

UNITED STATES TO CO-HOST AN EVENT LIKE NO OTHER

WORLD CUP

BY JAMES ROBSON
AP SOCCER WRITER

The biggest FIFA World Cup ever is almost here. A record 48 teams are set to play a record 104 matches spread out across the U.S., Canada and Mexico, with defending champion Argentina trying to do something that hasn't been done in generations: win back-to-back World Cups. The only nations to ever achieve that feat were Italy (1934 and 1938) and Brazil (1958 and 1962).

It will be a World Cup of extremes. Besides the most teams – up from 32 – and games – up from 90, the upcoming World Cup will have the most host countries and highest prices for tickets, transportation and parking.

The expanded format effectively removed the chance of multiple top-ranked teams ended up in the same group – known as a “group of death” in soccer vernacular. Much of the jeopardy traditionally seen in the early stages of the tournament has been removed until the round of 16 because the eight best third-place teams also advance to the round of 32 this time.

Purists are concerned that the world's largest sports spectacle may be diluted as a result of all the expansion.

“Maybe FIFA gets away with it this time because it's the first expanded tournament and because ticket prices are enormous.

But eventually broadcasters and fans may stop caring if the tournament doesn't become interesting until the last 16,” said Jonathan Wilson, author of *The Power and the Glory: A New History of the World Cup*. “A World Cup game should feel almost must-watch. ... Nobody is watching 90 out of 104 games. It's just too much.”

FIFA President Gianni Infantino says the expansion of the tournament will make the game “truly global” and create opportunities for countries that “would

never have dreamed to participate” in a World Cup.

The theory is that given a greater chance to qualify, more nations would increase grassroots funding and therefore improve the standard of soccer around the globe.

Considering the greater global reach of soccer, the sport needs to think more about the quality of its output, said Maheta Molango, chief executive of England's Professional Footballers' Association and an outspoken critic of the expanded format.

“We target China, the U.S., India. So this, in my view, should make us reflect on the value of scarcity because sometimes we always think that more is more, but I disagree,” he said. “The starting point has to be ‘let's put back the quality of the show at the center of our project.’”

ALL ABOUT THE MONEY

The World Cup is FIFA's main revenue generator and the financial advantage to expanding it is compelling. More games mean more tickets to sell, with prices rising to thousands of dollars for the best seats at the biggest matches.

When tickets went on general sale in January they ranged from \$140 to \$8,680. Since then some have been made available for less and others for significantly more — rising to a face price of \$32,970 for the final.

FIFA can make more money on its resale marketplace where it takes a 30% commission from each sale. In April, the platform listed four tickets to the final for just under \$2.3 million each.

Fans have accused FIFA of a “monumental betrayal” over its pricing strategy, but demand appears to be high and the not-for-profit organization says the money it makes goes back into the sport, more than \$9 billion in revenue anticipated this year.

A LOT TO WATCH

It remains to be seen if the supersized format is a turn-off for fans. Audience measurement company Nielsen says interest in international soccer in the U.S. is on the rise.

The most watched game on television in the U.S. between 2023-25 was Spain vs. England in the Euros final, with an average audience of 6.6 million.

FIRST TIMERS

Four nations will be making their debut at this World Cup, including tiny Curaçao, the smallest by population ever to qualify with only 185,000 residents.

“It's a big achievement for us to make it, but we also want to show that we can play and that we deserve to be there,” Curaçao goalkeeper Eloy Room said.

Jordan, Cape Verde and Uzbekistan are the other debutants. Haiti has qualified for the first time since 1974.

“As children, we all watched the World Cup.

We all dreamed of playing in the World Cup. But it was just a dream, a fantasy when you're a child,” Haiti midfielder Yassin Fortune said. “Qualifying and being able to participate is unimaginable.”

THE PARITY ERA

The last six World Cups have seen six different champions — Argentina in 2022, France in 2018, Germany in 2014, Spain in 2010, Italy in 2006 and Brazil in 2002. Such a run had never previously happened. All of those national teams are back for this year's World Cup, except Italy, which failed to qualify. All eyes will be on Argentina's attempt to make history.

What To Know

Host countries: United States, Canada and Mexico, all automatically qualified by hosting.

Number of Teams: 48, the most ever.

TOURNAMENT FORMAT:

• All teams are guaranteed three matches in the group stage of the tournament. Teams have been assigned to 12 different four-team groups. The top two teams from each group are guaranteed to advance, as will the eight best third-place teams. Teams finishing fourth in groups are eliminated.

• The 32 surviving teams after the group stage will enter a single-elimination tournament, with one exception: The teams that lose in the semifinals will advance to a third place match the day before the final.

TOURNAMENT DATES:

Group stage: June 11-June 27

Round of 32: June 28-July 3

Round of 16: July 4-7

Quarterfinals: July 9-11

Semifinals: July 14 and 15

Third-place match: July 18

World Cup final: July 19

U.S. SCHEDULE:

• **vs. Paraguay** at Inglewood, California on June 12.

• **vs. Australia** at Seattle on June 19.

• **vs. Turkey** at Inglewood, California on June 25.

If the Americans win their group, they play a Round-of-32 game at Santa Clara, California, on July 1. If the Americans finish second in the group, they play July 3 in Arlington, Texas. They could also advance with a third-place finish in the group.

HOW TO WATCH:

Fox Sports is the English-language home in the U.S. for the World Cup, with 70 matches set to be aired on Fox and 34 more on FS1. All matches will stream live on Fox One and the Fox Sports app.

Spanish-speaking viewers in the U.S. will be able to catch on NBCUniversal's Telemundo and Universo.

Peacock, FuboTV, Hulu, YouTubeTV and DirecTV Stream also offer matches.



Argentina's Lionel Messi reacts to winning the World Cup final in 2022.