

# The 2022 FIFA Winter World Cup Preview



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This coming November, 32 footballing nations will take to the pitch to compete in the 22nd edition of the FIFA World Cup, which promises to be the most unique, unprecedented and possibly the most controversial World Cup we may ever experience as football fans. With the sweltering heat of the Qatari summer far too difficult to work around for players and fans, we will be witnesses to the first (and hopefully final) winter World Cup tournament, wedging itself part-way through the domestic league season and running up until the 18th of December when the final is hosted in Lusail. This might make the tournament

all-the-more interesting, as domestic seasons could lead to unpredictable squads, possible injuries to some big names as well as bouts of good and bad form in the months leading up to the opening match. Can France be the first repeat World Champions since 1962? Will we see a legacy cemented as two of the all-time greats in Lionel Messi & Cristiano Ronaldo prepare for what could be their last World Cup tournaments? Let's take a deeper look at the teams, tactics and narratives:

J's Dark horse pick(s) = 🐎

J's Favorite to win = 🏆

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## Group A

### Qatar

FIFA Rank: 50

Manager: Felix Sanchez

Key Player: Almoez Ali / Akram Afif

Formation: 3-5-2 / 5-3-2

The vaguely contentious hosts, Qatar, are making their World Cup debut on their own turf. Since winning the bid to host the tournament back in 2010, the backlash and fallout for many of UEFA's highest ranking officials has been well-documented, even forcing many out of their positions such as former President Sepp Blatter for taking bribes to gift these games to the small gulf nation. Setting aside the controversy however, this footballing country has made great strides to become competitive since its bid was accepted, moving from 112th to 51st in the FIFA rankings as well as claiming their first Asian Cup in 2019. Heavy investment into coaching, player development and infrastructure has put this team in a position to, at the very least, push around some of their group members and with former Barcelona youth coach, Felix Sanchez, at the helm since 2017, they've developed an eye-catching, attacking, width-based style that is adjustable depending on the capabilities of opponents. Sanchez's appointment to a number of the Qatari youth teams since 2013 has been a clear sign of intent that they were preparing for this World Cup.

With the top-ranked African powerhouses in Senegal and a newly-stocked Dutch team posing the biggest pitfalls in the group, *The Maroon* will need to outperform expectations and take points wherever they can get them. Whoever claims the points between themselves and Ecuador in the opening match will have the best chance to shock the two favorites in my opinion, but the Qatari will not be pushovers.

## Ecuador

FIFA Rank: 44  
Manager: Gustavo Alfaro  
Key Player: Enner Valencia  
Formation: 4-3-3

*La Tricolor*, after missing out on the last World Cup finals, are back, making their 4th World Cup appearance and bringing with them a mix of youthful additions with long-standing veterans. The country's all-time leading scorer, Enner Valencia, will lead the line for them as the 32-year-old has notched 35 goals over his 10+ year career. Similarly to him, this team either contains players before or after their prime years, Valencia being the latter. Of the players taken to June friendlies, only 18% of the Ecuadorian team fall between the ages of 27-31 (5/28) representing a huge age gap in the team. Despite this, they managed to qualify 4th in South America, beating out some talented teams in Colombia, Chile & Peru to earn the last CONMEBOL automatic spot in this year's tournament. Many factors go into this qualification, such as the veteran players who had gone 8 years prior, mixed in with some real exciting young talent from the top 5 European leagues that fit well into their modern take on the 4-3-3. However, nothing stands as prevalent to their qualification as their 2,800m above sea-level home ground that has seen their home & away records' disparity produce one of the largest in the South American region, 2nd to only Bolivia, who's home ground stands at 3,600m above sea level.

While I maintain that this team will be a stern test, I have genuine doubts about their ability to perform on the biggest stage without their home ground, seeing as their easiest opponent on paper will be the hosts. They will need to grind out a couple results and ride their luck if they have any hope of progressing like they did back in 2006.

## Senegal 🇸🇳

FIFA Rank: 18  
Manager: Aliou Cisse  
Key Player: Sadio Mane / Kalidou Koulibaly  
Formation: 4-3-3

Just over two decades separates Senegal's opening match of this World Cup from the magical quarter-final run they forged in 2002's World Cup in Japan, beating former World Cup title holders France with legendary names the likes of Thierry Henry and Patrick Vieira. Captaining this team in '02 was none other than their current manager and former centre-back, Aliou Cisse, who has been at the helm of the *Lions of Teranga* since 2015 and has led them to back-to-back World Cup qualifications as well as the nation's first African Cup of Nations triumph in January of this year. With him, he brings quite possibly the most talented African squad of all-time. With established names playing in some of Europe's best clubs such as Sadio Mane, Kalidou Koulibaly, Idrissa Gueye and Edouard Mendy, and a young winger with a high ceiling in Ismaila Sarr, this team has the pieces and the manager to shock a lot of great opponents. In the past, Cisse has fiddled around with a 4-4-2 (double 6) and a traditional 4-2-3-1, but has more recently stuck with an attacking 4-3-3, using Mane and Sarr's pace to exploit defenses while maintaining a strong spine of Koulibaly with Gueye playing the 6 role in front.

I wouldn't be shocked if this were the African outfit that got back to that quarter-final stage, and possibly further. They were right there in 2018 and lost their Rof16 spot to Japan on one of the most strange tie-break rules I had ever seen; they simply had accumulated *two* more yellow cards than the Japanese, matching them on every tiebreaking criteria to come before that. Four years on, they're much more experienced and I expect them to make plenty of noise in Qatar. A dark-horse pick for me.

Sidenote: Sadio Mane's injury (two weeks prior to tournament) will greatly impact the attacking prowess this team has going forward, we hope that Senegal can still reach the potential of what they look like on paper without him.

## Netherlands

FIFA Rank: 8  
Manager: Louis van Gaal  
Key Player: Virgil van Dijk / Frenkie de Jong  
Formation: 4-3-3 / 3-5-2

After painfully missing out on the 2018 World Cup, the Dutch are back and they brought a familiar face with them: their 2010 World Cup manager Louis van Gaal, the man responsible for their trip to the final, losing in extra-time to eventual winners Spain. That team however, had some legendary attacking pieces, using van Gaal's more pragmatic style and still scoring bags of goals at an efficient level. This year's attacking options are deep, but nowhere near as experienced and certainly not as effective as the likes of van Persie, Kuyt, Robben, Huntelaar or van der Vaart. Many young players fill out the wing and striking positions and at times they may struggle if the offensive movement starts to stagnate. However, they may have one of the sturdiest defenses in this year's tournament, with a fully healthy van Dijk to pair beside the young de Ligt. Strong, pacey wingbacks offer great attacking width as well as the ability to not get caught in behind; this could work really well in the rotational 4-3-3 / 3-5-2 that van Gaal likes to toggle between to create width and/or pile extra defenders back.

I've always felt uneasy about picking the Dutch to go deep in tournaments as of late, but if their defense can hold firm with a centre-back the quality of van Dijk leading the line and create enough chances for a, quite frankly, young frontline, they could go deep in this tournament. They play up to many opponents as well as down to the level of others.

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## **Group B**

### England

FIFA Rank: 5  
Manager: Gareth Southgate  
Key Player: Harry Kane  
Formation: 3-4-2-1 / 3-4-3

The often dramatic English national team is back for another tournament run under manager Gareth Southgate, adding another chapter to this roller coaster they've seemed to be on since his appointment in late 2016. Just over a year on from losing the EURO 2020 final in painstaking fashion to the Italian's on penalties, this squad will have the highest weight of expectation they've had at a major tournament since the days of Gerrard, Lampard, Terry, Ferdinand and Rooney. With two deep runs in a row, that's just the terrain that comes with the territory, and seeing the talent available to them, it's no surprise there's some real optimism in the England camp about their chances. With that being said, this success has come under a cloud of uncertainty for some, as many fans and pundits have come to question the overly defensive and pragmatic style that Southgate employs. The results are unquestionable, a World Cup semi-final followed by their first ever EURO's final, but many feel as if their insistence to sit in and not dictate the pace as well as Southgate's ability to leave out some of the nation's best talent will eventually hinder them come a tough run-in of knockout games. Those exact feelings remain relevant as the team holds a 2-2-2 record in 2022, the most recent being an embarrassing home loss to Hungary by 4-0.

Listen, I don't love Southgate as England manager, I doubt his ability to pick his best team and I often find myself questioning why he is constantly overlooking England's best attacking players for the purpose of rigidity, structure and what seems to be a little bit of stubbornness. However, I am not naive and I understand the weight of what he has accomplished. If they continue along the trend and make a real run at this World Cup, I will hold my hands up like I had done in 2021. My hope is that he is more willing to experiment with the abundance of talent at his disposal because this pool of players could win a World Cup.

## Iran

FIFA Rank: 20  
Manager: Dragan Skocic  
Key Player: Mehdi Taremi / Sardar Azmoun  
Formation: 4-1-4-1

The Iranian national team has made it to their 3rd straight World Cup and their 4th in 5 attempts, making them a steady fixture in the quadrennial tournament. Despite their consistent qualifications since the turn of the century, they have still yet to get past the group stage round, coming eerily close in 2018 to eliminating powerhouse Portugal with a late goal. I know every Iranian who watched that game remembers Taremi's golden opportunity to snatch the game in stoppage time, but alas he hit the side of goal, and Iran were forced to look forward. Since then, they've changed managers, shifting to Croatia's Dragan Skocic who employs a more attacking 4-1-4-1 to try and get the most of Iran's premier attacking pieces. They're no longer quite as reliant on Taremi & Azmoun for their attacking output as they used to be and will rely on shrinking down their width in order to sit in a little more against the stronger sides should they need to. This is not a team that will give easy points to anybody.

Apart from the hosts, the fan support for Iran is expected to be one of the highest in this year's tournament. Their key players have been here before and the addition of a new manager since 2018's campaign may finally give them that first elusive trip to the knockout stages. They'll have stern tests in every group game but I think this outfit of players & coaches are more than capable of producing a shock.

## U.S.A.

FIFA Rank: 16  
Manager: Gregg Berhalter  
Key Player: Christian Pulisic  
Formation: 4-3-3

The American's are back at the World Cup after their stunning exclusion from Russia in 2018, their first missed World Cup since '86. Their 2-0 loss to Trinidad & Tobago in qualifying is a memory etched in every USMNT fan and one that has shaped the youth this team is underlined by in 2022. In my personal opinion, as someone who has quietly rooted for them after years of disappointment in team Canada, it was a moment they needed. Their old cast of players like Michael Bradley and Jozy Altidore were exactly that: old. In need of a revamp, a renewed sense of confidence and an air of American flair, the old guard was ushered out for their youthful development of European club-level based talent that have the promise of being some of the best players the United States has ever produced. They're a relatively inexperienced bunch who will look to use this year's World Cup as a barometer for how good they really are, or how good they could become in 4 years when they host their own World Cup. Young stars like Christian Pulisic, Weston McKennie, Gio Reyna, Timothy Weah and Zack Steffen are all proof of their abundance of young talent that gives their future a very bright look that could very well play up, or down to the level of competition, which makes them a very hard team to predict.

Gregg Berhalter's side play an attacking 4-3-3, unafraid of running at teams and looking to spread the pitch with the pace they possess down the wing & wingback positions. They *can* be dangerous, I guess my question is whether or not we'll see the America that can run over teams or the America that narrowly squeezed through to this World Cup on goal difference over a very ordinary Costa Rican team. They have a real chance of fast-tracking this national team rebuilding process.

## Wales

FIFA Rank: 19  
Manager: Robert Page  
Key Player: Gareth Bale  
Formation: 4-2-3-1 / 3-4-3

64 years ago, the 1950's golden age of Welsh football advanced to the quarter-final stage of their only World Cup appearance, losing to eventual winners and conceding to a young Brazilian teenager in Pele (Who'd go on to be pretty decent). 64 years later, behind legendary talisman Gareth Bale, the Welsh have qualified for their 2nd World Cup and the first time they've done so via the traditional qualification process, an important milestone for the small British country. Robert Page uses both a traditional 4-2-3-1, but also will turn to a 3-4-3 to add width when needed to move the ball through the wings. This may be the go-to for him, as the majority of the Welsh talent pool resides out on the byline. Bale will need help from his young wingers to create clear goal-scoring chances and will rely on a spine which includes a washed-up Joe Allen and an aging Aaron Ramsey.

While there are a handful of youthful options on this Welsh team, Wales is still mightily reliant on their old guard, as Bale & Ramsey still bear the largest chunk of responsibility for carrying the bucket to get this Wales team where it needs to go. Despite these circumstances, I still think they have as decent a chance as anyone in this group to advance (bar England), sharing a rivalry with group favorites England who have everything to lose, as well as two other group members who *can* be stifling but are definitely beatable.

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## **Group C**

### **Argentina**

FIFA Rank: 3  
Manager: Lionel Scaloni  
Key Player: Lionel Messi  
Formation: 4-3-3 / 4-4-2

*La Albiceleste* are back in the World Cup and their status as one of the world's best teams has slowly begun to be reignited, a stark contrast to the chaos that has followed this team in recent years. The narrative of this Argentina team over the past decade has been defined by their loss in the 2014 World Cup final against Germany, and the subsequent chaotic years that followed. With former manager Alejandro Sabella set to leave after that 2014 tournament, the Argentinian FA couldn't find their proper replacement, hiring and firing 3 different managers in the next 5 years. However, with the combination of the Scaloni appointment and Argentina's use of a wider young talent pool, this Argentina side is back to being a real contender to challenge for this World Cup. Their 4-3-3 system allows their more experienced attackers of Messi, Lautaro & Di Maria to interchange positions and offer a constant threat on the front foot whilst allowing Messi to operate in any spaces he wants when he gets into full flow, luxuries opponents can't afford to give him. Regardless, the difference between this current Argentina team and their 2014-2018 teams is very clear that the buck does not stop with one subpar Messi performance.

This is most likely Lionel Messi's final World Cup, and that narrative will be heard absolutely everywhere when talking about this team come November. The added weight of expectation comes with that, but I think this team has the potential to make a deep run and could even return to glory regardless of this pressure, seeing as Messi-led teams have had to bear lofty expectations in the past. With it being Messi's last World Cup and with the passing of late-great Argentinian legend Diego Maradona in November of 2020, the Argentinian's could give us a very, very special story.

### **Saudi Arabia**

FIFA Rank: 51  
Manager: Herve Renard  
Key Player: Saleh Al Shehri  
Formation: 4-2-3-1

The Saudis are prepared for their 6th World Cup appearance and are looking to qualify past the group stages for the first time since their debut tournament in '94. Unfortunately, their draw hasn't been too kind to them as they sit the weakest ranked nation in the group by some margin. Needless to say, the expectations aren't supposed to be too high for them. However, I think there are positives and a possible way out of this group for them, as their strength lies in the togetherness of this team with every

single player on the squad coming from their own domestic league. Coupled with that, the fan support for the Saudis should be overwhelming and could make a big impact when it comes to the group games.

The *Al-Suqor* play a modern 4-2-3-1 and will use their wingers to sink into deeper positions when out of possession for long periods, turning more into a 4-4-1-1. They can be dangerous on the attack as we saw in the Asia qualifiers, beating out a World Cup regular in Australia for the automatic spot. However, if they have any chance to advance at this tournament, they will have to be sturdy and rigid defensively against some seriously offensively adept squads, riding their luck and scoring at the right moments. The Saudis have their work cut out for them in Qatar.

### Mexico

FIFA Rank: 13  
Manager: Gerardo Martino  
Key Player: Raul Jimenez  
Formation: 4-3-3

*El Tri* are heading to this season's World Cup with one singular goal in mind: get past the Round of 16 stage. Since 1994, the Mexican national team has not only qualified for every World Cup, but every knockout stage as well, losing seven Round of 16 matches in a row. They've been a marker for all CONCACAF teams to follow and have set the bar for what is expected at the World Cup of the region, but there's no hiding that another immediate exit in the knockouts would largely be seen as a disappointment to the tricoloured nation. Similar to past tournaments, this outfit is well-drilled, rigid defensively, and fast down the wings with players like Hirving Lozano and Diego Lainez. They'll need to add width and pace to an attack that has struggled to score many goals and relied heavily on keeping clean sheets to qualify for this year's tournament.

The key for me in this Mexican team is how Raul Jimenez will play and can he score the big goals to propel them past some quality sides in their group. The wings will need to provide quality opportunities and their mix of experience and youthful exuberance in the middle with Hector Herrera and Edson Alvarez will be relied upon to break through the lines and provide for the towering Jimenez down the middle. As defensively structured as they've been, teams like Argentina and Poland will both pose huge threats to their goal and goals will need to be scored against sides the quality of these if they hope to advance to the knockouts, and beyond.

### Poland

FIFA Rank: 26  
Manager: Czeslaw Michniewicz  
Key Player: Robert Lewandowski  
Formation: 3-4-2-1 / 3-4-1-2

After a decade of hopes and dreams of this Poland team making waves at a World Cup, it seems as if this may be the last chance for the Lewandowski-led outfit to push on and achieve the promise we've seen in this side over the years. Following '16's painful PK quarter final defeat to eventual EURO winners Portugal, 2 major tournaments have come and gone, both of which has seen Poland finish dead last in their respective group. To add to that, Poland's former manager Paulo Sousa left his post in January to take the Flamengo management position, throwing Czeslaw Michniewicz into the fire. In spite of all that history and the moving of pieces, Michniewicz led them to their qualification victory over Sweden, and brought with him a well-mixed squad between the old guard and some new.

Typically the *Bialo-czerwoni* play a 3-4-2-1, with the wide two in the 4 bombing up and down the wing trying to provide for Lewandowski up top, but with the change of managers its seen Michniewicz try out both a 4-2-3-1 and 4-3-1-2 during Nations League games. I still maintain, however, that their best formation is the 3-4-2-1, giving a lot more width and spreading defenses in order to let their star-man Lewandowski move off the ball and find pockets of space inside the opponents penalty-area. I've long doubted the ability of this side to make a deep run at international tournaments, but this is a strong, sturdy Polish side with one of the World's best strikers on his way out of his peak. If there was any time for the Polish to have some urgency, it'd be right about now.

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## **Group D**

### **France**

FIFA Rank: 4  
Manager: Didier Deschamps  
Key Player: Karim Benzema / Kylian Mbappé  
Formation: 3-4-1-2 / 4-3-3

The defending champions are back in the World Cup and they've got some familiar faces in the group stages. Similar to 2018, this French team will face both Australia and Denmark in the group, with a debatably weaker side in Tunisia taking up Peru's spot from 2018. On the surface, this French team should have no problem getting through the group, an easier one than 2018 and they are bound to be one of the favorites to win the whole thing. What I find interesting, however, is how none of the last 3 World Cup title holders have made it through the group stages the following tournament, an incredibly strange stat considering how strong teams like 2010's Italy, 2014's Spain, and 2018's Germany were. Nevertheless, this French team would have to underperform mightily to not advance out of Group D.

Deschamps' *Les Bleus* will switch between a 3 centre-back and 2 centre-back system, flipping from a 3-4-1-2 in favor of a more attacking 4-3-3, a formation they used quite heavily in 2018's World Cup success. Most of this team remains pretty similar from 2018 and with Deschamps set to possibly leave following this year's tournament, this may be the last World Cup where the likes of French veterans like Benzema, Giroud and Lloris play a major factor in this squad. There are dozens of young French footballing talents to choose from going forward, so this World Cup feels like it will mark the end of an era for French football, excited to see how they do, and where they go past 2022.

### **Australia**

FIFA Rank: 38  
Manager: Graham Arnold  
Key Player: Mat Ryan / Jackson Irvine  
Formation: 4-2-3-1 / 4-3-3

Since the turn of the century, the *Socceroos* have been a mainstay at the World Cup, qualifying for the last 5. In atypical style, however, they found qualifying a real struggle, waning down the stretch and being forced to the playoffs, narrowly beating both UAE and Peru on penalties to get to Qatar. I remember past Aussie teams being so memorable, even if they weren't heading to the knockout stages they were regularly playing up to their competition and have never been an easy turnover team at World Cup's. I remember Tim Cahill in the air, I remember a strong, sturdy leader in Mile Jedinak, but this team doesn't give me that same feeling of quality and robustness, that ability to knick a goal here or there and then hold that defensive block efficiently.

Graham Arnold sets his team up in a 4-2-3-1 formation that can easily move between the 4-3-3, however considering their competition I'd like to think they'd go for the 4-2-3-1 to be a little more compact with heavier numbers in the middle of the pitch. The captain and longest serving member of the Soccerroo's, goalkeeper Mat Ryan, will need to use his high-level experience to keep his backline structured and ready for whatever France, Denmark, and Tunisia are ready to throw at them.

### **Denmark** 🇩🇰

FIFA Rank: 10  
Manager: Kasper Hjulmand  
Key Player: Christian Eriksen / Mikkel Damsgaard  
Formation: 3-4-3 / 3-4-2-1

The Danes enter this year's contest with a well-organized, tight-knit group of players that aren't easily pushed to the side by the big hitters. After the madness of EURO 2020, a tournament which saw so many different twists & turns for the Danish side, including an event that shook the football world to



its core, this team's togetherness is not something to be questioned. Their perseverance to advance so far in that tournament, with pieces of individual talent all over the pitch, makes it almost feel like Denmark's golden opportunity to go far is in Qatar. We're all very thankful to see Eriksen back as the Danes attacking talisman, and young pieces like Damsgaard will only aid this team as he was the one to really step up in Eriksen's absence. Apart from their attack though, they boast a rigid defensive unit with tenured stars such as Christensen, Anderson, and Vestergaard, captained by Premier League champions Kasper Schmeichel, a rock in net and an extremely useful tool for events like shootouts. This is not a team that will be blinded by the bright lights of a World Cup.

Kasper Hjulmand deploys a 3-4-3 / 3-4-2-1 system, an adaptable way of pushing wing backs forward to aid in a heavy possession-based game, as well as the ability to sit those wingbacks as a back 5 when dealing with stretches of pressure. This team has a great mix of experience and young talent, and I have a feeling players such as Atalanta's Joakim Maehle may be a much better known commodity after this tournament with how much the Danes try to overload their attacks with their wingbacks, and how used Maehle is to employing that same formation with Atalanta. I like the Danes to at least get out of these group stages, past that point? They have a puncher's chance on any of the heavy favorites.

### Tunisia

FIFA Rank: 30  
Manager: Jalel Kadri  
Key Player: Wahbi Khazri  
Formation: 4-3-3

The *Eagles of Carthage* are back at the World Cup following a nervy affair to slip past Mali 1-0 over the two legs. Qatar will mark the 6th time this footballing nation has made it to the big stage, and they'll be hoping that this time around is different to the previous 5, as they've never been past the group stages. They embark on a new era, led by former assistant manager Jalel Kadri, following Tunisia's poor AFCON performance which saw former manager Mondher Bebaier pay the price for failing to meet expectations.

Kadri employs a 4-3-3 formation, which is mostly set up to soak up pressure and catch teams on the break. They are a particularly tough bunch to break down but are rarely expansive in branching out from a solid defensive block and equally stingy midfielders. If they trust this young gun with the midfield, teenager and Manchester United product Hannibal Mejbri could become a vital piece to bridge the stinginess of their setup with chances down the other end. It's an uphill climb for the Tunisians in this group.

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## **Group E**

### Spain

FIFA Rank: 7  
Manager: Luis Enrique  
Key Player: Pedri  
Formation: 4-3-3

*La Furia Roja* are now a decade of separation from the golden generation that saw Spain become the dominant force in world football, capping the era with a 2nd EURO win in 4 years to go with their World Cup triumph in 2010. Following an incredibly positive EURO 2020 campaign which saw them narrowly miss out on the final, losing to eventual winners Italy, this year's team will be ready to try to push on and create some history of their own despite a bumpy qualification campaign. Enrique's brave, frontfoot setup mixed in with the team's technical ability littered all over the pitch makes them a formidable side to anyone. It's a team filled with an abundance of youth and expression and it's certainly showing positive signs that this team can be a threat to win trophies for the next few big tournaments, should they continue how they are going.



Enrique employs an attacking 4-3-3 with midfield controllers that are meant to possess the ball far up the pitch and commit numbers forward. In the middle of this system I think is by far their most important piece, a young player in Pedri that can control an entire game's tempo and break lines to open spaces for their dangerous, quick attackers like Olmo and Torres. He put in some absolutely outstanding performances at the EURO's so watch him closely this tournament as he's Enrique's favored midfield choice. The one weak spot to point out for this Spanish side is that their backline is not 100% locked in, as Enrique regularly toys around with different profiles to find what's best for this system, a tricky issue as this team commits numbers forward quite often and are susceptible to counters. The best way to describe this team is using Enrique's own words: "The players I have chosen and with whom I hope to be able to compete are players built to keep the ball, have it in the opposition's half, for the goalkeeper to play and commit their forward, even if it gives fans a heart attack."

### Costa Rica

FIFA Rank: 31  
Manager: Luis Fernando Suarez  
Key Player: Keylor Navas / Joel Campbell  
Formation: 4-2-3-1 / 5-4-1

*Los Ticos* are back at the World Cup and will be looking to shock the world again after their shock Group D win in the 2014 World Cup, eliminating England and Italy out of a "group of death" they topped with relative ease. Similarly to last time out, this team's strengths mostly belong in the frontline. Veteran stars of old like Bryan Ruiz and Joel Campbell will be tasked with the difficult job of putting away goals for this side and with their recent shaky defensive performances, they'll need goals.

Luis Fernando Suarez employs a 4-2-3-1 but dabbles in a 5-4-1 diamond as well. Although they typically go for Suarez's main formation we may see 5 at the back a lot more, as this team will need to cut down the space in their own third and rely on a world class keeper like Keylor Navas, as well as their attacking players to produce output at the other end. It's a tall mountain to climb for the Costa Ricans against some of the power houses in their group.

### Germany

FIFA Rank: 11  
Manager: Hansi Flick  
Key Player: Joshua Kimmich  
Formation: 4-2-3-1

For the first time in 16 years, Joachim Löw will not be heading the German national team. The man behind their 2014 World Cup triumph as well as a very poor follow-up campaign has been replaced by former Bayern Munchen boss, Hansi Flick. The 2020 Champions League winner takes over a team fiending for a new identity, with a real mix of the old guard and the new. Key player in this team, almost smack in the middle of both generations, is Joshua Kimmich. His ball retention and passing range make him extremely formidable and he's adaptable to defend deep when Flick will need him to, these two have a great relationship going back to their Munchen days.

Flick employs a 4-2-3-1 and will use Kimmich and likely Gundogan or Goretzka in the middle to create a formidable backbone above the backline. Ahead of them they have pace and power, and behind them they have the assurance of long-serving legend Neuer between the sticks. Germany is in that special group of powerhouses that always go into World Cup's with the expectation of winning, and this year will be no different. It's a formidable, organized, well-coached side. On paper, there are probably slightly stronger teams, but they know better than anyone that it's about the sum of the parts.

## Japan

FIFA Rank: 24  
Manager: Hajime Moriyasu  
Key Player: Takumi Minamino  
Formation: 4-3-3 / 4-2-3-1

*The Samurai Blue* have qualified for their 7th straight World Cup, bringing with them a team full of experience and young talent. 4 years prior, they lost a heartbreaking Round of 16 tie to Belgium, leading 2-0 at one point and losing it in the dying minutes of the game. This team is largely the same, with some nice young pieces that could give good defenses trouble, players like Monaco's Minamino, Sociedad's winger Takefusa Kubo, or Frankfurt's effective attacking midfielder Daichi Kamada. In the defense they have long-term veterans like Maya Yoshida with new additions such as Arsenal's Tomiyasu. On paper, this team should be no pushover for either Spain or Germany, these are talented players in a team who knows how to play together.

Moriyasu liked to employ an attacking 4-3-3 in qualifiers but with the step up of competition, he could probably switch into an 4-2-3-1 or 4-1-4-1 to crowd the middle of the park for the Spain's of this tournament. He has a nice mix of senior members who have played at this level before with great additions that will only add to their attacking options. If the Japanese can get the balance right, they could produce a shock in this group.

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## **Group F**

### Belgium

FIFA Rank: 2  
Manager: Roberto Martinez  
Key Player: Kevin de Bruyne  
Formation: 3-4-2-1 / 3-4-3

The Belgian national team has had a rollercoaster of a decade. *De Rode Duivels* have enjoyed what has been considered by many their golden generation of talent, which has in turn brought in new waves of young talented Belgians. However, by many people's estimates, they've largely underperformed at the big stage, finishing 3rd in 2018 and never reaching a final in either a EURO's or a World Cup. The generation of talent with household names such as Kevin de Bruyne, Eden Hazard, Romelu Lukaku, Toby Alderweireld and Jan Vertonghen are running out of time and for the names mentioned above this will be their final opportunity to get their hands on international silverware for the first time in Belgium's history.

It's been a complicated 7 years in charge for Roberto Matinez, giving this team an identity of playing a 3-back system with a mix of technically gifted and defensively stout midfielders to sit in front. Players like Youri Tielemans will give the older guard more dimensions in midfield but their biggest issue will be their aging backline and attackers. Age and experience *can* be used effectively, but with players like Hazard, Lukaku, Vertonghen, and Alderweireld likely not playing up to their previous level of 4 years ago, it will be a great test to see how far this generation of talented Belgian's can push themselves.

### Canada

FIFA Rank: 41  
Manager: John Herdman  
Key Player: Jonathan David / Alphonso Davies  
Formation: 5-3-2 / 3-5-2

The Canadian Men's National team have qualified for their first World Cup in 36 long years. After an impressive qualifying campaign that left World Cup regulars Mexico, USA, and Costa Rica scrambling to qualify late, *Les Rouges* have been handed a quite complicated group that will see them face two golden generations on their way out. Both Belgium and Croatia will offer stern, experienced tests with players far more ready for the World Cup test than that of the Canadian team, but the lack of real expectation coupled with the system that Canada are comfortable playing with may really give this team an edge and make them a much tougher opponent than the aging heavy-hitters or the overly-attacking Moroccans are expecting.

John Herdman experiments quite a bit with formations, switching between a 5-3-2 and a 3-5-2 depending on the numbers and width they'd like to throw forward. He's also shown he's not afraid to play in the 5-4-1 and play pure counter-attacking football, letting key midfielders Eustaquio press while veteran Atiba holds position above the backline, and that may be their biggest weapon against the bigger boys. Lastly, if this Canadian team is to get anywhere, they'll need goals, to take half-chances, and to play a physical game to frustrate opponents and disrupt tempo. Their biggest piece is starlet striker Jonathan David, and they'll need him or veteran Larin to take the half-chances where they present themselves, as David's a fast and effective striker who fits in well to a press-to-counter-attack style. The Canadians might be 4 years away from being a genuinely feared opponent, but this team will not be a pushover, I truly believe that.

### Morocco

FIFA Rank: 22  
Manager: Vahid Halilhodzic → Walid Regragui  
Key Player: Romain Saiss / Achraf Hakimi  
Formation: 4-3-3

You may be curious why we have two coaches listed under the Moroccan management position, and that's because after Vahid Halilhodzic's stunning dismissal of Chelsea player Hakim Ziyech earlier in the year, along with apparent "mutual differences", he's been let go just 3 months before the tournament. His replacement is Walid Regragui, a former Moroccan international himself who has next to no experience coaching at a high-level. The question for this individually talented Moroccan side is, can they come together under the circumstances? One major positive is the reintroduction of Ziyech, invited back after 15 months of exile from the national team. He will join other notable names such as Achraf Hakimi, Soufiane Boufal and Noussair Mazraoui in attempting to get out of a complicated group.

Halilhodzic played the team in two formations, 3-5-2 and 5-3-2, which Regragui does not co-sign. In his only two games he's managed as the Moroccan boss, they've played an out-and-out 4-3-3 attacking formation, using the talented wingers and wing-backs at his disposal. While I believe it would suit a lot of their stronger players, they may be vulnerable at the back pushing numbers like that forward. If Morocco can control enough possession and keep the tempo more towards their end, they could actually pin some decent teams back. The big concern comes from whether this team can come together, under a fresh new manager, and bring some needed defensive stability to go with their more flowing approach, it's a big ask.

### Croatia

FIFA Rank: 12  
Manager: Zlatko Dalic  
Key Player: Luka Modric  
Formation: 4-3-3 / 4-2-3-1

The final addition to this group of complex narratives is Croatia, former World Cup finalists in 2018. The *Vatreni* find themselves in a similar position to that of group members Belgium, as they are both near the end of their golden generations and may feel like Qatar presents their final opportunity to win a World Cup. Despite his growing age of 37, Luka Modric still presents Croatia's greatest opportunity to get back to the final, as his talent in controlling the tempo of any game is as valuable an asset as it was 4 years ago, winning player of the tournament in 2018. Other technical players such as Kovacic, Rakitic, Perisic and Rebic will round out their attacking talent and give them a firm base to build attacks from, however, their aging backline will pose the same question to that of Belgium's: Will they be able to prevent getting beaten off the dribble by the bigger nations' pacey attacking options?

Dalic sets his team up in a 4-3-3 attacking formation, overloading the midfield 3 with incredibly technically adept controllers. Modric will have his usual magic moments, but players like Kovacic and Brozovic will add even more quality and teams will have trouble dealing with their ball retention and tempo control. The determinant for them seems to be whether or not their aging defense will be able to hold it together against some extremely talented attacking sides, and even though I really like young upcoming stars like Josko Gvardiol, it remains to be seen what centre back pairing Dalic will go to and whether or not they have enough experience to shutdown the big sides like 4 years prior.

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## **Group G**

### **Brazil** 🇧🇷

FIFA Rank: 1  
Manager: Tite  
Key Player: Neymar / Thiago Silva  
Formation: 4-2-3-1 / 4-3-3

It just wouldn't be a World Cup without Brazil, would it? A *Seleção* are aiming to end the 20 year drought for a World Cup triumph, boasting one of the most outrageous abundances of talent that, if it were seen at club level, would have the rest of the footballing world screaming financial fair play. Every football fan knows the big names like Neymar or Thiago Silva, but the next wave of young talent is truly something to marvel at. Players like Guimaraes and Paqueta will add so much control and bounce to an aging midfield. Wingers like Vini Jr, Antony, Raphinha and Martinelli could make impacts starting or off the bench with flair and effectiveness. Their backline could even be headed by Marquinhos and Militao, leaving legendary defender Thiago Silva to come off the bench, which is a statement itself. To top it off, Tite gets to choose between two of the game's great keepers who are equally adept with their feet as they are with their hands. Everywhere you look, this team is compelling.

Tite has the unsavory job of nitpicking through the talent to find a right balance. He typically toggles between a 4-2-3-1 and a 4-3-3 and has the pieces to fulfill either. The question will be down to functionality and whether this team can get over the line, they have all the attacking verve and style to charm neutrals but it will be down to whether or not this team will be able to dig-deep in those group/knockout games where teams can find pockets hitting on the counter. Personally, I believe they're the strongest team at this World Cup and their abundance of talent will be a nuisance to deal with in any game, versus any opponent.

### **Serbia**

FIFA Rank: 21  
Manager: Dragan Stojkovic  
Key Player: Dusan Tadic / Filip Kostic  
Formation: 3-4-1-2 / 3-4-2-1

The Serbian National team are back in successive World Cups for the first time in their brief history, bringing with them the most talented team on paper that they've ever had. For their captain

and chief creator, Dusan Tadic, this will most-likely be his final World Cup, but the pieces at his disposal around him this time could change their fortunes. Players like Mitrovic, Vlahovic and Jovic have matured and developed well as out-and-out strikers and Tadic will have help in the middle to work attacks through phases with Milinkovic-Savic and Kostic. Although their defensive capabilities are not as assured or proven as some other nations, their history in this tournament could throw some people off, this is a very talented squad.

Dragan Stojkovic was appointed in 2021, impressing everyone by qualifying first in their group past heavy favorites Portugal. He introduced a 3-back system, giving his team numbers in the back with the ability to break at pace with width. Although they have some very talented strikers to choose from, the key players for this squad will be their most potent creators, Tadic and Kostic. Tadic leads the line with phenomenal vision and ball retention and Kostic's ability to bomb down the wing and assist goalscorers greatly aided his former club, Frankfurt, in securing the 2022 Europa League title. There has never been a more likely time for *The Eagles* to break their World Cup woes and advance to the knockout stages of the tournament, but their work will be cut out for them in an arduous group. They'll have to exercise the demons of 2018 when they were eliminated by the hands of both Brazil and Switzerland.

### Switzerland

FIFA Rank: 15  
Manager: Murat Yakin  
Key Player: Xherdan Shaqiri / Granit Xhaka  
Formation: 4-2-3-1 / 4-3-3

Switzerland finished World Cup qualifying with a flourish, defeating Bulgaria 4-0 on the final day to knock defending European champions Italy into the playoffs and out of the tournament entirely. Over the past decade, the Swiss have been a formidable side on the World stage, regularly advancing through international tournament group stages and on occasion, upsetting some massive nations. However, they've never seemed to be able to get into a position to win tournaments and are yet to get to an international semi-final with a team who's seen a lot of talent cycle in and out in the prior decade. They'll have a similar test as 2018, but even despite Brazil this might be the strongest group they've ever had to get through in recent memory.

Murat Yakin, like many managers at the tournament, will cycle between a 4-2-3-1 and a 4-3-3. The Swiss are known for their resilient defending and ability to shut down some of the world's better attacking sides and have the outlets necessary to hurt them down the other end. Long-time talisman Xherdan Shaqiri will be playing his final tournament at somewhere near his peak, a player who seems to always be one to watch heading into these tournaments, tending to shine on the international stage. Their key man in the middle will be Granit Xhaka. He has grown as a leader at Arsenal over the past 4 seasons and seems to have built a much stronger sense of control and tempo to his game, he'll be crucial to their success. The Swiss have the track record of getting past group stages, but the question will now be whether they can get out of a talented group.

### Cameroon

FIFA Rank: 43  
Manager: Rigobert Song  
Key Player: Andre-Franck Zambo-Anguissa / Eric Maxim Choupo-Moting  
Formation: 4-4-2 (double 6) / 4-5-1

*Les Lions Indomptables* are back at the World Cup after missing out 4 years ago in Russia, and they will have their work cut out for them this time around. Paired with difficult tests from South America and Europe, this Cameroon side will need to play to their maximum potential to make it out of what many see as one of the tougher groups to decide. The history of the African country in the World Cup has been mostly that of an inability to make it out of the group stages, only advancing once to the knockouts 32 years prior. With the help of former Cameroonian international Rigobert Song, they'll be hoping to get over the hump this time in what would be an incredible story if they were to take out any 2 of these 3 teams.

Song has been in charge of Cameroon for just 6 games, taking over from the prior manager Toni Conceicao after a lackluster performance in January's African Cup of Nations. Since then, Song's experimented with a 4-4-2, with the midfield 2 of the 4 sitting in as defensive midfielders (a double 6). He's also experimented with a 4-5-1 but in retrospect it may be a surprise package considering their lack of real time together. A big player in the middle will be Napoli's Zambo-Anguissa, an aggressive, marauding midfielder who will put out fires all over the pitch and can carry the ball effectively upfield. In an in-form Napoli side he's been fantastic this season and the hopes for Cameroon will be that Anguissa's ability to control and break up attacks will aid in Song's efforts to bring this team together in a short amount of time. They'll need to be able to stay compact and resilient to compete with some very talented attacking sides.

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## **Group H**

### **Portugal**

FIFA Rank: 9  
Manager: Fernando Santos  
Key Player: Cristiano Ronaldo  
Formation: 4-1-4-1 / 4-3-3

The Portuguese national team has qualified for their 6th consecutive World Cup after succeeding via the playoff format against North Macedonia. However, by March we were all primed and ready to see Portugal and Italy battle it out for that final spot, before a shock late upset of Italy by North Macedonia eased Portugal's road to the finals. The defending European Champions were kicked out, and the threat of all-time international top-scorer and legend Cristiano Ronaldo missing out on his final World Cup were quashed. Luckily for Cristiano, he has lots of help this time around. Gaining momentum from their 2016 European Championship, this national squad has become a much more deep and flexible team, who will have answers should Ronaldo be fatigued or not play his best with a plethora of young stars ready to make this team a threat regardless of their bigger names.

Fernando Santos has set up his team recently in a 4-1-4-1 but due to a lot of the attacking talent at his disposal he's also turned to a 4-3-3 at times. Young and adept attackers like Rafael Leao and Joao Felix, as well as technically gifted midfielders who can play the wings and higher up the pitch like Bernardo Silva and Bruno Fernandes are all pieces of this attacking puzzle that can be mixed and matched in the front 3. Their defensive and controlling midfield options are plentiful enough to switch between systems, they have full-backs with the ability to bomb down the wings with real technical ability should they need extra numbers, and the heart of their defense is a mix of the old and the new, with capable individuals from both generations. The question for *Os Navegadores* is whether or not they'll be able to find the right balance in time, as they've struggled to show their best on the international stage since their EURO victory in 2016.

### **Ghana**

FIFA Rank: 61  
Manager: Otto Addo  
Key Player: Thomas Partey  
Formation: 4-2-3-1

Similar to that of their African counterparts, Morocco and Cameroon, Ghana have let go of their prior manager from earlier this calendar year due to poor performance at AFCON. Not unlike their counterparts, they also hired a former national team player to turn around their fortunes, Otto Addo, the former Ghanaian assistant manager and current scout at Borussia Dortmund. Although he helped the team to advance to the World Cup with a win over Nigeria, Otto is just a little bit short of experience, as this will be his first management gig since managing the Hamburg U-19's in 2012.

Nevertheless, in a short-term situation, it's never a bad idea to bring in people who know what it means to play for your country.

Addo applies a 4-2-3-1 and in his handful of games in charge he hasn't deviated far from this structure. Seasoned defender Daniel Amartey will be joined by youngsters Tariq Lamptey and Mohammed Salisu in the backline, and in front of them will sit an in-form Thomas Partey who has been stellar in his ability to be press-resistant and stifle attacks all over the pitch. Ajax's Mohammed Kudus has impressed in the early stages of the season and with seasoned attackers in Inaki Williams and Jordan Ayew, this team has no shortage of options in their starting 11 to be dangerous. Their depth and inexperience at the management level give me the most anxiety about this team, but if they can click with their main pieces, Ghana have a history of pushing around the big guns at a World Cup. Speaking of...

### Uruguay

FIFA Rank: 14  
Manager: Diego Alonso  
Key Player: Rodrigo Bentancur / Darwin Nunez  
Formation: 4-4-2 / 4-3-3

12 years ago in South Africa, Asamoah Gyan of Ghana had the opportunity to send an African nation to a World Cup semi-final for the first time after Luis Suarez infamously volleyball-spiked the ball off of the goal-line. Gyan agonizingly hit the bar, Suarez celebrated down the tunnel, and the teams went to penalty kicks where Uruguay would topple the Cinderella story of Ghana. That was the last time *La Celeste* had seen the deeper stages of the competition and this year, with a mix of aging legends and new exciting talent, they have the firepower to do it again. The big names of the last decade, the Suarez's, the Cavani's and the Godin's will most-likely be participating in their final World Cup, but the in-form replacements are ready to build this team up to be a formidable opponent sooner rather than later.

Diego Alonso employs a 4-4-2 for the most part, but with the emergence of wonderfully technical midfielders like Bentancur and Valverde, he will sometimes opt for the 4-3-3. In either formation, the Uruguayans are a defensively stout, compact unit behind the ball. Long-time serving captain Diego Godin has lost some pace but will be aided by the emergence of Jose Maria Gimenez, who played alongside him briefly at Atletico Madrid. Their midfield seems to be the strongest they've had in decades if we're going off of form, and their legendary attacks of Suarez and Cavani will be aided by Liverpool's Darwin Nunez who's just starting to find his feet at a very high-level. This team has the pieces and stability, it will be interesting to see how they incorporate some of their players who have started their club seasons off very well.

### South Korea

FIFA Rank: 28  
Manager: Paulo Bento  
Key Player: Son Heung-Min  
Formation: 4-1-3-2 / 4-2-3-1

The *Taegeuk Warriors* are back for their 10th consecutive World Cup. The Tigers of Asia have been mainstays at the World Cup finals, but have only managed to make it past the group stages twice in 11 attempts, reaching their peak position in 2002 when they shocked the World and advanced to the semi-finals. This year's team is defined by their talisman, Son Heung-Min of Tottenham. He's a pacey, slaloming, technical dribbler of the ball and every team will be game-planning how to keep the exciting winger quiet. In 2018, this team played as a unit and managed one of the shock results of the tournament by defeating defending champions Germany and knocking them out by the group stages, struggling in a tough group which saw Sweden and Mexico play to their fullest potential.



Paulo Bento, a former Portuguese international who played against the South Koreans in '02, will set up this team in a 4-1-3-2, although he has experimented with a plethora of formations leading up to the tournament. He likes using Son and Hwang-Hee Chan in the 3 to connect his strikers with the midfield 6, talented ball carriers who are effective in front of goal who will know how to break should the stronger teams put them under bouts of pressure. Against teams like Portugal and Uruguay, powerhouses that have struggled to score tons of goals in group stages in recent memory, the South Koreans could frustrate them and take points. They will not be a rollover team and the powerhouses should look to exploit their weaknesses in defense and dictate the tempo, they're a tight-knit group who have played together over the past half-decade and if you allow them control over the game, they could surprise their group opponents.