



## [BONUS] FIFA WORLD CUP 2026 PREVIEW MEGARAMBLE 🏆

### Disclaimer

This is a bonus mid-week episode all about the football World Cup 2026. If you are not a football fan, please feel free to skip this episode!

I think this will be the first in a short series of bonus episodes over the next few weeks about the World Cup which I will upload in addition to the normal episodes that you get from me.

These World Cup episodes are in addition to the normal run of this podcast, so you'll keep getting normal episodes every Monday, but then sometimes I will upload another bonus episode during the World Cup and maybe one at the end.

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I love the World Cup, and like to do World Cup episodes when the tournament is happening. I don't actually support a local team but I've always been most excited about World Cup football.

However, I know this is not for everyone, because plenty of you aren't interested in football, and I don't want to pause my normal episode schedule in order to exclusively do episodes about football during June and July.

I want to keep uploading episodes normally on Mondays, and I have a lot in the pipeline.

But I also want to do episodes about the World Cup, even just 2 or 3.

So these are going to be bonus episodes, released mid-week, between normal episodes and also premium episodes.

So it might seem like a busy time in your LEP podcast feed. If you are into football and the WC then I hope you join me and also get involved with your comments, which I can respond to in later episodes.

But, one more time - if you are not interested in the football, then as I said, please feel free to just walk on by and skip this episode, and on Monday there will be another normal episode on a completely different topic - in fact, it will be me reading from a diary I wrote, while I was travelling in Vietnam (sneak preview for that).

### **Proper Introduction**

So, in this first bonus WC 2026 episode of LEP, I'm going to

- do a preview of the tournament

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- talk about the teams, the favourites, the medium tier ones and the very small teams who rarely make it - every single team will be mentioned, and there are a lot
- talk about England of course - I feel obliged to do that as an obvious England fan, and it's sort of a long running saga in the real world but also on this podcast as I have covered every England tournament to some extent on this podcast.
- talk about some issues and controversies surrounding the host nation(s) and FIFA (ooh, a bit of politics)
- some changes that have been brought in for this competition
- and any other points for discussion

It's just me on my own for this, but I think in future episodes of this WC series, I might be joined by guests.

I am recording this on 2 June 2026, about a week before the World Cup kicks off on Thu, Jun 11, 2026 and concludes on Sun, Jul 19, 2026.

Are you getting World Cup fever yet, or not so much?

But yes, this is 2/4 June and some things might happen between now and then that render all this information redundant, such as players getting injured, geopolitical stuff. This is just how things stand right now at the start of June, about a week before kick-off.

### **First, some context**

This is the 23rd World Cup.

- Are you still able to keep up with recent WC history?
- Do you have a clear sense of each competition since let's say 2002, where it was hosted, what happened and who won?

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- Has the World Cup changed, in your mind? Is this one more or less exciting than previous ones?

My memories of recent WC history have become blurred in recent years, because I'm getting old.

I can remember each WC I experienced in my life quite clearly and remember where I was during the final, that's probably from 1986-2006 (showing my age). Then after about the year 2006 things start to get a bit blurry.

Here's a little catch up.

Here is a summary of the FIFA World Cup tournaments since 2006.

<b>2006</b>	Germany	Italy	1-1 (5-3 pens)	Zidane's infamous headbutt on Marco Materazzi in his final career match.
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2006 - In Germany, Italy won, Zidane did the head butt, England got knocked out on penalties of course.

Watched the final in my flat with a Polish friend called Marek, who randomly turned up and brought Polish beers.

<b>2010</b>	South Africa	Spain	1-0 (a.e.t.)	Spain winning their first title; Iniesta's 116th-minute winner.
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- **2010:** A physical and tactical final where Spain cemented their status as a global powerhouse, ending the Netherlands' hopes in extra time.

2010 - South Africa - just the noise of a million bees invading each stadium as fans blew into their vuvuzelas. Spain beat Netherlands

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to win the WC for the first time. England lost awfully in the 2nd round to Germany, and justice was served in the form of a blatant goal by Lampard that was disallowed.

Don't really remember the final. I remember watching England get destroyed by Germany while sitting in the garden at my parents' place with my wife who I had met only a few months before. It was her first experience of the sorrow of being an England fan at the WC.

<b>2014</b>	Brazil	Germany	1-0 (a.e.t.)	Germany's stunning 7-1 thrashing of host nation Brazil in the semi-finals.
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2014 - Brazil. Brazil got thrashed 7-1 by Germany and it was actually painful to watch, and I nearly cried. Germany went on to win against Argentina. Terrific young team. England were rubbish and came bottom of their group. Shameful, terrible stuff.

<b>2018</b>	Russia	France	4-2	Kylian Mbappé, Luka Modrić	Croatia's surprising run to the final; Belgium's 94th-minute winner vs. Japan.
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2018 - Russia. Won by France against Croatia. England did alright (the Southgate years) and got to the sem-finals (beaten by Croatia) even if we were lucky to get the less challenging team at each step. I remember the unbelievable noise from the bars and cafes outside our flat when France won. I recorded it and played it on the podcast.

2022	Qatar	Argentina	3-3 (4-2 pens)	Lionel Messi, Kylian Mbappé	Lionel Messi finally winning the title; Mbappé's incredible hat-trick in the final.
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**2022:** Widely regarded as one of the greatest finals ever, featuring a back-and-forth battle between Argentina and France, culminating in an emotional coronation for Lionel Messi.

2022 - Messi did the job for Argentina over France. England knocked out by France in the QFs. Pretty sure I was in bed suffering with horrible flu, which was made infinitely worse by the football. England not bad - quite promising under Southgate.



## Being an England Fan

Things I have to say about being an England fan

- **Nobody likes England**

We're twats. Fans are hooligans, or just drunken idiots,

historical colonial bad guys with this still quite superior vibe like they're sponsored by The King or something, all dressed nice and smart in white uniforms, the team is underwhelming and boring, despite our premiership being the most popular club league)

- **Nobody understands the “It’s coming home” song**

We think we invented football, and the song was for when we hosted the Euros.

So as we were hosting it, football was coming home, but also the song is about the pain of being an England fan.

It’s not a sort of super patriotic thing about how we’re the best.

It was written by a couple of comedians.

- **England are cursed**

We always underperform and disappoint at major tournaments, and get knocked out in devastating fashion, usually on penalties.

See below.

## A brief history of England getting knocked out of things on penalties (just for fun)

England have been knocked out of major international competitions (WC and Euros) on penalties a total of 7 times.

Tournament	Round	Opponent	Shootout Score	Crucial England Miss(es)
1990 World Cup	Semi-Final	West Germany	3–4	Stuart Pearce, Chris Waddle

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<b>Euro 1996</b>	Semi-Final	Germany	<b>5–6</b>	Gareth Southgate
<b>1998 World Cup</b>	Round of 16	Argentina	<b>3–4</b>	Paul Ince, David Batty
<b>Euro 2004</b>	Quarter-Final	Portugal	<b>5–6</b>	David Beckham, Darius Vassell
<b>2006 World Cup</b>	Quarter-Final	Portugal	<b>1–3</b>	Frank Lampard, Steven Gerrard, Jamie Carragher
<b>Euro 2012</b>	Quarter-Final	Italy	<b>2–4</b>	Ashley Young, Ashley Cole
<b>Euro 2020</b> ( <i>Played in 2021</i> )	<b>Final</b>	Italy	<b>2–3</b>	Marcus Rashford, Jadon Sancho, Bukayo Saka

What are we complaining about anyway?

We've won it once and have reached the semi finals recently and came 4th in 2022 and 1990. Some clubs have never won and are lucky to get out of the group stages. Netherlands, for example. They've been in two finals and are an excellent team with history but have never won it (sorry Dutch LEPsters).

For England, I think it's because of the level of expectation, which actually crushes most teams when the pressure is on.

### **New manager**

But we have a new manager, a German guy called Thomas Tuchel.

Yes, England managed by a German.

What has happened to the world?

We had a Swede and an Italian before - both failed to deliver.

Tuchel has made shock squad announcements, with certain star players left at home.

The internet has been on fire with responses to his selection, with lots of criticism for leaving out players like Foden and Maguire.

Personally, I don't care! He is prioritising team dynamics and form over individual merit. I think he's probably the best manager we've had for a long time, based on his track record. England were good under Southgate, but he was actually a kind of stand-in who got the job. Maybe Tuchel can go a step further and whip this team into shape.

So, let's talk Thomas Tuchel, or Tommy Tuchel, Tom Tuchel, TT, Tommy T, Lil' Tommy T, T Dog.

**Thomas Tuchel** is a highly decorated German football manager who took charge of the England men's senior team on January 1, 2025.



His appointment marked a significant shift in English football, as he became only the third non-English manager in the history of the national team.

### Key Background & Career Highlights

**Elite Experience:** Tuchel is widely regarded as one of the best tactical minds in modern football. Before taking the England job, he managed some of Europe's biggest armies... sorry, I mean clubs, including Borussia Dortmund, Paris Saint-Germain, Chelsea, and Bayern Munich.

**Major Honors:** His trophy cabinet is extensive, and full of *silverware*, most notably highlighted by his **2021 UEFA Champions League victory with Chelsea**.

He has also won league titles in both France and Germany, as well as domestic cups. A plethora of European *silverware*.

**The Transition:** After leaving Bayern Munich in 2024, he was appointed as the permanent successor to Gareth Southgate. He signed an 18-month contract initially, which was extended in February 2026 to run through to **UEFA EURO 2028**.

**International Staff:** He is supported by English assistant coach **Anthony Barry**, with whom he previously worked during his time at Chelsea.

### Management Style & Tactical Approach

**Tactical Flexibility:** Tuchel is known for his ability to adapt his formations and tactics based on the opponent. He is recognized for his focus on high-intensity pressing, positional play, and structured defensive organization.

**Experience with English Players:** He has a deep familiarity with the English game, having managed numerous England internationals (such as Harry Kane, Mason Mount, and Reece James) at his previous clubs.

**High Standards:** Known for his meticulous attention to detail and demanding personality, he is often viewed as a "win-now" manager who brings a disciplined and rigorous approach to the training pitch and the dressing room.

Football Flick

I bet England still get knocked out in the first round, somehow on penalties.



## The England Challenge

His primary goal is to guide the England team to success on the international stage, with his tenure heavily focused on the **2026 FIFA World Cup** in North America. His appointment was a strategic move by The Football Association (FA) to secure a manager with a proven track record of winning major silverware and handling high-pressure, elite environments. (they make him sound like James Bond)

As of early 2026, he has been credited with overseeing a record-breaking World Cup qualification campaign, solidifying his position as the architect of England's current push for international glory.

England looked mostly great during qualification, but we always do that. Easy when you've got 75% possession on average during qualifying. England could crumble like a biscuit in a cupboard when we meet a proper team.

That's probably enough about England.

- What is this WC looking like?
- What are the main talking points both on and off the pitch?
- What changes have been made to the game and the comp this time?
- What are the top countries competing this year?
- What about the middle tier teams that also pose a threat?
- What minnows are in the competition (maybe for the first time?)
- What is the political backdrop of this year's competition?

## **Mega World Cup Footballramble 2026**

As we approach the 2026 World Cup, the footballing world is bracing for a tournament that is "larger" in every sense of the word. With the field expanding to **48 teams** and the matches spread across **three countries**, the scale is unprecedented.

Here is a breakdown of the general predictions and the major talking points currently surrounding the event.

### **Early Predictions & Favorites**

Recent performance data and betting markets suggest a few clear frontrunners, though the expanded format introduces a high degree of "chaos" potential.

The 2026 World Cup favorites are defined by a mix of tactical evolution, generational talent, and proven tournament pedigree.

With the tournament expanding to 48 teams, these nations are viewed as the most stable and formidable options in an increasingly unpredictable field.

Here is a breakdown of why these five+ teams are currently leading the conversation:

### **1. Spain (16–18% Probability)**

- **Tactical Cohesion:** Having triumphed at UEFA EURO 2024, Spain has successfully evolved from a rigid, possession-heavy style to a more direct, dynamic approach under manager Luis de la Fuente.
- **Key Strength:** They possess a rare balance between veterans and explosive youth. Rodri remains the essential anchor in midfield, while the rise of Lamine Yamal has given them an "X-factor" that can unlock any defense.

### **2. France (12–14% Probability)**

- **Squad Depth:** France is widely considered to have the most "plug-and-play" talent in the world. Their ability to rotate key positions without a drop in quality makes them a nightmare for opponents to prepare for.
- **The Mbappé Factor:** Now 27 and captaining the side, Kylian Mbappé is at the absolute peak of his career. Despite some external debate regarding his leadership style, his ability to single-handedly decide matches remains unmatched.

- Experience: Having reached the final in two of the last three World Cups (winning in 2018), the squad is seasoned in navigating the extreme pressure of knockout football.

### **3. England (12–13% Probability)**

- The "Golden Generation" Pressure: The current English squad is viewed as one of the most technically gifted in the country's history. With stars like Jude Bellingham leading the charge, there is a mounting expectation that this group is finally ready to translate their individual club-level success into an international trophy.
- Redemption Arc: After years of being labeled a team of "near misses," the current narrative is focused on their maturity and the tactical flexibility they have developed to grind out results against top-tier European opposition.
- But we haven't played a big team recently - never with this manager, so it's probably the usual story - smash it in the qualifiers, and fall apart under proper pressure

### **4. Argentina (9–11% Probability)**

- Continuity: Unlike many nations that overhaul their squads every cycle, manager Lionel Scaloni has kept the core of the 2022 championship team together. This consistency—with players like Julián Alvarez, Enzo Fernandez, and Alexis Mac Allister now in their prime—provides a massive competitive advantage.
- The Messi Legacy: While speculation always surrounds his future, Lionel Messi remains the heartbeat of the team. Argentina plays with a collective "protect-the-crown" mentality, using their status as defending champions to fuel a disciplined, high-intensity tactical approach.

## 5. Brazil (8–10% Probability)

- **The Ancelotti Effect:** Under the guidance of experienced manager Carlo Ancelotti, the expectation is that Brazil will shed the defensive volatility that has hampered them in previous tournaments. Ancelotti is known for his pragmatic approach, which fans hope will provide the stability needed to match their traditional attacking flair.
- **Resilience:** The team remains deeply committed to their stars, even through adversity; notably, Ancelotti has publicly reaffirmed his commitment to Neymar as a central leader for this tournament, signaling a focus on veteran leadership to guide a talented but young supporting cast.

Beyond the top-five, Portugal and Germany remain critical players in the 2026 World Cup landscape, each carrying distinct narratives regarding their current form, tactical identity, and roster challenges.

### **Portugal: A Team of Extreme Depth**

Portugal is often cited as having one of the most "stacked" rosters in international football, leading to a unique internal debate regarding the role of their captain, Cristiano Ronaldo.

At 41, Ronaldo is set for his sixth World Cup. While his legacy is undeniable, the central debate among analysts and fans is whether Portugal's tactical system—which leans toward high-pressing and fluid movement—functions more effectively when the team is built to support his goal-scoring or when it operates with a more dynamic, younger frontline.

### **Germany: The Quest for Redemption**

After consecutive group-stage exits in 2018 and 2022, Germany enters 2026 under Julian Nagelsmann with the primary objective of restoring their reputation as a tournament powerhouse.

Recent Form: They have shown resilience, qualifying successfully with five wins in six matches. Nagelsmann has moved the team toward a more pragmatic, defensively solid structure, which is a departure from the "risky" possession football seen in previous cycles.

## **Note on "Chaos" Potential**

The expansion to 48 teams creates a wider, more diverse bracket. While these 7 teams have the highest probability based on talent and form, the format change means they face a longer road to the final and a higher risk of unexpected upsets from emerging nations.

## **What do you think?**

- Which team feels like the biggest "wild card" to you?
- Who is the dark horse?

## **On-the-Pitch Talking Points**

The actual football will be defined by a massive structural shift and some "last dance" narratives.

**The 48-Team Format:** The move from 32 to 48 teams (12 groups of 4) means **104 total matches**. The inclusion of the "Round of 32" adds an extra knockout game, making the path to the trophy longer and more physically grueling. Getting to the final is like winning the World Cup, and then you have to win the World Cup

again.

**The "Last Dance" Paradox:** This could be the final World Cup for icons like **Lionel Messi** and **Cristiano Ronaldo**, but it is also the arrival of the "Yamal Era." Spain's **Lamine Yamal** is predicted to be the breakout global superstar of the tournament.

### Ronaldo vs Luke



Side point, on the subject of Ronaldo - who will get to 1000 first? Cristiano with his aim of reaching 1000 career goals, or me, with my aim of reaching 1000 podcast episodes?

**The Rise of the "Middle Class":** With more spots available, teams like **Norway** (led by Erling Haaland), **Morocco**, and **Japan** are no

longer considered "underdogs" but legitimate threats to reach the Quarter-finals or beyond.

**Tactical Adaptation to Travel:** Teams will have to manage massive travel distances between Vancouver, Mexico City, and New York. Squad rotation will be more important than ever.

- Weather and altitude
- Political situation in USA
- Iran won't be competing

## New on-pitch rules

### 1. Anti-Time Wasting Measures

These rules are the most aggressive changes to the game's flow, targeting the "dark arts" of slowing down play, or "shithousery" as it is also known:

**The 5-Second Countdown:** For both **throw-ins** and **goal kicks**, referees will initiate a 5-second visual countdown if they believe a player is deliberately delaying the restart.

**The Penalty:** If the ball isn't in play by the end of the countdown, the **throw-in is awarded to the opponent**, and a delayed goal kick results in a **corner kick** for the opponent.

**Timed Substitutions:** When a substitution is signaled, the departing player has exactly **10 seconds** to exit the field. If they exceed this, their replacement is forced to wait on the sideline for **one minute** of live play before they are allowed to enter the pitch.

**Off-Field Medical Treatment:** Any player requiring on-field medical assessment or treatment for an injury must leave the field

and stay off for **one minute** after play restarts, preventing players from stopping the game for minor knocks to break the opponent's momentum.

## 2. Expanded VAR Protocol

Video Assistant Referees (VAR) will now have a broader remit to correct "clear and obvious" errors that were previously outside their jurisdiction:

**Second Yellow Cards:** VAR can now intervene to review a red card that arises from a *clearly incorrect* second yellow card.

**Mistaken Identity:** VAR can now rectify situations where the referee cards the wrong player, including cross-team identity confusion.

**Corner Kick Errors:** VAR can now inform the referee if a corner kick was awarded incorrectly, provided the review is immediate and does not delay the restart of play.

## 3. Additional Regulatory Changes

**Referee Body Cameras:** Competitions now have the option to permit referees to wear chest- or head-mounted cameras, giving broadcasters and fans a unique "first-person" perspective of on-field interactions.

**Advantage Rule:** If a referee plays "advantage" for an offense that denied an obvious goalscoring opportunity (DOGSO), and a goal is subsequently scored, the offending player will **not** be cautioned (since a goal was scored).

Let me now talk about every single one of the 48 teams competing in this WC, probably.

## **Teams & Groups**

Here are the 12 groups for the 2026 FIFA World Cup. Each group consists of four teams, with the top two and the eight best third-placed teams advancing to the new Round of 32.

These are just the teams, and I will go on to talk about every single one of these teams in detail later in the episode in terms of their expected success and general level.

<b>Group</b>	<b>Teams</b>
<b>Group A</b>	Mexico, South Africa, South Korea, Czech Republic
<b>Group B</b>	Canada, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Qatar, Switzerland
<b>Group C</b>	Brazil, Morocco, Haiti, Scotland
<b>Group D</b>	United States, Paraguay, Australia, Türkiye

**Group E** Germany, Curaçao, Ivory Coast, Ecuador

**Group F** Netherlands, Japan, Sweden, Tunisia

**Group G** Belgium, Egypt, Iran, New Zealand

**Group H** Spain, Cape Verde, Saudi Arabia, Uruguay

**Group I** France, Senegal, Iraq, Norway

**Group J** Argentina, Algeria, Austria, Jordan

**Group K** Portugal, DR Congo, Uzbekistan, Colombia

**Group L** England, Croatia, Ghana, Panama

The tournament begins on June 11, 2026, and concludes with the final on July 19, 2026.

## **Off-the-Pitch Talking Points**

Logistics and climate are dominating the headlines outside of the stadium.

### **The "Pitches in Peril" (Climate Risk)**

Recent reports have highlighted that 10 of the 16 host cities (especially Houston, Dallas, and Monterrey) may face **extreme heat**. There is significant debate about whether matches will require "cooling breaks" or even late-night kickoffs to protect player safety.

### **Logistical Complexity**

This is the first time three nations are co-hosting. Issues regarding **visas, border crossings, and fan transportation** across such a massive geographic area are the primary concerns for organizers.

### **Time differences and a lot of matches in the middle of the night**

There will be quite a lot of red-eyed footie fans in Europe. I think the organisers have tried to schedule games at appropriate times for most fans, but some games happen v late in the evening, or in the middle of the night.

### **Commercial Giant**

This is projected to be the most profitable World Cup in history. The North American market is expected to shatter attendance and broadcasting records.

### **The Turf vs. Grass Debate**

Many NFL stadiums in the US use artificial turf, but FIFA requires natural grass. The technology used to temporarily install and

maintain grass pitches in indoor or multi-purpose stadiums is a major technical talking point.

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**Quick Fact:** The final is scheduled for **July 19, 2026**, at MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford, New Jersey (branded as New York New Jersey for the tournament).

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## POLITICS AND CONTROVERSY

The 2026 World Cup is shaping up to be one of the most politically charged sporting events in history. While the pitch is ready, the "off-pitch" landscape is dominated by a complex web of US immigration policies, geopolitical friction, and growing calls for boycotts.

As of **April 2026**, here is the state of the political and geopolitical situation:

### The "Visa Wall" and Border Control

The primary controversy involves the **Trump administration's** hard-line immigration stance, which critics argue contradicts the "open" nature of a World Cup.

### The 39-Country Travel Ban

A major travel ban currently affects 19 countries fully and 20 partially. This directly impacts qualified teams like **Iran, Senegal, Ivory Coast, and Haiti**, whose fans and potentially some non-athlete staff may be denied entry.

### **The \$15,000 Visa Bond**

In a move that has sparked global outrage, the US has introduced a requirement for "high-risk" visitors from 50 nations to post a **\$15,000 bond** to ensure they do not overstay their visas.

### **The "FIFA Pass" System**

To mitigate these issues, a "FIFA Pass" was launched to prioritize visa interviews for ticket holders. However, it does **not** guarantee a visa, and many fans still face 500+ day wait times at US consulates.

### **ICE Presence at Games**

Civil rights groups have expressed "alarm" over the potential for **ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement)** to conduct enforcement actions near "Fan Fests" and stadiums, which could deter even legal immigrants within the US from attending.

## **Geopolitical Tensions & Scandals**

Beyond the borders, several international conflicts are bleeding into the tournament's preparations.

**The Israel-Gaza Boycott Movement:** There is a significant movement, particularly in **Spain**, threatening to boycott the tournament if Israel is allowed to participate. Advocacy groups in Canada have also called on "Canada Soccer" to refuse hosting matches under these conditions.

**The FIFA "Peace Prize" Controversy:** FIFA President **Gianni Infantino** recently awarded President Trump the "FIFA Peace Prize," a move that many international observers viewed as an attempt to ensure political cooperation despite the restrictive travel policies.

## The Current Situation with Iran

**The Group:** Iran is currently slated to compete in **Group G** alongside **Belgium, Egypt, and New Zealand**.

### The Controversy: Potential Withdrawal

Despite their qualification, there is significant ongoing speculation regarding their actual participation.

### The Geopolitical Backdrop

Due to the ongoing conflict in the region, there is heightened concern about travel restrictions and the logistical ability of the team to participate in a tournament hosted by the United States.

CBS Sports

### Official Stance

As of late May 2026, both FIFA and the Football Federation Islamic Republic of Iran have publicly stated that they are proceeding as planned. FIFA President Gianni Infantino has confirmed discussions with U.S. leadership, asserting that the Iranian team is "welcome to compete."

Anadolu Ajansı

### The "What-If" Scenario

Should a withdrawal occur, it would be a logistical nightmare for FIFA. Because the tournament format relies on the 48-team bracket, a last-minute vacancy in Group G would force FIFA to make an unprecedented decision regarding whether to grant a spot to a replacement nation (such as Iraq) or proceed with a three-team group, which could disrupt the integrity of the "best third-place" knockout qualification.

## Economic and Social Risks

### Inbound Tourism Slump

US inbound tourism fell by **5.4% in 2025**, and analysts warn that if the visa restrictions aren't eased for the summer, the projected **\$1.24 million** international visitors may not materialize, leading to a massive financial shortfall for host cities.

### Host City Disputes

Some local US officials have raised concerns about the "unfunded mandates" of World Cup security. There are ongoing disputes between the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and local municipalities regarding who pays for the massive policing presence required.

For most, the 2026 World Cup is an "**unavoidable**" event. Even the most cynical fans are caught up in the uncertainty of a tournament that defies traditional expectations. There is a palpable sense that because of the new, bloated format, the "classic" path to the final has been erased—nobody truly knows what will happen, which is exactly what fans secretly love.

Ultimately, the fan experience in 2026 will likely be defined by a tug-of-war: the joy of the football and the global community versus the frustration of navigating a massive, commercialized, and potentially exhausting tournament structure.

## Your comments

As we approach the kickoff, are you leaning more toward the "excited to watch everything" camp, or are you sceptical about the changes to the format?

Who do you think are the favourites, and why?

What do you think of your country's chances, if your country is competing?

What do you think about England?

What do you think is going to happen?

Leave your comments in the comment section.

But now it's time for...

## **Every Team in the Tournament Discussed in terms of expected success and general level**

### **Group Teams**

**Group A** Mexico, South Africa, South Korea, Czechia

**A**

### **Expected Success & General Level**

**Mexico:** As co-hosts, Mexico is the clear favorite to top the group. The weight of home-field expectation is immense, and while their form has been somewhat inconsistent, the support at the Estadio Azteca and the favorable draw make them the team most likely to progress. Their success will largely depend on

handling the pressure of the tournament opener and maintaining consistency across the group stage.

Flashscore.com

**South Korea:** South Korea enters with a strong history of qualification (11 consecutive appearances), but their current level is a subject of debate due to injuries to key players and recent inconsistent club form for several stars. They remain a technically refined side capable of controlling the ball, but they may struggle against the physicality of teams like Czechia. They are considered a strong candidate for a Round of 32 spot.

The Guardian

**Czechia:** While they entered the tournament via a difficult play-off route, Czechia is viewed as a "dark horse" in this group. Their general level is defined by physical strength, a direct style of play, and aerial superiority. Having not qualified since 2006, they are highly motivated, and their "battle-hardened" nature makes them a tough matchup for any opponent in Group A.

Karlobag.eu

**South Africa:** Returning to the world stage, *Bafana Bafana* is the group's underdog. They are recognized for bringing energy and flair to their matches. While they face a steep climb to advance, they are fully capable of playing the "spoiler" role, particularly given their motivation to prove themselves after a long absence from the finals.

**Group B** Canada, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Qatar, Switzerland

**B**

### Expected Success & General Level

**Switzerland:** Entering as the clear group favorite (with roughly a 55% implied probability of winning the group), the Swiss are the "gold standard" here. They have reached the Round of 16 in each of the last three World Cups and boast a strong, experienced spine led by captain **Granit Xhaka**. Their general level is high, grounded in tactical discipline and proven tournament pedigree.

**Canada:** Expectations are high for the co-hosts. Led by coach Jesse Marsch, this is arguably the deepest Canadian squad in history. While their goal is to reach the knockout stage for the first time, they must avoid the defensive lapses that have plagued them in recent matches.

RotoWire

**Bosnia and Herzegovina:** Viewed as a tier below Switzerland but neck-and-neck with Canada in betting markets, they are returning to the World Cup for the first time since 2014. Their campaign will likely center on the veteran leadership of **Edin Džeko**. They are considered a "tricky" opponent, but their lack of recent experience on the global stage makes their progression less certain.

FIFA

**Qatar:** Coming off a difficult qualifying path and a challenging 2022 tournament, Qatar enters with the lowest expectations in the group. They are looking to secure their first-ever points at a World Cup, but are widely viewed as the least likely to advance.

**Group** Brazil, Morocco, Haiti, Scotland

**C**

**Expected Success & General Level**

**Brazil:** Brazil enters as the overwhelming favorite, not just for the group, but as one of the primary contenders to win the entire tournament. Their depth of talent, from established superstars to young, emerging forwards, is unmatched in this group. Their success is expected to be near-total, with the team aiming to secure maximum points to gain momentum for the knockout stages.

**Morocco:** Following their historic run in 2022, Morocco has cemented itself as a top-tier global competitor. They are the clear second favorite in this group. Their squad is composed of players competing in top European leagues, and they bring a high level of tactical organization that makes them difficult for even the strongest teams to break down.

**Scotland:** Scotland represents the "wild card" of the group. Under their current management, they have developed a strong, defensive-minded structure and a lethal counter-attacking threat. While they are likely to

struggle against the individual quality of Brazil, their match against Morocco will likely be the decisive battle for the second qualification spot. Plus, they've got Mel Gibson.

**Haiti:** While they have qualified on merit, Haiti faces a daunting challenge against three experienced and high-ranking opponents. They are expected to be the most "open" team, likely looking to play with freedom, but they will need a near-perfect defensive performance to secure points in this group.

**Group D** United States, Paraguay, Australia, Türkiye

**D**

#### **Expected Success & General Level**


**United States:** As co-hosts, the U.S. is expected to top this group. Their squad, featuring players with significant experience in European leagues, is deeper than in previous cycles. They will benefit immensely from the home crowd, and expectations are pinned on them to navigate the group stage comfortably.

**Paraguay:** After a tactical overhaul in 2024, Paraguay has become one of the most difficult teams to score against. Under Gustavo Alfaro, they rely on a compact 4-4-2, focusing on clean sheets and intense pressing. While they may not be the flashiest team, their defensive resilience makes them the most likely

contender to join the U.S. in the knockout stages.

The Guardian

**Türkiye:** Türkiye remains a volatile but highly talented side. They possess the individual quality to break down organized defenses, though they can be vulnerable to counter-attacks. They are expected to be the main challenger to Paraguay for the second spot, with their match against the South Americans likely being a defining moment for the group.

**Australia:** The Socceroos (do you see what they did? ) have a well-earned reputation for exceeding expectations through sheer work rate and collective discipline. While they may be considered the underdog in terms of raw individual talent, their ability to frustrate higher-ranked opponents—often by making matches "ugly"—makes them a team that no one in Group D will want to underestimate.

[Karlobag.eu](http://Karlobag.eu) (WTF karlobag.eu???)

**Group** Germany, Curaçao, Côte d'Ivoire, Ecuador

**E**

**Expected Success & General Level**

**Germany:** Germany enters the group as the overwhelming favorite to finish first. They possess a deep talent pool, a wealth of tournament experience, and a professional consistency that usually sees them handle "underdog" opponents effectively. Anything

less than a top-two finish would be considered a major upset.

**Ecuador:** They are widely expected to be the main challenger to Germany for the top spot. Ecuador has become an incredibly disciplined and difficult team to break down in recent years, often utilizing a high-intensity, physical style of play that causes problems for even the most technical European sides.

**Côte d'Ivoire:** The Ivorians are a wild card in this group. They are arguably the most talented team among the non-favorites, boasting players who compete in top-tier leagues. Their success will depend on whether they can match the tactical discipline of Germany and Ecuador; if they play to their potential, they are fully capable of securing a place in the knockout rounds.

**Curaçao:** Making their historic first-ever appearance at a World Cup, Curaçao enters as the definite underdog. Managed by veteran tactician **Dick Advocaat**, they play a very organized and disciplined style. While they are not expected to advance, their presence is one of the most inspiring stories of this tournament, and they will be looking to frustrate their opponents and secure a historic result.

**Group** Netherlands, Japan, Sweden, Tunisia

**F**

**Expected Success & General Level**

**Netherlands:** The Dutch enter as the clear favorites to top the group. They consistently produce world-class talent and have the structural maturity to handle the pressure of the opening stages. Their possession-based approach will likely see them control the tempo in most of their group matches.

**Japan:** Japan is widely regarded as one of the most improved nations in global football. With a roster filled with players competing in top-tier European leagues, they are no longer just a "dark horse" but a legitimate threat to top teams. Their match against the Netherlands will likely be a highlight of the group stage and will likely determine who finishes first.

**Sweden:** Sweden is the "physical hurdle" of Group F. They are known for their defensive solidity and ability to dominate set-piece situations, which can frustrate more technical opponents like the Netherlands or Japan. Their success depends on their ability to grind out results against the high-intensity play of their rivals.

**Tunisia:** While they face a very difficult path, Tunisia is not a side to be overlooked. They are historically difficult to break down and often rely on a counter-attacking style that can exploit teams pushing too many players forward. They will likely be the "spoiler" of the group, aiming to snatch points that could complicate the standings for the three favorites.

**Group** Belgium, Egypt, Iran, New Zealand

**G**

**Expected Success & General Level**

**Belgium:** As the clear favorites, the Red Devils are expected to top the group. With a squad led by veterans like Kevin De Bruyne and Romelu Lukaku, and managed by Rudi Garcia, they possess significantly more global tournament pedigree than the other teams in the group. Their objective is to secure the top spot to earn a favorable matchup in the Round of 32.

Sofascore

**Egypt:** Often considered the strongest challenger for the second qualification spot, the Pharaohs bring a high level of intensity to their matches. The group stage focus for them will be to break their historical winless streak at the World Cup and rely on the individual brilliance of stars like Mohamed Salah.

**Iran:** *Team Melli* are a tactically disciplined side. They have consistently proven difficult to break down in previous World Cups. While they have never advanced past the group stage, their matches—particularly against Egypt—will likely decide who claims the second automatic knockout spot.

RotoWire

**New Zealand:** The "All Whites" are the outsiders in this group, but they carry the pride of being the only representative from Oceania. Their general level is lower than the European and African counterparts, but they enter with a focus on organization and defensive stability. Even a single point would be viewed as a major success for them.

FIFA

*Shade, FIFA*

**Group H** Spain, Cape Verde, Saudi Arabia, Uruguay

**H**

**Expected Success & General Level**

**Spain:** Spain enters as the clear favorite to top the group. Boasting world-class technical quality and a disciplined system under Luis de la Fuente, they are expected to navigate the group stage with ease. However, they will be looking to break a string of Round of 16 exits that have marked their recent World Cup history.

**Uruguay:** As a storied football nation, Uruguay is the primary challenger for the top spot. Under the management of Marcelo Bielsa, they have embraced a high-energy, "Bielsa-ball" style of play that is both physically demanding and tactically sophisticated. Their matchup against Spain is one of the most

anticipated games of the opening round.

**Saudi Arabia:** The "Green Falcons" are a seasoned side with a well-earned reputation for disrupting global powers. Having qualified as winners of their AFC group, they bring a wealth of tournament experience. They are expected to be the most stubborn opponent in the group, focusing on defensive organization to challenge Spain and Uruguay for a qualification spot.

**Cape Verde:** The "Blue Sharks" are the tournament's feel-good story. Making their first-ever appearance at a World Cup finals, they qualified by topping a challenging CAF group that included Cameroon. While they are the clear underdogs, their ability to navigate a difficult qualification path suggests they have the talent to surprise teams that underestimate them.

**Group I** France, Senegal, Iraq, Norway

I

**Expected Success & General Level**

**France:** France enters as the clear favorite to win the group and is widely viewed as a candidate to win the entire tournament. With an embarrassment of riches in talent—including stars like Kylian Mbappé and a deep bench—they are expected to dominate possession and control the tempo. Anything less than a first-place

finish would be considered a significant upset.

Karlobag.eu

**Senegal:** The *Lions of Teranga* are a robust, tactically mature side. They have a strong record of success in major tournaments and possess the athleticism to compete with anyone. Their opener against France is heavy with historical significance—a rematch of the 2002 World Cup shocker—and will be a major test of their ability to secure a spot in the knockout round.

FIFA

**Norway:** This is a milestone tournament for Norway, marking their first appearance in 28 years.

Expectations are high, largely driven by the presence of Erling Haaland and Martin Ødegaard. They are technically sound and dangerous on the counter-attack, making them the primary rival to Senegal for the second qualifying spot. Their match against Senegal is widely expected to be a "must-win" for both teams.

RotoWire+ 1

**Iraq:** Under the guidance of manager Graham Arnold, Iraq has reached the global stage after a 40-year wait. While they are the clear outsiders in a group of established giants, they are a disciplined, well-coached unit. Their goal is to prove they belong on this stage; they will likely look to frustrate opponents and capitalize on set-piece opportunities.

Olympics.com

**Group** Argentina, Algeria, Austria, Jordan

**J**

**Expected Success & General Level**

**Argentina:** As the reigning champions, Argentina is the overwhelming favorite to win the group. Their squad depth, experience under pressure, and tactical flexibility under Lionel Scaloni make them one of the most formidable teams in the entire tournament. They are expected to secure the top spot comfortably, though they will be wary of the unpredictability of tournament football.

Tapmad

**Austria:** Austria is arguably the primary challenger to Argentina for the group lead, or at least the strongest candidate for the second qualification spot. They are a well-drilled side that relies on aggressive pressing systems and vertical attacking play. Their ability to force turnovers makes them dangerous against almost any opponent.

Sofascore+ 1

**Algeria:** Algeria brings significant flair and speed to the group. They are a team that thrives on quick transitions and creative attacking patterns. While they have had to battle through a tough qualification path, they possess enough individual quality to threaten both Austria and Argentina, making them a major contender to advance.

Tapmad

**Jordan:** Making their first-ever World Cup appearance, Jordan is the group's "inspiring underdog." Their general level of play is lower than their group peers, so they will likely focus on defensive organization and maintaining a low block to frustrate their opponents. Their goal is to prove their quality on the global stage, and they will look to secure a historic result in one of their three matches.

Tapmad

**Group** Portugal, DR Congo, Uzbekistan, Colombia

**K**

**Expected Success & General Level**

**Portugal:** As the top seed, Portugal is widely expected to win the group. They possess a world-class squad that blends veteran leadership with emerging talent. Their ability to control games against diverse styles will be their greatest asset, and they are considered legitimate title contenders who are looking to make a deep run.

**Colombia:** Colombia enters as the primary challenger to Portugal. With a high-energy, technical style and key stars like Luis Díaz and James Rodríguez, they have one of the most exciting attacking pipelines in South America. They are expected to be the most "entertaining" team in the group, and a high-scoring draw against Portugal could well determine who tops the table.

**DR Congo:** The *Leopards* are one of the most compelling stories of the tournament, returning to the World Cup for the first time since 1974. They are a physical, athletic side that excels in transition. Their match against Colombia is expected to be a high-intensity battle that will likely decide who claims the second automatic knockout spot.

**Uzbekistan:** As the first-ever Central Asian nation to qualify for a World Cup, Uzbekistan enters with immense national pride. While they are the clear underdogs in terms of tournament experience, they are a disciplined and well-organized side that has invested heavily in infrastructure and youth development. They will look to play "spoiler" and prove that their qualification was no fluke.

**Group L** England, Croatia, Ghana, Panama

L

### **Expected Success & General Level**

**England:** England enters the tournament as one of the favorites to win the entire competition. With a squad overflowing with talent from the Premier League and abroad, they are expected to dominate Group L. Their focus will be on clinical finishing and defensive stability to ensure a deep run into the knockout stages.

**Croatia:** Often referred to as a "tournament team," Croatia consistently outperforms expectations due to their elite midfield technicality and mental toughness.

The opening match against England is viewed as the group's "headline" clash, which will likely determine the winner of the group.

**Ghana:** The *Black Stars* are the group's primary disruptor. They have a history of performing well on the world stage and possess a squad that is physically aggressive and dangerous in transition. Their match against England in New Jersey is highly anticipated, and they will be looking to secure points that could help them capitalize on the expanded format for third-place advancement.

**Panama:** Making their second-ever World Cup appearance, Panama is the underdog, but they have shown significant progress in recent years. While expectations for them to advance are lower, they are a compact and well-drilled team. They will view every match as an opportunity to secure their first-ever World Cup win.

What do you think? Which team is

- The favourite
- The dark horse
- The underdog

That is it for this episode!

## [BONUS] FIFA WORLD CUP 2026 PREVIEW MEGARAMBLE 🏆

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I will talk to you again about football next time, probably during the competition, I suppose!

Let me know if you have enjoyed this bonus World Cup episode.

New normal episode coming on Monday (and it's a long one).

Oh, and if you want a lovely warm World Cup bath, check out

[532. A History of The World Cup | Luke's ENGLISH Podcast](#)

Until then, bye!

