR Congo and Portugal with Umarov confident qualification will provide further momentum for the sport's growth. "Playing in the World Cup

will inspire millions of young people, not only in Uzbekistan, but across Central Asia and in Uzbek communities around the world," he said. "This celebration of sport will inspire future generations to get active, live healthily and ultimately

improve lifestyles in our country for years to come.

"We have one of the youngest and fastest-growing populations on the planet, which means that we will not only benefit from new generations of young ath-

letes, but also from young men and women who want to be involved off the pitch.

"This will help our entire sporting ecosystem to thrive for years to come."

## Kick off party at Feestcafé

**The FIFA World Cup 2026 kicks off this week, and Feestcafé SXM is the place to be for all the action! Located at Welfare Road 60 in Cole Bay, Feestcafé invites locals, visitors, and football fans from both sides of the island to celebrate with us.**

With multiple large TV screens and projectors broadcasting every match live, you can enjoy the games with stunning lagoon views and refreshing Caribbean breezes, the perfect setting for unforgettable moments.

This year is extra special for our region: Curaçao's Blue Wave makes its historic first-ever World Cup appearance, becoming the smallest nation ever to qualify for the tournament! We'll be cheering loud for the Blue Wave as they take on the world stage.

At the same time, the Netherlands and France return with their legendary attacking style and star players, always a favourite in the

Dutch Caribbean.

Of course, all teams are welcome! Whether you're supporting Curaçao, Netherlands, France, Colombia, or any other squad, Feestcafé is the ultimate inclusive fan zone.

**Game-Day Specials (starting Thursday, June 11th):**

**\$1 Wings** – Crispy chicken wings for just one dollar each.

**Beer Bucket + Wings** – \$25 for a cold beer bucket paired with wings.

**Beer Bucket + Assorted**

**Snacks** – \$25 for beers with classic Dutch bites like Bitterballen, Bitter Garnituur, Krokets, and more.

**Happy Hour** – 5:00 PM to 7:00 PM: 2-for-1 drinks.

**Team Spirit Shots** – Wear your team's colors and get a free shot every time your team scores!

**Event Details:**

**Date:** Thursday, June 11th (Opening matches)

**Kickoff:** 3:00 PM ET

**Location:** Welfare Road 60, Cole Bay, Sint Maarten

**Entry:** Free

**Contact:** (+1 721) 526-0950 to RSVP or for more info

Come early to grab the best seats on the deck, bring your friends, wear your team colors with pride, and experience the World Cup with great food, cold drinks, big screens, and electric island vibes.

Feestcafé SXM, Good Food • Great Drinks • Best Views & World Cup Action!



**Feestcafé SXM**

**World Cup WATCH PARTY!**

**THURSDAY, JUNE 11TH**

**KICKOFF AT 3 PM ET**

**FREE ENTRY / FOOD & DRINK SPECIALS / AFTER PARTY**

**Welfare rd 60, Colebay, Saint Martin**

**CALL TO RSVP AT-(+1721)5260950**



# GROUP L

## England's World Cup puzzle: Promise, dependence on Kane, search for identity

**MANCHESTER, England--England enter another World Cup carrying the familiar blend of promise and persistent doubt, their prospects still tethered as much to individual brilliance as to coherence as a team.**

For all the evolution in personnel and the arrival of experienced German coach Thomas Tuchel last year, there remains a sense that the side's ceiling, and perhaps its fragility, is defined by a handful of players, none more so than Harry Kane.

The 32-year-old Kane's scoring record and influence for club and country

are beyond dispute, but recent tournaments have exposed a reliance that edges into vulnerability. When he is sharp, England's attack has structure, penalty-box presence and a focal point others can play off. When he drifts or struggles for rhythm, the drop-off is steep.

The alternatives, while capable, are not in his league in terms of all-round impact and England's attacking fluency can suffer. It leaves Tuchel with a dilemma: how to manage Kane's workload and form without compromising the team's identity.

If the Bayern Munich

striker reproduces quieter stretches that have marked parts of recent international tournaments, England could again look blunt at exactly the wrong moment. Compounding that uncertainty is how late in the cycle England still appear to be searching for clarity.

Tuchel had called up a total of 51 different players to the England squad between taking charge in January 2025 and unveiling his squad. Rather than sticking to a fixed roster, he has relentlessly cycled players in and out and has yet to produce a settled team.

Perhaps more concerning is the lack of definition



England players pose for a team group photo.

around roles for key players. Playmaker Jude Bellingham, one of the game's undisputed stars, epitomises the uncertainty.

Whether deployed as a deeper midfielder, a roaming number 10, or something in between, his influence can reshape England's approach, but it also raises questions about balance. That there is still ambiguity over the Real Madrid player's best position, or even how prominently he will feature in certain set-ups, underlines how fluid England remain.

And yet, the upside is ob-

vious. With Kane firing, Bellingham operating in his most effective role and Bukayo Saka -- back at his best after more than a month sidelined with an Achilles injury -- providing width and creativity, England have a core capable of matching anyone.

Saka's consistency offers a reliable outlet, Bellingham's dynamism brings control and thrust, and Kane's finishing remains elite. Around them, the supporting cast has the talent to complement rather than carry.

The challenge, as so often,

will be sustaining that level. England have a habit of looking cohesive and convincing one moment, then drifting off the boil and appearing distinctly average the next.

It may take another tournament in which their best team only truly reveals itself under pressure, shaped by circumstance rather than design. Whether that organic emergence proves a strength or a fatal delay will likely define their campaign, which begins in Group L starting with Croatia on June 17 followed by Ghana and Panama.

## Talismanic Kane holds key to England's World Cup fate

**MANCHESTER, England--England's World Cup hopes revolve around striker Harry Kane, their captain, talisman and, more often than not, the difference maker in major tournaments.**

Since emerging as England's leading forward a decade ago, Kane has been a constant in a team burdened by the weight of expectation, with its hopes increasingly tied to his influence. Yet for all the talk of a more balanced squad, of dynamic wide players and midfield depth, the equation remains simple: if Kane fires, England flourish. If he falters -- or is unavailable -- the entire structure begins to creak.

His importance is both statistical and psychological. He is England's record scorer with 78 goals in 112 appearances, their penalty taker, focal point and increasingly chief creator, dropping deep to link play and release runners such as Bukayo Saka.

He arrives at the tournament in formidable form after another prolific campaign at Bayern Munich, finishing as Bundesliga top scorer for a third successive season with 36 goals. On the World Cup stage,



England's Harry Kane shoots at goal against Latvia.

where fine margins usually decide knockout ties, having a forward capable not only of finishing chances but also creating them is invaluable and Kane ticks both boxes.

His tournament pedigree underlines that point: Golden Boot winner and semi-finalist at the 2018 World Cup and key contributions to England's run to the Euro 2024 final. Even when England have struggled to click, Kane has retained the ability to produce decisive moments, masking shortcomings elsewhere.

But that reliance cuts both ways. The 32-year-old missed England's March 31 friendly defeat by Japan due to injury, a reminder of how exposed the team can look without him.

Should that scenario play out at the World Cup, the options are limited. There is attacking depth in the squad,

but no like-for-like replacement capable of replicating Kane's all-round game and composure under pressure.

His absence would also leave a sizeable leadership vacuum, with few teammates able to match his experience, authority and calming influence on the biggest stage. Without him, England would not just lose goals, they would lose their emotional anchor.

The challenge for manager Thomas Tuchel, whose first task will be to lead his team out of a tricky group with Croatia, Ghana and Panama, is to ensure reliance on Kane does not become overdependence by encouraging tactical flexibility. Without him, the margins narrow, the structure is less stable, and the pursuit of a first World Cup triumph since 1966 looks even more difficult.

## PANAMA TARGET FIRST WORLD CUP WIN UNDER DANE CHRISTIANSEN

**PANAMA CITY--Panama will play in their second World Cup as Central America's only representative, aiming to raise the region's profile and showcase recent progress under manager Thomas Christiansen.**

The 53-year-old Dane, appointed in July 2020 to replace Argentina's Americo Gallego, hopes to cap his six-year tenure with an historic performance -- which for Panama would mean achieving their first win in a match on the global stage. In their first-ever World Cup appearance at Russia 2018, the country finished bottom of Group G after defeats by Belgium, England and Tunisia, conceding 11 goals and scoring two.

"What we've done in these years is compete with top

national teams. We're no longer being outplayed, we can beat them," Christiansen said in a March interview with FIFA, despite facing an uphill task against two European sides in their group.

"That's what we want against Ghana, Croatia and England: to compete and put Panama on the global map so the country can feel proud of its national team," he added, referring to their Group L rivals.

Panama last year finished runners-up to Mexico in the CONCACAF Nations League, after beating the United States in the semi-finals, but were knocked out of the Gold Cup in the quarter-finals by Honduras -- a major upset after reaching the final two years earlier when they lost to

Mexico.

The Central American team also reached the quarter-finals of the 2024 Copa America, beating the U.S. and Bolivia in the group stage before being thrashed by eventual runners-up Colombia.

When Christiansen took over Panama were 81st in the FIFA rankings but they have climbed to 33rd. That improvement has seen the Dane linked with a potential move to Europe after the World Cup.

"It's not usual to stay so many years in one place, but that's part of soccer," he said in March. "If things are going well and you feel comfortable, it's a reason to stay. My ideal dream is to have a good World Cup, compete as best as possible and advance from the group."

Christiansen will rely on 27-year-old Pumas midfielder Adalberto Carrasquilla and 2025 Gold Cup top scorer Ismael Diaz as he looks to realise that ambition.

Panama open their World Cup campaign on June 17 against Ghana in Toronto, face Croatia at the same venue six days later and close the group stage against England in New Jersey.



South Africa's Teboho Mokoena in action with Panama's Adalberto Carrasquilla.

# Modric primed for swansong as Croatia's beating heart

**DUBROVNIK--Croatia head into the World Cup aiming to extend a run that has cemented their status as one of football's most consistent overachievers, but their preparations have been clouded by concern over captain Luka Modric's fitness.**

The 40-year-old midfield maestro underwent cheekbone surgery in April but is expected to recover in time to anchor the midfield in what will probably be his fifth and final World Cup. With Modric still the team's heartbeat, the tournament will test Croatia's ability to balance continuity with transition as the Balkan nation continues to defy expectations despite a population of just around 3.8 million.

Modric, the 2018 Ballon d'Or winner who lifted 28 major trophies with Real Madrid, will feature in his 10th major international tournament, bringing unmatched experience with 196 caps. Around him, Croatia boast a squad that blends experience and emerging talent with central defenders Josko Gvardiol and Luka Vuskovic the bedrocks of the team.

Gvardiol, 24, one of the standout performers at the 2022 World Cup, returned to action only in May after five months out with a tibial fracture, and Vuskovic, 19, has recently recovered from a knee injury.

In attack, Igor Matanovic, Nikola Vlasic and Petar Musa will look to provide Croatia with a cutting edge starting with Croatia's opening game against England on June 17 in Arlington, Texas, before facing Ghana and Panama in a tough Group L.

Croatia topped their qualifying group with seven wins and one draw and manager Zlatko Dalic, in charge since 2017, has overseen the most successful era in the nation's history, guiding them to a runners-up finish in 2018 and third place in 2022. The 59-year-old will again lean on ex-

perienced figures such as Mateo Kovacic, Ivan Perisic and Andrej Kramaric to support Modric, particularly following the international retirement of longtime midfield anchor Marcelo Brozovic.

Ultimately, much may depend on Modric's fitness and his ability to orchestrate one final performance on football's biggest stage.



Croatia's Luka Modric in action.

## GHANA'S LATE COACHING SWITCH TO QUEIROZ COULD BOOST HOPES

**ACCRA--A late change of coach ahead of the World Cup might provide a boost to Ghana, who have turned to veteran Portuguese Carlos Queiroz after a run of poor results eroded confidence in his predecessor.**

German-born former Ghana international Otto Addo was coach at the last World Cup in Qatar but the country's failure to qualify for the Africa Cup of Nations at the turn of the year and comprehensive losses in their four high-profile games in November and March saw him fired in early April.

Queiroz was handed the reins weeks later. It will be a fifth successive World Cup for the 73-year-old Queiroz, whose past African experience has been with South Africa and Egypt and who managed Real Madrid and was Alex Ferguson's right-hand man at Manchester United.

Queiroz had a whirlwind

tour around Europe soon after his appointment to talk to key players but had little time for any in-depth preparations for their Group L encounters against Panama, England and Croatia. But his experience will likely give structure to a squad filled with individual talent but lacking in tactical discipline and defensive solidity.

Manchester City's Antoine Semenyo leads a strong attack, but Queiroz will be without the injured Mohammed Kudus, who has become the team's talisman and the key factor in their last two successful qualifying campaigns.

Ghana also continue their struggle to find an international-quality goalkeeper, which has been a problem through several major tour-



Ghana players pose for a team group photo before their match against Uruguay at the 2022 World Cup in Qatar.

naments. "We are running against the wind. We are running against time. But, in my experience and my expertise, and the support of the staff and especially our players, I'm very much

confident that we can do well," said Queiroz when he took over.

The Black Stars first qualified for the World Cup in 2006, long after they had

won the last of their four Cup of Nations titles in what was something of an oddity given they had long been one of Africa's strongest sides. Since then, they have missed one World

chance to do well at the finals in Canada, Mexico, and the United States. "I think that this country has a huge, enormous potential. This is a country of footballers," he said.

Cup - in 2018.

They proved competitive in their debut outing in Germany, reaching the second round, and four years later in South Africa, became the third African nation to reach the quarter-finals. They were a crossbar away from the semis, but Asamoah Gyan squandered a last-gasp extra-time penalty after a cynical handball from Luis Suarez saved Uruguay from defeat and allowed the South Americans to go on to win via a penalty shootout.

# Law changes that will come into effect at the 2026 World Cup

**NEW YORK**—The International Football Association Board (IFAB) has made changes to the laws of the game which will be applied from the 2026-27 season onwards as well as at the World Cup, which kicks off on June 11 in the United States, Mexico and Canada.

"The IFAB approved a set of landmark changes to the Laws of the Game and the FIFA World Cup 2026 will be the first major tournament to use them," FIFA's Chief Refereeing Officer Pierluigi Collina told reporters.

"These amendments aim to tackle discrimination, cut time-wasting, enhance match tempo and improve both the player and fan experience."

## Covering Mouth

- A player who covers their mouth with their hand, arm or shirt in confrontational situations will receive a red card.
- The new rule comes into effect after Benfica's Gianluca Prestianni was accused of making discriminatory slurs to Vinicius Jr with his mouth covered. Prestianni was given a six-game suspension by UEFA, with his ban extended worldwide.
- However, players who cover their mouths while having friendly conversations with club team mates on opposing teams, for example, will not be punished.

## Leaving Field

- Players who leave the field of play to protest about a referee's decision will be shown a red card.
- The rule will also apply to any team official who incites players to leave the field of play in protest.
- Teams which cause a match to be abandoned will now forfeit the match.
- The new rule comes into effect after Senegal stormed off the field in protest at a penalty awarded against them in the Africa Cup of Nations final, before they returned to beat hosts Morocco 1-0 after extra time.

## New throw-in and goal-kick countdown

- Referees will start a visual five-second countdown with a raised hand.
- If the ball is not in play at the end of the countdown, a throw-in is awarded to the opponents.
- If a goal-kick is not taken at the end of the countdown, a corner kick is awarded to the opponents.

## Substitution Protocol

- Players have 10 seconds to leave the field when the substitution board has been shown.
- Players must leave the field at the nearest point on the boundary line.
- If the player being substituted does not leave the field of play within 10 seconds, the substitute may enter only at the first stoppage after one minute has elapsed following the restart and the referee gives them the signal.
- Exceptions: player injuries, concerns related to safety and security.

## Off-Field Treatment

- An outfield player must leave the field of play for one minute after the restart if medical staff entered the pitch to treat them.
- Exceptions: goalkeeper injuries, collisions between a goalkeeper and outfield player, collisions between team mates that need attention, severe injury (such as head injuries and concussions), or when the injured player is set to take a penalty.

## VAR Protocol

"We started (using) VAR in FIFA competitions in 2017, at the Confederations Cup before the World Cup in Russia in 2018," Collina said. "So,

we (think it is) the time to reconsider the protocol which was written when there was very limited experience."

VAR may now intervene for the following incidents:

- Red card issued from a clearly incorrect yellow card.
- Mistaken identity: a player is shown a yellow or red card for an offence committed by another player.
- Incorrectly awarded corner kicks: VAR can intervene if the decision can be corrected immediately without delaying the restart.
- VAR can now intervene when a foul is committed before play restarts (for example: when an attacker fouls a defender before the ball is in play from a set-piece).

"VAR will recommend an on-field review, following which, if the referee determines that an offence occurred before the ball was in play, the appropriate disciplinary

action will be taken and the corner kick or free kick will be retaken," IFAB said.

## Hydration Breaks

- There will be a three-minute hydration break in each half in every match.
- The break will be taken around the halfway mark of each half (22nd minute).
- Referees have been given a bit of flexibility with the timing of the break. For example, if a player is injured and requires treatment in the 20th minute, the referee can signal the hydration break.

## Goalkeeper Injuries

- If a goalkeeper is receiving treatment on the pitch, players from both teams will not be allowed to leave the field of play and have a 'timeout' with their respective coach-

## World Cup VAR and rule changes

World football's governing body IFAB has introduced new powers for video assistant referees (VAR) at the World Cup, with a crackdown on time-wasting to improve match tempo



**Connected Ball Technology**  
Side-mounted 500Hz inertial measurement unit motion sensor chip

**Identifies time and location of each touch of ball**

Goals, e.g. ball crossing line



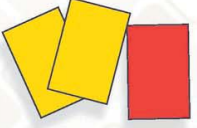
**VAR decisions**  
Offside, attacking player ahead of defenders and ball – when it is kicked  
Handball, e.g. deflection



**Fouls leading to penalty or goal**

**Red cards, penalties**

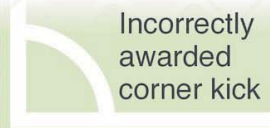
### NEW VAR REVIEW POWERS



Red cards arising from clearly incorrect second yellow card



Mistaken identity for card



Incorrectly awarded corner kick

### TIME-WASTING COUNTDOWNS AND PUNISHMENTS



**5 seconds**  
**Goal kicks**  
Corner to opposition



**60 seconds**  
**Injuries**  
Player must leave pitch for one minute, unless opponent receives a card.  
*Goalkeepers and penalty-takers exempt*



**10 seconds**  
**Substitutions**  
Team must play for one minute with fewer players



Sources: FIFA, IFAB, adidas      Picture: Getty Images      © GRAPHIC NEWS

# World Cup fever is here!

Catch every match live anywhere  
with **TelTV+** on the GO!

No buffering,  
just goals and vibes!

**Sign up today!**



**telem**  
Connecting You!

# The perfect pitch is the goal for World Cup grass growers

**WINNIPEG, Manitoba-**When billions of fans tune in to the 2026 World Cup, they will be witnessing the culmination of a global grass-growing mission that has scientists, farmers and turf specialists sweating as much as the players.

From Mexico to Canada, across 16 stadiums in wildly different climates, the continental tournament is putting turf science to its ultimate test. The goal: creating living surfaces that can withstand kicks, studs, tackles and scorching summer heat.

"It's very high stakes and no room for error, and we definitely do not want to have any kind of fail," said specialty turf farmer Bert Bos, whose family farm has provided and is responsible for the grass in Vancouver's World Cup stadium, which hosts seven matches beginning on June 13.

## Cutting Edge

That same intensity comes from Leah Brilman, who has a PhD in grass science and is a senior manager of turfgrass development with global grass seed company DLF.

There is a lot of pride in providing the ryegrass and other seed for the World Cup stadiums in Vancouver and Mexico City, but the first thought is ensuring everything goes right when the players' studs start tearing at the pitches. "It gets a lot more complex than people think," said Brilman, who has been involved with providing grass for World Cup stadiums since the 2010 tournament in South Africa.

The grass varies by stadium. Due to the intense heat in

some host cities, a number are being turfed with bermudagrass-based blends.

Temperate cities like Vancouver and Mexico City are using ryegrass blends, which thrive in cool conditions.

## Special Farmers

"It's kind of humbling," said Lorne Boundy, who farms just south of the tree line near Arborg, Manitoba, about ryegrass seed from his community providing World Cup pitches.

The specific varieties of grass being used are the product of decades of academic and commercial research, testing at research farms around the world, along with extensive involvement with soccer's global governing body FIFA, which sets the standards and has invested millions of dollars in soccer-specific grass development.

"We put a lot of time and a lot of investment into it," said Brilman, who ended up as a top turfgrass researcher from her interest in the evolutionary development of grasslands. "Every generation we improve on what we have."

That means the grasses used at previous World Cups are not likely to be those being used today, as relentless breeding creates tougher varieties that better fight off disease and weeds, while using less water and fertilizer.

Grass seed farming is a tiny industry. Boundy says there are only a few hundred farmers in his province, producing seed that ends up on U.S. golf greens, playgrounds and parks, and on millions of urban lawns.

There are also small com-



Workers install a patch of grass to be used as part of the pitch at SoFi Stadium, ahead of the FIFA World Cup soccer tournament, in Inglewood, California, U.S., May 13, 2026.

munities of grass seed growers in other parts of North America, like Oregon's Willamette Valley and in the U.S. southwest, producing whatever their area grows best.

After farmers harvest the seed, which is usually grown under contract with a buyer like DLF, it goes into a commercial cleaning, bagging and transportation system that gets it to its customers. Those can be urban lawn growers, city parks and recreation departments, or sod growers.

## Sideways Roots

Bos, the Abbotsford sod grower who produced the Vancouver pitch, said he relishes the challenges of growing something unique.

While local farmers could not help him with this specific grass, which is grown atop plastic, produces sideways-turning roots, and with the blades rising through a brushy, netlike fabric, the Australian provider of the system "walked beside us the whole process," said Bos.

There are intimidating standards. For example, across a three-metre length there might only be a five-millimetre allowance for height variation. "Everything has tight tolerances," said Bos.

Testing goes on throughout the development and



Tom Rinn of global grass seed giant DLF checks out a bag of turf grass in his company's facility in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, May 25, 2026.

growing process, including the use of a "fake foot" that presses the grass like a fast-turning footballer.

Brilman said it is not good enough to simply use the same grass that U.S. college football players or rugby players play on. "They're different-sized players," she said, who abuse the grass differently. In soccer, the area in front of goal takes a beating and can end up ragged and pockmarked, which cannot be allowed.

"You put seed back in that

area all the time," said Brilman.

There are tricky challenges for this World Cup, including grass pitches needing to be placed above the artificial turf permanently installed in some stadiums.

## Hoping Nobody Notices

The goal is for nobody to notice the grass. Everybody wants to avoid a repeat of the February 2023 Super Bowl, where players from both teams criticised the playing surface after a slip-and-slide fiasco that has be-

come part of NFL lore.

For Tom Rinn, a manager in DLF's processing and distribution system, knowing that seed grown in his corner of the world and handled by his company adds bragging rights to this World Cup.

He's looking forward to "sitting around, watching a game, having a cold one with the buddies, and being able to say 'That's our grass, that one right there, that came through here.'"



Farmer Lorne Boundy checks out a sample of ryegrass, which is one of the types of grass seed being used for the 2026 World Cup, in Arborg, Manitoba, Canada, May 22, 2026.

# WORLD CUP

# 2026

ON PORT DE PLAISANCE MARINA



*Paper Moon*  
Bar & Grill



**ALL  
GAMES**



**\$16**  
**6 BEER  
BUCKET**



**10% OFF**  
**ALL  
APPETIZERS**

**GREAT FOOD**

**MULTIPLE SCREENS**



**Large parking lot** 👍

**PAPERMOON RESTAURANT**  
**PORT DE PLAISANCE RESORT - MARINA**  
**RESERVATION +1 721-526-0243 & WHATSAPP**