

FIFTH AND GOAL SPORTS

2026

WORLD CUP



**Full Match
Schedule**

Page 3



Previews For All 48 Teams

FIFTH AND GOAL SPORTS WORLD CUP PREVIEW



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Luka Modric
CROATIA (pg. 51)



2026 FIFA WORLD CUP SCHEDULE

ALL TIMES ET

GROUP STAGE

THU, JUNE 11

Match 1 – Mexico vs. South Africa (3:00 PM) (FOX)
Match 2 – South Korea vs. Czechia (10:00 PM) (FS1)

FRI, JUNE 12

Match 3 – Canada vs. Bosnia-Herzegovina (3:00 PM) (FOX)
Match 4 – United States vs. Paraguay (9:00 PM) (FOX)

SAT, JUNE 13

Match 5 – Qatar vs. Switzerland (3:00 PM) (FOX)
Match 6 – Brazil vs. Morocco (6:00 PM) (FS1)
Match 7 – Haiti vs. Scotland (9:00 PM) (FS1)
Match 8 – Australia vs. Türkiye (11:59 PM) (FS1)

SUN, JUNE 14

Match 9 – Germany vs. Curaçao (1:00 PM) (FOX)
Match 10 – Netherlands vs. Japan (4:00 PM) (FOX)
Match 11 – Ivory Coast vs. Ecuador (7:00 PM) (FS1)
Match 12 – Sweden vs. Tunisia (10:00 PM) (FS1)

MON, JUNE 15

Match 13 – Spain vs. Cape Verde (12:00 PM) (FOX)
Match 14 – Belgium vs. Egypt (3:00 PM) (FOX)
Match 15 – Saudi Arabia vs. Uruguay (6:00 PM) (FS1)
Match 16 – Iran vs. New Zealand (9:00 PM) (FS1)

TUE, JUNE 16

Match 17 – France vs. Senegal (3:00 PM) (FOX)
Match 18 – Iraq vs. Norway (6:00 PM) (FOX)
Match 19 – Argentina vs. Algeria (9:00 PM) (FOX)
Match 20 – Austria vs. Jordan (11:59 PM) (FS1)

WED, JUNE 17

Match 21 – Portugal vs. DR Congo (1:00 PM) (FOX)
Match 22 – England vs. Croatia (4:00 PM) (FOX)
Match 23 – Ghana vs. Panama (7:00 PM) (FS1)
Match 24 – Uzbekistan vs. Colombia (10:00 PM) (FS1)

THU, JUNE 18

Match 25 – Czechia vs. South Africa (12:00 PM) (FOX)
Match 26 – Switzerland vs. Bosnia-Herzegovina (3:00 PM) (FOX)
Match 27 – Canada vs. Qatar (6:00 PM) (FS1)
Match 28 – Mexico vs. South Korea (9:00 PM) (FOX)

FRI, JUNE 19

Match 29 – United States vs. Australia (3:00 PM) (FOX)
Match 30 – Scotland vs. Morocco (6:00 PM) (FOX)
Match 31 – Brazil vs. Haiti (8:30 PM) (FOX)
Match 32 – Türkiye vs. Paraguay (11:00 PM) (FS1)

SAT, JUNE 20

Match 33 – Netherlands vs. Sweden (1:00 PM) (FOX)
Match 34 – Germany vs. Ivory Coast (4:00 PM) (FOX)
Match 35 – Ecuador vs. Curaçao (8:00 PM) (FS1)
Match 36 – Tunisia vs. Japan (11:59 PM) (FS1)

SUN, JUNE 21

Match 37 – Spain vs. Saudi Arabia (12:00 PM) (FOX)
Match 38 – Belgium vs. Iran (3:00 PM) (FS1)
Match 39 – Uruguay vs. Cape Verde (6:00 PM) (FS1)
Match 40 – New Zealand vs. Egypt (9:00 PM) (FS1)

MON, JUNE 22

Match 41 – Argentina vs. Austria (1:00 PM) (FOX)
Match 42 – France vs. Iraq (5:00 PM) (FOX)
Match 43 – Norway vs. Senegal (8:00 PM) (FOX)
Match 44 – Jordan vs. Algeria (11:00 PM) (FS1)

TUE, JUNE 23

Match 45 – Portugal vs. Uzbekistan (1:00 PM) (FOX)
Match 46 – England vs. Ghana (4:00 PM) (FOX)
Match 47 – Panama vs. Croatia (7:00 PM) (FOX)
Match 48 – Colombia vs. DR Congo (10:00 PM) (FS1)

WED, JUNE 24

Match 49 – Bosnia-Herzegovina vs. Qatar (3:00 PM) (FS1)
Match 50 – Switzerland vs. Canada (3:00 PM) (FOX)
Match 51 – Morocco vs. Haiti (6:00 PM) (FS1)
Match 52 – Scotland vs. Brazil (6:00 PM) (FOX)
Match 53 – Czechia vs. Mexico (9:00 PM) (FOX)
Match 54 – South Africa vs. South Korea (9:00 PM) (FS1)

THU, JUNE 25

Match 55 – Curaçao vs. Ivory Coast (4:00 PM) (FS1)
Match 56 – Ecuador vs. Germany (4:00 PM) (FOX)
Match 57 – Japan vs. Sweden (7:00 PM) (FS1)
Match 58 – Tunisia vs. Netherlands (7:00 PM) (FOX)
Match 59 – Paraguay vs. Australia (10:00 PM) (FS1)
Match 60 – Türkiye vs. United States (10:00 PM) (FOX)

FRI, JUNE 26

Match 61 – Norway vs. France (3:00 PM) (FOX)
Match 62 – Senegal vs. Iraq (3:00 PM) (FS1)
Match 63 – Cape Verde vs. Saudi Arabia (8:00 PM) (FS1)
Match 64 – Uruguay vs. Spain (8:00 PM) (FOX)
Match 65 – Egypt vs. Iran (11:00 PM) (FS1)
Match 66 – New Zealand vs. Belgium (11:00 PM) (FOX)

SAT, JUNE 27

Match 67 – Croatia vs. Ghana (5:00 PM) (FS1)
Match 68 – Panama vs. England (5:00 PM) (FOX)
Match 69 – Colombia vs. Portugal (7:30 PM) (FOX)
Match 70 – DR Congo vs. Uzbekistan (7:30 PM) (FS1)
Match 71 – Algeria vs. Austria (10:00 PM) (FS1)
Match 72 – Jordan vs. Argentina (10:00 PM) (FOX)

KNOCKOUT STAGE**SUN, JUNE 28**

Match 73 – Round of 32: 2A vs. 2B (3:00 PM) (FOX)

MON, JUNE 29

Match 74 – Round of 32: 1C vs. 2F (1:00 PM) (FOX)
Match 75 – Round of 32: 1E vs. 3 TBD (4:30 PM) (FOX)
Match 76 – Round of 32: 1F vs. 2C (9:00 PM) (FOX)

TUE, JUNE 30

Match 77 – Round of 32: 2E vs. 2I (1:00 PM) (FOX)
Match 78 – Round of 32: 1I vs. 3 TBD (5:00 PM) (FOX)
Match 79 – Round of 32: 1A vs. 3 TBD (9:00 PM) (FOX)

WED, JULY 1

Match 80 – Round of 32: 1L vs. 3 TBD (12:00 PM) (FOX)
Match 81 – Round of 32: 1G vs. 3 TBD (4:00 PM) (FS1)
Match 82 – Round of 32: 1D vs. 3 TBD (8:00 PM) (FOX)

THU, JULY 2

Match 83 – Round of 32: 1H vs. 2J (3:00 PM) (FOX)
Match 84 – Round of 32: 2K vs. 2L (7:00 PM) (FOX)
Match 85 – Round of 32: 1B vs. 3 TBD (11:00 PM) (FS1)

FRI, JULY 3

Match 86 – Round of 32: 2D vs. 2G (2:00 PM) (FOX)
Match 87 – Round of 32: 1J vs. 2H (6:00 PM) (FOX)
Match 88 – Round of 32: 1K vs. 3 TBD (9:30 PM) (FOX)

SAT, JULY 4

Match 89 – Round of 16 (1:00 PM) (FOX)
Match 90 – Round of 16 (5:00 PM) (FOX)

SUN, JULY 5

Match 91 – Round of 16 (4:00 PM) (FOX)
Match 92 – Round of 16 (8:00 PM) (FOX)

MON, JULY 6

Match 93 – Round of 16 (3:00 PM) (FOX)
Match 94 – Round of 16 (8:00 PM) (FOX)

TUE, JULY 7

Match 95 – Round of 16 (12:00 PM) (FOX)
Match 96 – Round of 16 (4:00 PM) (FOX)

THU, JULY 9

Match 97 – Quarterfinal (4:00 PM) (FOX)

FRI, JULY 10

Match 98 – Quarterfinal (3:00 PM) (FOX)

SAT, JULY 11

Match 99 – Quarterfinal (5:00 PM) (FOX)

Match 100 – Quarterfinal (9:00 PM) (FOX)

TUE, JULY 14

Match 101 – Semifinal (3:00 PM) (FOX)

WED, JULY 15

Match 102 – Semifinal (3:00 PM) (FOX)

SAT, JULY 18

Match 103 - Third Place Match (5:00 PM) (FOX)

SUN, JULY 19

Match 104 - CHAMPIONSHIP MATCH (3:00 PM) (FOX)

Erling Haaland
NORWAY (pg. 41)



Photo via The Guardian



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MEXICO

2026 World Cup Preview

MEXICO BIO

"El Tri"

World Cup Appearances: **18** (17-15-28)

Last Appearance: **2022** (Group Stage)

Best Finish: **Quarterfinals** (1970, 1986)

Manager: **Javier Aguirre**

Population: **132.8 million**



RAUL JIMENEZ

THIRD TIME (HOSTING) A CHARM?

This is the third time that Mexico will be hosting the World Cup, and they will be looking to replicate their successes in those previous tournaments. In each one, they reached the quarterfinal before being dispatched by the eventual runner-ups. Even without the expanded field (and the automatic berth to host nations), Mexico likely would have still qualified. In fact, the last time Mexico didn't qualify was when they were banned from the tournament in 1990. However, their quality has dropped off significantly, demonstrated by a group stage exit in 2022.

Javier Aguirre enters his third stint with the volatile national team. In the past, he played a key role as a player in the 1986 national team run to the quarterfinals and he stepped in to save the team both in the 2002 and 2010 mid-qualifying cycles as the manager. He'll be tasked with managing the many emotions that come with hosting the World Cup. Will the home crowd be an encouragement when things go poorly or will the environment quickly turn toxic? Precedent suggests that the outcome will be overwhelmingly positive, but with poor results in recent years, it's vital that "El Tri" starts off strong in the opening game of the tournament against South Africa.

Mexico and South Africa have a short, yet storied World Cup history. When South Africa hosted in 2010, their opening match was against Mexico in a thrilling 1-1 draw with Tshabalala's iconic goal as the predominant highlight. Now, 16 years later, South Africa will reverse roles as they attempt to play the spoiler in Mexico City. Mexico has won both previous World Cup matches against South Korea, 3-1 (1998 France) and 2-1 (2018 Russia). South Korea eventually aided Mexico's advancement from the group by upsetting the defending champions Germany 2-0. Mexico and Czechia have faced each other only once in World Cup history when Mexico took home a 3-1 victory in Chile in the 1962 tournament.

One of a few players on the national team that plays outside of the country, **Raúl Jiménez** had another successful season at Fulham scoring nine goals with three assists. Perhaps more important than the stats is the experience he brings from facing the world's best in the English Premier League, something most of his teammates lack. Mexico's style of play and history show a need for a top-flight goal scorer in order to compete at a high level, Jiménez must be that for Mexico to find success.

Prediction: 1st in Group A (Round of 16)

FIFA WORLD RANKING

15

Match Schedule (Group A)



South Africa

June 11 - Mexico City



South Korea

June 18 - Zapopan



Czechia

June 24 - Mexico City



Projected Starting XI (4-3-3)

GK - Raúl Rangel

DF - Israel Reyes

DF - César Montes

DF - Johan Vásquez

DF - Jesús Gallardo

MF - Edson Álvarez (C)

MF - Marcel Ruiz

MF - Gilberto Mora

FW - Roberto Alvarado

FW - Raúl Jiménez

FW - Alexis Vega

SOUTH AFRICA

2026 World Cup Preview

SOUTH AFRICA BIO

"Bafana Bafana"

World Cup Appearances: **4** (2-4-3)
Last Appearance: **2010** (Group Stage)
Best Finish: **Group Stage**

Manager: **Hugo Broos**

Population: **65.5 million**

Photo via Sunday World



LYLE FOSTER

YOUTH AND TRAVEL POSE CHALLENGES

South Africa finished first in Group C of the CAF qualification which sounds like a straightforward way to qualify for the World Cup, but it wasn't. Their road to qualification included a three-point deduction for fielding an ineligible player early in the campaign. The drama continued on the last day of qualifying as the combination of their 3-0 win over Rwanda and a 4-0 victory by Nigeria over Benin pushed them into first place. The 2026 edition will be their first World Cup appearance since becoming the first African nation to host in 2010 and they are looking to advance beyond the group stage for the first time ever.

Manager Hugo Broos has led the team since May 2021 and plans to retire after the World Cup. The height of his success outside of this year's qualification was a third-place finish in the 2023 Africa Cup of Nations. He leads a young and inexperienced team with an average age of 26.22, the eighth youngest of the 48 squads. His calm demeanor and leadership will be critical in directing this talented, but youthful team.

When South Africa opened the 2010 World Cup as host, Mexico was there to greet them and the game finished in a 1-1 draw. Now, South Africa will head to Mexico City for the opening match of the 2026 World Cup with the goal of playing spoiler. Later on, South Africa will get their first look against Czechia in a World Cup. In fact, their only matchup period was back in the 1997 Confederations Cup which finished in a 2-2 draw. South Africa and South Korea will face one another for the first time.

Lyle Foster is the biggest name for South Africa, scoring two goals and two assists in the Africa cup of Nations. However, he (along with much of his team at Burnley) struggled this season in the English Premier League, scoring only three goals. He will have to showcase his brilliance in specific moments, especially since there may not be a wealth of goal scoring opportunities for his squad.

South Africa is one of the squads with the disadvantage of long-distance travel between two of the host nations during the group stage. Travel beginning in Mexico City, then to Atlanta, then back to Guadalupe may be the "new normal" of multi-host tournaments, but it could prove detrimental to the country's chances of escaping Group A. Could "Bafana Bafana" force a draw in either of the two first games to set up a potential showdown with South Korea?

Prediction: 4th in Group A

FIFA WORLD RANKING

60

Match Schedule (Group A)



Mexico

June 11 - Mexico City



Czechia

June 18 - Atlanta



South Korea

June 24 - Guadalupe



Projected Starting XI (4-3-3)

GK - Ronwen Williams (C)
DF - Khuliso Mudau
DF - Siyabonga Ngezana
DF - Mbekezeli Mbokazi
DF - Samukelo Kabini
MF - Bathusi Aubaas
MF - Teboho Mokoena
MF - Nkosinathi Sibisi
FW - Relebohile Mofokeng
FW - Oswin Appollis
FW - Lyle Foster

SOUTH KOREA

2026 World Cup Preview

SOUTH KOREA BIO

"Taegeuk Warriors"

World Cup Appearances: **12** (7-10-21)

Last Appearance: **2022** (Round of 16)

Best Finish: **Fourth Place** (2002)

Manager: **Hong Myung-Bo**

Population: **51.6 million**

Photo via Major League Soccer



SON HUENG-MIN

HIGHER CEILING, HIGHER EXPECTATIONS

It's now 11 consecutive World Cup appearances for South Korea, could they be in their best form yet? The answer could be yes based on qualifying, where the Taegeuk Warriors won 11 matches and drew the other five, scoring an impressive 40 goals in that stretch. Manager Hong Myung-Bo is back, looking for a much better result than the 2014 World Cup when South Korea scratched across only a single point. His tactical 3-4-3 formation allows for the outside midfielders to retreat backwards when needed while still providing dynamism on the attack.

South Korea will open with Czechia, a match that will mark the first meeting between the two countries in the World Cup. They'll bookend group play with another debut competition against South Africa. The biggest challenge likely waits in Zapopan where host nation Mexico awaits. Mexico claimed both previous World Cup matchups (3-1 in 1998 France, 2-1 in 2018 Russia). South Korea's draw didn't necessarily do them any favors, but not necessarily due to their group stage opponents. The U.S. boasts the largest South Korea diaspora in the world with around 1.8 million individuals. Playing in the U.S. could have potentially provided the squad with a pseudo-homefield advantage, but all three matches will be played in Mexico.

South Korea typically showcases immense discipline and control with the squad's structure never in doubt. This style can provide a potential advantage against the more loose and flair-style teams. Historically, when this team has hit their ceiling, it has been due to a lack of an exceptional athlete with the creativity to make something out of nothing or against the run of play. **Lee Kang-in** of PSG and **Hwang Hee-chan** of Wolves have the potential to change this and provide more opportunities for star forward **Son Hueng-min**.

Anything short of advancing from the group stage would be deemed a stunning failure, especially with a manageable Group A draw in terms of the scheduled opponents. The expanded format means that more will be expected of this group. How well South Korea fares in the knockout stage will be very matchup dependent, a loose-styled team vs. the pragmatism of the Korean squad is just what the Taegeuk Warriors will be looking for, but they need to handle business in Group A first.

Prediction: 2nd in Group A (Round of 16)

FIFA WORLD RANKING

25

Match Schedule (Group A)



Czechia

June 11 - Zapopan



Mexico

June 18 - Zapopan



South Africa

June 24 - Guadalupe



KFA

Projected Starting XI (3-4-3)

GK - Kim Seung-Gyu

DF - Cho Yu-Min

DF - Kim Min-Jae

DF - Kim Joo-Sung

MF - Seol Young-Woo

MF - Hwang In-Beom

MF - Kim Jin-Gyu

MF - Lee Tae-Seok

FW - Son Hueng-Min (C)

FW - Lee Kang-In

FW - Hwang Hee-Chan

CZECHIA BIO

"Národ'ák"

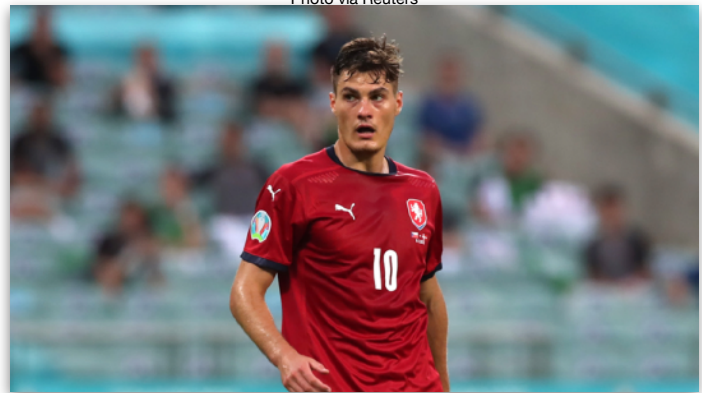
World Cup Appearances: **10** (12-5-16)

Last Appearance: **2006** (Group Stage)

Best Finish: **Runners-Up** (1934, 1962)

Manager: **Miroslav Koubek**

Population: **10.9 million**



PATRIK SCHICK

PHYSICALITY KEY IN 20-YEAR RETURN

Czechia clinched their spot in the World Cup for the first time in 20 years by finishing second in UEFA Group L behind Croatia. That finish sent them to the playoffs where they narrowly prevailed in penalties against the Republic of Ireland and Denmark to make the field of 48. Miroslav Koubek is 74-years-young, the second-oldest manager to make an appearance at the World Cup. He took over in December and the Czechia native has vast experience managing in the country, so he has an intimate knowledge of what the team needs.

The Czechs will open their tournament by facing two teams who they have never faced in the World Cup, South Korea and South Africa. They will wrap up group play against host Mexico, where the lone previous matchup occurred in 1962. Czechia may have nine prior World Cup appearances to their name, but this is just their second since their separation with Slovakia. They will have sights set on advancing out of Group A.

Their biggest advantage will be size and physicality. They boast a towering team, especially on the frontline that has the potential to give the likes of South Korea and Mexico problems. Set pieces for the likes of **Tomáš Chory** (6'6"), **Patrik Schick** (6'3"), and **Tomas Soucek** (6'4") have to produce goals. Their biggest vulnerability appears to be a lack of roster depth, so late in-game management will be critical.

Czechia could easily be overlooked with an average to below-average FIFA ranking and needing a UEFA playoff to qualify for the expanded tournament. However, one could argue that they will be sharper and more battle tested than most, especially since they played more meaningful games closer to the tournament. They lack the experience of Mexico and South Korea, but they should be extremely hungry behind top scorer Schick.

The group as a whole is vulnerable and could allow Czechia to slide into one of the top two spots if their opposition isn't careful. There's also a distinct possibility that the Czechs could advance as a third place team, and four points could represent the bar to meet. Depending on how everything shakes out, the June 18 matchup against South Africa could very well be a "must win" situation. Advancing out of the group (no matter the method) would be seen as a major success.

Prediction: 3rd in Group A (Round of 32)

FIFA WORLD RANKING

41

Match Schedule (Group A)



South Korea

June 11 - Zapopan



South Africa

June 18 - Atlanta



Mexico

June 24 - Mexico City



Projected Starting XI (3-4-2-1)

GK - Matej Kovar

DF - Stepán Chaloupek

DF - Ladislav Krejčí (C)

DF - Robin Hranác

MF - David Jurásek

MF - Vladimír Darida

MF - Tomas Soucek

MF - Vladimír Coufal

FW - Pavel Sulc

FW - Lukás Provod

FW - Patrik Schick

CANADA BIO

"The Canucks"

World Cup Appearances: **3** (0-0-6)
 Last Appearance: **2022** (Group Stage)
 Best Finish: **Group Stage**

Manager: **Jesse Marsch**

Population: **41.5 million**

Photo via CBC



ALPHONSO DAVIES

FROM COPA TO CO-HOST

The 2022 edition of the World Cup wasn't pretty. Canada lost all three of their matches while being outscored 2-7. To be fair, two of the teams in their group, Croatia and Morocco, finished third and fourth respectively in the entire tournament. However, when the dust settled on the country's second-ever appearance in the World Cup, they found themselves still lacking a win (or even a draw) in the sport's grand spectacle.

Expectations are much higher in 2026, and not just because Canada is co-hosting the event for the first time ever. 2024 was a huge stepping stone for the program after a very respectable fourth-place finish at the 2024 Copa America. That leap was due in part to the coaching of manager Jesse Marsch, who inked a four-year extension just prior to the start of the 2026 World Cup. His goal is to not only earn Canada's first point in the tournament but to advance to the knockout stage.

Marsch's squad will be ultra-aggressive, pushing the boundaries of physicality to see exactly what kind of contact will be deemed permissible. The 4-4-2 formation will press opponents, hoping to suffocate them and force mistakes. When those mistakes occur, **Jonathan David** will be tasked with capitalizing. **Tani Oluwaseyi** is another forward to watch.

Canada finds themselves with a favorable draw as a co-host. Switzerland is the clear threat, but if everything goes to plan, the Canadians will have great point-scoring opportunities against both Bosnia and Herzegovina and Qatar, setting up a potential winner-take-all game in the group stage finale. "Settling" for a second-place finish in Group B would be a perfectly acceptable result. One could argue that placing second in the group will actually be easier than what Canada accomplished in Copa America in 2024.

Health will be absolutely paramount for Canada. Recent draws against Iceland and Tunisia, neither of which are World Cup teams, raise some concern even though "The Canucks" weren't at full strength in either matchup. **Alphonso Davies**, the team captain, is likely going to miss the first matchup against Bosnia due to a hamstring injury and he had a torn ACL in March of 2025. It will take a collective team effort, but Canada will have the backing of very boisterous crowds in both Toronto and Vancouver that could prove to be the difference.

Prediction: 2nd in Group B (Round of 32)

FIFA WORLD RANKING

30

Match Schedule (Group B)



Bosnia & Herzegovina

June 12 - Toronto



Qatar

June 18 - Vancouver



Switzerland

June 24 - Vancouver

Projected Starting XI
(4-4-2)

GK - Dayne St. Clair
 DF - Richie Laryea
 DF - Derek Cornelius
 DF - Moise Bombito
 DF - Alistair Johnston
 MF - Alphonso Davies (C)
 MF - Ismael Kone
 MF - Stephen Eustaquio
 MF - Tajon Buchanan
 FW - Jonathan David
 FW - Tani Oluwaseyi

BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA

2026 World Cup Preview

BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA BIO

"Zmajevi"

World Cup Appearances: **2** (1-0-2)
Last Appearance: **2014** (Group Stage)
Best Finish: **Group Stage**

Manager: **Sergej Barbarez**

Population: **3.1 million**

Photo via BBC



EDIN DZEKO

CINDERELLA HAS ARRIVED

This is Bosnia and Herzegovina's second World Cup appearance as an independent nation after the disbanding of Yugoslavia. In the 2014 World Cup in Brazil, they lost to Argentina and Nigeria but claimed their first victory over Iran in the final match. To get to the 2026 tournament, Bosnia finished second in UEFA group qualifying just two points behind Australia which sent them to the playoffs. There, they narrowly defeated Wales via late goal scoring and penalty kick drama in the semifinals. They then stunned European giant Italy in penalties to earn their qualification.

Manager Sergej Barbarez famously has no coaching experience beyond managing this team since 2024, but he has already found a way to succeed in earning a World Cup bid. The Bosnia squad will be a highly pragmatic, counter attack-dependent group.

Bosnia already posted arguably the biggest upset in qualification, could they add to their accomplishments by shocking a host in their first match? By most metrics, this group is Switzerland's to lose with Canada highly favored to finish second. Qatar is likely a "must win" for advancement, so the meeting with Canada is the "fork-in-the road" match. The two countries have never faced one another in any previous competitions. Bosnia will be playing the spoiler role while Canada will have all the pressure to perform and the world's focus will be on the home team. On the field, Canada will have to initiate and break down the Bosnian defense, a strategy that doesn't necessarily align with their strengths. Meanwhile, the Bosnians will be able to play their pragmatic style and wait for counter attack opportunities.

Bosnia won a friendly against Switzerland 2-0 in 2016, but otherwise these two squads have never met. It's a similar story for Qatar, two previous friendlies (both teams won one) but it's the first "official" meeting in a major tournament setting.

Talisman and striker **Edin Džeko** (VfB Stuttgart) will lead the counter-attack opportunities for "Zmajevi" and watch out for youthful **Esmir Barjaktarevic** (PSV Eindhoven) as a potential catalyst on the wing. Advancing to the knockout stage likely requires a win over Canada or Switzerland, the defense and goalkeeping will need to be simply brilliant for that to happen.

Prediction: 3rd in Group B (Round of 32)

FIFA WORLD RANKING

65

Match Schedule (Group B)



Canada

June 13 - Toronto



Switzerland

June 18 - Inglewood



Qatar

June 24 - Seattle



Projected Starting XI (4-4-2)

GK - Nikola Vasilj
DF - Tarik Muharemovic
DF - Nikola Katic
DF - Sead Kolasinac
DF - Amar Dedic
MF - Ivan Sunjic
MF - Benjamin Tahirovic
MF - Amar Memic
MF - Esmir Bajraktarevic
FW - Ermedin Demirovic
FW - Edin Dzeko (C)

QATAR BIO

"Al-Annabi"

World Cup Appearances: **2** (0-0-3)
Last Appearance: **2022** (Group Stage)
Best Finish: **Group Stage**

Manager: **Julen Lopetegui**

Population: **3.1 million**

Photo via The AFC



AKRAM AFIF

WILL LESSONS LEARNED LEAD TO VICTORY?

Qatar is back in the World Cup, and this time they've qualified based on merit as opposed to the automatic bid they received in 2022 for hosting. It was not a great showing, the 0-0-3 record signified the worst performance by a host nation in World Cup history, but it was also their first World Cup appearance in country history. With some experience in the rearview mirror, what can Qatar do in 2026?

Earning their first point would be a good start, unfortunately, that may have to wait until the final match of the group stage. Barring a big upset, Switzerland and Canada are both daunting challenges, which leaves a big matchup against Bosnia and Herzegovina. The two countries have never met outside of a pair of friendlies, each team claiming one victory.

If the name Julen Lopetegui sounds familiar, it should. His most notable connection to the World Cup is that he was fired by Spain's national team on the eve of the 2018 tournament after negotiating a deal with Real Madrid under the table. After multiple stops between then and now, he's a year into his manager role with Qatar. The system he'll institute for the 2026 World Cup certainly has some Spanish influence, not entirely unlike the "tiki-taka" possession-focused style employed by Spain for many years. However, will that system really work at a World Cup-level of competition?

If it does, it probably means that **Akram Afif** has not only continued his impressive play but increased it. Through qualifying, he matched his jersey number with 11 assists and he might be the premier star in his country. **Almoez Ali** ended the lengthy AFC qualification process with a team-best 12 goals. Ali is coming off surgery post-qualification, so it's critically important to get him back in the lineup for both his production and leadership.

One wrinkle is that Qatar was not able to play their scheduled friendlies in March due to the Iran War. That could prove to be detrimental, and it also didn't give the squad a chance to wash the bad taste of a Arab Cup group stage elimination out of their mouths. To make matters worse, that elimination happened right at home. Al-Annabi (The Maroons) will need pull a major upset in order to extend their trip to North America for longer than three matches.

Prediction: 4th in Group B

FIFA WORLD RANKING

55

Match Schedule (Group B)



Switzerland
June 13 - Santa Clara



Canada
June 18 - Vancouver



Bosnia & Herzegovina
June 24 - Vancouver



Projected Starting XI (4-3-3)

GK - Meshaal Barsham
DF - Lucas Michel Mendes
DF - Boualem Khoukhi
DF - Pedro Miguel
DF - Ayoub Mohamed Al Ouwi
MF - Karim Boudiaf
MF - Assim Madimo
MF - Abdelrahman Moustafa
FW - Hassan Al-Haydos (C)
FW - Akram Afif
FW - Almoez Ali

SWITZERLAND

2026 World Cup Preview

SWITZERLAND BIO

"Nati"

World Cup Appearances: **13** (14-8-19)

Last Appearance: **2022** (Round of 16)

Best Finish: **Quarterfinals** (1934, 1938, 1954)

Manager: **Murat Yakin**

Population: **9.0 million**



GRANIT XHAKA

FIFA WORLD RANKING

19

Match Schedule (Group B)



Qatar

June 13 - Santa Clara



Bosnia & Herzegovina

June 18 - Inglewood



Canada

June 24 - Vancouver



Projected Starting XI (4-3-3)

GK - Gregor Kobel

DF - Ricardo Rodriguez

DF - Manuel Akanji

DF - Fabian Schar

MF - Silvan Widmer

MF - Remo Freuler

MF - Granit Xhaka (C)

FW - Ruben Vargas

FW - Fabian Rieder

FW - Dan Ndoye

FW - Breel Embolo

QUARTERFINAL DROUGHT QUENCHED?

Switzerland has never advanced beyond the quarterfinals of the World Cup, and the last time they reached that round, color television was the current novelty. However, on the other side of the coin, the Swiss have advanced out of the group stage in each of the last three World Cups and it would be pretty shocking if they don't make it four straight in 2026. On paper, when Switzerland travels north to face host nation Canada in Vancouver, the opportunity should be there to cleanly sweep Group B, but this tournament isn't played on paper.

Success for Switzerland needs to start on the defensive end. Sure, it's been four years since the last World Cup and a lot has changed, but the memories of allowing six goals in a dismal showing against Portugal remain. **Gregor Kobel** (Borussia Dortmund) fills the net-minding role this time around. In front of Kobel, Inter Milan's **Manuel Akanji** will lead the defense. **Ricardo Rodriguez** is a veteran with plenty of experience. However, the real strength of the team resides in the midfield where captain **Granit Xhaka** patrols.

Manager Murat Yakin is pragmatic in his approach, but watch out for the ever-dangerous **Breel Embolo** when the time comes to strike. Even though a draw against Kosovo turned some heads, Switzerland finished qualifying without defeat and outscored their opponents 14-2, with Embolo leading the charge with four scores. If Embolo can't get it going, where will the offense come from? That's a question Switzerland must answer if they want to avoid elimination prior to the quarterfinals.

Canada claimed not one but two victories in ice hockey during the Milano Cortina games, and Switzerland would love to return the favor on the pitch. To do so, they'll need to make sure the aggressive Canadian pace doesn't rip through their defense. An early strike would do wonders to quiet a crowd that will be their loudest yet on June 24.

It's Bosnia and Herzegovina's first World Cup in 20 years, and Qatar and Canada are both searching for their first respective wins in this tournament. Group B is Switzerland's to lose, and their talent across multiple levels and past experience should ensure that they won't. Notably, winning Group B means a "third-place" opponent, so Switzerland needs to take care of business.

Prediction: 1st in Group B (Round of 16)

BRAZIL BIO

"Seleção"

World Cup Appearances: **23** (76-19-19)

Last Appearance: **2022** (Quarterfinals)

Best Finish: **Champions** (1958, 1962, 1970, 1994, 2002)

Manager: **Carlo Ancelotti**

Population: **213.5 million**

Photo via ESPN



VINICIUS JUNIOR

TALENT MUST MEET COHESION

Brazil is the only nation to compete in all 23 editions of the World Cup, but the process to get to the 2026 edition wasn't exactly smooth sailing. The five-time World Cup champions finished fifth out of the six CONMEBOL qualifying spots, their worst performance ever.

Carlo Ancelotti didn't take over as manager until May of last year, late in the qualifying campaign. He brings a renowned pedigree and respect needed to reign in the oftentimes dramatic and individualistic style the Brazilian team has shown in recent past. His experience in managing personalities, specifically at Real Madrid, is why he was the long-sought-after man for the job. The concern has never been having a talented enough squad, but whether they can integrate their solo flare on the ball with more cohesive structure and shape. When that integration has come together in the past, they've been champions.

Brazil will open their tournament against the "Cinderella" of the 2022 World Cup. Back in 1998, Brazil took a 3-0 victory over Morocco in their only meeting. However, in 2023, Morocco got the best of them in a friendly 2-1. Brazil has historically dominated Haiti including a 7-1 blitz in the 2016 Copa America, but this will be their first World Cup matchup. It's far from the first matchup with Scotland, Brazil holds a major advantage, winning three of the four meetings and drawing the other.

There are some giant names on this roster to say the least. **Casemiro** (Manchester United), **Raphinha** (Barcelona), and **Vinicius Junior** (Real Madrid) are all notable, but the most important name may be Arsenal's **Gabriel**. The EPL champions were anchored by their defensive line led by the Brazilian center back. There is immense quality on the attack that needs to be harnessed, but for the Canary Yellows to have a chance to win the cup, physical defensive presence will be needed as well.

The first game against Morocco is perhaps the most anticipated opening match of the entire tournament. Morocco's rock solid defensive front could very well frustrate the easily irritated Brazilian squad and come out victorious. If the opener does go sideways, Haiti provides a great opportunity for an easy rebound victory and a chance to regroup before a critical matchup with Scotland. Can Ancelotti be able to bring together the personalities for a major tournament run like he has so many times in the past for Real Madrid?

Prediction: 2nd in Group C (Quarterfinals)

FIFA WORLD RANKING

6

Match Schedule (Group C)



Morocco

June 13 - East Rutherford



Haiti

June 19 - Philadelphia



Scotland

June 24 - Miami Gardens



Projected Starting XI (4-2-4)

GK - Alisson

DF - Alex Sandro

DF - Gabriel

DF - Marquinhos

DF - Wesley França

MF - Bruno Guimarães

MF - Casemiro (C)

FW - Vinicius Júnior

FW - Raphinha

FW - Matheus Cunha

FW - Luiz Henrique

MOROCCO BIO

"The Atlas Lions"

World Cup Appearances: **8** (76-19-19)

Last Appearance: **2022** (Fourth Place)

Best Finish: **Fourth Place** (2022)

Manager: **Mohamed Ouahbi**

Population: **38.8 million**



ACHRAF HAKIMI

A SOCCER POWERHOUSE EMERGES

Morocco had been quietly growing as an under-the-radar soccer power until the 2022 World Cup where they finally popped. Defeating highly-ranked European teams in Belgium, Spain, and Portugal on their way to a third-place finish, no one will be taking the Atlas Lions lightly this time around.

Qualification was a breeze, Morocco dominated CAF Group E, failing to drop a single point in any of their six matches. In 2022, they became the first African nation to make it to the semifinals of the World Cup, so perhaps it's not a huge shock that they dominated like they did in qualification, but it certainly shows their prowess.

Morocco opens up with a major showdown against Brazil. They lost 3-0 in their only World Cup meeting in 1998. However, in 2023, they defeated Brazil 2-1 in a friendly in 2023 after their true arrival on the world stage. Morocco took the only previous World Cup meeting against Scotland back in 1998. Haiti is a new opponent, both in World Cup play and any senior level competitions.

Mohamed Ouahbi has only been the manager of Morocco since March. That would ordinarily be a concern, but his track record speaks for itself. Much of the recent success for the nation in the sport has been due to their recruitment and development of young talent. In the process, additional exposure to the best clubs on the globe has been earned. Ouahbi has been a large part of this system, which coalesced in winning the 2025 U-20 World Cup over Argentina.

Achraf Hakimi (PSG) is the captain and the best known player on the squad. On the world stage, it feels as though the right-hand side of the field is walled off to the opposition because of his pace and quality. Along with goalkeeper **Yassine Bounou**, the defensive backbone of the team continues to grow in confidence with youthful reinforcements adding depth. Their smothering defense was the catalyst for their 2022 World Cup success, but to advance even farther, they will need lead scorer **Ayoub El Kaabi** (Olympiacos) and other young talent to produce more.

2022 was no fluke, but Morocco can remove whatever doubt may remain from critics by taking care of business in Group C. That begins with one of the most anticipated matches in the entire tournament against Brazil. The stingy Moroccan defense could easily frustrate Brazil and others.

Prediction: 1st in Group C (Quarterfinals)

FIFA WORLD RANKING

8

Match Schedule (Group C)



Brazil

June 13 - East Rutherford



Scotland

June 19 - Foxborough



Haiti

June 24 - Atlanta



Projected Starting XI (4-2-3-1)

GK - Yassine Bounou
DF - Noussair Mazraoui
DF - Issa Diop
DF - Nayef Aguerd
DF - Achraf Hakimi (C)
MF - Azzedine Ounahi
MF - Neil El Aynaoui
FW - Ismael Saibari
FW - Bilal El Khannouss
FW - Brahim Diaz
FW - Ayoub El Kaabi

HAITI BIO

"Les Grenadiers"

World Cup Appearances: **2** (0-0-3)
 Last Appearance: **1974** (Group Stage)
 Best Finish: **Group Stage**
 Manager: **Sébastien Migné**
 Population: **12.0 million**

Photo via Sky Sports



JOHNY PLACIDE

HISTORIC PATH TO THE NATIONAL STAGE

One of the beauties of the expanded format of the World Cup is that it allows countries like Haiti to appear for the first time in over 50 years. Now, the downside for "Les Grenadiers" is the inclusion means facing both Brazil and Morocco in the group stage which spells almost certain elimination. However, make no mistake, Haiti will be thrilled to be on the national stage.

In their previous World Cup appearance in 1974, Haiti won the CONCACAF championship but proceeded to lose all three matches, being outscored by a combined 14-2. This year, Haiti claimed CONCACAF Group C ahead of assumed favorites Costa Rica. Toppling the favorites may not have even been the most impressive achievement. Due to a security crisis going on in the country, all of their qualifying matches had to be played at neutral sites, so they became the first nation to qualify for the World Cup without playing a single match on home soil.

The positives for Haiti are that they have a large diaspora (1.1 million) on the eastern coast of the U.S., which so happens to be where they will play all three group stage matches. So, they should be one of the better represented fanbases of the tournament.

Give manager Sébastien Migné a lot of credit for leading this squad to the World Cup. He took over in 2024 and took full advantage of the expanded field and a new opportunity. Haiti has the offensive skill to get on the scoreboard with **Wilson Isidor** (Sunderland) and the nation's all-time leading scorer **Duckens Nazon** (Esteghal) in tow. However, the defense leaves much to be desired as illustrated in past competitions against top opponents. The defensive struggles don't leave much of a path for Haiti to advance, but that could change in a hurry if they find a way to earn three points against a sometimes offensively-challenged Scotland squad. Those two countries have never met in any competitive match.

Realistically, however, success for Haiti looks like enjoying the moment and working towards improvement on the -12 goal differential from the 1974 World Cup. Earning a first World Cup point would only be a bonus.

Prediction: 4th in Group C

FIFA WORLD RANKING

83

Match Schedule (Group C)



Scotland

June 13 - Foxborough



Brazil

June 19 - Philadelphia



Morocco

June 24 - Atlanta



Projected Starting XI (4-2-3-1)

GK - Johny Placide (C)
 DF - Duke Lacroix
 DF - Hannes Delcroix
 DF - Ricardo Adé
 DF - Carlens Arcus
 MF - Woodensky Pierre
 MF - Jean-Ricner Bellegarde
 FW - Ruben Providence
 FW - Josué Casimir
 FW - Louicius Don Deedson
 FW - Wilson Isidor

SCOTLAND BIO

"The Tartan Army"

World Cup Appearances: **9** (7-12-25)

Last Appearance: **1998** (Group Stage)

Best Finish: **Group Stage**

Manager: **Steve Clarke**

Population: **5.5 million**

Photo via BBC



SCOTT MCTOMINAY

A FAMILIAR FACE RETURNS

Once upon a time, Scotland was a regular in the tournament with this being their ninth appearance. However, this is their first World Cup since 1998. Even with regular entries and even upset victories, they have never advanced past the group stage. With a couple of heavy weights in their group, a result against one of them will most likely be necessary to succeed where they have failed in the past.

To get here, Scotland secured an automatic bid by winning UEFA Group C, which included a dramatic win over favorite Denmark in the final match. Even with the aforementioned heavyweights of Morocco and Brazil, there is a feeling of optimism. Scotland has a history of being giant killers and the expanded field allowing third-place teams to enter the knockout stage gives their feelings credence. To be fair, there was also optimism during the 2024 Euros which resulted in just a single point.

This is where manager Steve Clarke will have to show his squad's growth. He's been the man in charge for the last seven years and he has slowly brought the nation back to prominence after Euro Cup appearances in 2020 and 2024. As the strength of the team has grown, so too are the expectations for advancing out of the group stage.

Scott McTominay (Napoli) was already beloved, but he became a legend for his spectacular bicycle kick goal to help secure World Cup qualification against Denmark. "Legend" isn't an exaggeration, the government decided to place an image of that goal on the £20 bank note for a limited time. With 14 goals in 69 appearances, he will be relied upon to come up big for his team, especially now with two quality years in Serie A under his belt.

For Scotland to succeed, he and his teammates will have to limit opponents goal scoring opportunities with their low-block formation and then take full advantage of set-pieces with their physical brand of ball. Three points against Haiti in the opener will be a necessity with Morocco and Brazil looming. That first match will mark the first time Haiti and Scotland have squared off in international play. The "Tartan Army" has just one point in five tries against Brazil, but their second point will very likely be the difference between advancing or catching a flight home.

Prediction: 3rd in Group C (Round of 32)

FIFA WORLD RANKING

43

Match Schedule (Group C)



Haiti

June 13 - Foxborough



Morocco

June 19 - Foxborough



Brazil

June 24 - Miami Gardens



Projected Starting XI (4-2-3-1)

GK - Angus Gunn
DF - Andrew Robertson (C)
DF - Grant Hanley
DF - John Souttar
DF - Anthony Ralston
MF - Lewis Ferguson
MF - Ryan Christie
FW - Billy Gilmour
FW - Scott McTominay
FW - John McGinn
FW - Ché Adams

UNITED STATES

2026 World Cup Preview

UNITED STATES BIO

"The Stars and Stripes"

World Cup Appearances: **12** (9-8-20)

Last Appearance: **2022** (Round of 16)

Best Finish: **3rd Place** (1930)

Manager: **Mauricio Pochettino**

Population: **343.0 million**



Photo via ESPN

CHRISTIAN PULISIC

CAN U.S. ACTUALLY TAKE NEXT STEP?

After missing the 2018 World Cup, the U.S. made progress by making it through the group stage in 2022. This time around, at a minimum, the expectations are to once again advance through the group stage. However, as host, there is hope that the U.S. can actually make some noise once they've established their place on the bracket. Are those expectations realistic?

The management role for the U.S. has been under high scrutiny since the end of the 2022 World Cup. Greg Berhalter was reappointed despite a review of the falling out between him and the Reynas. That is, until the epic failure that was the Copa America. Failing to even advance past the group stage of the tournament was the end for Berhalter and Mauricio Pochettino is now at the helm. Pochettino has a history of dealing with young players and maximizing their abilities at the club level. The last regime seemingly failed in this regard, and it will be up to him to provide the creativity necessary to raise the program's ceiling.

Since moving to a more expansive playing style, the U.S. does well against competition they can overwhelm, but they have struggled to break down low block, defensive shells, due to a lack of creativity on the attack. To that point, the Americans scored only two total goals in the 2022 group stage. This time around, Paraguay and Australia will provide many similar challenges with arguably far superior counter attacking options. The defense was excellent through much of the previous World Cup and they will have to be quality again if the offense stagnates.

The recent ankle injury to **Chris Richards** (Crystal Palace) is extremely concerning, the American squad already lacks starting quality on the defensive line in several spots. Offensively, all the focus will be on **Christian Pulisic** (AC Milan) who struggles under those circumstances. Can **Folarin Balogun** (AS Monaca) or another forward relieve some goal scoring pressure and open up the park?

Outside of one matchup against Paraguay nearly 100 years ago, the U.S. will be getting their first World Cup look against Australia and Türkiye. However, they faced all three teams in 2025 friendlies. Against Paraguay, the U.S. drew 2-2 and won 2-1 in a pair of friendlies. The score against both Australia and Türkiye was 2-1, winning against Australia but falling to Türkiye.

The 3-1 thrashing at the hands of the Dutch in 2022 was a realization of just how far away the U.S. is from elite status. Unfortunately, since then, they have failed in every opportunity to change the status quo and prove the naysayers wrong. Can they prove their quality on the pitch against the World's best and give the home fans a reason to believe that they can win? This group is missing a true juggernaut, and that may prevent them from achieving anything more than they did in 2022.

Prediction: 2nd in Group D (Round of 16)

FIFA WORLD RANKING

16

Match Schedule (Group D)



Paraguay

June 12 - Inglewood



Australia

June 19 - Seattle



Türkiye

June 25 - Inglewood



Projected Starting XI (4-2-3-1)

GK - Matt Freese

DF - Antonee Robinson

DF - Tim Ream

DF - Chris Richards

DF - Sergino Dest

MF - Tyler Adams

MF - Tanner Tessman

FW - Christian Pulisic (C)

FW - Weston McKennie

FW - Tim Weah

FW - Folarin Balogun

PARAGUAY

2026 World Cup Preview

PARAGUAY BIO

"Los Guaraníes"

World Cup Appearances: **9** (7-10-10)

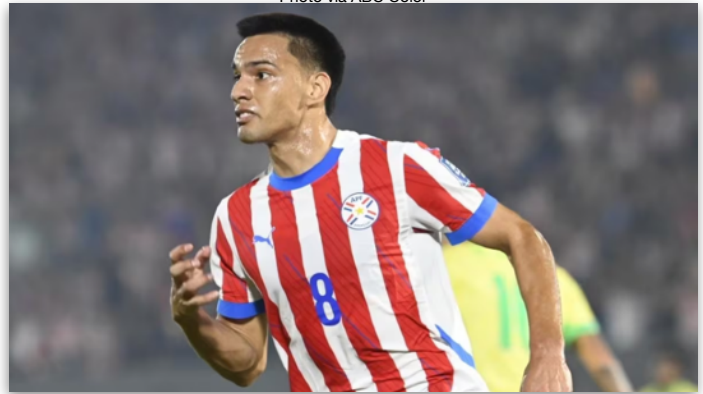
Last Appearance: **2010** (Quarterfinals)

Best Finish: **Quarterfinals** (2010)

Manager: **Gustavo Alfaro**

Population: **7.1 million**

Photo via ABC Color



DIEGO GOMEZ

OVERLOOK AT YOUR OWN RISK

Paraguay has far more World Class ability and talent than they are even given credit for. Lost in (quite literally) the middle of South America, they continue to find innovative ways to find success against their neighboring soccer giants. In a wide open group, there is a chance that the country could repeat their 2010 World Cup campaign in which they won their group over Italy and defeated Japan in the Round of 16.

Manager Gustavo Alfaro took over in August of 2024 for the qualifying run leading up to the World Cup. He has previous experience at the highest level of international soccer, guiding Ecuador to the tournament in 2022. His ability to define the strengths of the Paraguayan side of prioritizing stingy defensive play and taking few counter attacking options has led to victories over Brazil and Argentina throughout qualifying. They finished sixth in the CONMEBOL group, the last of the automatic qualifying spots for the highly competitive region. However, a more realistic outlook at their impressive qualifying record of 7-7-4 for a total of 28 points is that they finished tied for third with Colombia, Uruguay, and Brazil.

The defense will be a tough nut to crack with captain **Gustavo Gómez** (Palmeiras) and **Omar Alderete** (Sunderland) anchoring the backline. The main concern is where the offense will come from without a fully-healthy forward **Miguel Almirón** (Atlanta United). Without Almirón at 100%, much will be asked of young midfielders **Diego Gómez** (Brighton) and **Julio Enciso** (Strasbourg Alsace) who have the potential to break out.

Paraguay will open against the host U.S. Those two teams squared off twice in friendlies in 2025 and drew in the first meeting with the U.S. taking the second. Which group will be healthier, Paraguay's offense or the United States defense? The answer to that question will go a long ways in deciding the result. The only senior level team matchup against Türkiye came back in 1995, a draw. Group stage will wrap up with a critical matchup against Australia. It will be their first World Cup matchup, but the two countries did meet in 2010, resulting in a 1-0 victory for the Socceroos.

Because the margins in Group D could be razor thin, some of the injury concerns up front could be the difference between elation and heartbreak for the Paraguayan side.

Prediction: 4th in Group D

FIFA WORLD RANKING

40

Match Schedule (Group D)



United States

June 12 - Inglewood



Türkiye

June 19 - Santa Clara



Australia

June 25 - Santa Clara



Projected Starting XI (4-4-2)

GK - Orlando Gill
DF - Júnior Alonso
DF - Gustavo Gomez (C)
DF - Omar Alderete
DF - Juan Cáceres
MF - Miguel Almirón
MF - Andres Cubas
MF - Diego Gomez
MF - Ramón Sosa
FW - Julio Enciso
FW - Antonio Sanabria

AUSTRALIA BIO

"The Socceroos"

World Cup Appearances: **7** (4-4-12)
Last Appearance: **2022** (Round of 16)
Best Finish: **Round of 16** (2006, 2022)

Manager: **Tony Popovic**

Population: **28.4 million**



MATHEW RYAN

DEFENSE MAKES SOCCEROOS DANGEROUS

Australia is known for punching above their weight class on the global soccer stage. In the 2022 iteration, they bounced back quickly from a loss to France to win 1-0 over Tunisia and Denmark, finishing second in the group. They then put fear into the eventual champions Argentina losing 2-1 in the Round of 16.

To qualify, the Socceroos finished second in their AFC group, behind only Japan. Their qualification wasn't without drama, however, as a managerial change was made after a rough start to the campaign. Enter Tony Popovic, who has led the squad to an undefeated run of qualifying matches with his steady defensive structure and direct attacks.

Australia has to be thrilled with their placement on the west coast of the United States and western Canada. The draw allows a larger contingent of fans and those at home to be able to cheer on their team at a more reasonable hour of day. Expect there to be some crowd support present at these matches.

The aforementioned defensive structure is headlined by goalkeeper and captain **Mathew Ryan**. He's capable of keeping the Socceroos in every match. However, a potential threat to Australia's success is an over-reliance on that defense leading to a lack of consistent offensive quality and creativity. Both the U.S. and Paraguay will also lean on their defense, so finding the right time to take risks will be important.

That defense will get a good test in the group opener against the attack of Türkiye. Two friendlies were both taken by the Turks back in 2004, but this match will serve as the first World Cup contest between the two countries. From Vancouver, Australia will make the short journey south to Seattle to meet up with the host nation United States. The U.S. took a 2-1 victory in a friendly back in 2025. Group D may offer the most parity of any of the World Cup groups. So, the final group stage match against Paraguay could mean anything from fighting for a chance to take the group or simply clawing out of the group to the knockout stage. Expect a bit of slugfest in this game.

If Australia can pull an upset (at least based on FIFA rankings) against either Türkiye or the U.S., they'll be set up for another magical run. If that doesn't happen, Australian fans "Down Under" will be sweating out the final 90 minutes.

Prediction: 3rd in Group D (Round of 32)

FIFA WORLD RANKING

27

Match Schedule (Group D)



Türkiye

June 13 - Vancouver



United States

June 19 - Seattle



Paraguay

June 25 - Santa Clara



Projected Starting XI (3-4-2-1)

GK - Mathew Ryan (C)
DF - Alessandro Circati
DF - Harry Souttar
DF - Cameron Burgess
MF - Jordan Bos
MF - Jackson Irvine
MF - Aiden O'Neill
MF - Jacob Italiano
FW - Riley McGree
FW - Connor Metcalfe
FW - Mohamed Toure

TÜRKİYE BIO

"Ay Yıldızlılar"

World Cup Appearances: **3** (5-1-4)

Last Appearance: **2002** (3rd Place)

Best Finish: **3rd Place** (2002)

Manager: **Vincenzo Montella**

Population: **87.9 million**

Photo via Real Madrid



ARDA GÜLER

AGGRESSIVE ATTACK, FIRST GROUP WIN?

This is only the third time that Türkiye has qualified for the World Cup and their first since their magical run to the semifinals in 2002. With such little experience, expectations are probably pretty low, right? Think again. Manager Vincenzo Montella has done an outstanding job raising the nation back to quality standing at the international level. Taking charge in 2023, he led the squad to a quarterfinal finish at the 2024 Euros before getting them back to the World Cup.

The Turks qualified for the World Cup by finishing second in their UEFA qualifying group behind Spain. Taking down Romania and Kosovo in the European playoffs booked their ticket to Group D.

A large piece of what led Türkiye to this point has been their unapologetic, aggressive style of attack. The featured star is young midfield **Arda Güler** (Real Madrid). The downside to the aggressive attack is that Türkiye can find themselves vulnerable on defense, but with so many pragmatic sides in the overall field and within Group D, that style could take their opponents off guard. Their fluidness of formation and willingness to risk a high line should make them one of the more intriguing watches of the entire tournament.

One of the main questions is whether the defense can hold in critical moments when the attack places the midfielders and defensive backs out of position. Both Paraguay and Australia will rely upon the counter, so watch for potentially higher scoring and volatile matches.

All three group stage opponents are new World Cup opponents for Türkiye which perhaps isn't that surprising considering it's only the third time on this stage. However, the Turks did match up with the U.S. in a friendly in 2025 and took them down 2-1. They'll meet again in Los Angeles, will the boost provided by the home crowd provide the Americans with the needed edge or can Türkiye find success again? If Montella's squad can walk into SoFi (ahem, Los Angeles Stadium) with four points in hand, Türkiye will have the opportunity to win their first group ever at the World Cup. In any case, advancing to the knockout stage seems likely where their aggressiveness goes from a strength in Group D to a potential weakness against the elite of the elite.

Prediction: 1st in Group D (Round of 16)

FIFA WORLD RANKING

22

Match Schedule (Group D)



Australia

June 13 - Vancouver



Paraguay

June 19 - Santa Clara



United States

June 25 - Inglewood



Projected Starting XI (4-2-3-1)

GK - Ugurcan Çakir

DF - Abdülkerim Bardakci

DF - Merih Demiral

DF - Ferdi Kadioglu

DF - Zeki Çelik

MF - Ismail Yüksek

MF - Hakan Çalhanoğlu (C)

FW - Kenan Yildiz

FW - Arda Güler

FW - Baris Alper Yilmaz

FW - Kerem Aktürkoglu

GERMANY

2026 World Cup Preview

GERMANY BIO

"Die Mannschaft"

World Cup Appearances: **21** (68-21-23)

Last Appearance: **2022** (Group Stage)

Best Finish: **Champions** (1954, 1974, 2006, 2014)

Manager: **Julian Nagelsmann**

Population: **83.6 million**

Photo via The New York Times



JAMAL MUSIALA

THE OPPORTUNITY FOR REDEMPTION

For one of the world's most renowned soccer nations, Germany's international results since the 2014 World Cup title have been somewhere between disappointing and disastrous. After failing to get past the group stage in the 2018 and 2022 tournaments, reaching the knockout stage is the bare minimum that their fans will accept.

Germany qualified for the World Cup by winning UEFA Group A in dominant fashion. Young manager Julian Nagelsmann took over in 2023 and showed signs of progress by helping Germany advance to the quarterfinals in the 2024 Euros. That showing was enough to get him extended through the 2026 World Cup cycle. As one of the more talented squads on the globe, his flexible style of formation and approach fit the roster well. Expect to see varied formations throughout the tournament, with a high press, midfield overloads, and extreme width on the outside.

With that talent, the Germans are once again the favorites in a very winnable group at the World Cup. Since their last title in 2014, they have been the laughing stock of the global soccer elite (although Italy would like a word). Upsets to South Korea, Japan, and others over the past decade have been painful missed opportunities. In 2026, Ecuador is the major threat to their group supremacy, so can Germany sweep six points in their first two games so that the finale is just for seeding and not life or death?

The only previous matchup against Ecuador came back in 2006 with Germany cleaning up by a score of 3-0. Their first two matchups against Curaçao and Ivory Coast, respectively, will be their first looks at either squad in this tournament.

To avoid the issues of the past, the German offensive will need to get going behind creative midfielders **Jamal Musiala** (Bayern Munich) and Florian Wirtz (**Liverpool**). There haven't been enough scoring opportunities in the team's past failures, but their dominance and playmaking abilities in the midfield should be enough to provide ample chances for **Kai Havertz** (Arsenal) and company on the attack. The schedule is set up perfectly for "Die Mannschaft" to finally have a tournament finish they can be proud of. Their fans always travel well and despite cost and travel issues with host sites, the 2026 World Cup should be no different.

Prediction: 1st in Group E (Round of 16)

FIFA WORLD RANKING

10

Match Schedule (Group E)



Curaçao

June 14 - Houston



Ivory Coast

June 20 - Toronto



Ecuador

June 25 - East Rutherford



Projected Starting XI (4-2-3-1)

GK - Oliver Baumann

DF - David Raum

DF - Nico Schlotterbeck

DF - Jonathan Tah

DF - Joshua Kimmich (C)

MF - Leon Goretzka

MF - Aleksandar Pavlovic

FW - Florian Wirtz

FW - Jamal Musiala

FW - Leroy Sane

FW - Kai Havertz

CURAÇAO BIO

"The Blue Family"

World Cup Appearances: 1 (0-0-0)

Last Appearance: **None**

Manager: **Fred Rutten**

Population: **0.19 million**

Photo via BBC Sport



LEANDRO BACUNA

THE ULTIMATE DAVID VS. GOLIATH

You're looking at one of the true "cinderella" qualifying stories of the World Cup. Curaçao is the smallest country *ever* to compete in the tournament. To get here, Curaçao took full advantage of an opportunity provided by the three largest countries in CONCACAF hosting the World Cup and thereby receiving automatic bids. They went unbeaten in the last round of qualifying to stamp their ticket.

As if the odds weren't already stacked against them, former manager Fred Rutten stepped down from his post with less than two months until kickoff in the World Cup. Just a few months before that, Dick Advocaat had relinquished his manager role due to personal reasons. So, Curaçao's first call to fill the open manager position? Dick Advocaat. The 78-year-old Dutch manager will be the oldest in the role ever at a men's World Cup.

Despite the multiple transitions, Advocaat has fostered a strong team culture and his potential return was what ultimately led Rutten to step down. His team features a resilient defensive line that has infuriated higher ranked teams such as Jamaica. They will have to lean heavily on their spirit and togetherness, as any pathway to advancing will mean surviving goal differential and pulling an upset against Ivory Coast. The competition level is going to be matched up several notches by all of their group members compared to what they've faced in the past.

Curaçao is understandably thrilled to be in the tournament for the very first time. Truly, their goal has already been accomplished just by making it and there could be a decent showing of fans in the opener in Houston despite the relatively diminutive size of the population. The Blue Family will need to show some grit through difficult results as they were shown no favors falling into a tremendously difficult group.

At some point, reality will probably set in on the pitch and it will likely be a very short stay for Curaçao in the World Cup. Germany is focused and ready to right the wrongs of the past two tournaments and will eventually break down the Curaçaoan defense. Ecuador will be looking to improve on whatever Germany did as goal differential could be massive in deciding the group winner. If the body blows from those two matches isn't too much, Curaçao will reset their aim in the finale against Ivory Coast with the goal of playing spoiler.

Prediction: 4th in Group E

FIFA WORLD RANKING

82

Match Schedule (Group E)



Germany

June 14 - Houston



Ecuador

June 20 - Kansas City



Ivory Coast

June 25 - Philadelphia



Projected Starting XI (4-3-3)

GK - Eloy Room

DF - Shrel Floranus

DF - Roshon van Eijma

DF - Juriën Gaari

DF - Shurandy Sambo

MF - Livano Comenencia

MF - Juninho Bacuna

MF - Leandro Bacuna (C)

FW - Kenji Gorré

FW - Gervane Kastaneer

FW - Jeremy Antonisse

IVORY COAST BIO

"Les Éléphants"

World Cup Appearances: **4** (3-1-5)
 Last Appearance: **2014** (Group Stage)
 Best Finish: **Group Stage**
 Manager: **Emerse Faé**
 Population: **33.5 million**

Photo via Sport News Africa



FRANCK KESSIÉ

LUCK OF THE DRAW BETTER IN 2026?

Ivory Coast qualified for the World Cup by topping CAF Group F, going unbeaten in the final round of qualifying. It's been twelve long years since the Elephants were last in the World Cup, far too long a wait for a nation with the soccer culture of Côte d'Ivoire.

Ivory Coast has never advanced past the group stage, but poor luck and group placement has been their achilles heel more than poor match results. Often placed in one of the most difficult groups, Ivory Coast has won at least one match and finished third in their group at every World Cup appearance. In each instance, they've been one bounce or call away from advancing. Now with the expanded field allowing the top eight third-place finishers through, they may finally get the opportunity they've been longing for.

Emerse Faé was named the interim manager during the 2023 African Cup of Nations after the team had a poor run during the group stage. The immediate turnaround was incredible as he led the Elephants to win the tournament and he was quickly named the permanent manager of the team afterwards. The focus of Faé's system is retaining possession of the ball and a high press. This kind of style is often pleasing to watch for a neutral fan, so Ivory Coast could become a fan favorite especially considering their group opposition. All three of those opponents will be "new" on the World Cup stage with no prior matches.

Ivory Coast is full of players who compete in the top leagues throughout the world, so this group will not be intimidated by the likes of Germany and Ecuador. In midfield, **Franck Kessié** (Al-Ahli) will provide reliability in his box to box presence. **Amad Diallo** (Manchester United) leads a group of young and dynamic wingers whose high pressing attacks could prove disastrous for opponents.

Practically, for Ivory Coast to move forward, they will be looking for a result in one or both of the first two matches against Ecuador and Germany. They are quite capable of not only drawing, but winning those games, but they focus and quality of those units could prove to be too much in the end. There will be third place teams that advance to the knockout stage with only 3 total points, but a positive goal differential, and Ivory Coast with an effective showing against Curaçao could be one of those teams.

Prediction: 3rd in Group E (Round of 32)

FIFA WORLD RANKING

34

Match Schedule (Group E)



Ecuador

June 14 - Philadelphia



Germany

June 20 - Toronto



Curaçao

June 25 - Philadelphia



Projected Starting XI (4-3-3)

GK - Yahia Fofana
 DF - Evan Ndicka
 DF - Kossounou
 DF - Ghislain Konan
 DF - Guela Doué
 MF - Ibrahim Sangaré
 MF - Christ Inao Oulaï
 MF - Franck Kessié (C)
 FW - Ousmane Diomande
 FW - Amad Diallo
 FW - Evann Guessand

ECAUDOR BIO

"La Tri"

World Cup Appearances: **5** (5-2-6)
 Last Appearance: **2022** (Group Stage)
 Best Finish: **Round of 16** (2006)
 Manager: **Sebastián Beccacece**

Population: **18.4 million**

Photo via The Independent



MOISÉS CAICEDO

THE 2026 DARK HORSE?

After qualifying for the first time in 2002, Ecuador has made every World Cup since besides 2018, and has been a regular thorn in the side of larger nations. Now, they are seen as one of the true dark horses to make a real run in 2026. Ecuador passed through qualification with flying colors, finishing second overall in the tightly contested CONMEBOL. For context, this means they finished ahead of South American powerhouses such as Colombia, Brazil, and Uruguay. Much of their success was due to the defense surrendering just five goals in 18 qualifying matches.

Manager Sebastián Beccacece took over in August of 2024 and implementing his tactics has turned the Ecuadorian team into the best version the nation may have ever seen. The compact back four, a centralized midfield, and tracking back forwarders makes it almost impossible to score against them at times. Convincing forwards to track back speaks to his credibility and the squad's overall buy-in to the system. However, perhaps even more impressive is how the team can pivot on the fly to a high press, aggressive assault on the opposition due to their talented midfield.

Moisés Caicedo (Chelsea) is the pivot man with the Ecuadorian team. His flexibility in changing from a defensive anchor in the middle of the park to the offensive catalyst to push the attack forward changes the game for the opponents. His club season with Chelsea was up and down to say the least this year, but if he returns to his usual international form, he's a world class talent. **Willan Pachó** (PSG) and **Piero Hincapié** (Arsenal) are who allows for the freedom in front of him as they make up the stingiest part of that defensive front.

The only prior meeting in the World Cup against any of their three opponents-to-be came against Germany back in 2006, a 0-3 loss. There hasn't been any recent friendlies against the Group E trio.

Don't be surprised to see many pick Ecuador to move deep into the tournament with this group. There are high expectations from their own fanbase which means that a good start is critically important. Their first match against Ivory Coast is the most crucial as they navigate the physical play of "the Elephants." A win sets up a showdown against Germany in the group stage finale which could be epic or lackluster depending on what the stakes are heading into the match.

Prediction: 2nd in Group E (Round of 32)

FIFA WORLD RANKING

23

Match Schedule (Group E)



Ivory Coast

June 14 - Philadelphia



Curaçao

June 20 - Kansas City



Germany

June 25 - East Rutherford



Projected Starting XI (4-4-2)

GK - Hernán Galindez
 DF - Pervis Estupiñán
 DF - Piero Hincapié
 DF - Willan Pachó
 DF - Joel Ordóñez
 MF - John Yeboah
 MF - Pedro Vite
 MF - Moisés Caicedo (C)
 MF - Alan Franco
 FW - Enner Valencia
 FW - Gonzalo Plata

NETHERLANDS

2026 World Cup Preview

NETHERLANDS BIO

"Oranje"

World Cup Appearances: **12** (30-14-11)

Last Appearance: **2022** (Quarterfinals)

Best Finish: **Runners-Up** (1974, 1978, 2010)

Manager: **Ronald Koeman**

Population: **18.4 million**

Photo via BBC



VIRGIL VAN DIJK

INJURIES TOO MUCH TO BEAR?

The champions of "almost" have the chance for one more run with their world class center-back. Finishing runner-up three different times isn't for the faint hearted, but the last time that happened was back in 2010 and this is of course a completely different squad. Still, they have plenty of their own experience and some recent revenge to dish out. The Dutch had a brilliant 2022 campaign that only ended after a controversial defeat in penalty kicks to eventual champions Argentina. An unbeaten record in UEFA Qualifying Group G helped them breeze into their 12th World Cup all time.

Manager Ronald Koeman started in 2023 before the 2024 Euro Cup where he led the team to a semifinal finish. Now in his second stint as manager of the national team after leading the team from 2018 to 2020. Tactically, he provides a star center back **Virgil Van Dijk** with a lot of independence to move forward as he wishes in dictate play.

Netherlands will kick off their tournament against Japan, who they faced and defeated 1-0 in the 2010 World Cup on their way to winning the group and advancing all the way to the final. Match two will move from one Texas city to another and will feature a rematch of a 1974 contest that ended in a 1-1 draw against Sweden. The finale against Tunisia marks the first World Cup match between the two countries.

Unfortunately, the key question entering the tournament is whether the Dutch can overcome a mountain of injuries. **Xavi Simons** (Tottenham) will be out after tearing his ACL in April. **Matthijs de Ligt** (Manchester United) will be out after back surgery, and **Jerdy Schouten** (PSV) also tore an ACL. For a team that requires proper pace on the outside, these injuries will most likely hinder them immensely in their quest to make a deep tournament run. **Cody Gakpo** (Liverpool) and **Nathan Aké** (Manchester City) will be called upon to make bigger impacts than they ever have at the international stage for the Oranje to succeed at their typical level.

While the Netherlands will still be the favorites to win Group F, their injuries could be their limiting factor and it could mean that the quarterfinals are the team's ceiling. The opening match against Japan will be critically important, a draw against the Japanese will add some goal differential pressure to the remaining two contests.

Prediction: 2nd in Group F (Round of 32)

FIFA WORLD RANKING

7

Match Schedule (Group F)



Japan

June 14 - Arlington



Sweden

June 20 - Houston



Tunisia

June 25 - Kansas City



Projected Starting XI (4-3-3)

GK - Bart Verbruggan
DF - Micky van de Ven
DF - Virgil van Dijk (C)
DF - Jurrien Timber
DF - Denzel Dumfries
MF - Tijjani Reijnders
MF - Frenkie de Jong
MF - Ryan Gravenberch
FW - Cody Gakpo
FW - Donyell Malen
FW - Teun Koopmeiners

JAPAN

2026 World Cup Preview

JAPAN BIO

"Samurai Blue"

World Cup Appearances: **8** (7-6-12)

Last Appearance: **2022** (Round of 16)

Best Finish: **Round of 16** (2002, 2010, 2018, 2022)

Manager: **Hajime Moriyasu**

Population: **122.5 million**

Photo via Bleacher Report



TAKEFUSA KUBO

A MODEL OF CONSISTENCY

Japan has qualified for all eight World Cups since making their debut in 1998. They have been a true marker of consistency in that time, often punching above their weight class evidenced by four separate trips to the Round of 16. Highly disciplined and structured, the Samurai Blue are always a difficult out even for tournament favorites that come up against them.

Hajime Moriyasu has been a remarkably long-tenured national team manager since taking over in 2018. His squad was brilliant in the 2022 Qatar games, finishing first in their group with comeback wins over Spain and Germany. It took penalty kicks against eventual third-place Croatia to defeat them. Utilizing the team's depth and disciplined mid-block style, expect the Japanese to be a thorn in their opponent's side.

Japan qualified relatively easily in their AFC group, securing first place with three games to spare despite challengers Saudi Arabia and Australia in their group. The most recent competition against their three group opponents came against Sweden in a 2022 friendly which ended in a 1-1 draw. Japan faced Netherlands in 2010, losing 0-1, and they defeated Tunisia 2-0 back in 2002.

The Japanese contingent would have certainly preferred host sites on the west coast of the United States, but they at least landed in a manageable group. The Netherlands are the presumptive favorites, but don't be surprised if Samurai Blue finds a way to surprise once again and finish first. The big question is if they can advance past the Round of 16 for the first time, especially now with an extra match required to get there.

To find success, the Japanese will need to lean on their strength of team structure and their ability to avoid a major drop-off in quality when going to their bench. **Wataru Endo** (Liverpool) will help lock down the defensive midfield while **Takefusa Kubo** (Real Sociedad) will provide excellent pace on the attack.

The opening match against the Dutch will be one of the best openers of any group stage match this tournament. An outright win, while far from a given, would give Japan a massive advantage and a clear path to a group win. With the proper matchup in the knockout stage, this team has the capability of reaching new heights.

Prediction: 1st in Group F (Round of 32)

FIFA WORLD RANKING

18

Match Schedule (Group F)



Netherlands

June 14 - Arlington



Tunisia

June 20 - Guadalupe



Sweden

June 25 - Arlington



Projected Starting XI (3-4-2-1)

GK - Zion Suzuki
DF - Hiroki Ito
DF - Ko Itakura
DF - Tsuyoshi Watanabe
MF - Keito Nakamura
MF - Daichi Kamada
MF - Wataru Endo (C)
MF - Ritsu Doan
FW - Keito Nakamura
FW - Takefusa Kubo
FW - Ayase Ueda

SWEDEN BIO

"Blågult"

World Cup Appearances: **13** (19-13-19)

Last Appearance: **2018** (Quarterfinals)

Best Finish: **Runners-Up** (1958)

Manager: **Graham Potter**

Population: **10.6 million**

Photo via ESPN



VIKTOR GYÖKERES

HIGH PRESS, HIGH RISK

Sweden has a rich World Cup history with many deep runs in the tournament, with the most recent being a 2018 quarterfinal finish. Of course, it's a far different squad now in 2026 since that finish ahead of Mexico and Germany in an insane World Cup group. Still, there is always immense soccer quality to be found in Scandinavia.

Despite finishing dead last in their World Cup qualifying group without a single win, they reached the UEFA playoffs by virtue of winning their Nations League group. With that second chance, they took down Ukraine 3-1 and Poland 3-2 to secure their spot and their 13th overall appearance in the World Cup in their program's history.

On of the big reasons for the turnaround in that UEFA playoff was Graham Potter stepping in as manager. He took the job in October 2025 and just getting Sweden to this point was an immense accomplishment. That said, advancing to the knockout stage will be an even bigger hurdle. Potter's success has come with a reliance on high press, position-based tactics which reflects the physical makeup of this team well.

That high press attack is led by a star trio in **Alexander Isak** (Liverpool), forward **Viktor Gyökeres** (Arsenal), and winger **Anthony Elanga** (Newcastle). That group will need to not only finish off scoring opportunities but to create them in the first place. The downside to the high press are the concerns over key defensive vulnerabilities in key moments if the opposition breaks through that press. Sweden's success in this tournament could very well come down to how well they can limit those breakthroughs.

It's a high-risk, high-reward strategy that provides Sweden with upside, but it could also be a very short tournament if things don't go well. Japan's disciplined style may counteract Sweden's scheme and Netherlands can lean on their high-end talent. Assuming the Swedes don't walk away with three, or even a single point in either of those matchups, the opener against Tunisia will be hugely important. The defense will have their hands full against those squads, which may prove too much to overcome.

Prediction: 3rd in Group F (Round of 32)

FIFA WORLD RANKING

38

Match Schedule (Group F)



Tunisia

June 14 - Guadalupe



Netherlands

June 20 - Houston



Japan

June 25 - Arlington



Projected Starting XI (3-4-2-1)

GK - Kristoffer Nordfeldt

DF - Isak Hien

DF - Carl Starfelt

DF - Victor Lindelöf (C)

MF - Daniel Svensson

MF - Jesper Karlström

MF - Yasin Ayari

MF - Gabriel Gudmundsson

FW - Anthony Elanga

FW - Viktor Gyökeres

FW - Alexander Isak

TUNISIA BIO

"Eagles of Carthage"

World Cup Appearances: **7** (3-5-10)

Last Appearance: **2022** (Group Stage)

Best Finish: **Group Stage**

Manager: **Sabri Lamouchi**

Population: **12.4 million**



ELLYES SKHIRI

MORE UPSETS IN STORE FOR TUNISIA?

Tunisia has never advanced to the knockout stage in six previous World Cup attempts, but that doesn't mean they didn't make their mark in 2022. They upset eventual runner-up France and drew against Denmark. Tunisia finished their last stage of qualifying on a dominant run by winning nine and drawing one across their final ten outings to finish first in the CAF group.

However, the positive momentum gained from that great stretch of play was squandered in a disappointing Round of 16 exit at the 2025 African Cup of Nations. That finish led to a managerial change, and Sabri Lamouchi arrived in January to lead the national team in the field of 48. Expect a more pragmatic Tunisian side with a mid to low block with a willingness to sacrifice possession to their opponents.

Captain **Ellyes Skhiri** (Eintracht Frankfurt) will provide a defensive anchor for the Eagles of Carthage. The biggest question is where the offensive firepower will come from. **Hannibal Mejbri** was a spark at time for his club team Burnley this season, but he will need to evaluate his play even more in the World Cup. **Elias Achouri** (Copenhagen) will need to provide difference-making pace on the outside and take advantage of the counter attack with his teammates in a strong defensive formation.

Tunisia has faced all three opponents before in various capacities, but no matchups recent enough to put stock in regarding their showdowns in June. Sweden and Netherlands will be new World Cup opponents for Tunisia.

In terms of sheer quality, Tunisia is capable of finishing third place. The opening match against Sweden will set the table and provide a clear picture of just how much Tunisia might accomplish in the tournament. One of the challenges for the Eagles of Carthage will be a lack of a "bottom squad" in Group F. In other words, there isn't an obvious three points sitting there for the taking, Tunisia will have to create their own success by pulling an upset on the pitch. To advance to the knockout stage for the first time, Tunisia may need to cross their fingers that Netherlands has nothing to play for in the final match of the group stage.

Prediction: 4th in Group F

FIFA WORLD RANKING

44

Match Schedule (Group F)



Sweden

June 14 - Arlington



Japan

June 20 - Houston



Netherlands

June 25 - Kansas City



Projected Starting XI (4-2-3-1)

GK - Aymen Dahmen

DF - Dylan Bronn

DF - Montassar Talbi

DF - Ali Abdi

DF - Omar Rekik

MF - Hannibal Mejbri

MF - Rani Khedira

MF - Ellyes Skhiri (C)

FW - Elias Saad

FW - Amine Ben Slimane

FW - Hazem Mastouri

BELGIUM BIO

"Red Devils"

World Cup Appearances: **15** (21-10-20)

Last Appearance: **2022** (Group Stage)

Best Finish: **Third Place** (2018)

Manager: **Rudi Garcia**

Population: **11.9 million**

Photo via SB Nation



KEVIN DE BRUYNE

CHAMPIONSHIP WINDOW STILL OPEN?

Belgium has a rich history at the World Cup, being an unenviable member of a select group of teams to never lift the trophy. After a third place finish in 2018, their supposed "golden generation" fell off hard as they failed to make it through the group stage in 2022. So, is the golden generation over and is the championship window shut?

For this World Cup, Belgium qualified by finishing first in UEFA group J, a couple points ahead of second-place Wales. Their offense was flying, scoring 29 goals across just 7 matches. One big reason for that is new manager Rudi Garcia, who took over in January 2025, installing an aggressive, high-tempo 4-2-3-1 formation. This new focus is all about creative freedom in the attack which is centered around talisman **Kevin De Bruyne** (Napoli). A gifted passer, he will dictate the tempo and pull defenders out of position. On the wings, **Leandro Trossard** (Arsenal) and **Jérémy Doku** (Manchester City) could take advantage of De Bruyne's misdirections. The clinical finishing and pace of that duo will be a thorn in the side of any defender in their path.

While the offense has a chance to be prolific like they were in qualifying, the major question is whether their defense can keep up with the offense. When Belgium loses possession, there will be openings given the squad's aggression on offense and the old stalwarts of the backline from World Cups past are long gone. While they are deservedly the favorites of the group, their weakness is right in line with the counter-attacking or high press options of their opponents. Essentially, don't be surprised to see Belgium surrounding some goals in this group stage. However, they're the favorites for a reason.

All three opponents will be first time matchups in the World Cup setting. The opener against Egypt pits too aggressive teams against one another, Belgium should be able to lean on their talent and come away with three points. The styles of Iran and New Zealand won't necessarily play into Belgium's hands, which is where things could get interesting. They'll face a very emotional Iranian squad in Los Angeles and make the trip up to Canada to face New Zealand. Assuming Belgium takes care of business, the defensive vulnerabilities will really show in the knockout stage which could lead to a shorter stay than desired by the "Red Devils."

Prediction: 1st in Group G (Quarterfinals)

FIFA WORLD RANKING

9

Match Schedule (Group G)



Egypt

June 15 - Seattle



Iran

June 21 - Inglewood



New Zealand

June 26 - Vancouver



Projected Starting XI (4-2-3-1)

GK - Thibaut Courtois

DF - Maxim De Cuyper

DF - Zeno Debast

DF - Arthur Theate

DF - Thomas Meunier

MF - Youri Tielemans (C)

MF - Amadou Onana

FW - Jeremy Doku

FW - Kevin De Bruyne

FW - Leandro Trossard

FW - Romelu Lukaku

EGYPT BIO

"The Pharaohs"

World Cup Appearances: **4** (0-2-5)
Last Appearance: **2018** (Group Stage)
Best Finish: **Round of 16** (1934)

Manager: **Hossam Hassan**

Population: **120 million**

Photo via CAF Online



MOHAMED SALAH

CAN HISTORIC PROGRAM FIND VICTORY?

The Pharaohs were the very first African and first Arab nation to play in the World Cup. Unfortunately, that distinction hasn't come with much success with qualification droughts of 56 and 28 years. Their only knockout stage appearance was their first in 1934 where they were eventually defeated by Hungary. It's been only eight years since their last appearance, so there's at least some World Cup experience on the roster. Will that be enough to earn Egypt their first ever win?

Egypt qualified for this World Cup by finishing first in their CAF group. The first place finish was virtue of an undefeated record with wins in eight of the ten matches. Led by manager Hossam Hassan, the focus has shifted tactically to rapid speed of play with vertical passes to take advantage of their star talent on the attack.

All the focus will be on **Mohamed Salah** (Liverpool) as he makes his second trip to the World Cup. 2018 didn't go how Egypt had hoped, but Group G is an open opportunity to produce positive results. For that to happen, **Omar Marmoush** (Manchester City) will need to provide reprieve for Salah on the attack, drawing away some of the defensive focus. He's capable of doing that as he is a brilliant forward in his own right. The lethality of this duo is crucial to advancement in the tournament. Chances are high that the 2026 tournament will be Salah's last cup, so all chips should be on the table. Salah is already a national soccer hero, but this is a chance to provide even more joy for his home country on an international stage.

Egypt has never faced their group opponents in the World Cup but there have been relatively recent friendlies against both Belgium and New Zealand. Egypt actually beat Belgium in a friendly in 2022 and they claimed a 1-0 victory against New Zealand back in 2024.

Belgium will be a tough opening draw, Egypt will have to put together an incredible defensive showing to case a high-powered Belgian attack fits. The best chance for Egypt's first ever win in the World Cup will come in Vancouver against New Zealand. They'll have an opportunity to overwhelm the opposition's defense with the Salah/Marmoush duo. If The Pharaohs do, in fact, claim three points, the finale against Iran will be massive. Could Egypt go from never winning a game to advancing out of Group G?

Prediction: 3rd in Group G (Round of 32)

FIFA WORLD RANKING

29

Match Schedule (Group G)



Belgium

June 15 - Seattle



New Zealand

June 21 - Vancouver



Iran

June 26 - Seattle



Projected Starting XI (3-4-1-2)

GK - Mohamed El Shenawy
DF - Ramy Rabia
DF - Mohamed Abdelmonem
DF - Yasser Ibrahim
MF - Ahmed Abou El Fetouh
MF - Trézéguet
MF - Marwan Attia
MF - Mohamed Hany
FW - Omar Marmoush
FW - Emam Ashour
FW - Mohamed Salah (C)

IRAN BIO

"Team Melli"

World Cup Appearances: **6** (3-4-11)

Last Appearance: **2022** (Group Stage)

Best Finish: **Group Stage**

Manager: **Amir Ghalenoei**

Population: **93.1 million**

Photo via The AFC



MEHDI TAREMI

HARNESSING EMOTIONS KEY TO SUCCESS

Well, it's the elephant in the room. What will the reception and reaction be of the Iranian contingent playing the World Cup in a country they are currently at war with? From a purely soccer perspective, without the issues off the pitch, the quality is legitimately good enough to make noise in the tournament. How well the squad is able to focus and harness their energy properly will determine if Team Melli can produce a proper showing.

Iran qualified for the World Cup by finishing first in AFC Group A over another tournament participant, Uzbekistan. The 2026 edition marks the fourth World Cup in a row that Iran has qualified for as the program continues to be built. In 2022, they narrowly failed to advance past the group stage for the first time in a narrow defeat to the United States in their final match. Now, not only because of the expanded knockout stage but because of their group placement and quality, Iran could make history by advancing out of their group.

Amir Ghalenoei has managed Iran since 2023, his second stint after previously managing the team from 2006-07. His style with the squad is one of the defensive priority, with rare high presses but rapid transitions. In the same vein, their 4-2-3-1 can be altered on the fly to be a more rigid 4-3-3 or 5-4-1 depending on game flow.

At forward, **Mehdi Taremi** (Olympiakos) is the captain and he's also the best scoring threat for the Iranian side. He has immense experience across European top clubs and is considered one of, if not *the* best, to ever do it from the country. The success of the team may hinge on **Saman Ghoddos** (Kalba) in the midfield. What the squad can often lack is creativity in the midfield, so if Ghoddos can provide that, the team will ascend in their potential.

The outside geopolitical noise will enter all three stadiums Iran will compete in during their 2026 World Cup. If Iran can handle that noise and embrace the pressure they will face, it could actually aid them on the pitch. If they aren't able to manage the emotions, it'll be another unceremonious group stage exit. Don't look now, but if the United States and Iran both finish second in their respective groups, they would face one another in a Round of 32 matchup in Arlington, Texas.

Prediction: 2nd in Group G (Round of 32)

FIFA WORLD RANKING

21

Match Schedule (Group G)



New Zealand

June 15 - Seattle



Belgium

June 21 - Inglewood



Egypt

June 26 - Vancouver



Projected Starting XI (4-3-3)

GK - Alireza Beiranvand

DF - Milad Mohammadi

DF - Shoja Khalilzadeh

DF - Ali Nemati

DF - Aria Yousefi

MF - Saeid Ezatolahi

MF - Mohammad Mohebi

MF - Saman Ghoddos

FW - Amirhossein Hosseinzadeh

FW - Mehdi Ghayedi

FW - Mehdi Taremi (C)

NEW ZEALAND

2026 World Cup Preview

NEW ZEALAND BIO

"All Whites"

World Cup Appearances: **3** (0-3-3)

Last Appearance: **2010** (Group Stage)

Best Finish: **Group Stage**

Manager: **Darren Bazeley**

Population: **5.4 million**

Photo via Sport Nation



CHRIS WOOD

ELEVATING TO TOP LEVEL COMPETITION

New Zealand qualified for the World Cup by earning the only spot in Oceania (OFC). The finishing touch was a 3-0 victory over New Caledonia. Overall, the New Zealanders outscored their opponents 29-1 in qualifying competitions. While impressive, the goal disparity demonstrates the lack of a regional rival to help New Zealand level up their play since Australia left OFC in 2006. Therefore, the main question will be whether this squad can level up alongside the competition to prove they are underrated and overlooked due to their geographical location. They did that to an extent in 2010, drawing each match in the group stage including against the defending champions Italy. By virtue of the FIFA World Ranking of 85, New Zealand is one of the biggest underdogs in the tournament.

Darren Bazeley has managed the All Whites since 2023, leading the team throughout their qualifying campaign. How will his style adjust to the level of competition? In Oceania, the onus is on New Zealand to be the aggressor and initiate play. This means that the squad relies on possession-based tactics, controlling the game through the midfield. The assumption is that there will be a move to a more pragmatic style with a lower block defense to absorb pressure and counter attack with star striker **Chris Wood**.

Wood, the captain, will receive all the headlines, and if New Zealand is to accomplish anything at this World Cup, he'll have to be the special finisher he's proven to be in the English Premier League. Beyond him, there aren't a lot of players who compete at a high club level internationally, which leaves an incomplete answer on who may step up on the world stage. **Tim Payne** (Wellington Phoenix) has been dubbed the "least known" player at the World Cup to showcase this reality.

From a practical standpoint, the level of competition makes the group stage daunting for the All Whites. They could surprise a potentially distracted Iranian side in the opener, but it isn't likely. Their matchup against Egypt, a rematch of a friendly that The Pharaohs won 1-0 in 2024, will pit two squads against each other who are both searching for their first ever World Cup victory. Anything beyond a single point or two will be quite the achievement and would include a pretty major upset along the way.

Prediction: 4th in Group G

FIFA WORLD RANKING

85

Match Schedule (Group G)



Iran

June 15 - Inglewood



Egypt

June 21 - Vancouver



Belgium

June 26 - Vancouver



**New Zealand
Football**

**Projected Starting XI
(4-2-3-1)**

GK - Max Crocombe

DF - Ben Old

DF - Tyler Bindon

DF - Michael Boxall

DF - Liberato Cacace

MF - Joe Bell

MF - Marko Stamenic

FW - Sarpreet Singh

FW - Matthew Garrbett

FW - Elijah Just

FW - Chris Wood (C)

SPAIN BIO

"La Roja"

World Cup Appearances: **17** (31-17-19)

Last Appearance: **2022** (Round of 16)

Best Finish: **Champions** (2010)

Manager: **Luis de la Fuente**

Population: **49.6 million**

Photo via Barca Blaugranes



PEDRI

FIRST EURO CUP, NOW WORLD CUP?

Spain enters the World Cup as one of the presumptive favorites of the entire tournament due to both a stacked roster and a proven track record after winning the 2024 Euro Cup. The overwhelming sense of optimism was dampened when star player **Lamine Yamal** (Barcelona) was injured during a club match in April, suffering a partially torn hamstring. However, disaster seems to be averted as Yamal was still named to the roster, and while he may miss the opener, he is expected to eventually make his debut in the group stage.

Spain steamrolled their way to the World Cup by finishing first in UEFA Group E, amassing a +19 goal differential in just six matches. That strong showing adds to the run Luis de la Fuente has been on with this Spanish squad after taking over in December 2022. They have look the part as the top soccer nation in Europe, and perhaps the world, with their youthful and growing composition. He had to work hard to modernize their style from the stereotypical tiki-taka (which emphasizes possession and slow build-up play), to an aggressive press with a high back line.

The biggest news on the injury front is the Yamal injury, but overall health with dictate the success of this squad heading into the tournament. Winger **Nico Williams** (Athletic Bilbao) is suffering from both groin and hamstring injuries while midfielder **Mikel Merino** (Arsenal) is dealing with a stress fracture in his foot. Spain's depth allows them to deal with these key injuries better than most, but for ultimate success they will need these players not only to return to the field, but return in proper from. With the aforementioned players in question, even more will be asked of Ballon d'Or winner **Rodri** (Manchester City) and **Pedri** (Barcelona) in the midfield as the offense finds their footing. These are two of the best possession based midfielders on the globe, skilled at dictating the pace of the game.

Ultimately, La Roja's expectations will be to win their second-ever World Cup this summer. If they get healthy, they are the best team on the globe, and nine points in the group stage will go a long way in showing just that. That's easier said than done with a matchup against Uruguay looming in the finale with major group implications likely at stake. The two countries have met twice in the 1950 and 1990 World Cups and both matches resulted in a draw. Anything less than a semifinal finish for Spain would likely be perceived by team and fans alike as an absolute failure.

Prediction: 1st in Group H (Runner Up)

FIFA WORLD RANKING

2

Match Schedule (Group H)



Cape Verde

June 15 - Atlanta



Saudi Arabia

June 21 - Atlanta



Uruguay

June 26 - Zapopan



Projected Starting XI (4-3-3)

GK - Unai Simon

DF - Marc Cucurella

DF - Aymeric Laporte

DF - Pau Cubarsi

DF - Marcos Llorente

MF - Fabian Ruiz

MF - Rodri (C)

MF - Pedri

FW - Nico Williams

FW - Mikel Oyarzabal

FW - Lamine Yamal

CAPE VERDE

2026 World Cup Preview

CAPE VERDE BIO

"Tubarões Azuis"

World Cup Appearances: 1 (0-0-0)
Last Appearance: **First Appearance**

Manager: **Bubista**

Population: **0.53 million**

Photo via Daily Trust



RYAN MENDES

EXPLORING UNCHARTED WATERS

The smallest nation by landmass to ever qualify for a World Cup, the Blue Sharks are thrilled to participate in this tournament. To qualify, Cape Verde finished at the top of Group D in the CAF in a shocking upset over more traditional power Cameroon. Cape Verde will have to do even more to shock the collective soccer world in North America this summer.

Under manager Pedro Leitão, better known as Bubista, the Blue Sharks have expanded their horizons. After taking over in 2020, Bubista led the squad to a quarterfinal appearance in the Africa Cup of Nations in 2023. The tactical focus of the team is a deep, compact defensive structure, built to absorb pressure. They accomplish this structure through zonal defending rather than a classical, aggressive man-marking system. On offense, the squad will be reliant on target men up top and set piece brilliance.

Being such a small nation, Cape Verde's squad is a vast compilation of those born on the island nation along with a contingent from the diaspora, mostly in Europe. The cohesion of the team has been Bubista's crowning achievement in many ways. Captain **Ryan Mendes** (Iğdır) also deserves a lot of credit as the leader and top goal scorer on the team. The 36-year-old forward has nearly 100 caps, the most in the country's history, and he'll need to add to his goal scoring tally for the Blue Sharks to have a chance. Meanwhile, **Logan Costa** (Villarreal) will have the responsibility at center-back of keeping Cape Verde in reach with their physical and compact defensive structure.

This tournament will mark uncharted waters for Cape Verde in many ways, including the opponents that they will face in the group stage. Obviously there are no previous World Cup matchups since this is Cape Verde's first appearance on this stage, but there's no senior level men's competitions of record either. The unfamiliarity and the difficulty of their opponents won't do Cape Verde any favors in their debut.

Spain and Uruguay will more than likely overwhelm the Blue Shark defense, no matter the tactic employed. However, with an expanded field, if they can manage to limit the goal differential damage in those first two matches, their dreams of advancing will still not be over when they face Saudi Arabia. Taking three points would mark a major upset to be sure, but at the very least if Cape Verde hasn't lost its spark, they could make that match no fun for the Saudis.

Prediction: 4th in Group H

FIFA WORLD RANKING

69

Match Schedule (Group H)



Spain

June 15 - Atlanta



Uruguay

June 21 - Atlanta



Saudi Arabia

June 26 - Houston



Projected Starting XI (4-2-3-1)

GK - Vozinha

DF - João Paulo

DF - Roberto Lopes

DF - Nuno da Costa

DF - Steven Moreira

MF - Willy Smedo

MF - Lenini

FW - Jamiro Monteiro

FW - Jovane Cabral

FW - Ryan Mendes (C)

FW - Dailon Livramento

SAUDI ARABIA

2026 World Cup Preview

SAUDI ARABIA BIO

"The Green Falcons"

World Cup Appearances: **8** (4-2-13)
Last Appearance: **2022** (Group Stage)
Best Finish: **Round of 16** (1994)

Manager: **Georgios Donis**

Population: **35.1 million**

Photo via The AFC



SALEM AL-DAWSARI

WILL LATE SHAKE UP HELP OR HURT?

When the dust settled on the 2022 World Cup, Saudi Arabia was the only team that could boast about a defeat of the champions, Argentina. That epic victory for the Green Falcons was recognized by many as one of the greatest upsets in World Cup history. Matches against Uruguay and Spain to start out the 2026 tournament will provide the Saudis with two more chances to add to their resume.

Despite that shocking upset, Saudi Arabia made the surprising decision to dismiss manager Hervé Renard this April who led the charge in 2022. His firing led to the appointment of Georgios Donis who has vast experience in the Saudi Pro League. Saudi Arabia qualified for the World Cup by finishing first in their AFC playoff group after finishing behind automatic qualifiers Japan and Australia the previous qualifying round.

Renard's familiarity with the players and staff will be key, with such a short timeframe to prepare. Expect his squad to play pragmatically and to sit comfortably without the ball for large swathes of matches.

The roster makeup is almost entirely comprised of players play their club soccer in the Saudi Pro League with defender **Suad Abdulhamid** (Lens) as the lone exception. The Saudi league has certainly improved in the last decade, but it still leaves a lot of unknowns as to how this group will matchup against the rest of Group H. Saud will be tasked with finding a way to hold down the fort for the majority of the games, while captain and forward **Salem Al-Dawsari** (Al Hilal) will need to add to his national World Cup goal scoring record.

Switching managers at the last minute has worked before, Morocco in 2022 being a prime example. However, in this situation, the timing could actually become disruptive since this team arguably doesn't have spare talent to deal with distractions. Even when the Saudis won their opening against Argentina, they still failed to make it out of their group, losing to Mexico and Poland.

With the expanded field, Saudi Arabia's goal should be finding a way to somehow steal a point against either Uruguay and Spain and to combine it with a win over Cape Verde to secure advancement. Even if they can't get a positive result in their first two games, keeping the goal differential as close to zero as possible will be critical.

Prediction: 3rd in Group H (Round of 32)

FIFA WORLD RANKING

61

Match Schedule (Group H)



Uruguay

June 15 - Miami Gardens



Spain

June 21 - Atlanta



Cape Verde

June 26 - Houston



KSA

Projected Starting XI (4-3-3)

GK - Nawaf Al Aqidi

DF - Nawaf Boushal

DF - Ali Lajami

DF - Hassan Tambakti

DF - Saud Abdulhamid

MF - Musab Al-Juwayr

MF - Abdullah Al-Khaibari

MF - Mohammed Kanno

FW - Khalifah Al-Dawsari

FW - Salem Al-Dawsari (C)

FW - Feras Al-Brikan

URUGUAY BIO

"La Celeste"

World Cup Appearances: **15** (25-13-21)

Last Appearance: **2022** (Group Stage)

Best Finish: **Champions** (1930, 1950)

Manager: **Marcelo Bielsa**

Population: **3.4 million**



FEDERICO VALVERDE

A RETURN TO SOCCER PROMINENCE

Uruguay has a proud and rich soccer tradition dating back to their two World Cup championships in the early days of the tournament. However, recently, the nation has been in a bit of a slump. That is, until they appointed Marcelo Bielsa as manager in 2023. Before his arrival, Uruguay suffered through a dismal 2022 showing. With an opportunity to advance out of the group stage, they drew South Korea in the final match which ended their trip in Qatar.

Uruguay qualified by finishing third in CONMEBOL just behind Argentina and Ecuador. Prior to qualification, Bielsa guided the Uruguayans to a third-place finish in Copa America and he has clearly instilled his unique tactics on this team. That style includes fullbacks who press high up the field and a defensive pivot midfielder for buildup. Using that formation, look for Uruguay to aggressively force openings on the attack with overloads. Their man marking and aggression allows their highly skilled players to fully utilize mismatches on the pitch, but can leave them vulnerable all the same defensively.

Manuel Ugarte (Manchester United) runs the midfield in the crucial pivot position, providing extra defensive aid and allowing the team to effectively possess the ball from the back. Look for Ugarte to sometimes move behind the backline at times to ensure possession. **Darwin Núñez** (Al-Hilal) will receive much of the deserved attention offensively as the chief goal scoring threat. **Giorgian de Arrascaeta** (Flamengo) serves as the engine of the attack, providing much of the creative goal scoring opportunities. He must have a quality tournament for Uruguay to make any kind of run.

Group H is arguably one of the most straightforward groups of the entire World Cup. Very few will expect Uruguay to finish somewhere other than second place behind Spain and ahead of Saudi Arabia. If that's true, is Uruguay closer to first or third place? Bielsa has this squad ready to go and may give Spain more of a match than the general public will expect, especially if they find an early rhythm in their first two matches. The Saudis are capable of providing issues in an opener and shouldn't be overlooked, but it's quite possible that both Uruguay and Spain will have six points in hand when they meet on June 26 in Mexico. That matchup against Saudi Arabia will be a rematch of a group stage match played in the 2018 Russia World Cup, won by Uruguay 1-0.

Prediction: 2nd in Group H (Round of 32)

FIFA WORLD RANKING

17

Match Schedule (Group H)



Saudi Arabia

June 15 - Miami Gardens



Cape Verde

June 21 - Miami Gardens



Spain

June 26 - Zapopan



Projected Starting XI (4-4-2)

GK - Fernando Muslera

DF - Mathías Olivera

DF - José María Giménez

DF - Ronald Araújo

DF - Guillermo Valera

MF - Maxi Araújo

MF - Manuel Ugarte

MF - Federico Valverde (C)

MF - Agustín Canobbio

FW - Darwin Núñez

FW - Giorgian De Arrascaeta

FRANCE BIO

"Les Bleus"

World Cup Appearances: **17** (39-14-20)

Last Appearance: **2022** (Runners-Up)

Best Finish: **Champions** (1998, 2018)

Manager: **Didier Deschamps**

Population: **69.1 million**

Photo via CNN



KYLIAN MBAPPÉ

THIRD STRAIGHT TITLE APPEARANCE?

France came up just a touch short from capturing back-to-back World Cup titles, which would have made them the first country to do so since 1962. Based on talent and the #1 FIFA ranking in the world, they have as good a chance to win it all again as any other country. However, the 2026 edition of "Les Blues" left a lot to be desired in a 2-1 defeat to the Ivory Coast in a friendly. Because the bar for France is as high as it could possibly be, this lone result was of particular concern. Considering their top class talent all over the pitch including many of the same components of the previous two World Cup runs, the issue won't be their capabilities.

France qualified for the 2026 World Cup by finishing first (and undefeated) in UEFA group D, with an impressive +12 goal differential. Manager Didier Deschamps has been on a historic run since taking over in 2012. The longest tenured manager in the World Cup has announced that he will step down after this tournament. His tactical focus with this team starts from a pragmatic compact defense while still allowing certain players with the freedom to create.

Kylian Mbappé (Real Madrid) has justifiably taken up most of the oxygen in the room since exploding onto the scene in the 2018 World Cup. Yet, this is **Antoine Griezmann's** (Atletico Madrid) team in many ways as he creates the openings offensively with strategic overloads and balance by dropping defensively into the center of the pitch. The team is chock-full of other top class players including star center back **William Saliba** (Arsenal) and **Ousmane Dembélé** (PSG) at forward. There are a myriad of options for Deschamps to look to on the attack and numerous reliable possessing defenders.

France will start their World Cup defense against Senegal, a rematch of game played in the 2002 World Cup in which Senegal pulled off a 1-0 upset on their way to a quarterfinal finish in their first ever appearance. The intensity won't be lacking considering both countries' history. No matter the result of the first contest, the game against Iraq should be a bit of a reprieve as the French attack will be overwhelming. The final group match against Norway could be crucial for both nations attempting to advance - at the very least it could provide intrigue for seeding purposes. Mbappe vs. Haaland on the global stage will be fascinating. There's no question France has the capacity to win the World Cup yet again, so long as they don't lose a cutting edge mentality.

Prediction: 1st in Group I (Semifinals)

FIFA WORLD RANKING

1

Match Schedule (Group I)



Senegal

June 16 - East Rutherford



Iraq

June 22 - Philadelphia



Norway

June 26 - Foxborough



Projected Starting XI (4-2-3-1)

GK - Mike Maignan

DF - Lucas Digne

DF - Dayot Upamecano

DF - William Saliba

DF - Jules Kounde

MF - Aurelien Tchouameni

MF - N'Golo Kante

FW - Desire Doue

FW - Michael Olise

FW - Ousmane Dembele

FW - Kylian Mbappé (C)

SENEGAL

2026 World Cup Preview

SENEGAL BIO

"The Lions of Teranga"

World Cup Appearances: **4** (5-3-4)
Last Appearance: **2022** (Round of 16)
Best Finish: **Quarterfinals** (2002)

Manager: **Pape Thiaw**

Population: **19.3 million**

Photo via Al Jazeera



SADIO MANE

LIONS OF TERANGA ON THE PROWL

The Lions of Teranga are a dark horse favorite this time around at the World Cup. After a good showing in 2022, which included an impressive win over Ecuador and Round of 16 finish, Senegal is believing there's a chance for even more. Senegal qualified for the World Cup by finishing first and going undefeated in CAF Group B. That finish included finishing ahead of fellow CAF qualifier DR Congo.

Manager Pape Thiaw took over in December 2024, replacing legend Aliou Cissé who achieved World Cup appearances in 2018 and 2022 along with the country's first Africa Cup of Nations title in 2022. Thiaw has followed suit and started off well himself, qualifying for the 2026 World Cup and, depending on who you ask, winning the 2026 Africa Cup of Nations of Morocco. Debate the wild finish to that tournament, but the quality of this Senegalese team is not up for debate.

This squad will set up in a 4-3-3 formation, but they prefer defending on the front foot which means lots of overlapping runs from their fullbacks to provide wide options. This style puts immense pressure on opposing defenses with a high press, but can put them in a very susceptible place for astute counter attack teams.

The nation's all-time leading scorer **Sadio Mané** (Al Nasser) is the most important player on the team. He is still playing at a world class level and will have to produce on the attack. The x-factor for Senegal's success might be **Pape Matar Sarr** (Tottenham) in the midfield. It was a rough season for his club, but he has the quality to control the midfield and help prevent counter attacks from populating for opponents.

Geopolitical current events and history always have an effect and are affected by the game of soccer. One common thread across World Cup history is the intensity in a matchup that features a country and their former colonizer. Senegal being a former colony of France will make the opening matchup must-see television. Senegal won't be intimidated, but France may have received its wakeup call already, losing 2-1 to the Ivory Coast in a recent friendly. The matchup against Norway will be a physical, potentially high-scoring affair. With their group play schedule front loaded, they may have work to do in their final against Iraq.

Prediction: 2nd in Group I (Round of 16)

FIFA WORLD RANKING

14

Match Schedule (Group I)



France

June 16 - East Rutherford



Norway

June 22 - East Rutherford



Iraq

June 26 - Toronto



Projected Starting XI (4-3-3)

GK - Edouard Mendy
DF - El Hadji Diouf
DF - Moussa Niakhate
DF - Kalidou Koulibaly (C)
DF - Krepin Diatta
MF - Pape Gueye
MF - Idrissa Gueye
MF - Habib Diarra
FW - Sadio Mane
FW - Nicolas Jackson
FW - Iliman Ndiaye

IRAQ BIO

"Lions of Mesopotamia"

World Cup Appearances: **2** (0-0-3)
 Last Appearance: **1986** (Group Stage)
 Best Finish: **Group Stage**
 Manager: **Graham Arnold**
 Population: **47.8 million**

Photo via 964media



AYMEN HUSSEIN

A LONG-AWAITED RETURN

Iraq is back in the World Cup for only the second time ever, their first appearance coming in 1986. In their debut, they failed to register a single point, so they'll be eying that accomplishment here in 2026. Iraq had one of the longest paths to qualifying, finishing in their AFC group well enough to make a two-legged regional elimination match against the United Arab Emirates. After defeating the U.A.E., they advanced to an intercontinental playoff in Monterrey, Mexico where they defeated Bolivia 2-1 to finally punch their ticket.

The drama-filled qualification journey was navigated by manager Graham Arnold, who managed Australia in the 2022 World Cup in Qatar. Arnold has built this squad based on simplicity with a low block that is difficult to dissect. They are more than comfortable seeding control of the ball to their opponents, waiting patiently for a few counter-attack openings to show themselves. The sturdy 4-4-2 formation is all based around discipline off the ball on defense and a workhorse mentality by the midfield.

If Iraq is to pull off an upset somewhere in the group stage, it will most likely be due in part to scoring from forward **Aymen Hussein** (Al-Karma). Hussein scored eight goals in qualifying including the winner against Bolivia in the intercontinental playoff. Goalkeep and captain **Jalal Hassan** (Al-Zawraa) will have to stand on his head in goal in key moments to provide the Lions of Mesopotamia a chance against these outstanding opponents.

Going back to that first 1986 appearance, no, Iraq didn't earn a single point. However, they lost each game by only a single goal in a group that included host country Mexico, Belgium, and Paraguay. This time around the group is equally difficult with all three opponents being unfamiliar to Iraq with no senior level history. Iraq may very well be sitting in the 2026 edition of the "group of death".

Success for Iraq was making the tournament, so what does success look like now that they are here? Receiving their first positive result would be great and a first-ever World Cup victory would be simply magnificent. The best chance for that achievement will most likely be in their opener against Norway. It will be difficult to deal with the Norwegian size, so they will need to be the aggressor. France will likely be an overwhelming experience and they could end up facing a Senegal team still fighting to advance out of the group.

Prediction: 4th in Group I

FIFA WORLD RANKING

57

Match Schedule (Group I)



Norway

June 16 - Foxborough



France

June 22 - Philadelphia



Senegal

June 26 - Toronto



Projected Starting XI (4-4-2)

GK - Jalal Hassan (C)
 DF - Akam Hashim Rahman
 DF - Zaid Tahseen
 DF - Marches Doski
 DF - Hussein Ali
 MF - Amir Al-Ammari
 MF - Zidane Iqbal
 MF - Ibrahim Bayesh
 MF - Youssef Aryn
 FW - Ali Ibrahim Al-Hamadi
 FW - Aymen Hussein

NORWAY BIO

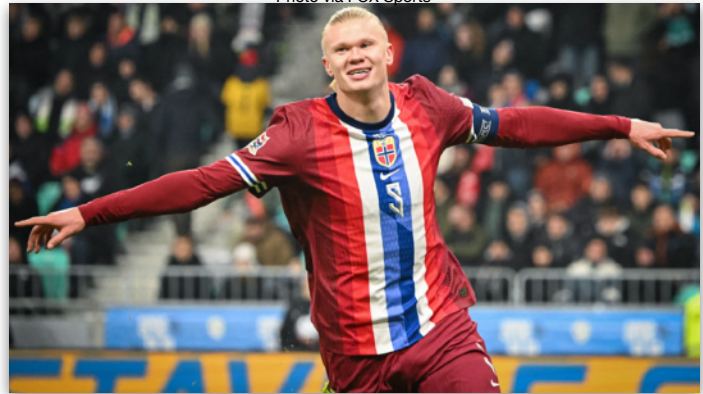
"Løvene"

World Cup Appearances: **4** (2-3-3)
Last Appearance: **1998** (Round of 16)
Best Finish: **Round of 16** (1938, 1998)

Manager: **Ståle Solbakken**

Population: **5.6 million**

Photo via FOX Sports



ERLING HAALAND

A SUPERSTAR WORLD CUP DEBUT

When the 2022 World Cup kicked off, the vast majority of the household names were duking it out on the pitch with the exception of **Erling Haaland**. That will change in a major way in 2026. Norway qualified for the World Cup for the first time since 1998 by winning UEFA Group I with a perfect 8-0-0 record. Haaland (Manchester City) led a brutal attack, scoring 16 out of the team's blistering 37 total goals.

Manager Ståle Solbakken took over in 2020 with the purpose of building to this moment and to surround generational stars Haaland and **Martin Ødegaard** (Arsenal) with a team capable of making a run in a major tournament. They will play in unique formations on the pitch with a left-lopsided 4-3-3 formation that morphs into a 4-1-4-1 defensively. This strategy is utilized in part to keep Haaland fresh and utilize the wingers to shift back on defense.

Rivals in the English Premier League, Haaland has won the golden boot three of his four years while Ødegaard plays the midfield maestro of the recent champions Arsenal. Combined, they are more than capable of dragging their team to victory, but the extent of the overall team success will be wholly reliant on the supporting cast.

Fullback **Julian Ryerson** (Borussia Dortmund) will need to be as reliable as advertised on counter attacks when the offense gets caught too high up the pitch. Meanwhile, **Antonio Nusa** (RB Leipzig) providing pace on the wing will be critical in providing options for Ødegaard. One thing that will be apparent tactically once the Norwegians are on the field is their size advantage. They are tied with Bosnia as the tallest team in the tournament, so set pieces and crosses from the wings could be a lethal differentiator in tight contests.

Victory against Iraq in the opener is an absolutely must for advancement considering the varying challenges Senegal and France present. In the Senegal match, specifically, the blazing speed of their opponent could cause significant issues. Norway has never faced France in a World Cup before, but the European rivals each headlined by their respective superstars have played 15 matches all-time with France holding the advantage 7-4-4. While the French roster will be difficult to overcome, Norway only needs one point against either Senegal or France to advance to the knockout stage assuming they take care of business in the opener.

Prediction: 3rd in Group I (Round of 32)

FIFA WORLD RANKING

31

Match Schedule (Group I)



Iraq

June 16 - East Foxborough



Senegal

June 22 - East Rutherford



France

June 26 - Foxborough



Projected Starting XI (4-3-3)

GK - Ørjan Nyland
DF - Leo Østigard
DF - Kristoffer Ajer
DF - David Møller Wolfe
DF - Julian Ryerson
MF - Sander Berge
MF - Patrick Berg
MF - Martin Ødegaard (C)
FW - Antonio Nusa
FW - Alexander Sørloth
FW - Erling Haaland

ARGENTINA

2026 World Cup Preview

ARGENTINA BIO

"La Albiceleste"

World Cup Appearances: **19** (47-17-24)

Last Appearance: **2022** (Champions)

Best Finish: **Champions** (1978, 1986, 2022)

Manager: **Lionel Scaloni**

Population: **47.9 million**

Photo via NBC News



LIONEL MESSI

THE TITLE DEFENSE BEGINS

We were lied to. Okay, that's a little dramatic, but while the 2022 World Cup was clearly **Lionel Messi's** crowning achievement, he didn't ride off into the sunset afterwards like we were led to believe. Now with the majority of that championship squad returning for the 2026 edition of the tournament, there is an opportunity for an even greater story. Argentina could enter rarified error by becoming only the third team to ever win back-to-back tournaments and the first since Brazil in 1958 and 1962.

Argentina dominated CONMEBOL qualifying, clinching an automatic qualifying spot with five games to spare. They took their foot off the gas in the back end of qualifying but still finished nine points ahead of second place Ecuador.

Lionel Scaloni has been a marvelous and undervalued manager internationally since taking over the national team in 2018. Since his installment, Argentina has won the elusive World Cup in 2024 as well as the Copa America in 2021 and 2024. In the past, his tactics have revolved around unleashing Messi to roam high around the pitch, as any proper manager would. However, with Messi now 38-years-old, the question is whether there needs to be adjustment for them to repeat as champions.

The 4-4-2 diamond midfield has been so effective for Argentina because they have a trio of workhorse midfielders behind Messi in **Rodrigo De Paul** (Inter Miami), **Alexis Mac Allister** (Liverpool), and **Enzo Fernández** (Chelsea). These three have skillsets beyond what they are asked to do for the national team, but with Messi never being much help defensively (and even less now), they often pick up the slack allowing him to save his energy for the attack.

Argentina won't take Algeria for granted after losing their opener to Saudi Arabia in the 2022 World Cup opener. Their second group stage contest against Austria provides an interesting matchup of the Austrian's attempts to press Argentina's defense into submission, but the build up play is right in the Argentine wheelhouse. The finale against Jordan will most likely be an opportunity to rotate to save Messi and other starters for the knockout stage. Argentina is more than capable of winning the World Cup again, but there is a reason there hasn't been a back-to-back winner in over 60 years.

Prediction: 1st in Group J (Quarterfinals)

FIFA WORLD RANKING

3

Match Schedule (Group J)



Algeria

June 16 - Kansas City



Austria

June 22 - Zapopan



Jordan

June 27 - Mexico City



Projected Starting XI (4-4-2)

GK - Emiliano Martinez

DF - Nicolas Tagliafico

DF - Lisandro Martinez

DF - Cristian Romero

DF - Nahuel Molina

MF - Giuliano Simeone

MF - Rodrigo De Paul

MF - Enzo Fernandez

MF - Alexis Mac Allister

FW - Julian Alvarez

FW - Lionel Messi (C)

ALGERIA

2026 World Cup Preview

ALGERIA BIO

"Les Fennecs"

World Cup Appearances: **5** (3-7-13)

Last Appearance: **2014** (Round of 16)

Best Finish: **Round of 16** (2014)

Manager: **Vladimir Petković**

Population: **47.4 million**

Photo via Al Jazeera



RIYAD MAHREZ

THE OLD AND THE YOUNG

Algeria always seems to make their World Cup appearances intriguing. In their last outing in 2014, they made it out of the group stage ahead of South Korea and Russia and took the eventual champions Germany to extra time in the knockout stage. Way back in 1982, they were eliminated in the group stage due to a suspicious draw between West Germany and Austria, and they'll get a group stage rematch against the latter company. Those two countries needed a draw for both to advance and, depending on who you ask, some conspiring appears to have happened in a match that has since been dubbed as the "Disgrace of Gijón".

Algeria qualified for the World Cup by finishing first in CAF Group G. They accomplished that first place finish by losing only one of their ten qualifying matches. Questions could be asked about the level of competition they faced in that process, but their past pedigree in four prior World Cups speaks for itself.

Manager Vladimir Petković has led the Desert Foxes back to the tournament after missing the previous two. Taking over in 2024, he has utilized a 4-2-3-1 formation based on the makeup of the squad. Specifically, the double pivot in the midfield allows them to provide an extra hedge of protection for the older centerback duo.

Provided Algeria gets that proper support from the midfield, this is a strong defensive side. That support will need to come from 20-year-old rising star **Ibrahim Maza** (Bayer Leverkusen). He has been growing as the creative spark of the team and will need to feed chances to forward **Riyad Mahrez** (Al-Ahli). The key component of why Algeria is rated in the top 30 of the FIFA rankings is that they have collective experience playing in top flight leagues. However, this squad simultaneously feels like they are in between generations with some players a bit too old and some too young. The result could be an uneven experience at the World Cup.

Argentina won't take their first opponent lightly this time around after the near catastrophic upset loss to Saudi Arabia last World Cup, so Algeria will likely be preparing for their matchup against Jordan still in search of their first point. That matchup will be a hinge game that decided whether moving forward is a reality. Advancing to the knockout stage would be considered a success in the country's first World Cup in 12 years.

Prediction: 3rd in Group J

FIFA WORLD RANKING

28

Match Schedule (Group J)



Argentina

June 16 - Kansas City



Jordan

June 22 - Santa Clara



Austria

June 27 - Kansas City



Projected Starting XI (4-2-3-1)

GK - Luca Zidane

DF - Rayan Ait-Nouri

DF - Ramy Bensebaini

DF - Aïssa Mandi

DF - Rafik Belghali

MF - Ismael Bennacer

MF - Hicham Boudaoui

FW - Housseem Aouar

FW - Riyad Mahrez (C)

FW - Amine Gouiri

FW - Mohamed Amoura

AUSTRIA BIO

"Das Team"

World Cup Appearances: **8** (12-4-13)

Last Appearance: **1998** (Group Stage)

Best Finish: **Third Place** (1954)

Manager: **Ralf Rangnick**

Population: **9.2 million**

Photo via goal.com



MARKO ARNAUTOVIC

AUSTRIA AIMS FOR ADVANCEMENT

The soccer crazed country is finally back where they belong on the world stage after being relegated to simply cheering against their regional rivals for far too long. Austria qualified for the 2026 World Cup by finishing at the top of UEFA Group H. Going 6-1-1 overall, they got a crucial draw against second-place Bosnia in the final qualifying match to earn the automatic spot.

Ralf Rangnick took over as manager in 2022 and has achieved the basics of what he was hired to do, getting the country through the Euro 2024 group stage and back to the World Cup here in 2026. However, the Euro Cup was a bit of a mixed bag. Austria took down Netherlands finished above France in the group, but they were bounced in the Round of 16 by Türkiye. Under Rangnick, Austria utilizes a high press which appears as a 2-4-3-1 and on rare retreats shapes into a defensive 4-2-3-1. Rangnick has even instituted a "10 second rule" where he demands that his team transition from winning back the ball to taking a shot on goal within 10 seconds.

David Alaba (Real Madrid) is and has been the heart and soul of this squad. Thrilled to finally be in the World Cup, he will hold down the defensive front. Meanwhile, **Marcel Sabitzer** (Borussia Dortmund) will be required to build up the offensive attack from the midfield and all-time caps leader **Marko Arnautović** (Red Star Belgrade) will need to add to his top scoring tally.

After overcoming a brutal 2024 Euro Cup draw to win the group over France and Netherlands, Austria got a small break in the World Cup. Yes, defending champions Argentina is in their group, but their level should be above that of Jordan and Algeria. Jordan could struggle to break free from the Austrian high press and the best matchup of the group against Argentina comes next. While many are writing an Argentine victory in pen, they're more vulnerable than many believe and there hasn't been a repeat winner in the World Cup in over 60 years.

Either way, a final victory over Algeria should do the job to advance as the second place team in Group J. Success for Austria would be a trip to the Round of 16 or better, which is possible if they get a matchup against a team that struggles to build out of the back.

Prediction: 2nd in Group J (Round of 32)

FIFA WORLD RANKING

24

Match Schedule (Group J)



Jordan

June 16 - Santa Clara



Argentina

June 22 - Zapopan



Algeria

June 27 - Kansas City



Projected Starting XI (2-4-3-1)

GK - Alexander Schlager

DF - Kevin Danso

DF - Marco Friedl

DF - David Alaba (C)

DF - Konrad Laimer

MF - Nicolas Seiwald

MF - Xaver Schlager

MF - Christoph Baumgartner

MF - Marcel Sabitzer

FW - Romano Schmid

FW - Marko Arnautović

JORDAN BIO

"Al Nashama"

World Cup Appearances: **1** (0-0-0)
Last Appearance: **First Appearance**

Manager: **Jamal Sellami**

Population: **11.6 million**

Photo via The AFC



MOUSSA AL TAMARI

HISTORY FOR JORDANIAN SOCCER

Manager Jamal Sellami has been a home run hitter. He has guided the Jordan national team to their first World Cup appearance. His team reached the ultimate stage by finishing with the second quailing spot in AFC Group B in a close call with only a point separating them and third place Iraq. Prior to qualifying, Sellami's Jordan squad had an impressive showing in the 2025 Arab Cup where they finished as runner-up losing to Morocco 3-2 in the final. On their way there, they took out fellow World Cup qualifiers Egypt, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia.

The typical 3-4-3 formation will morph into a back five when Jordan doesn't have possession. In this group stage scenario, they will likely end up in this defensive structure more often than not and they'll have to remain patient for their counter-attack opportunities. How they react to the rank up of competition and how well they remain disciplined in their structure will decide whether they can remain competitive.

Captain and leader **Ehsan Haddad** (Al-Hussein) will have to hold the reins of the team to keep them in shape and defensive minded. Vocally, he must be the manager's spokesman on the pitch from the defensive back line. **Moussa Al-Tamari** (Stade Resnais) won't receive many chances on the counter attack, so he will also have to remain disciplined and take advantage of the key opportunities that come his way. Sure, Jordan will need him to score, but they also need him to provide some reprieve for his defense that will likely find themselves under siege throughout the tournament, and he has the pace to accomplish this important task.

Since this is Jordan's first World Cup appearance, there isn't going to be any prior tournament history with their three opponents, but even at senior level play at large, the only prior meeting came in a 1-1 draw against Algeria in 2004.

Jordan is another debutant whose proper perspective will be lacking, but needed. Merely making the tournament is a massive accomplishment for the nation and nothing that happens at the World Cup will take away anything from that feat. However, they are most likely to play the role of sacrificial lamb in Group J. Austria's press will provide questions that Jordan won't have the answers to. In the second match, a result against Algeria isn't inconceivable, getting on the scoreboard for the first time might be the goal. Jordan could luck out a bit in the finale if Argentina is playing their second squad. A single point would be a massive accomplishment on top of what Jordan has already done to get here.

Prediction: 4th in Group J

FIFA WORLD RANKING

63

Match Schedule (Group J)



Austria

June 16 - Santa Clara



Algeria

June 22 - Santa Clara



Argentina

June 27 - Mexico City



Projected Starting XI (3-4-3)

GK - Yawed Abu Laila
DF - Ehsan Haddad (C)
DF - Abdallah Nasib
DF - Yazan Al-Arab
MF - Ibrahim Sadeh
MF - Amer Rasem Adel Jamous
MF - Nizar Al-Rashdan
MF - Mohannad Abu Taha
FW - Moussa Al-Tamari
FW - Ali Olwan
FW - Yazan Al Naimat

PORTUGAL BIO

"Seleção das Quinas"

World Cup Appearances: **9** (17-6-12)

Last Appearance: **2022** (Quarterfinals)

Best Finish: **Third Place** (1966)

Manager: **Roberto Martínez**

Population: **10.4 million**

Photo via BBC



CRISTIANO RONALDO

MORE HISTORY FOR RONALDO

As it turns out, 2022 wasn't **Cristiano Ronaldo's** last chance at a World Cup, but 2026 almost certainly is. He's the only holdover from a Portugal team that won the Euros back in 2016 but far from the only returning player from the group that made it to the quarterfinals in the 2022 World Cup before bowing out to Morocco. More recently, Portugal claimed the Nations League title about this time last year taking down their neighbors, Spain.

Ronaldo is already one of the most decorated World Cup players of all time. He's the only player to have scored in five World Cups and if he finds a way to add a goal in 2026, that record feels untouchable. Somewhat similar to 2022, look for Ronaldo to play more of the "closer" role, likely coming off the bench. When he does appear on the pitch, he'll be the only player to appear in six World Cups.

There's no question that 41-year-old best years are behind him (even though he netted five goals in qualification), but the timing for his team at large could be perfect. Several key members including **Bruno Fernandes** and **Vitinha** are entering their peak years and there's solid overall depth to lean on. Of the six World Cups that Ronaldo will have participated in, this one might be the best supporting cast he's ever brought along with him. The midfield, especially, will be a source of strength and their ability to cross the ball won't easily be rivaled by any of the other 47 squads.

Roberto Martinez took over the manager role in 2023 and his resume speaks for itself beyond just the Nations League championship. Prior to taking the Portugal job, he guided Belgium to a third place finish in the World Cup in 2018 and also managed them in 2022. His team will be set up in a way to focus on possession and direct attacks. The achilles heel of the team could be on defense, Ireland exploited this in a win over Portugal in qualifying.

If everything goes to plan, the first two matches against DR Congo and Uzbekistan should serve as great opportunities to get in rhythm and maybe even save the legs of some key players if Portugal is able to really flex their muscle. Colombia will be looking to do the same, and the group finale in Miami could be a highly intriguing matchup if Group K is on the line. Ronaldo has never scored in a knockout stage match and he (and Portugal) have never made it to the title match. Could Portugal change all of that in a magical run?

Prediction: 1st in Group K (Semifinals)

FIFA WORLD RANKING

5

Match Schedule (Group K)



DR Congo

June 17 - Houston



Uzbekistan

June 23 - Houston



Colombia

June 27 - Miami Gardens



Projected Starting XI (4-2-3-1)

GK - Diogo Costa

DF - Nuno Mendes

DF - Ruben Dias

DF - Gonzalo Inacio

DF - Joao Cancelo

MF - Joao Neves

MF - Vitinha

FW - Bernardo Silva

FW - Bruno Fernandes

FW - Pedro Neto

FW - Cristiano Ronaldo (C)

DR CONGO BIO

"The Leopards"

World Cup Appearances: **2** (0-0-3)
 Last Appearance: **1974** (Group Stage)
 Best Finish: **Group Stage**
 Manager: **Sébastien Desabre**
 Population: **116.4 million**

Photo via BBC



AARON WAN-BISSAKA

A DEBUT DO-OVER

DR Congo's only other World Cup appearance came way back in 1974 well before a single player on the current roster was even born. Known by Zaire at the time, DR Congo was trounced by Scotland, Yugoslavia, and Brazil by a combined score of 0-14. So, for all intents and purposes, "The Leopards" will make their true debut here in 2026 considering they have a team they believe can actually make some noise. There's a lot to check off the "to-do list" of World Cup firsts such as scoring the first goal and earning the first point before DR Congo can seriously consider advancing out Group K. However, there's perhaps no greater test to see how they stand up to the world's best than with an opening match against Portugal.

Sébastien Desabre has been the manager for DR Congo since 2022, and he's already accomplished an impressive feat by getting his squad to this point. The qualification for DR Congo was far from simple. They finished second in CAF Group B which set the Leopards on a rather tenuous and lengthy path. They navigated around Cameroon and Nigeria in the African playoffs and then took out Jamaica in extra time to reach the World Cup.

Desabre has done a tremendous job with building the culture of the team, and he'll have to get his squads buy in on a disciplined approach, calming nerves that will certainly be present for an inexperienced team. Protecting the ball will be priority number one and giving **Yoane Wissa** (Newcastle United) looks at the goal will be a close second. Even against top competition, Wissa's pace will stand out and he's a lethal finisher, DR Congo just needs to find a way to get the ball on his foot consistently. **Noah Sadiki** is a young player who is easy to root for and his success in winning the ball will have a direct impact on the DR Congo's chances to score and remain competitive.

Defenders **Aaron Wan-Bissaka** (West Ham United) and **Axel Tuanzebe** (Burnley) will be two critical x-factors especially as they find themselves under attack from top level goal scorers. Tuanzebe was the hero for DR Congo in qualifying, without his extra time goal, the Leopards wouldn't be in this position.

It's difficult to see DR Congo truly threatening the likes of Portugal and Colombia unless they find a sudden burst of scoring, but they'll have a great opportunity to win straight up against Uzbekistan, so salvaging goal differential in the first two matchups will be critical.

Prediction: 3rd in Group K

FIFA WORLD RANKING

46

Match Schedule (Group K)



Portugal

June 17 - Houston



Colombia

June 23 - Zapopan



Uzbekistan

June 27 - Atlanta



Projected Starting XI (4-4-2)

GK - Lionel M'Pasi
 DF - Axel Tuanzebe
 DF - Chancel Mbemba (C)
 DF - Arthur Masuaku
 DF - Aaron Wan-Bissaka
 MF - Samuel Moutoussamy
 MF - Noah Sadiki
 MF - Meschack Elia
 MF - Nathanaël Mbuku
 FW - Cédric Bakambu
 FW - Yoane Wissa

UZBEKISTAN

2026 World Cup Preview

UZBEKISTAN BIO

"White Wolves"

World Cup Appearances: **1** (0-0-0)
Last Appearance: **First Appearance**

Manager: **Fabio Cannavaro**

Population: **38.2 million**

Photo via The Asian Game



ABDUKODIR KHUSANOV

PHYSICALITY REQUIRED IN DEBUT

This is Uzbekistan's first World Cup as an independent nation. As a relatively young soccer nation in that regard, reaching the field of 48 is an impressive accomplishment. Despite that, Uzbekistan decided to move on from manager Timur Kapadze who was in charge during the qualification run and instead turn to Fabio Cannavaro. If that name sounds familiar, you probably remember Cannavaro from the 2006 where he captained Italy and help lead his team to a World Cup championship.

You would think that the experienced gained with Italy and his pedigree as one of the best defenders of all time (the only defender this century to win the Ballon d'Or) would translate seamlessly to the manager role, but that hasn't necessarily been the case. Prior stops with Saudi Arabia, Italy, and Croatia didn't necessarily go well, but he could turn that perception quickly by guiding the White Wolves to success in 2026. For what it's worth, the results from friendlies leading up to the World Cup have been mostly positive.

To qualify for their first World Cup, Uzbekistan had to grind through a grueling schedule of 16 matches across two group stages. They hung on in several 1-0 matches, and a 0-0 away draw against the United Arab Emirates helped seal second place in their AFC third-round qualifying group. When the dust settled, their final qualification record was just one loss in 16 matches and a +16 goal differential.

In qualifying **Eldor Shomurodov** (Istanbul Basaksehir) did a little bit of everything. With the responsibility of wearing the "C", Shomurodov led the way with both five goals and five assists, both of which led the team. Any goals he scores in the World Cup will add to his all-time leading tally in program history. **Abdukodir Khusanov** (Manchester City) will be tasked with leading the Uzbek defense. The team's defensive structure is what Cannavaro will prioritize first, and he'll expect physical play from all 11 players.

Even if the White Wolves can execute Cannavaro's desires of a compact, physical defense, the sheer talent of Colombia and Portugal will likely be enough to undo their efforts. Goal scoring was sometimes a liability against even lesser competition and will likely prevent them from making any real noise in their first World Cup. The finale against DR Congo will be monumental for both teams looking to make history for their respective nations.

Prediction: 4th in Group K

FIFA WORLD RANKING

50

Match Schedule (Group K)



Colombia

June 17 - Mexico City



Portugal

June 23 - Houston



DR Congo

June 27 - Atlanta



Projected Starting XI (3-4-2-1)

GK - Utkir Yusupov
DF - Avazbek Ulmasaliyev
DF - Rustamjon Ashurmatov
DF - Abdukodir Khusanov
MF - Otabek Shukurov
MF - Aziz Ganiyev
MF - Sherzod Nasrullayev
MF - Khojiakbar Alijonov
FW - Oston Urunov
FW - Abbosbek Fayzullaev
FW - Eldor Shomurodov (C)

COLOMBIA BIO

"La Tricolor"

World Cup Appearances: **6** (9-3-10)
Last Appearance: **2018** (Round of 16)
Best Finish: **Quarterfinals** (2014)

Manager: **Néstor Lorenzo**

Population: **53.9 million**

Photo via SB Nation



LUIS DÍAZ

A COLOMBIAN GOLDEN AGE?

Missing the 2022 World Cup was especially disappointing due to recent success in the tournament. In 2018, Colombia made it the knockout stage and the tournament prior made an impressive run all the way to the quarterfinals. But now, Colombia is back and boasting what could easily be considered their best team ever.

That's not hyperbole, just look at their run in qualifying. They went unbeaten in their first eight games with monumental victories over both Argentina and Brazil. Although they eventually played a total of 18 matches, finishing 7-7-4, they accomplished so much early that their qualification was secured early and they wrapped up a third place finish in the CONMEBOL standings.

Manager Néstor Lorenzo deserves plenty of praise for turning around this team since he took over in 2022. He has vastly improved the culture of this team, and his team has seen in real time that they can compete with the sport's best, so confidence and belief won't be an issue for "La Tricolor."

Outside of the true blue bloods, most of the teams competing in the World Cup have key strengths to lean on but also possess potentially crippling weaknesses that will lead to their eventual demise. One could argue that Colombia doesn't have those glaring issues and that their balance could lead to a magical run. They are quite capable of dominating possession, allowing their players like veteran captain **James Rodríguez** (Minnesota United) and **Luis Díaz** (Bayern Munich) to direct traffic and develop the attack. This team could have a distinct advantage in set pieces if their qualification matches are a sign of things to come.

A disadvantage, if you want to call it that, of the blistering hot start to qualification is that Colombia took their foot off the gas, and that showed up a bit in two March friendly defeats against Croatia and France. Luckily for them, matches against Uzbekistan and DR Congo could be exactly what is needed to develop a rhythm before a critical showdown against Portugal in Miami. Those first two games will take place in Mexico, and the crowd should be overwhelmingly in favor of the team in yellow. A top two finish in Group K seems very likely. Can La Tricolor turn up their offense enough to provide enough scoring opportunities for advancement through the knockout stage?

Prediction: 2nd in Group K (Round of 16)

FIFA WORLD RANKING

13

Match Schedule (Group K)



Uzbekistan
June 17 - Mexico City



DR Congo
June 23 - Zapopan



Portugal
June 27 - Miami Gardens



Projected Starting XI (4-2-3-1)

GK - Camilo Vargas
DF - Jhon Lucumí
DF - Davinson Sánchez
DF - Johan Mojica
DF - Daniel Muñoz
MF - Jefferson Lerma
MF - Richard Ríos
FW - Luis Díaz
FW - James Rodríguez (C)
FW - Jhon Arias
FW - Luis Suárez

ENGLAND BIO

"The Three Lions"

World Cup Appearances: **16** (32-22-20)

Last Appearance: **2022** (Quarterfinals)

Best Finish: **Champions** (1966)

Manager: **Thomas Tuchel**

Population: **58.6 million**

Photo via Bleacher Report



HARRY KANE

IT COULD ACTUALLY COME HOME

Every four years, the same question has been asked, can England actually bring the World Cup trophy home? The answer has been "no" going on 60 years, but could finally change in 2026. England has brought great teams to the World Cup in the past, but there's a chance this squad could be the best equipped to actually go the distance. For one, thing will be their most experienced squad ever in terms of previous World Cup appearances led by captain **Harry Kane** (Bayern Munich). Kane, now 32-years-old, appears to be in peak form, and he's not the only one.

Much was made of Thomas Tuchel's selection of the 26 players who will don the Three Lions crest on their chest, but his team's impressive showing in qualification resulted in a contract extension that will have Tuchel in charge through Euro 2028. In fact, "impressive" showing is an understatement. England became the first European side to win at least eight qualifying matches without conceding a single goal. Kane chipped in eight of the 22 goals scored in that same time span.

Most of the remarkable 22-0 qualifying run came against relatively inferior opponents, none of who made the field of 48. The competition will ramp up significantly in the opening match against Croatia, a rematch of a 2018 semifinal. They faced stiffer opposition in the March friendly window, and the results were much less impressive if not outright concerning. However, Kane was not in the mix in a 1-0 defeat to Japan. Since the last World Cup, England's statistics plummet when Kane is not in the lineup, so it's crucial that he stays healthy during what fans hope will be a long run in the tournament. **Elliot Anderson's** (Nottingham Forest) play in the midfield will be critical to properly executing Tuchel's risk-taking style. That style clearly shows itself different than the one run by Gareth Southgate when England has possession and forms into a aggressive attacking 2-3-5.

There aren't many nations whose expectations are higher than England's on any given World Cup year, and 2026 is no exception. There's talent all over the pitch and the depth at Tuchel's disposal could be the difference between actually lifting the trophy and previous disappointments. If England can find a way to earn three points against a very stingy Croatia team, they will have practically won the group in their first match as they should overwhelm both Ghana and Panama.

Prediction: 1st in Group L (Champions)

FIFA WORLD RANKING

4

Match Schedule (Group L)



Croatia

June 17 - Arlington



Ghana

June 23 - Foxborough



Panama

June 27 - East Rutherford



Projected Starting XI (4-2-3-1)

GK - Jordan Pickford

DF - Nico O'Reilly

DF - John Stones

DF - Marc Guéhi

DF - Reece James

MF - Declan Rice

MF - Elliot Anderson

FW - Anthony Gordon

FW - Jude Bellingham

FW - Bukayo Saka

FW - Harry Kane (C)

CROATIA BIO

"Vatreni"

World Cup Appearances: **7** (13-8-9)

Last Appearance: **2022** (Third Place)

Best Finish: **Runners Up** (2018)

Manager: **Zlatko Dalić**

Population: **3.8 million**

Photo via Managing Madrid



LUKA MODRIC

EXTENDING CROATIA'S GOLDEN AGE

Croatia's "golden generation" certainly has to be over, right? Surely there's no way a nation of just 3.8 million can simply reload for another impressive run and top four finish, right? Croatia has quelled doubts before, and it appears they are well on their way to do the same in 2026. The hope for Croatia is that they can blend veteran, experienced leaders with young high-end talent in another magical run throughout the knockout round.

Zlatko Dalić has been the manager for both of Croatia's last two World Cup runs and he will know exactly what strings need to be pulled to set the national team up for yet another success. His pedigree speaks for itself, and the number of traditional powers he has taken out in the previous two World Cups is unrivaled.

There were really no issues to speak of in qualification, Croatia glided to an undefeated 7-1-0 record, overpowering their opponents by a goal differential of 26-4. **Andrej Kramarić** (TSG Hoffenheim) led the scoring with six goals in those eight games. Facing stiffer competition, Croatia will be heading into the World Cup with a bit of uncertainty following a 3-1 defeat against Brazil, but their experience should override any unnecessary nerves.

He may be 40, but **Luka Modric** (AC Milan) is still the focal point of the team he captains. He joins the likes of Ronaldo and Messi as the elder statesman of the World Cup, but there's an argument to be made that his form is tops of the trio. One could also argue that he'll be most important to his team's success. Although he plays a different position, **Luka Vušković** (Tottenham) may be the heir apparent Croatian star, and not just because he shares the same first name. He was on loan at Hamburg and he's been linked to some of the most notable clubs in the country at just 19-year-old. Don't overlook his potential goal scoring even from his central defender position.

While the ceiling remains extremely high for Croatia, the floor could be a lot lower if older players show their age and younger players show their inexperience. However, the floor is still probably second place in Group L since Croatia should be able to outclass Panama in Ghana. That first matchup against England will be one of the top matchups in all of group play especially considering their recent history (2018 semifinal matchup). If the Croatian defense can hold up to England's resolved attack, their confidence will elevate and they'll turn back the clock to the 2018 and 2022 campaigns.

Prediction: 2nd in Group L (Round of 32)

FIFA WORLD RANKING

11

Match Schedule (Group L)



England

June 17 - Arlington



Panama

June 23 - Toronto



Ghana

June 27 - Philadelphia



Projected Starting XI (4-2-3-1)

GK - Dominik Livakovic

DF - Duje Caleta-Car

DF - Luka Vuskovic

DF - Josko Gvardiol

DF - Josip Stanisic

MF - Luka Modric (C)

MF - Mateo Kovacic

FW - Ivan Perisic

FW - Andrej Kramaric

FW - Marco Pasalic

FW - Ante Budimir

GHANA BIO

"Black Stars"

World Cup Appearances: **5** (5-3-7)
 Last Appearance: **2022** (Group Stage)
 Best Finish: **Quarterfinals** (2010)

Manager: **Carlos Queiroz**

Population: **35.6 million**

Photo via GhHeadlines News



ANTOINE SEMENYO

QUICK CHANGE OF FORTUNES NEEDED

The Black Stars are one of the more mysterious teams in the World Cup field. With less than three months until competition began, Ghana decided to part ways with manager Otto Addo and they bring in Carlos Queiroz in his place. While Addo helped guide Ghana to a relatively routine World Cup qualification which included eight wins in then tries and a 23-6 goal differential, more recent competition wasn't so smooth. A 5-1 blowout against Australia was the last straw for a team that had made the World Cup quarterfinals as recently as 2010.

So, in steps Queiroz at 73-years-young. He has a plethora of experience that includes World Cup campaigns with both Portugal and Iran. His focus will be on restoring discipline, especially on defense, and keep possession will be a key to Ghana's potential success.

If there's a player who can get Ghana back on track, it's **Jordan Ayew** (Leicester City) who was at the heart of practically every ball that hit the twine for the Black Stars in qualifying, directly scoring or assisting on 14 of the 23 goals. The pairing of Ayew and **Antoine Semenyo** (Manchester City) gives Ghana a legitimate one-two punch, if Queiroz is adventurous enough to give them freedom to create. **Abdul Fatawu Issahaku** (Leicester City) is another player to watch up front.

Attacking could be a distinct strength for Ghana, but with Queiroz's focus on the defensive end, does he have the personnel on the back end of the formation to accomplish what is needed for success? If so, Ghana will could have the firepower to hang in there against England and Croatia. If the Black Stars earn three points against Panama in the opener, "hanging in there" might be all they need to do to advance, since eight of the twelve third place teams will move on. Third place is likely the ceiling considering the talent and experience of both England and Croatia, and Ghana is only one poor result against Panama away from a last place finish.

Sometimes a quick managerial change before the World Cup can pay dividends, other times it can be a major distraction that prevents any hope of success. Considering how Ghana was playing down the stretch, it was probably worth a try since it seemed very unlikely that the team was going to make much noise in the World Cup. A lack of defensive strength could very easily be Ghana's undoing in 2026.

Prediction: 3rd in Group L

FIFA WORLD RANKING

74

Match Schedule (Group L)



Panama

June 17 - Toronto



England

June 23 - Foxborough



Croatia

June 27 - Philadelphia



Projected Starting XI (4-3-3)

GK - Benjamin Asare
 DF - Derrick Kohn
 DF - Jerome Opoku
 DF - Alexander Djiku
 MF - Gideon Mensah
 MF - Thomas Partey
 MF - Kwasi Sibo
 MF - Mohammed Kudus
 FW - Abdul Fatawu Issahaku
 FW - Jordan Ayew (C)
 FW - Antoine Semenyo

PANAMA BIO

"Los Canaleros"

World Cup Appearances: **2** (0-0-3)
 Last Appearance: **2018** (Group Stage)
 Best Finish: **Group Stage**
 Manager: **Thomas Christiansen**
 Population: **4.6 million**

Photo via La Prensa Panama



ADALBERTO CARRASQUILLA

COMPETING, NOT JUST APPEARING

Panama is back in the World Cup after making their debut in 2018. This time around, expectations are much higher after losing all three of their group stage matches the first time out. To quote their manager Thomas Christiansen, "We're not going for a selfie." Christiansen was born in Denmark but briefly lived in Panama and he's now the longest tenured coach in the national team's history. Now, Panama will experience the culmination of his guidance since he first took over in 2020 and relief from the disappointment of missing the tournament in 2022.

Panama didn't drop a single match in qualifying, finishing with a 7-3-0 record, allowing only five goals in the process. It's worth mentioning that qualifying was easier than usual with the host countries not vying for placement. However, they did face fellow World Cup qualifier South Africa in two friendlies, one of which they won 2-1 and they fell in a tough, close battle to Mexico.

Look for Panama to adjust their style of play to the level of competition, it's quite possible you'll see a possession-centric scheme against Ghana and a much more compact shape against England. Primarily, the shape that Christiansen will employ is a 3-4-2-1 with the midfield duo of **Adalberto Carrasquilla** (Pumas UNAM) and **Aníbal Godoy** (San Diego FC) running the show. Carrasquilla, perhaps better known as "El Coco" can't be missed with his trademark hairstyle and his technical skill. Panama shared the love in the goal scoring category during qualifying with **José Luis Rodríguez** (FC Juárez) and **José Fajardo** (CD Universidad Católica) each netting three.

To put it kindly, Panama was smoked in 2018 by a combined score of 11-2. This time around, expectations from players and fans alike won't simply be satisfied with a return to the World Cup. In fact, a single point or two won't suffice either, Panama believes they are capable of advancing to the knockout stage, and that assessment could be correct. It's hard to imagine a path to the knockout stage that doesn't include defeating Ghana in their opening match of the tournament considering the strength of the other two opponents. Panama definitely didn't get an easy draw, so advancing from Group L will be a challenge. The Red Tide will need to outwork Croatia and England to scrounge a point from either matchup.

Prediction: 4th in Group L

FIFA WORLD RANKING

33

Match Schedule (Group L)



Ghana

June 17 - Toronto



Croatia

June 23 - Toronto



England

June 27 - Philadelphia



Projected Starting XI (3-4-2-1)

GK - Orlando Mosquera
 DF - José Córdoba
 DF - Andrés Andrade
 DF - Éric Davis
 DF - Michael Murillo
 MF - Carlos Harvey
 MF - Aníbal Godoy (C)
 MF - Ismael Díaz
 FW - Adalberto Carrasquilla
 FW - José Luis Rodríguez
 FW - Cecilio Waterman