

SOCCER360

WORLD CUP 2026

CANADA | MEXICO | USA

SPECIAL EDITION

TEAM
PREVIEWS
48 NATIONS

SCHEDULE
EVERY GAME
DATES + TIMES



GOAL KINGS
MESSI READY

COACHES
WORLD CUP TACTICS

GREAT
EXPECTATIONS
FAVOURITES
+ DARK HORSES

ONE ON ONE
VINNI
YAMAL

ENGLAND
FACTOR
TOP PLAYERS

VENUES
HOST STADIUMS



WORLD CUP TROPHY CHASERS



GREAT EXPECTATIONS

THERE WILL BE MORE TEAMS COMPETING AT THIS SUMMER'S WORLD CUP FINALS THAN EVER BEFORE, BUT ONLY A FEW HAVE A SERIOUS CHANCE OF GLORY. DAN ROBERTS TAKES A LOOK AT THE FIVE BIG CONTENDERS FOR FOOTBALL'S BIGGEST PRIZE.

IT WILL BE THE BIGGEST WORLD CUP WE HAVE EVER SEEN. A TOTAL OF 48 NATIONS WILL BEGIN THE TOURNAMENT WITH A DREAM TO GO ALL THE WAY AND LIFT THE FAMOUS TROPHY IN JUNE. BUT ONLY A FEW OF THOSE ARE CONSIDERED TO BE SERIOUS CONTENDERS. ARGENTINA, SPAIN, ENGLAND, FRANCE, AND PORTUGAL ARE AMONG THE FAVOURITES TO BECOME WORLD CHAMPIONS THIS YEAR - BUT WHICH OF THOSE IS MOST LIKELY TO ULTIMATELY BE VICTORIOUS?

ARGENTINA

Argentina is the obvious place to start, and the current world champions look

arguably more likely than any team in recent history to win back-to-back titles. Brazil was the last nation to retain the trophy in 1994, and despite several instances of holders going mighty close in all the years since, winning the World Cup on back-to-back occasions has proven one of the most challenging feats in all of sport. Having ended a 36-year wait, dating back to 1986, the dramatic triumph in Qatar four years ago seems to have lifted Argentina to new heights. Whereas before the current decade began they were becoming renowned for repeatedly failing in their bid for silverware with Lionel Messi's international career seemingly cursed far at times by new lifting trophies is but a habit in the wake of a glittering few years. They defeated the European champions Italy to win the Copa Libertadores in 2022 and have established a total dominance over the rest of CONMEBOL,





**"MESSI WILL
BE THE FOCAL
POINT OF
ARGENTINA'S
CHALLENGE
TO RETAIN THE
TITLE"**

**OPPOSITE
BOTTOM**
Argentina's 6'inter
Wissam Ben
Lakdhar
**OPPOSITE
TOP**
One to watch,
Eduardo Paredes

winning a second successive Copa America in 2024, as well as cruising to top spot in qualifying for this summer's tournament, in a section containing the likes of Brazil, Uruguay and Colombia among others, the fact the Atacameño topped the table by nine points merely served to undermine their class and credentials.

Coach Lionel Scaloni has been the one to engineer this period of success, but forever providing the stardust on the field and making the extraordinary happen, is of course, Messi. He continues to write glorious chapters in his one-of-a-kind career, the latest of which saw him inspire Inter Miami to the MLS Cup and sweep the board in the 2023 awards. His triumph in 2022 was proof to those who were still unsure that he is the greatest of all time. At 35, many thought it would be the last act of his international career but he's back on the biggest stage again and winning it all for a second time would surely settle the argument, once and for all.

There is outstanding quality elsewhere in the squad of course, not least with Lautaro Martínez and Julián Álvarez as the two main striking options. In midfield Alexis Mac Allister is the pass master while Enzo Fernández will look to have the same impact he had in 2022 when he was one of the breakout stars. And who could forget Emiliano

Martínez in goal, after his decisive contributions in Qatar, not to mention his antics, so Argentina definitely have the talent to win another world cup, with Messi set to be the focal point of any challenge to retain the title. A concerted effort by everyone, allowing the great man to shine, could be enough for them to eradicate Pékín Brazil side.



"LAMINE TURNS 19 SIX DAYS BEFORE THIS SUMMER'S WORLD CUP FINAL."

SPAIN

While there's apparently little to choose between the our five main favorites to lift the World Cup this year, Spain are the ones who many are leaning towards as they seek to win the competition for a second time and emulate the achievement of their legendary 2010 side by following up success in the European Championships with victory on the global stage.

The overall strength of Luis de la Fuente's squad is expected to overcome most of their obstacles in the heat of North America this summer. And while there are some phenomenal players dotted throughout, compared to their rivals La Liga probably benefit more from the collective excellence of the team, as opposed to relying on certain players to produce moments of individual magic – a proven recipe for success in international football.

That certainly helped make the difference at Euro 2024 where Spain were the deserved winners, outplaying all their rivals with an exhilarating high-tempo style which was executed to perfection by every member of the team from back to front. No team could truly compete with the quality of their football and they complemented all that with a real cutting edge in attack.

And since then, that form has shown no sign of easing off as only a penalty shoot-out defeat to Portugal in the UEFA Nations League final last June seemed an unlikely record in competitive matches, since the surprise loss to Scotland way back in 2023 – creating ominous signs for anyone else with designs on claiming the trophy this summer.

If Argentina are hoping for one last display of magnificence from their veteran maestro Lionel Messi, it is Barcelona's new guard that will provide Spanish fans with hope. Pau Cubarsi, Pedri, and Geron Torneo would be enough talent for most teams, but they also have Lamine Yamal in their ranks.

Yamal burst onto the global scene at Euro 2024, teaming up with Athletic Bilbao's Nico Williams to great effect on either side of a scintillating front three and promising a bright future for La Liga. From there he has grown into a genuine world beater, with his domestic form pushing Barcelona

Spain's young sensation Lamine Yamal considered one of the brightest talents in world football

PAU CUBARI: Dynamic duo Lamine Yamal and Pau Williams

RIGHT: Midfield maestro Pedri will be looking to make his mark



to another La Liga title, and his international appearances continue to show that he is the real deal. And as he's progressed, the records have just kept on building. The World Cup has delivered nothing but misery for Spain since their victory in 2010, with a shock group stage exit in 2014, followed by three penalty shoot-out defeats at the hands of Russia and Morocco in 2018 and 2022 respectively. Surely they will put those failures behind them here and reach the latter stages. Indeed, anything less than the semi-finals and it would be a shock.



"FOR A TEAM THAT USED TO BE GUARANTEED TO PROVIDE CHAOS, LES BLEUS ARE NOW ONE OF THE MOST COMPLETE SQUADS IN THE GAME"

FRANCE

They recently returned to the top of the FIFA rankings, so naturally France have to be among the favourites this summer. After winning the World Cup in 2018 and going so unbelievably close to retaining their crown with a thrilling final, Deschamps inspired fightback in the 2022 final, they're plotting to be around right to the bitter end again and with a squad comprising of a virtually endless amount of talent, there's every reason why Les Bleus would be disappointed if they don't end up winning the competition for a third time. Didier Deschamps led his France side through the qualifying campaign relatively unscathed, dropping just two points on their way. The legendary former captain's 16-year reign as coach comes to an end following the tournament and it would be the perfect way to end, having overseen a period where he inherited a squad prone to chaos or force and went on to nurture a veritable conveyor belt of superstars. Mbappé is still the main attraction and looks as though he has fully recovered from a knee injury, even after the Real Madrid medical squad apparently originally evaluated the warring limbs. However, he's ably supported by none other than the reigning Ballon d'Or winner himself, with Ousmane Dembélé finally producing the performances he had promised for years when he first became a professional. Add to that Marcus Thuram, Achille Mbeki, and the frighteningly talented Ollivier Giroud, and France's attacking unit look unbeatable. That's before you even take a look at the global stars packing their defence and midfield in terms of individual quality at



TOP: A united France can go far

TOP LEFT: One to watch: Michael Olise

ABOVE: On the Captain: Kylian Mbappé

this tournament, frankly they are unmatched.

Recent performances have been strong hence their rise back to the top of the rankings, but finding the right formula to turn the best group of individuals at the World Cup into the best team is what Deschamps needs to address. Hopefully for their sake, lessons will have been learned from the laboured performances of Euro 2016 and if so, France could well be unstoppable.

They have had a history under Deschamps of growing into tournaments and waiting until at least the last 16 to start producing their best, but France may need to hit the ground running given they find themselves in what looks the toughest group of all.

Having to play both Senegal and Norway before the knockout rounds begin is undoubtedly a tough task. Iraq might be missing up the numbers in Group A, but the opening fixture against Senegal will have French fans anxiously remembering the debacle of 2002, with the final game pitting France against the power of biting Hazard et al. France could go all the way this summer, but any drop in concentration against these two sides could leave them playing catch-up.



ENGLAND

England's fans might repeatedly sing about football coming home, but the fact is that there has been nothing but disappointment and a recurring sense of what might have been since the Three Lions won the World Cup at Wembley in 1966. Despite their chances being taken up time after time in the build-up and generations of iconic, celebrated players pulling on the famous white shirts, England have fallen short and floundered under the weight of expectation all too often over the past six decades. However, they have at last started to become a real contender again at major tournaments in recent years under the statesmanlike guidance of Gareth Southgate, finishing as runners-up at the last two European Championships while making it to the semi-finals and the last eight respectively at the previous two World Cup Finals. They missed glory on all four occasions only to fall painfully short, so now with the desperation to win some elsewhere as palpable as ever, England are trying to do whatever it takes to get over the line.

The appointment of Thomas Tuchel as Southgate's replacement underlined that fact, given his record as a proven winner at the highest level in club football (but the jury is still out on the Germans' tenure so far). The current squad looks like one of the best in the tournament on paper, but there are some serious questions to be asked about its over-reliance on all-time-record scorer Harry Kane. The Bayern Munich striker has been a talismanic captain for the last few years and is definitely missed when he is absent, as some poor friends in Munich proved.

to far, all of Kane's potential understudies have proven unconvincing in the role and despite having a plethora of top-class attacking midfield options to choose from including Jude Bellingham, Bukayo Saka, and Cole Palmer, the team has looked disjointed. Current head coach Thomas Tuchel will claim that there is nothing to worry about, but the national media is always very quick to criticise when anything goes wrong, so a decisive showing in the potentially tricky group matches against Costa Rica, Ghana, and Panama will be crucial. And on the bright side, England have often saved their best performances for major tournaments over the past few years. England's biggest battle always seems to be against the expectations thrust upon the squad but although some pundits might balk at the idea, England has just as much chance of winning the World Cup as anyone else. All the recent indications suggest though that Kane needs to stay fit and healthy if football is to come home again.

TOP:
Trophy Chasers
England

MIDDLE BOTTOM:
Strike force Harry Kane

BOTTOM:
Midfield maestro
Jude Bellingham





PORTUGAL

There are a number of other teams, like Germany and Brazil, who have the talent and pedigree to challenge for football's most prestigious honour this summer if they can hit their stride, but it might be Portugal's chances that are being severely underrated by many people. All the attention will be on the ability of Cristiano Ronaldo to roll back the years once again and lead his nation to the ultimate glory for the first time ever, but he is just one of the exceptional names in a squad crisscrossed with top global stars.

Indeed, in his remarkable 20-year international career Ronaldo has never had such an elite group of players around him. Among his esteemed teammates are no fewer than three of the Paris Saint-Germain that has ruled Europe in impressive fashion, with Nuno Mendes widely regarded as the best left-back in the world while midfield duo João Neves and Vitinha are being hailed as the new Xavi Hernandez and Andrés Iniesta.

If you also consider the further creativity provided by Bruno Fernandes and Bernardo Silva, as well as the robust defensive leadership of Ruben Dias, then it's increasingly unwise to discount Portugal as one of the favourites. Their credentials were further enhanced too by winning the 2024-25 UEFA Nations League, where they twice fought back from behind against Spain before prevailing in a penalty shoot-out. That should surely give them further belief that they're capable of mounting a strong challenge to go all the way.

While they will expect to comfortably advance to the knockout stages despite the presence of some potentially tricky opponents in Group C, coach Roberto Martinez must ensure his side are able

to gradually build through the tournament and go through the gears rather than peaking too soon – something which has proved their undoing in recent years.

As a result, they haven't gone beyond the quarter-finals of any major competition since winning the Euro trophy in 2016. One area where Portugal are at a disadvantage compared to their fellow favourites is that they aren't one of the top four seeds, who have been kept apart in the draw until the semi-final. That means, unless there is a major shock somewhere along the line, A teams will need to beat one of Argentina, Spain, France, or England in order to reach the last four. But although they are the least favoured of the five main contenders, Portugal unquestionably have the quality and depth in their squad to triumph this summer. It would be a fair tale for Ronaldo, at the age of 41, he can finally claim a World Cup to round off an astonishing legacy. And let us not forget Diogo Jota, whose tragic death last summer serves as a poignant source of inspiration.

ABOVE:
One to watch
this time

LEFT:
Ronaldo's last
World Cup

ALLEZ LES BLEUS!

The United States, Canada, and Mexico will all be hoping to benefit from home advantage this summer. Dan Roberts takes a look back at the last time a host nation won the World Cup.



TOP:
Zinedine Zidane
Thierry

BELOW:
Goal King Thierry
Henry

GOALKINGS

The Golden Boot will be awarded to the tournament's top goal scorer this summer. Dan Roberts takes a look at the leading contenders for the coveted prize. There are some legendary games when it comes to the World Cup Golden Boot winners. Kylian Mbappé and Harry Kane both the honour at the last two Finals, and the likes of Ronaldo, Ibrahimović, and David Alaba have also won in the past. The 18 goals scored by Just Fontaine in 1958 will take some beating, but here are the five leading contenders for World Cup 2026.

Lamine Yamal - Spain

He will have only turned 19 six days before this summer's World Cup final, but the Spanish sensation has already proved himself on the global stage, with his team in place as the favourite to lift the trophy. Yamal should get the games needed to record a good tally - and expect him to chip in with a healthy total of assists, too.



Erling Haaland - Norway

Norway are finally back at a finals for the first time since 1994, and many experts have the Scandinavians down as a dark horse to go all the way. Much of that belief comes from the incredible goalscoring prowess of Haaland, who will be eagerly anticipating a chance to play at the highest level of international football.



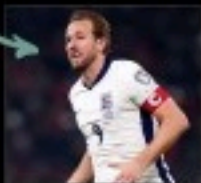
Lionel Messi - Argentina

Winning the World Cup in 2022 cemented an already legendary status for the Argentinean maestro, and a Golden Boot this summer would crown a glittering career. It is one of the only individual honours Messi is still yet to win, but even at 35 you wouldn't put it past him achieving it this summer as he side-kicks to retain the trophy.



Harry Kane - England

England are one of the favourites to win the World Cup this summer, but a lot will depend on the goals of Harry Kane. Thomas Tuchel's side have struggled without their talismanic captain, but a fit and healthy Kane will definitely be in contention having been in imperious form again for Bayern Munich in 2023-24.



Kylian Mbappé - France

No other player has ever won more than one World Cup Golden Boot, but Kylian Mbappé has a chance to break that record this summer, with France being one of the more-fancied teams. Some tough group opponents could slow his early goal rate, but anything can happen, since the best make a superstar hit his red brick.



France hadn't even qualified for the two previous World Cup Finals, although a run to the semi-final stage of Euro 98 suggested that a new group of players were about to challenge for trophies in the same way that Michel Platini, Alain Giresse, and Jean Tigana had done in the 1980s.

Now, in 1998, Les Bleus had home advantage and were looking to win the most prestigious competition in football for the very first time. France's first game didn't come until the third day of the competition, but a comprehensive 3-0 victory over South Africa showed that this team meant business.

A 20-year-old forward from Monaco called Thierry Henry scored in stoppage time in that game, and he went on to score two more in the 4-0 win over Saudi Arabia six days later, with progress already assured. France beat Denmark 2-1 in the final group match to join Argentina as the only two teams with a 100% record.

The World Cup's first ever Golden Boot from Laurent Blanc saw France beat Paraguay in the round of 16, setting up a mouth-watering quarter-final clash with Italy, where it took a penalty shoot-out to break the deadlock and send Les Bleus through to a semi-final against surprise package Croatia.

There, Lilian Thuram scored the only two goals of his 142-game international career to set up the final that everyone had been looking forward to - against Brazil.

The build-up to the game was dominated by conflicting reports concerning Zidane's omission

and their inclusion in the starting line-up. The midfielder was clearly off his game in the final but tried his best, to no avail, as Zinedine Zidane scored two headers before half-time to give the hosts a commanding lead.

France continued to keep Brazil goalless, even after having Marcel Desailly sent off with 20 minutes to go, and Emmanuel Petit sealed a famous victory in stoppage time. Les Bleus lifted the trophy in front of their jubilant fans and would go on to win the European Championship two years later, proving to be the best in the world. Thank whatever this summer's co-hosts would surely love to emulate.

