

The 2020 UEFA European Football Championship Preview



@BeautifulGameJS

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The 2021 European Championships, (licensed as “UEFA EURO 2020”) after an extended wait for International Football, is almost upon us. This will be the 2nd time the Euro’s have used this expanded 24-team format, and will be one of the more unique tournaments in recent history as things like positive COVID tests and fan attendance will evolve along with the COVID-19 response. The 24 European nations will go head-to-head in a month-long contest which will see the best players in Europe duking it out to claim Europe’s biggest international prize. Will Portugal’s title defence hold up with their new

mixture of experience & youth, or will we see someone new lift the European Cup? Let’s take a look.

J’s Dark horse picks = 🐎

Group A - (Rome / Baku)

Group Strength: A-



Turkey 🐎

FIFA Rank: 29
Manager: Şenol Güneş
Key Player: Çağlar Söyüncü
Formation: 4-2-3-1 / 4-4-2

The mastermind of Turkey’s bronze medal success from the 2002 World Cup, Şenol Güneş, is set to lead the Turkish side into this year’s 2021 EURO tournament with a rather atypical side to their norm. Güneş’ side is heavily reliant on organization, teamwork, and consistency as opposed to flashes of individual brilliance, and with a nice blend of youth and experience, I believe this side could cause a lot of problems to the big boys around Europe. Their qualification process saw them take 4 points off of World Champions France, as well as a draw to Germany in friendly play and an impressive 4-2 victory over the Dutch in World Cup qualifying. If they can find a way to synchronize their young backline to their experienced frontline, with their range of industrial-type midfielders doing the dirty work in between, I think Turkey could really surprise a lot of people this summer.

Italy

FIFA Rank: 7
Manager: Roberto Mancini
Key Player: Marco Veratti / Jorginho
Formation: 4-3-3

Welcome back to the Italian outfit that looks utterly unrecognizable from the team of 3 years ago who failed to qualify for the World Cup. Under Mancini, the Italian’s have transitioned from a rugged, stable defensive side filled with experience to a much younger, technically sound, attacking outfit. Mancini’s 4-3-3 is based on pressing and possession, buoyed by highly technical midfielders such as Veratti, Jorginho, Barella and Tonali. If their youthful exuberance of attacking talent can supply them with goals, they can be as formidable as anybody this summer. It’ll be very interesting to see how the Italian’s fare against a stern test in Group A, I’d keep my eyes on the Italians.

Wales

FIFA Rank: 17
Manager: Robert Page (taking over from Ryan Giggs)
Key Player: Gareth Bale
Formation: 4-2-3-1 / 3-4-3

Just 4 years after ending their 57 year wait for a major tournament, the Welsh are back again with their 2nd EURO berth in their last four years. The Dragons will be looking to follow up an incredibly impressive semi-final appearance last time out with a team that looks almost identical personnel-wise. With Gareth Bale and Aaron Ramsey being the main sources of output, well-known young guns like Harry Wilson, Daniel James, and Neco Williams will look to make their mark on this year's tournament. While I think this may be the most talent Wales have had at their disposal, the switch to assistant Robert Page and lack of comparable depth with their counterparts in the group may see them out in the group stages.

Switzerland

FIFA Rank: 13
Manager: Vladimir Petković
Key Player: Granit Xhaka
Formation: 3-5-2 / 3-4-3

The Swiss find themselves in a, let's say complicated situation. The transformation the nat'l team has done over the past decade to become a staple in major tournaments makes me think that success in this year's tournament is likely, but manager Petković's contract expiry at the end of the summer as well as the side's underwhelming qualification campaign paint another picture. The team ticks with Granit Xhaka's presence in the middle and relies on experience oozing from the squad, with the likes of Yans Sommer, Fabian Schar, Xherdan Shaqiri, and Remo Freuler filling out the ranks once more. If the Swiss can break their funk and play to their potential, they're a very solid outfit that can give anybody trouble. That is a big if, however.

Group B - (Copenhagen / St. Petersburg)

Group Strength: B+



Denmark

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

The Danes. Fairy-tale winners of EURO 1992, and a federation filled with a history of success at this tournament, 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. In their past 23 games leading up to this summer they've lost just two, both to group overdogs Belgium. Coming off of their knockout stage exit at the World Cup to eventual-finalist Croatia, this team looks hungry and has the firepower under talisman Christian Eriksen to cause some real trouble to the big boys. Their 4-2-3-1 gives Eriksen time and space to roam free and he hardly disappoints on the international stage. Wouldn't be shocked to see such a well-rounded, solid unit push their boundaries and try making a deep run this summer.

Finland

FIFA Rank: 54
Manager: Markku Kanerva
Key Player: Teemu Pukki
Formation: 4-4-2 / 5-4-1

Finally, after 82 years, the Finns can finally rejoice at their nation having a seat at the international tournament table. Behind their talismanic goalscorer, Teemu Pukki, the Finns grabbed 16 goals in qualifying, with Pukki grabbing 10 of those 16. The setup for the new boys is a no-fuss 4-4-2 led by former Helsinki centre-back Markku Kanerva, but often will shift to a 5-4-1 for the purpose of defensive stability against bigger competition. Expect to see a lot of resolve at the back from this unit, as well as an overabundance of wing-related counters and service into Pukki. Sometimes the simple way is the best way.

Belgium

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

"De Rode Duivels" are back and they're here for another run at a major trophy. They came off a World Cup campaign that was strong, but not strong enough for powerhouse and defending World Cup champion France. With that in mind, and an aging squad, there may be more of a sense of urgency than there's ever been in their camp, and

why wouldn't there be? De Bruyne and Hazard are set to turn 30 this year, Kompany's absence has resulted in plenty of young callups, and what's left of their backline is on its international last legs. This tournament could make or break the legacy of this incredibly strong Belgian side, and although I love their depth going forward, I find Martinez's very defensive approach a tough pill to swallow with aging defenders and a youthful abundance of attacking players. Regardless of those tactics, De Bruyne, Hazard, and Lukaku can strike fear in almost any defence.

Russia

FIFA Rank: 38
Manager: Stanislav Cherchesov
Key Player: Artem Dzyuba
Formation: 4-2-3-1

After one of the nation's most incredible international runs in the 2018 World Cup finals, The industrious Russians are back and are looking to make it to the knockout stages in back-to-back tournaments. Lining up for the white, blue, and red is an almost identical team to that of 3 years ago, with Stanislav Cherchesov reprising his role as Russian manager. It's not been all sunshine and rainbows for the Russians, however, as many have criticized decisions under Cherchesov for a reliance on the old guard and a reluctance to bring in more youth. They rely quite heavily on World Cup hero Artem Dzyuba for goals and are particularly short for options in the backline, making them a risky bet for advancing far in the tournament. But hey, I didn't pick them to do well last time either and look how that went.

Group C - (Amsterdam / Bucharest)

Group Strength: B



Netherlands

FIFA Rank: 16
Manager: Frank De Boer
Key Player: Memphis Depay
Formation: 4-3-3 / 5-3-2

Finally, the Oranje are back in a major tournament since their 3rd placed finish at the 2014 World Cup. Unfortunately, it's not under the circumstances they may've wanted, as their star defender and leader Virgil van Dijk is unavailable. In addition, when the EURO's originally announced its move to 2021, their tenured manager Ronald Koeman left for Barcelona, leaving them little options and forcing the appointment of former Dutch international Frank De Boer. With less than a year to implement his philosophy, he's stuck to a 4-3-3, switching to a 5-3-2 when in need of stability. This team is heavily reliant on its free roamer in the system, Memphis Depay, who could prove crucial to the Dutch team's success this summer as he's been one of their main sources of goals. Although I like a lot of pieces to this Dutch team, I don't exactly have concrete faith in De Boer as a manager to take them deep into this tournament. I do however expect them to survive this group.

Ukraine 🇺🇦

FIFA Rank: 24
Manager: Andriy Shevchenko
Key Player: Andriy Yarmolenko
Formation: 4-3-3 / 5-4-1

Following some down years in international play, the Yellow and Blue will stride confidently into this year's tournament, led by Ukrainian Icon Andriy Shevchenko and on the back of a very unexpected qualification campaign. Drawn with defending champions Portugal and World Cup qualifying Serbia, the Ukrainians went unbeaten in 8 games, winning 6 of them and thrashing Serbia 5-0 along the way. Under Shevchenko, the squad has found a nice balance between defensive solidity and attacking creativity. Manchester City's Zinchenko is used in the 4-3-3's midfield, providing a touch of class and chance creation in the middle. Stepanenko you'll find will be the connective tissue between defence and attack, and if their naturalised attacking Brazilian Marlos and attacking ace Yaremchuk can catch fire, Ukraine can cause problems for any team in Europe.

North Macedonia

FIFA Rank: 62
Manager: Igor Angelovski
Key Player: Enis Bardhi
Formation: 3-5-2 / 3-4-1-2

The North Macedonian's have made their mark by advancing to their first ever major tournament in the young footballing federations' history. Climbing almost 100 places in the FIFA rankings, the Macedonian's won't be

the sit-in and soak up pressure team that you'd expect from such a relatively unknown side. With creative talents (Pandev/Bardhi) in the central midfield and a plethora of wing-back and wide midfielders (Alioski/Ristovski/Elams) to fit into the midfield 5, Macedonia won't be just another pushover. While I wouldn't put money on their success, I wouldn't call this squad and its players unable to advance. A longshot, but a shot nonetheless.

Austria

FIFA Rank: 23
Manager: Franco Foda
Key Player: Marcel Sabitzer
Formation: 4-2-3-1

The good news for the Austrian's may be that their expectation to advance deep into the tournament is not there this time, following poor showings in '08 and '16. That could play into their favour, as their squad has plenty of recognizable names. The obvious change to a Franco Foda led-Austria is the 6-time Austrian footballer of the year, David Alaba, who's been put back into his natural left-back position as opposed to previously experimenting with the midfield. In Foda's 4-2-3-1, I believe Sabitzer might be the key to picking defenses apart as well as presenting a meaningful scoring threat. He's integral to a lot of Austria's directness in attack as he's tactically aware and very versatile, being able to fill multiple midfield positions in Foda's system. Austria are a solid, tough unit that have a chance to turn the fortunes of a struggling football-nation.

Group D - (London / Glasgow)

Group Strength: A-



England

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

The Three Lions, the never-ending saga. As you may've been able to tell in the past year or so, confidence in the man up top has withered, so where has that come from? A big reason and I think the primary one, is his choice of cementing his 3-back system. England come into this year's EURO's with debatably the best attacking talent they've had since the '96 EURO's, and many fans attribute England's lackluster attacking output leading up to the tournament as down to Southgate's overly-cautious setup. Even still, can his system really gloss over the likes of Grealish? Foden? Rashford? Sancho? Kane? Believe me, I could go all day. So, with the depth of talent at Southgate's disposal and his team's stellar defensive record as of late, could they take their magic of 3 years ago even further? Under this management, I have my doubts.

Croatia

FIFA Rank: 14
Manager: Zlatko Dalić
Key Player: Luka Modrić
Formation: 4-1-4-1 / 4-2-3-1

Just 3 years after Croatia's incredible run to the World Cup final, Croatia look to repeat the magic with a much more youthful squad than usual. We remember Croatia as it has been for more than a decade, but with only 3 of their starting 11 featuring in their most recent fixtures, Dalić is looking to freshen up the national setup with some young guns. Players like Vlasic, Brekalo, Pasalic, and Caleta-Car. However, at the centre of it all remains Luka Modric, and where he goes, Croatia goes. The man is the authority on the pitch for all of his teammates, dictating tempo and turning defenders inside out with his everlasting agility it seems. Even with the Croatian turning 36 in September, this unit wouldn't stand a chance of going deep without his leadership, experience, and know-how. In a group filled with interesting narratives, the Croatian's bridge between their old guard and new guard will be interesting to watch come June.

Scotland 🏴󠁧󠁢󠁥󠁮󠁧󠁿

FIFA Rank: 44
Manager: Steve Clarke
Key Player: John McGinn
Formation: 5-3-2

A warm welcome back to the Scots! It's their first major tournament since 1998 and with it they bring a team capable of causing serious trouble. Steve Clarke's 5-3-2 takes advantage of his pace down the wing-back positions and relies on their "McMiddle" (coined by Gavin Carey) for their pace of play and control of the middle of the park. Both Robertson and Tierney will look to be deployed at LCB and LB respectively, which can create serious issues at either end, but my key player for the Scots has to be John McGinn. McGinn acts as a connective tissue in between the two strikers and two holding midfielders, and his workrate and potency in ball retention coupled with McTominay's strong showings lately could pose some real problems in the middle for their opponents. One of the few concerns I have for them are the goals drying up, but with the addition of Che Adams into the Scotland setup, I could see Scotland surprising a lot of people this summer.

Czech Republic 🇨🇪

FIFA Rank: 40
Manager: Jaroslav Silhavy
Key Player: Tomas Soucek
Formation: 4-2-3-1 / 4-1-4-1

Jaroslav Silhavy took over the Czech's in 2018 and has turned them into a hard-working, high-pressing outfit with a solid defence. With a team sheet lacking real stars, the Czech's deploy a strong, sturdy midfield, using Tomas Soucek as the more defensive of his midfield duo or preferring to sit him in behind the midfield 4 in a 4-1-4-1. Hertha Berlin's Darida provides their midfield attacking spark and is responsible for their directness in attack, as Silhavy prefers the ball to move quickly, preferring only a few passes before shots on target. With Leverkusen's Patrik Schick up top, the Czech's could be a lot of teams' downfall as the sum of their parts can overwhelm any subpar performance. The Czech way is simple, but it can be very effective.

Group E - (St. Petersburg / Seville)

Group Strength: B+



Spain

FIFA Rank: 6
Manager: Luis Enrique
Key Player: Thiago Alcantara
Formation: 4-3-3

After the initial shock of Luis Enrique's inclusion of zero Real Madrid players in his squad, I quite like some of the pieces he's taken. It seems like a real attempt at leaving Spain's golden generation in the past, which isn't the worst idea, seeing as how past glories came only as recently as 9 years ago. With the addition of their youth, comes Enrique's determination to take the game to their opponents, a brave setup when lacking the level of experience they've had in the past. In his 4-3-3 system they play a very fast-tempo, attacking setup, with Thiago pulling the strings as their key man in the middle. Young guns like Ferran and Pau Torres have impressed at either end of the pitch all season and will headline this year's version of a youthful, new Spanish national team. Although I think they can do well, the positive COVID test on Busquets may cause a little uneasiness in the camp just four days before the tournament begins. Hopefully La Furia Roja have what it takes to make a deep run and get out of the shadow of that golden generation.

Sweden

FIFA Rank: 18
Manager: Janne Andersson
Key Player: Emil Forsberg / Dejan Kulusevski
Formation: 4-4-2

To be honest, I'm quite impressed how Sweden continues to hold their outfit together. Even as they go through a major transitional period, they remain one of the best units at showing tactical discipline and defensive organization in Europe. Janne Andersson focuses purely on neutralising the opponents attacking outlets and playing as direct as possible, quite similar to their role in the 2018 World Cup. With an attacking surplus of young guns in Isak, Kulusevski, and Svanberg, this Swedish side could be a constant thorn in the side of their opponents as frustration in attack could be the order of the day. While they may be rugged and staunch defensively, I still think this Swedish side is a few years away from transforming into a real force.

Poland

FIFA Rank: 21
Manager: Paulo Sousa
Key Player: Robert Lewandowski

Formation: 4-2-3-1 / 4-4-2

One thing this Poland side doesn't lack, is experience. From top to bottom this team is teeming with experience, whether it's Szczesny/Fabianski in goal, Glik in defence, Krychowiak working the middle or their star man Lewandowski up front. After an unsuccessful experiment with the 4-1-2-1-2 diamond in Sousa's first couple months, the Polish have decided on a 4-2-3-1 system, opting for a 4-4-2 when needing stability. They rely heavily on their main-man Lewandowski for goals, but who wouldn't when you have someone like him up top? Personally, I've always felt a bit dull about this Polish team, but with their mix of experience and talent, maybe this could be the year they push their boundaries.

Slovakia

FIFA Rank: 36
Manager: Štefan Tarkovič
Key Player: Milan Skriniar
Formation: 4-1-4-1

What a road to the EURO's for the Slovaks. First with an enthralling penalty shootout victory against Ireland, before downing Northern Ireland in extra-time of the play-off final. The road, unfortunately, only gets harder from here, as they face stern tests in all 3 of their group stage matches. Slovakia employs a 4-1-4-1, using Lobotka as the midfield backbone, while relying on Hamsik and Kucka for their attacking flair and output. Their most important piece certainly has to be Internazionale defender and rock at the back, Milan Skriniar. Without a surplus of goals on the horizon the Slovak's will be looking to ride their luck to push past the group stage this summer.

Group F - (Budapest / Munich)

Group Strength: ∞



Hungary

FIFA Rank: 37
Manager: Marco Rossi
Key Player: Willi Orban
Formation: 3-5-2

Poor, poor, poor Hungary. They may have just gotten the worst draw in recent memory, grouping together with the last two World Cup winners as well as the defending EURO Cup champions. Then, their star talent got injured, as Dominik Szoboszlai will be missing for the entire summer with a groin injury. As things stand, the 3-5-2 that Marco Rossi employs may not be enough to get a single point from the group stages, as they may be forced to sit back and soak up pressure for all 270 minutes. If Hungary were to advance, I'll hold my hands up in the air, it'd be a hell of an accomplishment.

Portugal

FIFA Rank: 5
Manager: Fernando Santos
Key Player: Ruben Dias
Formation: 4-4-2 / 4-2-3-1

The reigning champions enter this year's tournament with a much, much stronger team than the one that won 3 years ago, that's scary. This team no longer relies on the heroics of Ronaldo and have a plethora of attacking talent for Fernando Santos to choose from. Bruno Fernandes, Diogo Jota, Joao Felix, Bernardo Silva and Andre Silva are all options for the Portuguese powerhouse to use alongside Cristiano, but their depth doesn't end there. Ruben Dias is coming off of a spectacular season which saw him pickup numerous individual accolades for his sudden stardom at Manchester City, and can be paired alongside season veterans like Pepe or Ligue 1 winner Jose Fonte. As if they couldn't get deeper, their midfield is stellar as well. In either formation they have numerous DM's who are integral to the way Portugal move up the pitch and retain the ball, with Real Betis mainstay William Carvalho becoming integral part of Santos' team and Renato Sanches ready to make his mark after an impressive season with Lille. You never know what's going to happen in this group, but I can certainly say this side has more than enough firepower to win their 2nd straight European trophy.

France

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

What's better than one reigning champion in your group? How about 2. The French national team has turned into the World's most feared national team and it's easy to see why, they have an absolute embarrassment of riches to choose from. With the re-addition of Karim Benzema to the frontline, I doubt any backline can keep out a front 3 of Benzema, Griezmann, and Mbappé when they're firing. Whether Deschamps goes for the more attacking 4-3-3 or the more pragmatic 4-2-3-1, the French will have more than enough quick, tricky and technical players to support the lone Benzema up top. With Pogba supplying long balls and gliding up the pitch in his usual manner, the French are going to be an absolute Juggernaut to stop going forward, and with no real weakness in the backline it's hard to see who's gonna drop out of this group out of the three heavyweights.

Germany

FIFA Rank: 12
Manager: Joachim Löw
Key Player: Kai Havertz
Formation: 3-4-3 / 3-4-1-2

To finish off this ridiculous group, we finally have the Germans, winners of the 2014 World Cup and 3-time winners of the European Championship. For decades, we've looked at the German national team as an example of consistency, constantly performing well at major tournaments and accruing silverware while they did it. This time, it feels like there are more questions than answers, and this current iteration looks completely foreign to the rampant consistency we've come to see from the Germans. If the unexpected group stage exit wasn't enough to make fans nervous, a 6-0 drubbing at the hands of rivals Spain and a freak loss to minnows North Macedonia has ramped up the anxiety. Ofcourse, it goes without saying that if this side can click and perform to their ceiling, that they can beat anyone on any day, but that's a big if for a side full of youth and unaware of their best 11. This might be Löw's final stint as German manager, and he'll hope that his new pragmatic 3-4-3 can mesh against some very worthy opponents in their group and beyond.
