

UNITED STATES TO CO-HOST AN EVENT LIKE NO OTHER WORLD CUP

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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,”



AP PHOTOS

Fans celebrate announcement of the U.S. men's national team roster, May 26, in New York.

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.

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

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 sites:

Group stage: Atlanta; Foxborough, Massachusetts; Arlington, Texas; Guadalajara, Mexico; Houston; Kansas City; Inglewood, California; Mexico City; Miami Gardens, Florida; Monterrey, Mexico; East Rutherford, New Jersey; Philadelphia; Santa Clara, California; Seattle; Toronto; and Vancouver.

Round of 32: Foxborough, East Rutherford, Inglewood, Toronto, Santa Clara, Seattle, Houston, Arlington, Mexico City, Atlanta, Miami Gardens, Vancouver, Kansas City.

Round of 16: Vancouver, Atlanta, Mexico City, East Rutherford, Seattle, Arlington, Houston, Philadelphia.

Quarterfinals: Foxborough, Inglewood, Miami Gardens, Kansas City.

Semifinals: Atlanta, Arlington.

Third place match: Miami Gardens.

World Cup final: East Rutherford.

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

Group breakdown:

Current FIFA ranking in parentheses.

Group A: Mexico (15), South Korea (25), Czechia (41), South Africa (60).

Group B: Switzerland (19), Canada (30), Qatar (55), Bosnia and Herzegovina (65).

Group C: Brazil (6), Morocco (8), Scotland (43), Haiti (83).

Group D: United States (16), Turkey (22), Australia (27), Paraguay (40).

Group E: Germany (10), Ecuador (23), Ivory Coast (34), Curaçao (82).

Group F: Netherlands (7), Japan (18), Sweden (38), Tunisia (44).

Group G: Belgium (9), Iran (21), Egypt (29), New Zealand (85).

Group H: Spain (2), Uruguay (17), Saudi Arabia (61), Cape Verde (69).

Group I: France (1), Senegal (14), Norway (31), Iraq (57).

Group J: Argentina (3), Algeria (28), Austria (24), Jordan (63).

Group K: Portugal (5), Colombia (13), Congo (46), Uzbekistan (50).

Group L: England (4), Croatia (11), Panama (33), Ghana (74).

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.

Who will win?

Sportsbooks have Spain (+450) as the World Cup favorite, followed closely by France (+550), England (+650), Brazil (+800), Argentina (+800) and Portugal (+1000). The U.S. has odds of +4000.

The longest shots in the field? Haiti and Curaçao, both currently at +250000, meaning a \$100 bet on either returns \$250,000 if they were to win.

Players To Watch



Lionel Messi
ARGENTINA

The magnificent Messi finally achieved his career ambition in Qatar four years ago by leading

Argentina to World Cup glory and emulating national icon Diego Maradona.

With it, Messi effectively completed soccer, winning the top titles for club, country and individually.

Since Qatar, he has moved to the United States to make Inter Miami the dominant force in MLS, winning the MLS Cup last year.

His status as the greatest player of all time is still debated, with Maradona and Pelé generally considered his rivals for that title. But back-to-back World Cups — which Pelé achieved in 1958 and '62 — would further strengthen his case.

It's not a given that Messi will play in the World Cup. The 38-year-old recently was substituted in an Inter Miami game and diagnosed with “an overload associated with muscle fatigue in his left hamstring.”



Cristiano Ronaldo
PORTUGAL

Ronaldo is still waiting for the one trophy that has eluded him in his record-breaking career. He heads to the World Cup after leading Saudi club Al Nassr to the domestic league title this season. That trophy adds to league titles with Manchester United

in England, Real Madrid in Spain and Juventus in Italy, along with five Champions League trophies (four with Madrid, one with United).

His 143 goals is a record in men's international soccer and nobody has scored more than his 41 in World Cup qualifiers.

Even at the age of 41, his hunger for trophies and records shows no sign of relenting.



Kylian Mbappé
FRANCE

Mbappé has long been considered the player to take over the title as the best player on the planet

after Messi and Ronaldo.

Some would say the Real Madrid striker has already done that as a World Cup and multiple title-winner, but the fact that he has yet to win the Champions League or Ballon d'Or leaves a big question hanging over his career.

He should have a good shot at this year's Ballon d'Or — awarded annually to the best player in the world — if he can lead France to another World Cup title, having scored 48 goals in 50 games so far this season.



Erling Haaland
NORWAY

The Manchester City striker is playing in his first major international tournament after smashing records at club level. Haaland, 25, is well on his way breaking scoring records in the Champions League and Premier League and has already

surpassed benchmarks set by Messi in terms of the speed with which he's amassing goals.

Norway is an outsider at this year's World Cup, but in Haaland it has arguably the most lethal forward at the tournament.



Lamine Yamal
SPAIN

Spain's teenaged sensation was the star of its triumph at the European Championship in 2024 despite not turning 17 until the eve of the final.

He was the youngest-ever scorer at a men's Euros and with mesmerizing speed and footwork. Yamal is earning comparisons to Messi, who was once photographed with the winger when he was still a baby.

Yamal has arguably overtaken Mbappé as the man most likely to fill void when Messi and Ronaldo retire and an impressive World Cup could strengthen that argument.



Jude Bellingham
ENGLAND

He's the midfielder virtually every top team wanted when Real Madrid sealed his signature in 2023. He went on to lead the club to its 15th Champions League title and the Spanish title in his first season at the club before driving England to final of the Euros with one of the goals of the tournament on the way.



Neymar
BRAZIL

Brazil's all-time record goal-scorer has carried the weight of a nation on his shoulders throughout his career. Despite winning the biggest honors as a player, he is yet to lead Brazil to a record-extending sixth World Cup title.

Neymar, now 34, has been called up by Brazil coach Carlo Ancelotti for his fourth World Cup after enduring injuries and an underwhelming move to Saudi Arabia since the last edition in Qatar four years ago.



Mohamed Salah
EGYPT

The Egyptian icon is leaving Liverpool after a disappointing campaign, but remains his country's talisman. Egypt will just have to hope the

33-year-old striker has saved his best for the World Cup.

Salah scored 257 goals in 442 games and won a full set of trophies with Liverpool — including the Champions League and two Premier League titles.