

# SAVETHEPUNTER

WORLD CUP 2018 PREVIEW

## PREVIEWS

We preview all 32 teams heading to Russia

## TIPS

Giving you the heads up on value selections for every side

## KNOCKOUTS

Expert analysis looks at the potential overall winners market

## WALLCHART

Get your World Cup Wallchart ready for each match this summer



# LET'S PREVENT MALE SUICIDE

## A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

Media attention is thankfully highlighting the fact that suicide is the biggest single killer of men between 18-45 in the UK. That's not enough though. We can't stop our efforts and treat this like a fad. That's why rather than charging for this magazine, we're simply asking for a donation to CALM. The Campaign Against Living Miserably is a superb charity.

£8 can fund a call that could potentially save a life. And that's what CALM's helpline does. It gives those struggling, someone to talk to and can help save lives. What would be even better is if each and every one of you went further than this.

You're reading this because you've already generously donated. Take it a step further and make sure you speak to mates that maybe you've fallen out of contact with and could be going through difficult times. Don't just text them. Try and make time to meet them.

Finally, thanks to the array of diligent proof readers. But most thanks goes to two heroes: Alex Everson and Kieran McGirr. Without you this magazine would not be launched in May.

Cheers,

**Parris Barron**  
Owner & Founder of STP



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# MATT LE TISSIER INTERVIEW

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## STP: What is your earliest World Cup memory?

**Parris Barron** sits down with **Matt Le Tissier**, former England international and Southampton legend ahead of kick off this summer in Russia. Now known for his punditry on Sky Sports News, Matt played over 400 times for Southampton over the course of sixteen years.

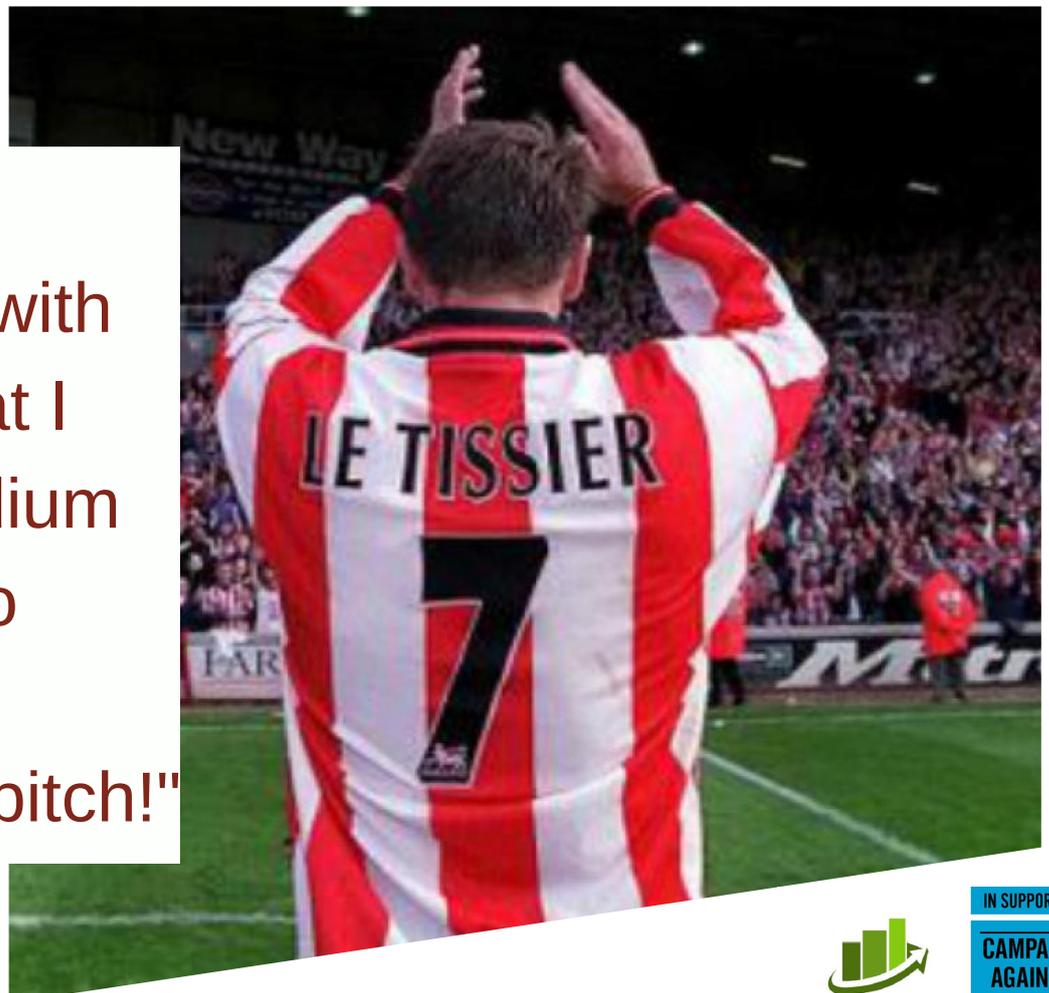
With an incredible record of spot kicks, converting 47 from 48 attempts, Matt was nicknamed "Le God" at The Dell. Matt won eight caps for England and has kindly gave us some of his time for us to garner his thoughts on the World Cup, likely winners and England's chances of success at the World Cup.

The 1978 Argentina World Cup and in particular the host nation needing to beat Peru by six goals to go through. Miraculously, they managed to win 6-0. Definitely not suspicious! I was actually supporting Scotland in that tournament because England didn't make it.

I was about nine at the time and I distinctly remember seeing a spectacular ticker-tape reception for the Argentinian team. I was so obsessed with football that I built a stadium out of Lego around my Subbuteo pitch.

I even went as far as to rip up lots of toilet paper and throw it on the pitch to replicate the reception that my future heroes Ossie Ardiles and Ricky Villa received. I say future heroes because they moved to Tottenham off the back of their performances.

"I was so obsessed with football that I built a stadium out of Lego around my Subbuteo pitch!"



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MATT LE TISSIER | INTERVIEW

# MATT LE TISSIER INTERVIEW

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**STP: They were probably a bit more successful than United buying Karel Poborsky and Jordi Cruyff off the back of the Euro 96 tournament, right?**

Indeed. Any club really should caution against buying players off the back of performances at an international tournament. Liverpool suffered a bit with that when they signed Salif Diao. And of course Newcastle were probably surprised to get £30 million for Mo Sissoko after the last Euros. His performances in a Spurs shirt make me think he's more of a £3 million player. Not sure how that happened seeing as Tottenham had first hand experience of his beleaguered performances from the same division they play in!

However, it is great that there's more representation from teams around the world now that we have a 32 nation format. Though it's important scouting systems have a look at a player's past performances before recommending their clubs spend tens of millions on them!

**STP: So speaking of good performances, who would you say the most likely winner is of the Golden Ball, the award for the best player at a World Cup?**

Gabriel Jesus is a young boy with a hell of a lot of ability and the potential to get even better. The injury he sustained earlier in the season might work in his favour, as he could be quite fresh going into the tournament.

He'll play through the middle with Neymar and Coutinho just behind him. With that creativity and flair supporting him, he could really give us some value for money at 25/1 to be the best player. Jesus has the right mentality to take responsibility on board for Seleção.

**STP: The betting markets say the most likely winners of the World Cup are Brazil, Germany, Spain and France, in that order. Who would carry your money?**

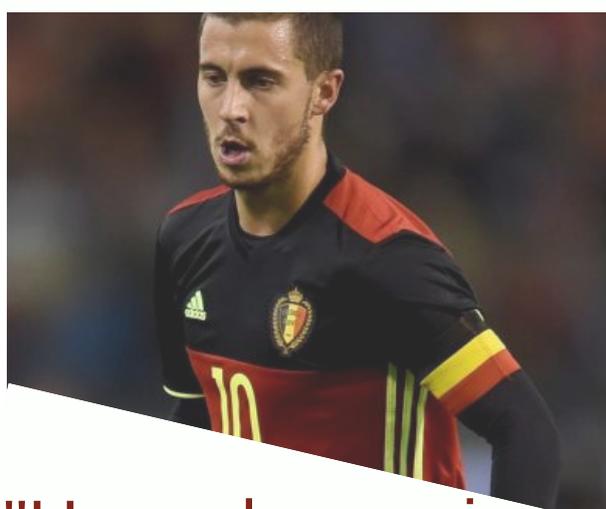
History tells you that it'll probably be one of those 4 winning the tournament. However, in

knockout football, anything can happen. You could have a player sent off in the first 10 minutes of a knockout game and go from overwhelming favourites, to struggling to progress.

Germany have a great record at tournaments and just seem to find form at the right time. The bookmakers probably have it right though. Brazil would probably carry my twenty quid, especially given the amount of players that play in Europe: so like the other countries at the top of the betting market, there can't be any excuses about acclimatising.

If you wanted an each way shout, perhaps Belgium at 12/1 could be the best of the rest. Eden Hazard can win any football match on his own when he's in the right mood and you have one of the standout players in the Premier League in Kevin De Bruyne.

They have a lot of players with 60-80 caps like Thibaut Courtois, Toby Alderweireld, Jan Vertonghen, Marouane Fellaini and Romelu Lukaku. You need enough players with experience to manage in-game situations and have that know-how to get the job done.



"Hazard can win any football match on his own"

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MATT LE TISSIER | INTERVIEW

**STP: How far do you think England could get?**

It's a difficult one because the starting XI is going to look very different to how we thought two years ago when this qualification campaign started. Joe Hart, Wayne Rooney and Adam Lallana were regulars who haven't even made the squad. Even some that have made it, Gary Cahill and Danny Rose for instance, have struggled with form and fitness respectively.

The key is to beat Panama and Tunisia. Anything other than six points from those two games and I'd be worried needing anything from the Belgium game. Once in the 2nd round I would fancy our chances against Poland or Senegal if we played them. I'm not too sure on Colombia as I've not seen them play enough.

If we get to the quarter finals, we'll need a bit of luck to progress. Our likely opponents at that stage are fantastic teams & England will need to be at our very best on the day

**STP: If you were the manager, are there any changes to Southgate's squad you'd make?**

Adam Lallana would be in my 23 as he can beat a player with skill rather than just pace. I'd also have James Tarkowski in front of Phil Jones. Given the plethora of defenders, my philosophy would be to be a bit more attacking so I'd have an extra midfielder in Jack Wilshere instead of Cahill in defence.

I did consider JonJo Shelvey but he's never been in a Southgate squad so that put me off. That being said, he does offer us something we don't really have. Shelvey, Lallana and Wilshere can all unlock a tight defence with a pass or bit of skill.

Perhaps Ruben Loftus-Cheek is the wildcard with something about him. I've been impressed when I've seen him play. Especially given Dele Alli has struggled to replicate last season's form.

**STP: Are you a fan of VAR and its inclusion at the World Cup?**

Good question. I'm a fan to an extent. From what I've seen, it's been brought in to solve too many variable decisions where there is still ambiguity with technology. I'd like to see it's involvement scaled down to be more gradual. The Premier League choosing to delay it's full-scale adoption proves that point.

It's also worrying that a lot of these referees in Russia may be using VAR for the first time this summer as the technology isn't used in their own domestic leagues.

Whatever happens, it promises to be an interesting tournament and I'm very excited to watch it.

"If we get to the quarter finals, we'll need a bit of luck to progress"



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MATT LE TISSIER | INTERVIEW

# OUTRIGHT PREVIEW

## SAVETHEPUNTER

Former head of trading at a national bookmaker, **NICK GOFF**, takes a look at the outright winner market. Now a full-time sports bettor, Nick clearly has his eye on one team to watch in Russia

### The WORLD CUP!

Just saying it is fun. While others get excited by Royal Weddings and the like, we all know this is the best thing that happens every four years, right?

It's a month of football, all day, every day. Well technically there are five days off. I suppose I'll have to leave the house and talk to people?? Hopefully they won't suggest a match between two lesser nations isn't that important. If they do, I simply must stop and correct them. It's the World Cup! Every single match matters. Skiving off work a bit early to watch Iran v Morocco – unthinkable at any other time – is absolutely acceptable during the World Cup.

That's the magic of it. So before we start looking at the betting opportunities, let's underline that. Watch as much as you can, and enjoy every minute of it. It's the World Cup!

The outright market has a slightly odd feel to it this year, because a few of the teams you usually see in the second tier – not the strong favourites, but those countries you know always have a chance – haven't qualified. As a result, that second tier looks pretty light, numbers wise.

The four superpowers are there of course. Holders Germany, Brazil, Spain and France. Those four, at current prices, take up 61% of the market. Put more simply, we should expect one of those four to win the tournament 61% of the time, if we were able to hold it many times over. These four clearly hold outstanding claims and the winner is probably among them.

After those four in the market come the likes of Argentina, Belgium, England, Portugal, Uruguay and Croatia. But not Italy and Holland.

Two giants of world football failed to qualify, and while no one has a divine right to be at a World Cup, it's fair to say the tournament will be a bit poorer for their absence.

"The tournament will be a bit poorer for their absence"



We'd usually expect to see those two in this group of big football nations who, while not being seen as the most likely winners, are all capable of a big run if they turn up in the right mood and little things go their way at crucial moments.

And that last point is one worth emphasising. Once we reach the knockout stage these are all one-off games, often decided by the finest of margins: the odd goal, a mistake from tired legs in extra time, or a penalty shootout. Anyone can win a penalty shootout (even England; they did it once against Spain in Euro 96!) so holding your nerve at crucial moments and good luck often go a long way at The World Cup.

For that reason it's foolish to be too bullish about the hopes of any country. One moment of madness, one bad refereeing decision or one awful piece of luck can kill anyone's chance in any given year.

But my job is to try to find the winner, and in doing so we ought to start by focusing on those four giants at the head of the market. **Brazil (9/2)** have obvious claims – we can say this almost every time a World Cup comes around. However, there are a few concerns. Neymar's recent return from injury means he may well be slightly undercooked and not at 100%, while Renato Augusto, playing in China, is apparently favoured over Fernandinho for a starting spot in midfield. Right back Dani Alves also misses out through injury. They have a big

chance, naturally, but at 9/2 they are perhaps a bit short and worth avoiding.

There's little to be said about **Germany's (5/1)** major tournament record that hasn't already been said. Joachim Low, seemingly their manager forever, brings stability and many of the players are back again having won the tournament last time. However, and this may turn out to be foolish, there appear to be a few reasons to pass over Germany on this occasion.

Jerome Boateng may again start at centre back, and there is always reason to believe he can be got at. Mesut Ozil hasn't had his best season at Arsenal, and Timo Werner, as impressive as he's been for Leipzig, is yet to be truly tested at the top level. As with Brazil, they have a decent chance of course, but at the prices may be a touch short and therefore worth avoiding.

**France (15/2)** have strength in depth all over the squad. They have Didier Deschamps as manager however, and that worries me. He seems capable of a very odd team selection at any time, and seems likely to start Olivier Giroud despite the embarrassment of options they have available. Even at 15/2, I can leave them alone too.

So that brings us to **Spain (13/2)**, who I feel have a real chance and represent decent enough value at 13/2. Winners as recently as 2010, Spain are the team with fewest questions against their squad.

De Gea is the best keeper in the world and is protected by a stellar back four of Carvajal, Ramos, Pique and Alba. Not much weakness to expose there. The midfield can dominate games and is likely to be picked from David Silva, Sergio Busquets, Isco, Koke and the genius that is Andres Iniesta. Finally, with Diego Costa ahead of them they have bark & bite.

For me, that's the best starting XI at the tournament, and it's why they're getting my vote to leave Russia as World Champions once again.

Of that second tier nations we discussed earlier, any team with Lionel Messi cannot and must not be discounted. In what may be his last World Cup, could he drag **Argentina (10/1)** to World Cup glory? Too right he could, and I'm sure many people would love to see it happen, as he's been the greatest player of most of our lifetimes.

Many people's double digit selection is **Belgium (12/1)**. A formidable looking squad of players, but is Roberto Martinez World Cup winning coach? Surely not! Even the partisan in me recognises that **England (20/1)** are light of world class players. That being said, if you can get 20/1, it's not a terrible bet and among the highest odds England have ever been at a FIFA World Cup.

European Champions **Portugal (25/1)** won just one game at Euro 2016 don't forget! Proof, should it be needed, that you need that bit of luck along the way. Lightning surely can't strike twice here.

No, if I'm to add one of these second-tier nations as my second outright selection it has to be **Uruguay (33/1)**. With Godin and Jimenez, Atletico Madrid teammates, at the spine, and a strikeforce of Suarez and Cavani (who can match that?). If Uruguay get on a roll they can be genuine outsiders. An each way bet at around 33/1 looks decent value.

So that's it. We've sussed the World Cup! It's Spain and Uruguay as the two bets for me, but whoever you back, and wherever you're going to watch, enjoy it, because 2022 sounds a long way away!



"They're getting my vote to leave as World Champions"

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OUTRIGHT PREVIEW

# GROUPS PREVIEW

## SAVETHEPUNTER

Former head of trading at a national bookmaker, **NICK GOFF**, takes a look at the group betting markets. Nick gives us his surprise tips, and which groups to avoid this summer.

The draw to assign teams to groups is always a bizarre, surprisingly amateur operation, broadcast live on TV globally. Normally it offers some interesting match-ups, and hopefully we can help you predict a few correct qualifiers from the eight groups.

Bookmakers offer a range of betting options here, from group winner to whether a team will qualify, the top two qualifiers in the correct order (straight forecast) or in either order (dual forecast), and to finish bottom of the group.

So it's almost impossible, over eight groups, not to find something that takes your fancy. Equally you'll statistically have close to no chance of predicting all qualifiers for the Round of 16.



"It's almost impossible not to find something that takes your fancy"

In **Group A** the hosts Russia take on Uruguay, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. What would usually seem like a straight two-way battle to win the group has an added element: Mo Salah. Latest reports have him missing only the first match.

Can he almost single handedly get Egypt through to the last 16? Many people seem to think so, but it'll be a really tough ask for them against the host nation and a Uruguay side containing several world class players. Saudi Arabia have absolutely no chance, and Russia's home advantage and 'influence' may see them get past Egypt for second place so the best bet here may be the **Uruguay 1st, Russia 2nd straight forecast** at around 9/4.

"Tottenham's Christian Eriksen is so important to Denmark"



**Group B** really does look a match between Spain and Portugal, but don't completely write off Morocco. They have some talented players and if one of the big two underperform they could just sneak through. But Spain really ought to win the group, though there doesn't seem much juice in the price.

The first group I can potentially see a shock is in **Group C**. I'd be happy to oppose the most likely winner, France, here and take a chance on **Denmark to win the group**, for whom Tottenham's Christian Eriksen is so important, at around 11/2. At that price, it feels like a risk worth taking.

Up next is **Group D**, containing Argentina, Croatia, Nigeria and Iceland, which was the easiest group to pass over betting wise. Argentina will surely progress but no one can be dismissed out of hand in this group.

I wouldn't want to be taking around 4/6 on Argentina to win this group. They should, but these are three trappy fixtures and one poor performance could see them having to settle for second place. We'll find better groups than this to bet in.

And as if to prove my point, **Group E** contains one of the underdogs who could be a decent value bet to spring a surprise. Serbia are a boom or bust type outfit, when things go wrong their squad harmony can go through the floor and it wouldn't be a surprise to see them fighting with themselves.

The other side of that coin is when things are going

well for them they know how to ride the crest of the wave. Having the weakest opponent, Costa Rica, in their first match is very helpful in terms of potentially building some momentum.

Yes, it'll be tough to see off Brazil, but 9/1 to win the group very much compensates for that. The 11/8 for **Serbia to qualify** may be even better.

**Group F**, with Germany as top seeds playing Mexico, Sweden and South Korea looks like another one we can avoid betting on.

Sweden are a pretty dull bunch, although they deserve credit for their playoff victory over Italy to get here.

Mexico reach the last 16 at every World Cup, but never seem to go further. That could well be their fate again here at 6/5 **Mexico to qualify** seems decent enough.

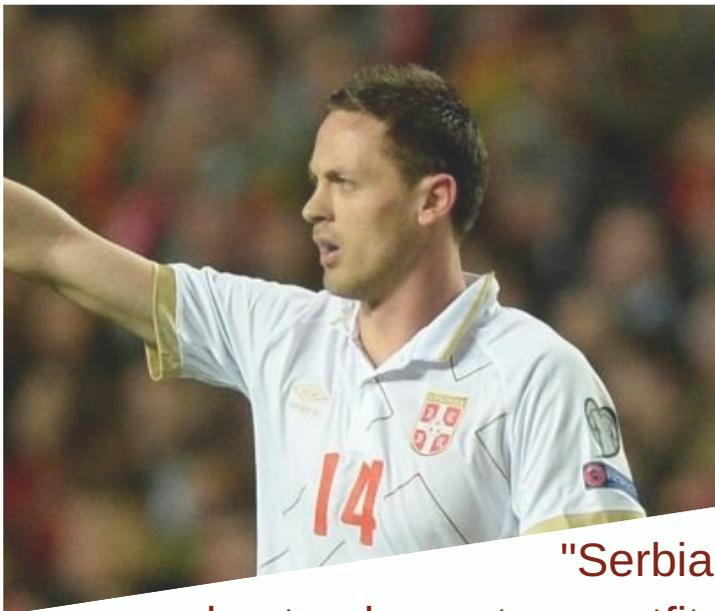


"Favourites  
Colombia  
look to be  
on shaky  
ground"

One false move here and any of the others may capitalise. Poland have quality all over the park and look one of the lesser lights capable of a surprise quarter final run. The same could be said for Senegal, who might just be the best African team at the tournament.

Japan have had a strange build up to this World Cup, sacking the manager recently for not picking some of the established old guard, so we can safely expect to see those players back in the fold now. They're one of the hardest teams to assess, as there's no doubt there's some quality in midfield and attack but it would be no surprise to see them flop given the off the field shenanigans.

This looks the best chance of a group favourite completely failing, and as a result our best option here may be to back **Colombia NOT to qualify** at around 11/5.



"Serbia

are a bust or boom type outfit,  
and if things go well they know  
how to ride the crest of the wave"

Belgium and England really ought to navigate their way past Tunisia and Panama in **Group G**, but in which order? The market has Belgium slight favourites and that seems sensible, but as a betting proposition it's another group to avoid.

And that leaves the most interesting group to last. **Group H** is the most wide open of the lot, with four sides that really could all come top. For that reason favourites Colombia look to be on shaky ground.

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GROUPS PREVIEW

# PANELIST QUESTIONS

## SAVETHEPUNTER

**We chat with betting experts, sports traders, and your typical fan to gain some opinions on various topics surrounding this years tournament.**

**Parris Barron**  
@parrisbarron  
Founder of sports betting consultancy, Save The Punter.



**Ash White**  
@CherryAnalysts  
Ex pro bettor, reinvented as software expert in the city



**Nick Goff**  
@nickgoff79  
Ex Head of Trading of a national Bookmaker, turned professional bettor.



**Rupert Wyman,**  
Sports trader for one of the marquee bookmakers. Lives and beers in Gibraltar. *All views are his own and not of his employer.*



**Perry Braham**  
@PerrySB23  
Electrician & archetypal English fan in the street, who definitely doesn't understand at least one word in this sentence.



<p><i>Which of the better teams are most vulnerable to get knocked out in the Group Stages?</i></p>	<p>I don't rate <b>Russia</b>, and the Confederations Cup compounded that opinion. However, Egypt without Mo Salah should give them an easier path so I'll go for <b>Argentina</b>. They should manage to get through the group, but have problems defensively. Moreover, they only scored 19 goals in 18 qualifying games.</p>	<p><b>Portugal</b>. The current European Champions have only managed to win six of their previous nineteen tournament fixtures in 90 minutes. Spain are superior to them, Morocco are dangerous and Iran are an underrated side. They're still a 'one man team' and if Ronaldo doesn't fire, they will find themselves in trouble.</p>	<p><b>Colombia</b> are the one group favourite I think are really vulnerable as I like two of their group rivals, Poland and Senegal. And you also can't write off Japan. I also don't think Brazil are the certainties for their group others are suggesting.</p>	<p>Euro 2016 winners <b>Portugal</b> have Ronaldo but have an aging defence and a number of players struggling for form or playing time at club level. They are heavily dependent on the 35-year old Pepe. Portugal also carry the expectations of their nation on their shoulders after the Euro Championships.</p>	<p>I think 2014 World Cup finalists <b>Argentina</b> could be vulnerable in the group stages., with Croatia, Nigeria and surprise package of Euro 2016 Iceland in group D. Argentina had a far from convincing qualifying campaign finishing 3rd and lost recently in a friendly to Nigeria.</p>
<p><i>Normally it's five or six goals that gets a player the Golden Boot award. Who would your money be on to win it this year?</i></p>	<p>I liked <b>Isco</b> at 100/1 as an EW shout, as he should play a very advanced role for Spain. He scored five goals in eight qualifying games. However that price has already halved, so <b>Romelu Lukaku</b> (18/1) isn't a bad shout given his reputation as a flat track bully up against Tunisian and Panamanian defences.</p>	<p><b>Harry Kane</b> (16/1) or <b>Luis Suárez</b> (25/1) could have this wrapped up after the group stage games against Tunisia and Panama or Saudi Arabia, respectively. These fixtures offer a fantastic opportunities for these two world class finishers to get amongst the goals. I will be backing both of them.</p>	<p>I expect Uruguay to have a decent run in the tournament and can score plenty at the group stage against weak opponents. For that reason <b>Luis Suarez</b> around 25/1 looks value.</p>	<p><b>Cavani</b> looks a bet at the price of 25/1. He has been in sensational form for PSG and proved that he can play alongside the likes of Mbappe and Neymar. I expect a big WC from Uruguay as they have weak opposition in their group although Suarez will take the penalties.</p>	<p>I'm going to go with an unlikely player, <b>Timo Werner</b> of Germany. Germany have a relatively easy group with South Korea, Sweden and Mexico. Werner has had another good season for Leipzig and has a good international scoring record with 7 goals in 12 games.</p>
<p><i>Which player are you most looking forward to watching in Russia?</i></p>	<p>Not John Obi Mikel, despite his cousin trying to claim he was an unheralded player in our Nigeria preview! So it would have to be <b>Christian Eriksen</b>, as Denmark will be my second team in this World Cup. My knowledge of the youngster eight years ago, indirectly led to my old flatmate marrying a Danish woman that we met at a bar!</p>	<p><b>Raheem Sterling</b>. For my money he's the most technically gifted player I've ever seen for England. The media/fans criticised him for only getting assists. This season he got goals and assists. Given his 18 goals from 87 shots this season, his pace and positional awareness should be a danger for any team in Russia.</p>	<p>I think the obvious answer has to be <b>Messi</b>, perhaps the best footballer of all time in what could be his last World Cup. Away from the obvious, <b>Sergej Milinkovic-Savic</b> of Serbia could announce himself on the big stage.</p>	<p><b>Loftus-Cheek</b>, should he get playing time for England, can showcase his talent on the international stage. He was sent on loan to Palace and was their best player in an average side. He creates many chances and, should England progress far, he will look to make an impact from the bench.</p>	<p>Being a Chelsea fan I'm looking forward to watching <b>Eden Hazard</b> on the biggest stage of them all. It will be interesting to see if he can fulfill his potential and light up the World Cup. As too many times for Chelsea he has been inconsistent.</p>
<p><i>How do you think the video assistant referee (VAR) technology will fair?</i></p>	<p>See my article elsewhere in the magazine for the full answer. However in short, I feel that this is probably one tournament too soon for the technology.</p>	<p>The ball is in play for under 60 minutes in a football match, so the idea that VAR slows the game down is ludicrous. There's been many games where it been available but not needed: e.g.Chelsea v Arsenal League Cup Semi-Final. If the only criticism of the system is that fans in the stadium have to wait a minute before celebrating the correct decision, then I would choose having the correct outcome every time.</p>	<p>I don't think anyone knows how VAR will fair, that's the scary part of it! If it's used smartly to assess key decisions, the crowd and TV audience are kept informed and quick, correct decisions are made then great. If they still get things wrong or it's horribly slow it could descend into farce.</p>	<p>Although the Premier League is still resisting the use of VAR, it has come a long way in a few years. Fifa believe it will lead to a 'more transparent and fairer' World Cup and I don't disagree. Who remembers Lampard's ghost goal for England?</p>	<p>I'm not a fan of VAR what so ever. I think it could ruin the World Cup. They tested it in the FA Cup and it was an absolute shambles. With referees who do not have big game experience, and also not wanting to make any mistakes, it could slow the game down a lot. VAR is still based on opinion as some refs have different views to others.</p>
<p><i>Can you give us a group game match up that we should not miss?</i></p>	<p><b>Morocco v Iran</b> because I'll be watching with the rest of the editing team. Although I'll be supporting Morocco, my grandmother is actually of Iranian heritage. The goal expectancy is low in that game, so I'll look forward to a tactical masterclass.</p>	<p><b>France v Peru</b>. Potentially the biggest game in Group C, with the winner probably avoiding Argentina in the round of 16.  Peru are an under-rated side at this tournament. They have the capability to cause a young French squad plenty of issues.</p>	<p><b>Spain v Portugal</b> on the second day of the tournament is probably the predictable answer here but aside from that, <b>England v Belgium</b>, which is the last group match when both may already be assured qualification. This is the only meeting of two top eight teams in the outright betting, and has the added spice of no love being lost between them.</p>	<p><b>Portugal and Spain</b>, also known as the Iberian derby. I expect Spain to expose Portugal's defensive weaknesses. Sergio Ramos will do whatever it takes to win and he will be taking on a team mate in Ronaldo and a former one in the notorious Pepe. It has all the makings to be a classic!</p>	<p>I think <b>Spain vs Portugal</b> has potential to be a great game. Both are very attacking teams with some of the best players in the world. With Ronaldo wanting to be top goal scorer in possibly his last World Cup. Spain have a nice blend of experience and youth now with new faces such as Asensio and Isco who are both in line to be stars.</p>

# VIDEO ASSISTANT REFEREE

## SAVETHEPUNTER

*Should VAR be used at the World Cup? After a trial in England in the FA Cup, and implementation in Bundesliga and MLS, this summer will be the first major tournament to use VAR.*

**Bill Lord, Matthew Campbell and Parris Barron** report

Joining the long list of 'unknowns' before every World Cup, is for the first time, the concept of the Video Assistant Referee, or VAR. FIFA have restlessly tried to modernise football to capitalise on its already global brand and endless streams of revenue.

The first step for new technology, was 'Goal line, which is universally accepted as an example of technology aiding this modernisation. The reason for this acceptance is mainly due to its unambiguous decision-making finality.

**VAR is not unambiguous, and that is the problem.**

Sepp Blatter no longer remains, but many of the advances he advocated in favour of are still in the mix. VAR is not in this category though, with the disgraced former FIFA president saying 'You cannot use the World Cup as a guinea pig for such a serious intervention in the game.'

Whilst understanding that perceived mistakes from match officials give us even more to debate at home, in the pub and in the studio, most of us do want a fairer way of ensuring significant errors are picked up on.

VAR was first trialled in 2016 with varying levels of success. One interesting side effect has been highlighting the lack of understanding of the laws of the game from many commentators.

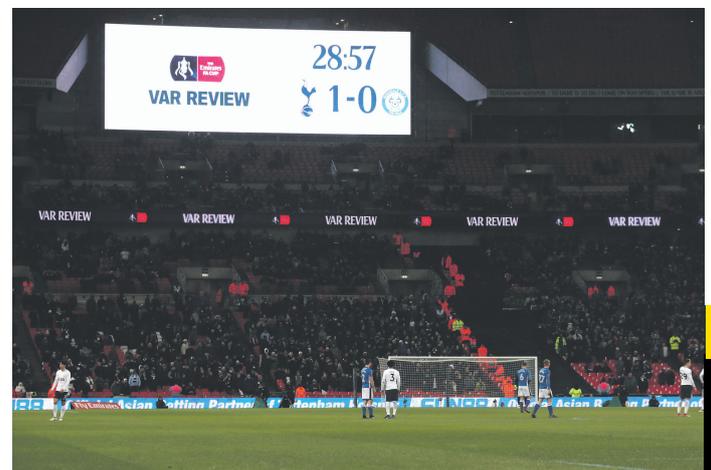
Laughably, for instance, VAR has been maligned when the last man has been taken down in the area, but the referee has not shown a red card, illustrating commentators are not aware of the relaxation in the triple-jeopardy laws: in short, no longer is a player to be red carded for a foul inside the penalty area, if the foul is not deemed to be intentional.

VAR has been trialled less in England than Germany and the USA, where it is now a regular part of the Bundesliga and MLS. However, it has been no less controversial here - the Rochdale v Tottenham FA Cup tie in February was a farce, when lengthy stoppages were experienced in dropping temperatures, causing players to get cold and tight whilst waiting. Tottenham player Danny Rose labelled it "complete nonsense".

VAR allows an official in a video technology room to review decisions made by referees in the following four areas: goals, penalty decisions, direct red card incidents and cases of mistaken identity. "Completely sensible", I hear you say. However, as aforementioned, on- and off-pitch referees have not been quick to implement this without big delays in games. Zinedine Zidane was frustrated at the long delays during Real Madrid's Club World Cup semi-final against Al-Jazira complaining that "We had to wait three or four minutes to get a decision and it wasn't pleasant".

What's even more worrying is that many referees in the World Cup will be experiencing VAR for the very first time. That seems flabbergasting.

Interestingly, and perhaps with more spin than a British political consultant, FIFA state that VAR accuracy is 98.9%, with games averaging fewer than 5 checks and with almost 70% of games having no reviews! Well forgive these authors for thinking it has not felt that way in the small sample size on English shores.



STP

SHOULD VAR BE USED?

# VIDEO ASSISTANT REFEREE

SAVETHEPUNTER

In fact, England fans will no doubt remember the VAR awarding Italy a penalty after an incident between James Tarkowski and Federico Chiesa in a recent friendly. Even though VAR was correct by the letter of the law, it did not stop any debate and the opinions in the media were polarised. The normally measured Gareth Southgate remarked "I don't think with instances like that, it's going to clear things up, an obvious handball or offside, but not that."

Across the globe, we have seen a number of ridiculous VAR-related occurrences: in Portugal, a Boavista fan obscured the view of the camera so a controversial missed offside decision could not be overturned and allowed a goal to stand incorrectly; in Germany, a future 'What happened next' quiz-question spawned, with players in a Bundesliga match summoned back onto the pitch at half-time to allow a penalty to be given and taken; in the Southern Hemisphere, failed technology in an A-league match in Australia prevented the assistant referee from watching the replay. You couldn't make it up.



However, VAR has only really come to the fore as a result of these moments of madness. Largely, most weeks in the competitions that have adopted it pass without incident and VAR has become a welcome part of the normality. Controversial, game-changing errors have been reduced and the majority of referrals have resulted in the correct outcome (although scepticism does indeed remain of FIFA's reported accuracy claims).

The main issue has not been with the technology itself, save a few instances, but with the application of it by the officials. Surely in Russia, at FIFA's prestigious marquee event, we can expect a far more robust use of the system with consistency and devoid of the long delays that have been the chief criticisms thus far. We hope that VAR will simply aid justice on the pitch and keep the tournament controversies to a minimum.



SAVE THE PUNTER

IN SUPPORT OF

CAMPAIGN AGAINST LIVING MISERABLY CALM

STP

SHOULD VAR BE USED?

# WALLCHART - GROUP STAGES

SAVETHEPUNTER

Group A	
Russia	Saudi Arabia
Egypt	Uruguay
Russia	Egypt
Uruguay	Saudi Arabia
Saudi Arabia	Egypt
Uruguay	Russia

14/6/17 16:00 - Moscow (Luzhniki)  
 15/6/17 13:00 - Ekaterinburg  
 15/6/17 19:00 - Saint Petersburg  
 20/6/17 16:00 - Rostov  
 25/6/17 15:00 - Samara  
 25/6/17 15:00 - Volgograd

Group B	
Morocco	Iran
Portugal	Spain
Portugal	Morocco
Iran	Spain
Spain	Morocco
Iran	Portugal

15/6/17 16:00 - Saint Petersburg  
 15/6/17 19:00 - Sochi  
 20/6/17 13:00 - Moscow  
 20/6/17 19:00 - Kazan  
 25/6/17 19:00 - Kaliningrad  
 25/6/17 19:00 - Saransk

Team	W	D	L	Pts
1				
2				
3				
4				

Team	W	D	L	Pts
1				
2				
3				
4				

Group C	
France	Australia
Peru	Denmark
France	Peru
Denmark	Australia
Peru	Australia
Denmark	France

16/6/17 11:00 - Kazan  
 16/6/17 17:00 - Saransk  
 21/6/17 13:00 - Samara  
 21/6/17 16:00 - Ekaterinburg  
 26/6/17 15:00 - Sochi  
 26/6/17 15:00 - Moscow (Luzhniki)

Group D	
Argentina	Iceland
Croatia	Nigeria
Argentina	Croatia
Nigeria	Iceland
Iceland	Croatia
Nigeria	Argentina

16/6/17 14:00 - Moscow (Spartak)  
 16/6/17 20:00 - Kaliningrad  
 21/6/17 19:00 - Nizhny Novgorod  
 22/6/17 16:00 - Volgograd  
 26/6/17 19:00 - Rostov  
 26/6/17 19:00 - Saint Petersburg

Team	W	D	L	Pts
1				
2				
3				
4				

Team	W	D	L	Pts
1				
2				
3				
4				

Group E	
Costa Rica	Serbia
Brazil	Switzerland
Brazil	Costa Rica
Serbia	Switzerland
Switzerland	Costa Rica
Serbia	Brazil

17/6/17 13:00 - Samara  
 17/6/17 19:00 - Rostov  
 22/6/17 13:00 - Saint Petersburg  
 22/6/17 19:00 - Kaliningrad  
 27/6/17 19:00 - Nizhny Novgorod  
 27/6/17 19:00 - Moscow (Spartak)

Group F	
Germany	Mexico
Sweden	South Korea
Germany	Sweden
South Korea	Mexico
Mexico	Sweden
South Korea	Germany

17/6/17 16:00 - Moscow (Luzhniki)  
 18/6/17 13:00 - Nizhny Novgorod  
 23/6/17 19:00 - Sochi  
 23/6/17 16:00 - Rostov  
 27/6/17 15:00 - Ekaterinburg  
 27/6/17 15:00 - Kazan

Team	W	D	L	Pts
1				
2				
3				
4				

Team	W	D	L	Pts
1				
2				
3				
4				

Group G	
Belgium	Panama
England	Tunisia
Belgium	Tunisia
England	Panama
Panama	Tunisia
Belgium	England

18/6/17 16:00 - Sochi  
 18/6/17 19:00 - Volgograd  
 23/6/17 13:00 - Moscow (Spartak)  
 24/6/17 13:00 - Nizhny Novgorod  
 28/6/17 19:00 - Saransk  
 28/6/17 19:00 - Kaliningrad

Group H	
Colombia	Japan
Poland	Senegal
Japan	Senegal
Poland	Colombia
Japan	Poland
Senegal	Colombia

19/6/17 13:00 - Saransk  
 19/6/17 16:00 - Moscow (Spartak)  
 24/6/17 16:00 - Ekaterinburg  
 24/6/17 19:00 - Kazan  
 28/6/17 15:00 - Volgograd  
 28/6/17 15:00 - Samara

Team	W	D	L	Pts
1				
2				
3				
4				

Team	W	D	L	Pts
1				
2				
3				
4				

# WALLCHART - KNOCKOUTS

SAVETHEPUNTER

## Round of 16

50	1C			2D	30/6/17 15:00 - Kazan	53	1E			2F	02/7/17 15:00 - Samara
49	1A			2B	30/6/17 19:00 - Sochi	54	1G			2H	02/7/17 19:00 - Rostov
51	1B			2A	01/7/17 15:00 - Moscow (Luzhniki)	55	1F			2E	03/7/17 15:00 - Saint Petersburg
52	1D			2C	01/07/17 19:00 - Nizhny Novgorod	56	1H			2G	03/7/17 19:00 - Moscow (Spartak)

## Quarter Finals

57	W49			W50	06/7/17 15:00 - Nizhny Novgorod	60	W55			W56	07/7/17 15:00 - Samara
58	W53			W54	06/7/17 19:00 - Kazan	59	W51			W52	07/7/17 19:00 - Sochi

## Semi Finals

61	W57			W58	10/7/17 19:00 - Saint Petersburg	62	W59			W60	11/7/17 19:00 - Moscow (Luzhniki)
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## Third Place Playoff

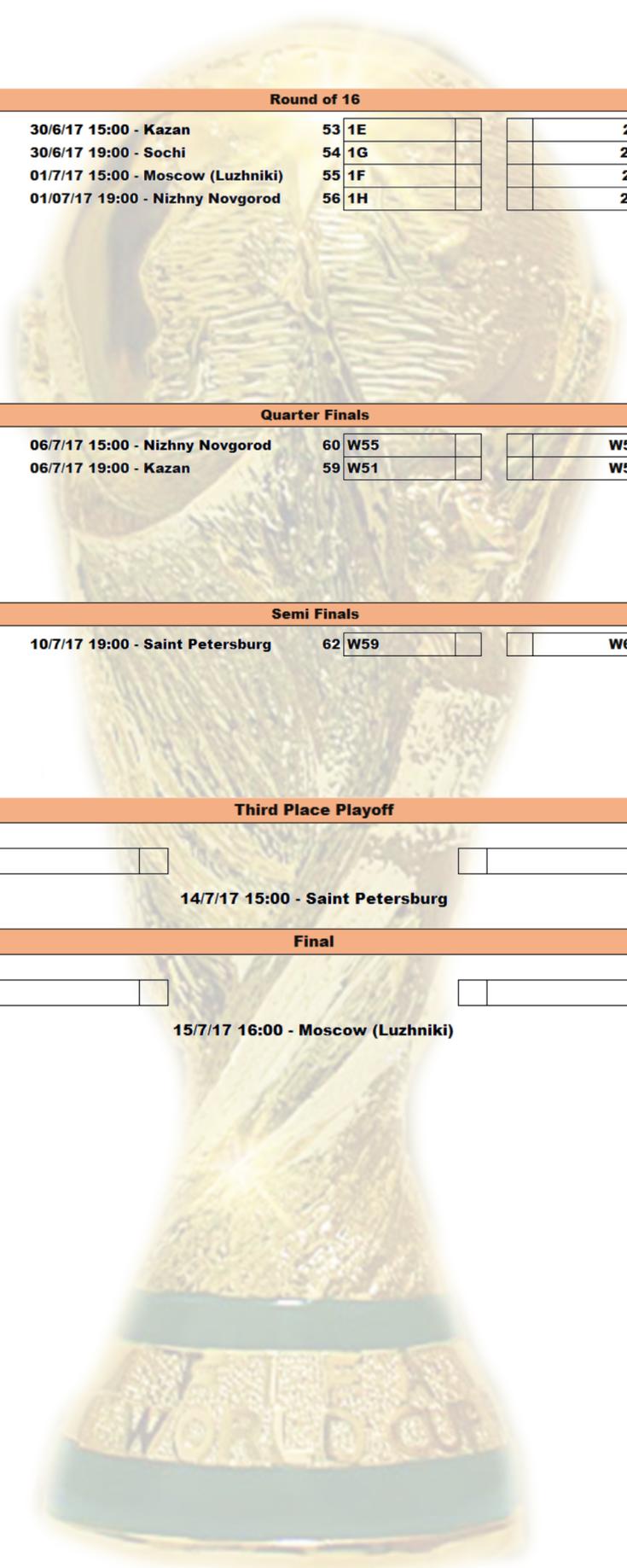
L61											L62
-----	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	-----

14/7/17 15:00 - Saint Petersburg

## Final

W61											W62
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15/7/17 16:00 - Moscow (Luzhniki)



# Group A

## SAVETHEPUNTER

### The Manager

**Stanislav Cherchesov** has been the man behind the wholesale squad changes following the departure of Leo Slutski after Euro 2016 and currently has the record of W5-D5-L8. Prior to taking the national team job, he won the Ekstraklasa with Legia Warsaw in 2016.

Unusually for a manager at the highest level, Cherchesov was a goalkeeper during his playing career, having played for multiple Russian clubs, including both Spartak and Lokomotiv Moscow, before a six year spell with Innsbruck in Austria.

He has tournament experience having been named in squads for the World Cups in '94 and '02 and Euro '96, although he only ever managed one appearance for Russia at a major finals, a 6-1 win v Cameroon at World Cup '94.

Cherchesov tends to set up his team with wing-backs with the only recent use of a flat back four being the disappointing draw with Iran.

### Fixtures

#### ➔ Saudi Arabia 14/06



Russia drew 1-1 with similar opponents in October but this was with an experimental back four. Reverting to their usual system and the backing of the home crowd should be enough to overcome their limited opponents

**PREDICTION: RUSSIA 3-0 SAUDI ARABIA**

#### ➔ Egypt 19/06



The Mo Salah effect means that Egypt could provide tough opposition, particularly if the free-scoring Liverpool player is matched up against the ageing Zhirkov. However, I think Russia will have enough to overcome Egypt with 3.25 looking good value for a Russia win with BTTS.

**PREDICTION: RUSSIA 2-1 EGYPT**

#### ➔ Uruguay 24/06



This could be a hotly fought contest to avoid Spain in the Last 16. Even with home advantage, Uruguay will have too much quality up front with Suarez and Cavani leaving Russia having to settle for second place in their group.

**PREDICTION: RUSSIA 1-3 URUGUAY**



# RUSSIA

By John O'Gorman

The 2018 edition will be Russia's 11th World Cup, seven of which were played as the Soviet Union. They qualified automatically, and as always with the host nation, the lack of competitive fixtures makes it difficult to analyse their form. Russia's last competitive games were last summer in the Confederations Cup, which featured a much-changed squad, from that which had disappointingly represented Russia at Euro 2016, with only nine players surviving.

They began the Confederations Cup with a dominant, although not spectacular, 2-0 win over New Zealand to raise optimism for the home nation. However, subsequent uninspiring losses of 1-0 to Portugal and 2-1 to Mexico meant that Russia did not advance past the group stage. Since last summer, their friendly record reads W1-D2-L3, albeit with the last four of those games coming against footballing superpowers in the form of Argentina, Spain, Brazil and France. The sole win was a 4-2 victory over South Korea back in October, which flattered Russia slightly due to the two own goals by Kim Joo-Young. This was followed up with a drab 1-1 draw with Iran where, despite more possession, Russia did not look that dangerous. The only bright spot in the remaining four friendlies was the 3-3 draw against Spain, where the Russians showed some fight to come back from behind twice. The warm-up friendlies against Austria and then Turkey will be the last opportunity to meld the squad.

#### Squad & Tactics

Almost all of the Russian squad are home-based and a look at the performance of the Russian clubs in Europe this year (including a 6-3 drubbing of CSKA by Arsenal) points to manager Stanislav Cherchesov having his work cut out to reach the latter rounds of the tournament.

Russia are captained by their centurion-capped goalkeeper, Igor Akinfeev. Other than a short period following a knee injury, Akinfeev has been Russia's first-choice between the sticks since he was 19 – thirteen years ago. The one-club goalkeeper will be well-known due to his European appearances for CSKA Moscow, which include an 11-year and 43-game run in the Champions League without keeping a clean sheet. However, it is a tad unfair to pin this on the goalkeeper as it more a symptom of the lack of quality in the Russian league rather than Akinfeev's ability. He will certainly be required to provide the experience to a back-line that is much changed due to retirements after Euro 2016.



The first player to score five goals in a single World Cup match was Oleg Salenko, as Russia beat Cameroon 6-1 in 1994.



## Russia Best Bet of World Cup 2018: Miranchuk top team goalscorer 12/1

The stepping down of long-standing internationals the Berezutski brothers and Sergei Ignashevich means that the new-look centre-back trio will feature the Rubin Kazan defenders Fyodor Kudryashov and Vladimir Granat. They will probably be joined Roman Neustadter, who has played two friendly games for Germany before electing to represent Russia. The wing-back roles should spring no surprises with Aleksandr Samelov of Spartak Moscow and former Chelsea player Yuri Zhirkov pretty much nailed on starters.

22 year-old Aleksandr Golovin (CSKA) already has 17 caps to his name and will be the fulcrum of the midfield which will also feature the attacking flair of club teammate Alan Dzagoev. The other, more defensive spot, is still an unknown but likely to fall to Aleksandr Yerokhin or Roman Zobnin following the omission of the experienced Denis Glushakov from the squad (although he has been named as a reserve).

A return for the squad of FC Arsenal Tula's Artem Dzyuba after 18 months does give Cherchesov an alternative option to Smolov up front but it remains to be seen how much game time he will get as the uncapped 20-year-old Fedor Chalov has also been given a place in the provisional squad following a run of goals in the lead up to the tournament for CSKA Moscow.

With Aleksandr Kokorin suffering a cruciate ligament tear in March, the goal-scoring exploits of Fyodor Smolov will have to be maximised. He was top scorer in the Russian league for two years running after joining Krasnodar in 2015 and was second in the top-scoring list last year. It is disappointing for the 28 year-old striker that his club did not progress to the group stage of the Europa League this year to prove his worth at a higher level than the Russian Premier League following his record of six goals in eight appearances the previous season when Krasnodar were knocked out by Celta Vigo in the last 16. However, two goals against Spain and further goals

against France show that he is the player to watch. At 100/1, Smolov is a rank outsider to win the Golden Boot but having been seeded and drawing favourable opposition, he will be keen to take advantage.

### Chances of Progression

In their first group game, Russia play Saudi Arabia, having drawn 1-1 with similar opponents in October albeit with an experimental back four. Reverting to their usual system and the backing of the home crowd should be enough to overcome their limited opponents. The pace of Mo Salah means that Egypt could provide tough opposition, particularly if the free-scoring Liverpool player is matched up against the ageing Zhirkov. It's Uruguay for Russia in the final match and, even if both teams have scored maximum points already and therefore qualified, this could be a hotly fought contest to avoid Spain in the Last 16. Even with home advantage, Uruguay will have too much quality up front with Suarez and Cavani leaving Russia probably having to settle for second place in their group.



### Unheralded Player

Smolov will lead the line with support from Aleksei Miranchuk, whose twin brother Anton is also in the squad. Like Golovin, Aleksei is a previous winner of the Russian Premier League Young Player of the Year Award but has not quite reached the potential he was thought to have had. However, the injury to Kokorin and question marks over the viability of Dzyuba and Chalov means that this is a perfect opportunity for Miranchuk to announce himself on the world stage at the relatively young age of 22. Although the headline stat of four goals in 16 caps is not great, his minutes per goal ratio currently stands at 132. The more advanced role that Miranchuk will play this summer should mean he adds to his tally.



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AGAINST  
LIVING  
MISERABLY  
CALM**

# Group A

SAVETHEPUNTER

## The Manager

**Héctor Cúper** – The experienced Argentinian has managed a wide variety of club sides, including Mallorca, Inter Milan and Valencia, taking the latter to two Champions League finals.

Since taking charge of Egypt in March 2015, it is fair to state that Cúper has divided opinion amongst the Egyptian support. Some will criticise his dull and direct playing style and point to an over-reliance on Mohamed Salah.

Others point to the fact that he has taken Egypt to an AFCON final, which they narrowly lost to Cameroon, has made them tough to beat (Egypt have never lost a match by more than a single goal during his tenure), and of course achieved the holy grail of World Cup qualification.

What is for sure is that no-one in Group A will be taking Egypt lightly with the wise old head of Cúper setting out their game plan.

## Fixtures

### → Uruguay 15/06



Egypt open up their group matches playing the South American Uruguayans, I expect this to be a tight game, and if any star player can produce a moment of quality, either side could take three points.

PREDICTION: EGYPT 1-1 URUGUAY

### → Russia 19/06



A sneaky win for the Pharaohs in their second game could be on the cards, and their long ball tactics could prove to be Russia's undoing in this match.

PREDICTION: EGYPT 1-0 RUSSIA

### → Saudi Arabia 24/06



A win in their final game should see the Egypt team secure their first berth of the last 16 in their history. I expect Egypt to be too strong for the Saudi team.

PREDICTION: EGYPT 2-0 SAUDI ARABIA



# EGYPT

By Ramzy Elftesi

On October 8th 2017 Egypt's 28 year hiatus from the World Cup was ended through Mohamed Salah's dramatic 95th minute penalty securing a 2-1 victory over Congo, and more importantly a place in Russia. Despite winning four African Cup of Nations titles over the past 20 years, World Cup qualification has consistently eluded the Pharaohs and as such this achievement sparked wild scenes of celebrations right across the country.

During the final round of qualification Héctor Cúper's men maintained a defensive setup throughout, with three of the four victories achieved by a single goal margin. Whilst it may be harsh to claim that Egypt are a one man team, it is important to note that Salah was responsible for five of the eight goals scored in qualification. It is this defensive approach which has seen the Argentinian come in for criticism within some quarters of the Egyptian press, despite having an impressive win record (63%) during his tenure.

### Squad & Tactics

Focusing on the Egyptian defence, the solid foundations that have come from the 45 year old goalkeeper Essem Al-Hadary (who will become the oldest ever player to compete at a World Cup) and centre half pairing of Ahmed Hegazy and Ali Gabr has meant that Egypt have kept 17 clean sheets during Cúper's 33 games in charge. However in terms of playing style, do not expect to see the ball being played out from the back. One of the key themes of qualification was seeing long balls frequently punted from the defence with the aim of Salah running onto these and piercing through the opposition backline. Whilst this approach has been successful in getting Egypt to a World Cup, it remains to be seen whether this can be as effective against the experienced Uruguayan and Russian defences.

Two other players who could well be key to Egypt's hopes of getting out of Group A are Abdullah El-Said and Ramadan Sobhi. El-Said is one of the few players within the Egyptian squad capable of linking the play and playing in through balls which can cut through the defence. Ramadan, as many Stoke fans will attest to, has bundles of technical ability but his decision-making in the final third can often be questionable. However, a tournament set-up and the opportunity to succeed on the biggest stage of all, coupled with the fact that he should still be relatively fresh

? Egypt were the first African nation to compete in a World Cup in 1934, but were eliminated after one match, losing 4-2 to Hungary.



## Egypt Best Bet of World Cup 2018: Stage of elimination – last 16 @ 9/4

having been in and out of the Stoke team this season means that Russia could be the location for Ramadan to deliver on his potential.

However, it should not be underestimated just how much of Egypt's World Cup hopes rest on the shoulders of the 'Egyptian King', Mohamed Salah. The records broken, individual awards and frankly ridiculous statistics from the 2017-18 season show that Egypt do genuinely have a superstar within their squad. He has also delivered on many occasions for Egypt, and quite often his goals have come from moments of individual quality – a recent example of this was a fine strike from the edge of the box in the March friendly against Portugal.

The dejection that spread throughout Merseyside was also felt across Egypt when Salah went off with a shoulder injury in the Champions League final. The latest update from the Egypt camp and Salah is that it is just a strain in the shoulder ligaments and he should be fit in time for the first game in Yekaterinburg.

### Chances Of Progression

The talent of Salah, alongside them being a tough side to break down, shows that Egypt have more than a fighting chance of qualifying from Group A. A draw (45/17) in the opener on vs. Uruguay would leave Egypt well placed ahead of the crucial second match vs. Russia on June 19th. Whilst the host nation at a World Cup traditionally perform strongly, it must be noted that this is a distinctly average Russian side without any real outstanding individuals, whilst Egypt do have a genuine world-class talent on their hands in Salah. Expect a tight game vs. the hosts (under 2.5 goals @ 8/13) but do not be surprised if Egypt spoil the home nation's party with a narrow victory. If they can come away with four points from the first two games then they will go into the final game with qualification in their own hands against the likely

already eliminated Saudi Arabia. A win in the final group game (8/11) will then surely see the Pharaohs' enter the World Cup knockout stages for the first time in their history.



### Unheralded Player

The 23 year old winger, Trezeguet, is finally starting to deliver on the promise that he showed when he first broke into the AL-Ahly team at 18, prompting Anderlecht to sign him back in 2015. He has since been out on loan at Mouscron in Belgium and most recently Kasimpaşa in the Turkish Süper Lig.

It is here where he has excelled scoring 14 times and providing 6 assists in 29 games in the 2017/18 season. He will be returning back to his parent club next season hopeful of a starting place, but firstly he will be looking to excel on the biggest stage of all alongside the other Egyptian attacking threats of Ramadan, El-Said and of course Salah.



Egypt, now going into their their third World Cup, have never won a Group match!



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# Group A

SAVETHEPUNTER

## The Manager

Juan Antonio Pizzi, has been managing Saudi Arabia since November 2017, replacing fellow Argentinian Edgardo Bauza, who had led the side to the World Cup finals. He previously was in charge of Chile, before being sacked in October 2017, after failing to get them to Russia.

Pizzi had a journeyman career around Argentina and Spain throughout the 1990's, his highlight being two seasons playing up front for Barcelona alongside Ronaldo and Luis Enrique, where he won his only league title in 1998. As a manager, he won the 2016 Copa America with his previous side, Chile.

Since his role begun with Saudi, he has managed them at the Arabian Gulf Cup, where they failed to get past the group stages, an inauspicious start, given the fact they were in a group with Oman, UAE and Kuwait. There have also been also numerous friendlies, with the main highlight being wins to nil recently against Algeria and Greece. However, they have also suffered heavy defeats against both Iraq and Belgium.

## Fixtures

### ➔ Russia 14/06



In the opening match of the tournament, Saudi Arabia play hosts Russia at Luzhniki Stadium in Moscow and they could spring a surprise..

PREDICTION: SAUDI ARABIA 1-1 RUSSIA

### ➔ Uruguay 20/06



Saudi Arabia will not be able to cope with the star quality of Uruguay who should be able to take apart the Asian side with ease.

PREDICTION: SAUDI ARABIA 0-3 URUGUAY

### ➔ Egypt 25/06



Mo Salah may be fully fit by the time the Saudi's take on Egypt in Volgograd, and if he is, I would expect Egypt to send Saudi Arabia out of the tournament.

PREDICTION: SAUDI ARABIA 0-1 EGYPT



# SAUDI ARABIA

By Will Al-Wilde

Saudi Arabia are outsiders in the World Cup curtain-raiser, outsiders to advance from Group A and the rank outsiders to lift the Jules Rimet trophy, so what can we expect from them other than a plethora of oil-related puns?

Saudi Arabia first qualified for the World Cup in USA '94. They did pretty well in the States as they sailed through their group beating both Morocco and Belgium, before going out in the last 16 to Sweden. The victory over Belgium, however, remains their last win in the competition despite them qualifying for the next three tournaments. In nine World Cup matches between 1998-2006, Saudi Arabia picked up just two points and failed to score in all eight defeats. This is the first World Cup they've qualified for since Germany 2006.

Saudi Arabia, led by Nawaf Al Abid who joint-topped the goal scoring table, finished second in their final round Asian World Cup qualifying group to grab an automatic spot in the main draw – Australia finished third and had to go down the playoff route . A record of W6-D1-L3 included taking 13 points from a possible 15 at home, but they'll have no such local surroundings in Russia. The Asian qualifying route is different to the European one we know well and is divided into different rounds of group stages. The Saudis progressed from their first group with a commanding record of W6-D2-L0 F28-A4.

### Squad & Tactics

The experienced captain, Osama Hawsaw, who made his debut back in 2007, is the key defensive player for Saudi Arabia and brings power and solidity to the rear line. He is a workhorse at the back and standing at 6'2" is commanding in the air with serious strength. With that he provides an element of trust in this side and although in his advancing years, he still possesses outright ground speed to get back and recover. He will no doubt have a huge role to play in the organisation and leadership in aside who, as a whole, don't have the most talented pool of players.

The creative outlet for Saudi Arabia will likely come from Yahya Al-Shehri who plys his trade in La Liga for relegation battlers Leganes. He will be the creative focal point in this side, he is known as the Asian Messi, largely due to his exquisite left foot. He is one of the nine Saudi Arabian players

? Although Saudi Arabia currently rank 70th in the world, they were as high as 21st back in July 2004.



**Saudi Arabia Best Bet of World Cup 2018:  
Al Salhawi Top Goalscorer 4/1**

that have gone on loan to Spanish clubs this year, as part of a policy to get more Saudi players abroad. Al-Shehri played a vital role in getting his country to the World Cup, playing in every game and scoring five goals, featuring in the majority on the right wing as he has the ability to effortlessly dribble past players as well as hit the back of the net. This team will look to him for his moments of magic in the tournament, if they are to manage to perform in the group and pick up any points.

The key striker for the Green Falcons is Mohammed Al-Sahlawi who was the prolific goalscorer for Saudi in qualifying netting 16 goals in the 14 games he started. He is likely to play as a lone central striker with great jumping and heading ability as well as being able to take on players and finish with both feet which is why the experienced striker scores so many. With the dribbling ability of Al-Shehri in the side, Al-Sahlawi should be able to link up with him to add to his tally and become the second highest Saudi Arabian goal scorer ever. However, as he still needs seven more, he is extremely unlikely to get there this tournament, although he will surely sense an opportunity in the game against Egypt.

**Chances of Progression**

The opponents of Saudi Arabia in group A should be delighted, they've been drawn alongside two of the best strikers in the world: Egypt – led by the remarkable Mo Salah – and Uruguay who boast both Edinson Cavani and Luis Suarez, who should be far too strong for the Saudi defence.

Saudi Arabia's main chance of an unlikely route to the Last 16 is picking up three points in their first game and hoping other results go their way. That's not as impossible as it might sound given Russia are winless in their last five including a home match against Iran in October, the opening match of the tournament therefore will prove vital for the Asian side if they are to stand any chance of progressing.

Saudi Arabia will have to turn past form on its head to make a dent in the tournament. Since 1974, Asian sides have won just 12% of World Cup matches outside of Asia as they've lost 53 of their 88 fixtures. It'll be a real shock if the Saudi's aren't on an early plane back to Riyadh following their final group game against Egypt.



**Unheralded Player**

Another member of the Saudi contingent who have been on loan in La Liga this season, Fahad Al-Muwallad is one to keep an eye on during the World Cup. Although his stint with Levante was poor, only managing one appearance, his career before this point has been strong.

Having previously turned down Barcelona as a young child, he now turns out for Al-Ittihad as a pacey winger. Making his debut for Saudi in 2013 at the age of 19, he has been a regular for Saudi, and has 41 caps under his belt already.

**?** Saudi keeper Mohamed Al-Deayea has conceded the joint most World Cup goals: 25 goals across four World Cups.



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# Group A

SAVETHEPUNTER

## The Manager

Óscar Tabárez, known as El Maestro, has been Uruguay manager since 2006 and is the longest serving international coach at the World Cup finals. This is his second stint coaching his national side after previously coaching them between 1988 and 1990. This is his fourth World Cup and will bring a huge wealth of knowledge to a side full of exciting youth, many of whom have no prior World Cups to their name.

As a player, Tabárez only had a very modest career as a defender, the height of which was playing for Montevideo Wanderers in the Copa Libertadores. He retired aged 32 and took up coaching the following year in 1980, forming a close bond with trainer José Herrera, someone who he still works with 38 years later.

Tabárez is regarded as the man who revived Uruguayan football after a prolonged period of trouble, only reaching two World Cups between 1978 and 1998. Since then, Uruguay have reached 4 of the last 5 when including the 2018 edition.

## Fixtures

### ➔ Egypt 15/06



Uruguay have more ability than Egypt and if they can keep Salah quiet this should be comfortable.

PREDICTION: URUGUAY 3-1 EGYPT

### ➔ Saudi Arabia 20/06



Potentially the highest scoring game of the tournament, I fully expect Uruguay to show their difference in class.

PREDICTION: URUGUAY 5-0 SAUDI ARABIA

### ➔ Russia 25/06



Even against what I view as the toughest opponents in the group, I'd be surprised with anything other than a Uruguayan win.

PREDICTION: URUGUAY 2-1 RUSSIA



# URUGUAY

By Tom Mayrick

Twice World Cup winners, Uruguay went through their CONMEBOL qualifying group in second with a solid record of 9-4-5, with only one of those losses coming at home, to top qualifiers Brazil. This is a significant improvement for Uruguay, who have had to go through the FIFA World Cup Interconfederations Qualification Games in the last 4 World Cups, winning three and losing one in 2006 to Australia.

Considering the way they have recently only scraped through into the World Cup proper, they have certainly outperformed themselves once there, particularly in South Africa 2010, where captain Diego Forlan was one of the few players who could control the infamous Jabulani ball. He led his side to the semi finals before a 3-2 loss to the Netherlands.

### Squad & Tactics

Óscar Tabárez went through the qualifying with a solid 4-4-2 formation but had a definite emphasis on attack, averaging 1.77 goals per game. The main source of those goals was Ligue 1's Foreign Player of the year; Edinson Cavani. Cavani who lead the CONMEBOL scoring charts with 10 goals, bagging just over 31% of all of Uruguay's goals, four of which came against other World Cup qualifying nations.

Alongside Cavani was Barcelona's wild child, Luis Suarez, scorer of five qualifying goals, four of which came against World Cup opposition, showing he is potentially the player for the big moment when his team progresses.

It is likely that Uruguay will deploy a flat, yet dynamic, four across the midfield to protect their defence and to give them control in the centre of the park. Uruguay have a range of options to deploy in the middle but it looks likely they will play Cristian Rodríguez and Premier League old-boy Gastón Ramírez out-wide, both known for the technical ability and speed in possession of the ball.

Between them, a mix of exciting youth can be displayed, with Juve's Rodrigo Bentancur and Real's Federico Valverde leading the way in the central slots. Both players have huge potential, particularly Valverde, who won the silver boot at the 2017 Under 20 World Cup.

? Uruguay won the first tournament held in 1930, before managing to defend it in their next appearance, winning it again in 1950.

STP

URUGUAY | GROUP A



## Uruguay Best Bet of World Cup 2018: Uruguay Winner, Saudi Arabia Last Place 15/8

Both have the ability to drive the team forward, creating chances for Cavani and Suarez, whilst not being shy to shoot either.

Defence will be led by their Atletico Madrid pairing Diego Godin and Jose Gimenez, recently buoyed by their success (and another clean sheet) in the Europa League final and boasting over 150 international caps between them. These two are likely to be the unsung heroes for Uruguay with Suarez and Cavani likely to be getting the headlines. The way they marshal the defence will be key to Uruguay's success and any injuries to them could be detrimental to their country's chances of progression; if they are solid, they will dictate the game and use their nous to set their team up, starting moves and controlling the opposition's attacking threats.

Alongside them in the right-back and left-back positions will be Guillermo Varela, formerly of Manchester United, and international stalwart Maxi Pereira, who has more caps for Uruguay than anyone else (124). They will be backed up by utility player Diego Laxalt and Gastón Silva. Their aim will be to get forward when possible to offer attacking support, but also drop in to help captain Godin and Jimenez.

Between the sticks will be Galatasaray keeper Fernando Muslera who will be looking to break a century of caps for Uruguay during the World Cup.

He is Uruguay's undisputed number 1 which is key to give confidence to the players in front of him. He is expected to have a strong World Cup and will be looking to keep at least two clean sheets during the group stage against Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

Tabárez can change his formation up if necessary, as he has done recently in the China Cup. Here he deployed 4-3-1-2 in a couple of the games, placing Giorgian De Arrascaeta, who plays for Cruzeiro in Brazil, in the attacking midfield position to link the midfield to the deadly attack.

### Chances of Progression

It would come as a huge surprise if Uruguay were not to progress out of their group with the other seeded team, Russia, alongside them. Of the other two teams, Egypt in the opener should be relatively straightforward as long as Salah is suppressed, followed by what could potentially be one of the higher scoring games of the tournament against Saudi Arabia. Finally, they play hosts Russia in what should decide first and second placing.

Once out of the group, Uruguay's tournament may be swiftly curtailed as it looks likely that they shall play Portugal, assuming they come second to Spain in their group. Although the star players for Uruguay outnumber that of Portugal, Portugal play to very fine margins, and a game against them would be tight. If they made it through, it would then mean a quarter final draw against France or the runner up of the group of death, group D, which will be where the Uruguayan dreams would surely end, finishing in the final eight however would be a successful tournament for Tabarez.

### Unheralded Player

The South American side have a lot of star power, but one player to watch out for this summer could be youngster Federico Valverde. Playing in central midfield, he has just begun to break into the Uruguay squad, having lined up in the first XI three times during qualification. He managed to get himself a goal during qualification and with him being on the books at Real Madrid (he has just spent a season out on loan at relegated Deportivo La Coruna), we may see his talent break through this summer.

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URUGUAY | GROUP A

# GROUP B

## SAVETHEPUNTER

### The Manager

Appointed in September 2014 to help rescue Portugal's Euro 2016 qualification campaign, 63-year-old **Fernando Santos** will always be considered a legend of the Portuguese game having gone on to win that tournament outright, lifting the country's first ever piece of major silverware. Previously, Santos has spent his managerial career flitting between Portugal and Greece. In his homeland, Santos managed the Primeira Liga's "Big Three" of Porto, Sporting CP and Benfica, although he only really had any success at the first of these, where he picked up five major trophies.

He had stints at various Greek clubs including AEK Athens and Panathinaikos (two of the Greek "Big Three") before taking charge of their national team in 2010. He led Greece to the last eight of the 2012 Euros, where they lost 4-2 to Germany and to the round of 16 at the last World Cup, where they succumbed on penalties to the plucky Costa Ricans (after Santos had been sent to the stands for dissent at the final whistle).

### Fixtures

#### → Spain 15/06



Portugal go into their first match playing against Iberian rivals Spain, however they seem unlikely to be able contain Spain going forwards.

PREDICTION: PORTUGAL 0-2 SPAIN

#### → Morocco 20/06



The second match sees them take on a very tough defensive Moroccan unit, however the star quality of Cristiano Ronaldo should see them through in this critical match.

PREDICTION: PORTUGAL 1-0 MOROCCO

#### → Iran 25/06



Although many will see this as a walkover, Portugal may struggle to breakdown a very well organised Iran side, however I would expect Portugal to take all three points and to limit the chances for Iran.

PREDICTION: PORTUGAL 1-0 IRAN



# PORTUGAL

By Jamie Farr

Portugal enter the 2018 World Cup in the unprecedented position of having a major trophy under their belts and as current European champions, following their famous triumph over France in July 2016. Progression to qualify for the tournament in Russia was relatively serene, particularly when compared to some of the struggles the team has faced in the past.

Fernando Santos' men had been placed in a pretty generous group from which they would always be strong favourites to progress. The only real threat in the group appeared to be perennial qualifiers Switzerland and so it proved as Portugal got the qualification phase off to a poor start in Basel. The Seleção de Quinas (The Navigators), without the injured Cristiano Ronaldo, succumbed to a 2-0 defeat to immediately put the pressure on for the subsequent games. They wouldn't have to meet Switzerland again until the final group match, which already had the feel of being decisive.

Portugal's record following this defeat was impeccable, sweeping aside the minnows in their group with consummate ease. Latvia, Faroe Islands and Andorra were each dished out thrashings and while Hungary presented more of a challenge, three points from each encounter was still achieved without conceding a goal. Switzerland had a perfect record going into the final group stage match in Lisbon, but the European champions produced an excellent performance to gain revenge on the Swiss, winning 2-0 to top the group on goal difference and avoid the playoff route, often required for Portugal in recent tournament history.

#### Squad & Tactics

Fernando Santos didn't earn many style points with the team's tactics in France two years ago, winning only one match inside 90 minutes on their way to triumph. However a more cautious style was ultimately successful and as such not much is expected to change in Russia.

While not always easy on the eye, there was no denying that Santos' 4-4-2 set up, featuring more natural wingers as strikers, made Portugal hard to beat. Cristiano Ronaldo and Nani were the choice frontmen in this system at the Euros, but this time around the latter will be replaced by an altogether more natural frontman in AC Milan striker André Silva. Together with Ronaldo, the pair amassed 24 goals from 10 games in qualifying,

Despite his reputation, only 6/81 of Cristiano Ronaldo's goals for Portugal have come from the penalty spot. He has missed 4/10 penalties for Portugal.



## Portugal Best Bet of World Cup 2018: Under 5.5 tournament goals scored at evens (Advised by STP Panel)

so while a pragmatic approach will remain, attack will still very much be one of Portugal's weapons against Spain, Morocco and Iran.

There will be key roles played by Portugal's forward-thinking fullbacks, with players such as Raphaël Guerreiro, Cédric Soares and Ricardo Pereira set to get through a lot of attacking and defensive work.

In between these roles, veterans Pepe and José Fonte will be expected to continue the partnership that proved reliable in 2016. One of the key men of Santos' system will be Sporting CP defensive midfielder William Carvalho.

He'll anchor a midfield that will contain the creative talents of the likes of Bernardo Silva, João Mário and Bruno Fernandes and as the only natural defensive midfielder named in the 23 man squad, there is huge pressure on his shoulders.

### Chances Of Progression

The World Cup draw has presented Portugal with a testing group but one they should feel confident of progressing from.

The opening game could not be much worse of a contest to begin with, facing their Iberian rivals, the mighty Spain, in a match that could well determine who will win Group B.

Portugal will likely fall back on their pragmatic style that proved so successful at Euro 2016 in this opening encounter, aiming to keep things tight against the free-flowing Spaniards.

The attacking philosophies will likely be explored more so in their next matches against Morocco and Iran where they will not be able to afford any slip-ups. Portugal are not being mentioned in the same breath as tournament favourites such as Germany, Spain and Brazil, but surely an international double is beyond them?

### Unheralded Player

William Carvalho has long been a name in the transfer gossip columns but has surprisingly not made the move from Portugal yet. Often misidentified as something of a brutal, destructive physical presence, William is certainly robust in stature and has strengths in those areas but his key abilities revolve around his range of passing and positioning.

More dictator than destroyer, this summer will likely see William finally make the move to one of Europe's super leagues. A strong performance in Russia will only add digits to what will already be a lofty transfer fee.



The most yellow cards in a World Cup match was Portugal v Netherlands in 2006. The game had 16 yellow and four red cards.



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PORTUGAL | GROUP B

# GROUP B

## SAVETHEPUNTER

### The Manager

**Julen Lopetegui** was announced as the Spain manager in July 2016 following Vicente del Bosque's retirement. Del Bosque left the national set up with a European Championship and World Cup win under his tutelage.

Lopetegui was somewhat of a surprise appointment to the national team job; with only one managerial position at a major club. This was an underwhelming spell at Porto. With a poor 1st season, they failed to win any silverware, losing the league to Benfica. In his second season, Lopetegui was relieved of his duties in January following another poor start to the campaign.

One reason behind the Spanish FA's appointment may be his work with the Spanish U17's, U19's, U20's and U21's; he won the European Championship at both U19 and U21 levels.

Although on paper Lopetegui may not seem to have the credentials to lead a team brimming with such talent as Spain, he has proved that you do not have to be a great club coach to succeed at international level; he lead Spain through a successful qualifying campaign, whilst transitioning the squad personnel and phasing out some Spanish stalwarts, such as Iker Casillas.

### Fixtures

#### ➔ Portugal 15/06



Although on the face of things this game would scream goals & both teams scoring; however, taking into account this is the biggest match of the group and the very start of the group stages, I envisage a cagier affair with Spain taking the win.

**PREDICTION: SPAIN 2-0 PORTUGAL**

#### ➔ Iran 20/06



This may be Spain's opportunity to slightly rotate their squad against slightly weaker opponents. Iran will likely be looking to play counter attacking football against Spain & ensure they do not score.

**PREDICTION: SPAIN 1-0 IRAN**

#### ➔ Morocco 25/06



As the last game of the group stages, this may cause the game to be a lot more open with Morocco potentially relying on goals to see them qualify in second.

**PREDICTION: SPAIN 3-0 MOROCCO**



# SPAIN

By Tom Muat

Spain are coming into this World Cup looking to recapture their form from 2008-2012, where they won the World Cup sandwiched between back to back European Championships. Since these fantastic tournament wins, Spain started to slide back to mediocrity with a woeful 2014 World Cup, failing to make it out of their group. Embarrassing defeats were suffered at the hands of the Netherlands & Chile. This was followed up by a Round of 16 defeat to Italy two years later in the European Championships.

However, despite the two recent flops at major tournaments; with a new coach installed & a team starting to fire again Spain will be an interesting watch this summer.

Spain qualified for this summer's World Cup unbeaten; with an impressive record of 36 goals scored & just 3 conceded. However, Spain's qualification group was relatively weak, with just Italy a true contender for the top spot, whom against they dropped their only points, away from home.

Across the qualifying campaign, no one player dominated the goal scoring; with 4 players chipping in with 5 goals (Costa, Morata, Silva & Isco), with Vitolo notching 4 goals. Spain had 14 individual goal scorers.

#### Squad and Tactics

Spain seem to be quite settled in a 4-3-3 formation, which has been utilised throughout their qualifying campaign. Manchester United's David De Gea is nailed on to be the starting goalkeeper, having been in fantastic form for club & country.

Sergio Ramos and Gerald Pique are centre-half shoe-ins. Ramos is set to captain Spain & with good reason; he has amassed a staggering 391 appearances for Real Madrid & 151 appearances for Spain; which is a sheer testament to his quality & longevity.

The left back position has one front-runner, following a string of good performances for club & country - Jordi Alba of Barcelona. Alba is an exciting full back, with pace & stamina allowing him to



Despite winning the tournament in 2010, Spain had previously only made it to the semi finals once before this, way back in 1950.



**Spain Best Bet of World Cup 2018:  
Spain to win every group game 23/10**

push forward & assist in a lot of the offensive actions, whilst he has also shown himself as an adept defensive player.

Right back is not such a clear-cut position, with the front runner being Danny Carvajal. Carvajal has played the majority of the qualifying campaign but will face stiff competition from César Azpilicueta. Regardless of starting, Azpilicueta is key to this squad due to his versatility in defence, shown at Chelsea.

In the centre of midfield, we find the glue that sticks this Spanish team together, Sergio Busquets. Protecting the back four, anchoring the midfield & feeding the array of attacking talent ahead of him.

Alongside Busquets in midfield should be the elder statesman of the squad, Iniesta. Whilst ageing, his recent performances for Spain against Germany & Argentina prove that whilst he may not have the fitness to play the full 90 at international level, he clearly still has the ability to unlock the best of defences.

Now the attacking talent is where it gets really exciting, with the likes of Silva, Asensio & Vazquez all included. On current form, Silva & Asensio are both nailed on for starting positions; with Vazquez providing a remarkably talented back up. Isco could be a key man playing just behind Diego Costa. 5 goals in 8 qualifying matches and a string of superb performances for Real Madrid have seen him pencil his name in the starting XI.

Without doubt Costa is undeniably talented but his temperament may be a worry for Lopetegui; with a tendency to do the irrational when riled up and in a tournament football, a red card ban could be completely detrimental to Spain's bid. The other option is Iago Aspas; scorer of 20 goals in 32 league appearances this season.

**Chances of Progression**

Spain's biggest test in the group stages is first up, with a scintillating match versus Portugal. Spain are an even-money shot to win this tie and around 1/2 to win the group.

Spain are likely to face Russia or Egypt in the round of 16 before perhaps a match up versus Argentina in the Quarter Finals. Should they win this and results go as the bookies would expect, the semi-final would likely be against Germany.

With good recent performances against both Argentina & Germany, this Spanish squad brimming with talent must come into this World Cup full of confidence and will be looking to make a deep run this summer.

Spain are great contenders to go all the way.



**Unheralded Player**

With his lightning acceleration and penchant for a spectacular long range goal, Marco Asensio is destined for a long and successful career. Regular La Liga viewers will be abundantly aware of the talented, left-sided Real Madrid player. His direct and pacey attacking play has earned Asensio superlatives in the Spanish media.

The fact that Zinedine Zidane often picked Asensio above Gareth Bale this season, speaks volumes -high praise indeed from a player many considered the best of his generation!

Asensio may not start, but expect an impact late on in games, when he comes on from the bench to the horror of tired opposition defenders.



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# GROUP B

## SAVETHEPUNTER

### The Manager

**Herve Renard** has been in charge of Morocco since February 2016 and has a fairly solid record, losing only 5 games from 23 in charge so far, with none of these losses being by more than one goal.

Renard has some international pedigree having twice won the Africa Cup of Nations with Zambia (2012) and Ivory Coast (2015) and he has also managed Angola. Renard is one of the most respected coaches to ever grace African shores.

Prior to his move to manage Morocco, Renard was managing Lille. However he was sacked after just thirteen matches, having picked up only one point per game in his very brief spell with the club.

He was out of football for only four months before Morocco came to give him his fourth African national team in early 2016.

### Fixtures

#### ➔ Iran 15/06



Morocco will aim to get Boutabib involved early on and will be looking to keep a clean sheet to give themselves early momentum in the tournament.

PREDICTION: MOROCCO 1-0 IRAN

#### ➔ Portugal 20/06



The defensive unit will need to remain stable in this crucial match for Morocco if they are to qualify. I can see a surprise result if they slow down Ronaldo.

PREDICTION: MOROCCO 0-0 PORTUGAL

#### ➔ Spain 25/06



Spain may have already qualified by this point, and Morocco will aim to take advantage of a potentially weaker side. However, Spain should still remain too strong for them even with first team players rested.

PREDICTION: MOROCCO 0-1 SPAIN



# MOROCCO

By Alex Everson

Morocco make their return to the World Cup Finals for their fifth appearance this summer in Russia, having had a 20 year absence since their last foray into the competition. Qualification saw Morocco top an incredibly tough group containing Gabon & Ivory Coast, remaining unbeaten in 6 games, and not conceding a goal. They go into the tournament with hopes of making it the last 16 potentially for only the second time in their history under the stewardship of Frenchman Herve Renard.

Caution must be noted though as qualification wasn't quite as easy as it seems on first glance. Three 0-0 draws in their first 5 games meant a make-or-break game away to Ivory Coast. Not only did they avoid defeat, but they actually passed this test with flying colours, defeating The Elephants 2-0 with captain Medhi Benatia, Juventus centre back, claiming the second goal which all but sealed their place in Russia this summer.

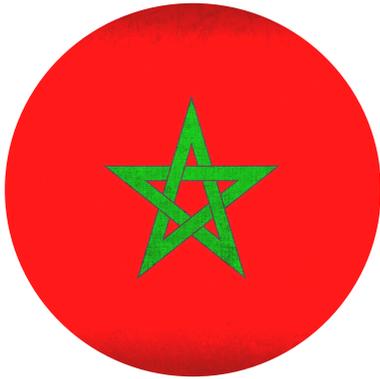
#### Squad & Tactics

They play a fairly defensively minded 4-3-3 which can at times transform into 4-5-1, with striker Khalid Boutabib leading the line up front on his own and they are expected to start in this wide 4-3-3 formation come the World Cup.

This style will likely be fairly stubborn at the back and will aim to frustrate opponents who are more technically gifted going forwards, such as Spain and Portugal. It should, however, remain expansive enough for them to try and take the game to teams when they are on the front foot.

Certainly the emphasis going into the tournament will be to maintain recent strong defensive performances, having only conceded eight goals in fifteen games since the beginning of 2017. Central defence is manned by Benatia, the man in the squad who has most experience playing at the higher levels club football having previously been at Roma and Bayern Munich, before moving to Turin. He will likely have Roman Saiss, who has impressed all season for recently promoted Championship winners, Wolves, alongside him. Their partnership will be vital for Morocco to progress throughout the tournament.

? Morocco come into the tournament having conceded no goals in their final group qualification stage of six matches, finishing with a +11 goal difference.



## Morocco Best Bet of World Cup 2018: Morocco to concede less than 3 goals 10/1

In front of them, they will have a strong defensive midfielder in Feyenoord player, Karim El Ahmadi, who was named Player of the Year in Holland when the Rotterdam team won the league in 2016/17..

The other piece of the puzzle in midfield comes in the form of Younès Belhanda. The experienced attacking midfielder is no stranger to big game pressure, having previously won Ligue 1 with Montpellier and also been part of deep runs in European competition with previous club Dynamo Kiev. Last season, he had big shoes to fill, taking on the No. 10 jersey at Galatasary, previously held by Wesley Sneijder.

Hakim Ziyech of Ajax will line up behind Boutabib and will be the main creative outlet for the North African side. He will be supported in attack by the more industrious Nordin Amrabat, who surprisingly left Watford last summer just before the closure of the transfer window for La Liga's Leganes. A willingness to take on opponents, as well as battle back, should allow Morocco greater opportunity to indulge in more attacking flair elsewhere.

One to potentially watch out for is El Kaabi who has scored eight goals in just ten appearances for Morocco, however the majority of these came in the lower-rated, African Nations Championship in 2018. He will likely be playing back up to Boutabib.

### Chances of Progression

The main game for Morocco is going to be their first match on the first full day of the World Cup, June 15th vs Iran.

If Morocco can manage to hold Iran out in this game and go onto to get a win, this will put the pressure onto Spain and Portugal tremendously in their next two matches to go out and beat Morocco. This is one that they should manage to claim all three points from, despite Iran currently being the strongest Asian team at the World Cup.

In the second game, Portugal may find it very difficult to get past the North Africans and the European Champions could be heading home early: Morocco are a side which could certainly spring a surprise in the tournament.

With a favourable draw against what is likely to be Uruguay or Russia in the second round, Morocco would have a chance of making it the quarter finals, and becoming just the fourth African team to have done so. Watch out for Morocco this summer.



### Unheralded Player

The key player to watch going forward is Ajax midfielder, Hakim Ziyech, who previously represented Netherlands youth teams and received a call-up to the first team before pledging his allegiance to Morocco.

He has proven himself to be invaluable in the side since his progression into the squad and has an excellent record of eight goals in fifteen for the the Atlas Lions. Although a number of his goals so far have come against weaker opposition for Morocco, he did score against Serbia in a recent friendly. Ziyech will also provide for his teammate - he has been the Eredivisie's top assist provider in three of the last four years - and is also a dead ball specialist.

62% of Moroccan players used in  
 qualifying, were actually born  
 abroad! Senegal were next with  
 40%.



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MOROCCO | GROUP B

# GROUP B

## SAVETHEPUNTER

### The Manager

Doing what well-connected football men do, Mr. **Carlos Manuel Brito Leal Queiroz** has taken three teams to previous World Cups (South Africa in 2002, Portugal in 2010, and Iran in 2014) and is returning with Iran once more in '18. He's the trusty hand on the rudder and as a result is now Iran's longest ever serving manager having taken over in 2011.

He began his coaching career in Portugal, winning two FIFA World Youth Championships in a row with the Portugal Under-20s and then was just a late Dino Baggio goal away from taking the senior side to only their third ever World Cup at USA '94.

After achieving Sporting CP's first cup and best league finish in over a decade, he travelled the globe managing in America, Japan, and United Arab Emirates. As Manchester United assistant, Queiroz was groomed by Sir Alex Ferguson as his successor, but his stock fell after a poor season at Real Madrid and later an unpopular second spell with Portugal.

### Fixtures

#### ➔ Morocco 15/06



A must-win game right from the start in Saint Petersburg, missing a key player in Ezatohli, against a team who have a poor record away from home. However, Iran may struggle to create enough to win.

PREDICTION: IRAN 1-1 MOROCCO

#### ➔ Spain 20/06



Iran will rely on their defensive minded 4-2-3-1 formation and look to stifle any creativity from Spain. This may result in a much lower scoring game than some expect.

PREDICTION: IRAN 0-1 SPAIN

#### ➔ Portugal 25/06



Hopefully no late free-kicks for the star frontman this time, as Iran face the European champions in Saransk, another tight game decided by fine margins.

PREDICTION: IRAN 0-1 PORTUGAL



# IRAN

By Martin Dennehy and Oscar Phoenix

This will be the fifth occasion that Iran have graced the highest table of world football.

Disappointingly they have only once managed a win, beating United States 2-1 in 1998, and many do not expect that tally to be increased this time round. The only other footballing memories that Iran may spark for readers will probably be the fact that former player Ali Daei has scored more international goals than any other player (109) and that they lost 2-1 in the 2002 World Cup intercontinental play-off to a Republic of Ireland team featuring the likes of Kevin Kilbane and Gary Breen imitating Franco Baresi.

The Iranians' qualification campaign was all business. Undefeated. Invincible. Arsene would be proud. Conceding five goals in 18 qualifiers, Simeone would be proud too. Well, probably just quietly pleased. Excluding the hosts themselves, Team Melli (unoriginally, "The National Team") were the second team to book their flights to Moscow after fellow international journeymen Brazil.

Taking in the world football hotspots of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Ruislip along the way, they made light work of Rounds Two and Three of the Asian Football Confederation. In their final qualifying match against Syria they conceded for the first time in 13 games, displaying a defensive fortitude that might earn them a draw against Morocco, but probably not against either Portugal or Spain. Whilst solid at the back, they were not exactly battering teams at the other end, only scoring ten goals in the ten matches that the final qualification round comprised of.

### Squad & Tactics

They trust a very defensively-minded 4-2-3-1 and it gets the job done and some against weaker teams such as Guam, who they beat 6-0 in the first round of qualifying. Though confident in building attacks with quick one or two-touch short and long passing, Iran at a World Cup will be well drilled in defence, keeping men organised behind the ball and giving the opposition no space, breaking with frightening speed when their opponents commit too far forward. They've been toying with more pressing in recent games as an alternative, as Queiroz realizes they simply can't afford to be so predictable.

Iran have only won one of twelve matches in their previous World Cup appearances, losing eight of these games, although they have never exited a World Cup without at least one point.



## Iran Best Bet of World Cup 2018: Iran to finish bottom of Group B 5/6

Queiroz has been ruthless and surprising picking his final squad, entirely omitting several former regulars in favour of newer players who can play different roles. Nobody predicted this squad. Combined with the changing tactical adaptability for each match, it makes predicting an XI very tough.

Former #1 keeper Alireza Haghighi is completely omitted, meaning Alireza Beiranvand will be relied on to keep clean sheets but also provide the sudden counter-attacking threat with long throws straight into the opposing half.

Another surprise omission is Jalal Hosseini, who played most of Iran's qualifiers and several friendlies, but the 36-year-old centre-back was dropped to the standby list possibly with pace and stamina in mind. But only Queiroz knows which Iran-based defender will partner regular Morteza Pouraliganji in that key area. Milad Mohammadi will likely play left-back, with perhaps Ramin Rezaeian on the right.

The key man in the middle of the pitch is Saeid Ezatolahi, who will be suspended for the Morocco game. He's as close to a complete midfielder as the Iranians have, and played all 9 qualifiers at the age of 21. Olympiakos' Ehsan Hajsafi, who is closing in on 100 appearances, will likely start all 3 games.

Attacking midfielder Masoud Shojaei is the outspoken and progressive leader of the side. He, along with Hajsafi, were supposedly 'banned' by Iran after being "forced" to play against an Israeli club, but Queiroz ignored this and picked both.

Ashkan Dejagah captains the side, if fit. The German-Iranian's counter attacks against Argentina four years ago threatened an upset. He's still an Iran regular and is integral to keeping the team together, but has only played 14 minutes this season and underwent surgery in February.

The central striker will surely be Sardar Azmoun. In just 31 games, he has scored 23 goals, leading to the inevitable 'Iranian Messi' and 'new Daei' comparisons. Although his club form in Russia for Rubin Kazan has yet to reflect his stardom.

### Chances Of Progression

None to none. More of a chance of Trump finding those nuclear centrifuges himself. OK, slightly better than that with current prices of 6/1 to qualify out of the group, mainly because someone will stick a tenner on them, claiming that Iran are the Leicester of world football. But they'd be incorrect. However that's not really the point for many teams like Iran at the World Cup is it?

For some nations, this will be the only time they qualify in an entire generation and at least Iran can be mildly confident that this won't be the case for them. In Queiroz, the nation has united behind a borderline-firebrand due to his disagreement with the South Koreans during 2014 qualification when the South Koreans were angered by a "rude gesture" from Queiroz and what they lack in quality, they make up for in cohesion. Iran will not set the world alight this year by any means, but give it a few years with the right oversight and you never know.



### Unheralded Player

With Sardar Azmoun just not scoring for Kazan, the Iranian player to keep an eye on is Alireza Jahanbakhsh. Fast as hell with quick changes of direction to match, he's a handful and has shown it in the Eredivisie this season, finishing as the league's top scorer with 21 and enters the World Cup as one of the in-form players. It will not be a huge surprise to see him graduating to the big leagues post-tournament. He was a sub in Brazil but he's ready to become the main man in Russia.



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IRAN | GROUP B

# Group C

SAVETHEPUNTER

## The Manager

Didier Deschamps was renowned for his stamina and guile in his playing days as a defensive midfielder for Juventus.

Having a manager who was triumphant as an international player is always a bonus, and Didier certainly seemed to get this bunch of characters playing to the same tune on home turf two years ago. Captain of both the 1998 & 2000 winning teams, Deschamps has earned a reputation as making bizarre team selections though, and his stock could be on the wane.

Deschamps' domestic managerial career has been successful. In his first post, as manager of Monaco, he won the League Cup and guided Les Monégasques to the 2004 Champions League final where they were thoroughly beaten by Jose Mourinho's Porto. After four years in the principality, Deschamps resigned due to differences with the club president. He returned to his former club Juventus for a solitary season, winning Serie B before, perhaps oddly, resigning when the title was confirmed.

## Fixtures

### ➔ Australia 16/06



The Socceroos will simply be too weak for the might of France. An uncomplicated victory for France in their first game.

PREDICTION: FRANCE 3-0 AUSTRALIA

### ➔ Peru 21/06



Peru are a dangerous outfit but are without their inspirational captain for 'accidentally' ingesting cocaine, so France can qualify after two games.

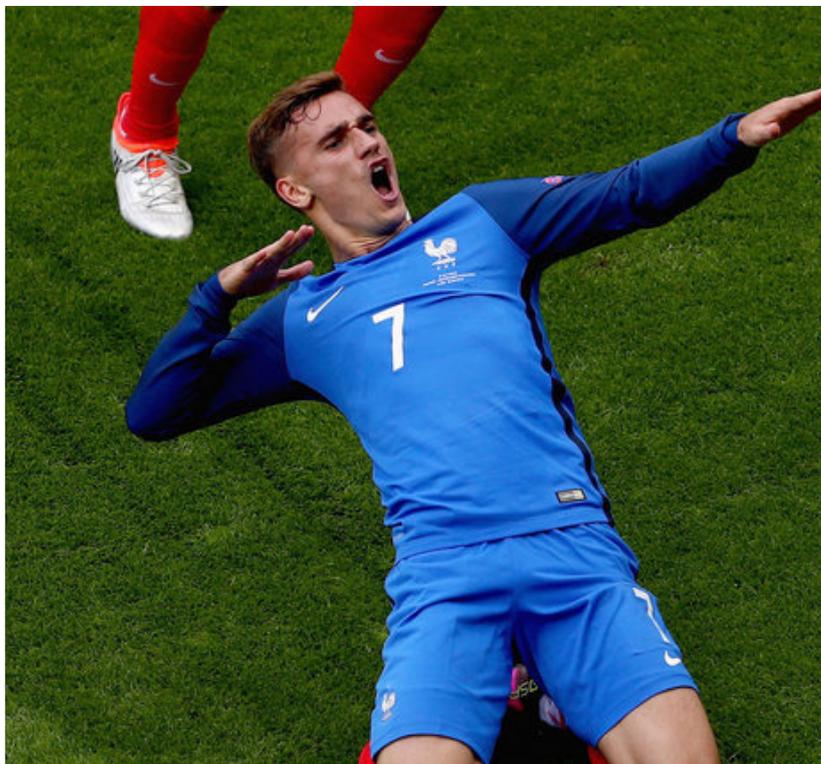
PREDICTION: FRANCE 1-0 PERU

### ➔ Denmark 26/06



Even if Les Blues field a second string team, with qualification assured, it would still be a match for The Danes at full strength.

PREDICTION: FRANCE 2-2 DENMARK



# FRANCE

By Parris Barron

Arguably among the most mentally weak sporting nation worldwide, France are rated fourth favourites to lift the Jules Rimet trophy. Perennially bottle jobs in other sports, at least their footballers, Les Bleus, have been able to lift international trophies in recent memory: World Cup '98 and Euro 2000.

France have not impressed during qualification. Their 7-2-1 record doesn't tell the whole story; they drew with Belarus and Luxembourg. The latter of those results was greeted with derision in the French media and the match further highlighted the worrying decline in France's goals per game. With just 18 goals in the 10 qualifiers, France scored three and eight goals less than Holland and Sweden respectively, both of whom finished below France in their qualifying group.

### Squad and Tactics

In spite of a number of high profile errors for both club and country, Tottenham's Hugo Lloris retains the absolute support of the squad and will start in goal and skipper the side. Four-time Champions League winner Raphael Varane and Barcelona's Samuel Umtiti will start at centre half. Perhaps Benjamin Mendy (Manchester City) will be given the friendlies to prove his fitness in a bid to take the left back slot. Either Monaco's Djibril Sidibe or Stuttgart's Benjamin Pavard will play right back.

N'golo Kante and Paul Pogba make up a familiar centre midfield partnership to English viewers. Blaise Matuidi, currently at Juventus, is a superb back-up option. Blackburn and Stoke fans will remember Steven N'Zonzi, who is in the squad and has been in fine form for Sevilla this season, but will likely spend most of the tournament on the bench.

Surprisingly, France's second best player at Euro 2016, Dimitri Payet, has not been given the chance to recover from the thigh injury he suffered in the Europa League final. This is yet another odd decision by Deschamps.

Therefore the wide berths could be filled by the world's second most expensive player, Kylian Mbappe of PSG, and Thomas Lemar, completing a very attack-minded midfield. Although Lemar

? Just Fontaine holds the record for most goals scored in a single tournament, having scored 13 goals for France in 1958.

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FRANCE | GROUP C



**France Best Bet of World Cup 2018:**  
 Dutch France being eliminated in the  
 Quarter Final (10/3) and Semi Final  
 (4/1) which will pay a touch better  
 than 18/5.

has not been in good form this season for Monaco. Consequently a lot of strain will be on Kante to keep the defensive shape. But, if anyone can cope it is the diminutive Chelsea workhorse.

Fresh from scoring twice for Atletico Madrid in their Europa League triumph in May, Antoine Griezmann will support female fan's favourite, Olivier Giroud up top. Both have four goals from qualifying and Greizmann's turn of pace and eye for goal were evident for all to see in France's run to the Euro 16 final. Barcelona's Ousmane Dembele and Marseille's Florian Thauvin, once a Newcastle reject, will be hoping for an opportunity to shine but those chances will probably be few and far between.

Alexandre Lacazette only made the standby list and such is the embarrassment of riches France have going forward, Atletico Madrid's Kevin Gameiro didn't even make the squad. For those unaware, Karim Benzema hasn't been selected for a long time due to his involvement in a strange blackmail case regarding a sex tape and fellow pro Mathieu Valbuena.

**Chances Of Progression**

It's not a popular opinion, but I feel France can be got at on the flanks. Neither full back has both experience and fitness and, as aforementioned, Lloris is always capable of a mistake. Nonetheless, they should be too strong for Australia and Peru and could go into the final group match already having qualified for the second round.

Both Argentina and Croatia (if indeed that's who qualifies from Group D) would represent a significant step-up in ability on Group C opponents. However, this French team should have enough about them to see either off, potentially with the need for extra time.

A Quarter Final appearance would put France against one of the better teams from Groups A and B. On the assumption Spain top their group, Les Blues could face a tricky tie against Portugal or Uruguay in the last eight. They'll likely need to replicate the attacking prowess they demonstrated at Euro 2016, where they top scored with two goals per game, if they are to ensure progression to the latter stages. If, and it's a big IF, they make it that far, the likely opponents would be Germany.

Whilst a repeat of their memorable win against Germany two years ago isn't out of the question, we're already talking about a lot of tight games that go either way. With a gun to my head I'd suggest that France will be eliminated in the Quarter or Semi Final.



**Unheralded Player**

One player who could come to the fore is Corentin Tolisso. Despite only having 6 caps, and playing just twice in the qualifiers, Tolisso has an x-factor that can help unlock tight defences.

Just shy of six foot tall, with Togolese heritage, Bayern's record signing should get game time from the bench and he could make enough of an impact to force his way into the starting line-up for one or two games if France go deep in the competition.

As demonstrated in the Champions League semi-final, the 23 year old Bayern Munich midfielder can mix it against the best in the World.



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# Group C

## SAVETHEPUNTER

### The Manager

For the second World Cup in a row the Socceroos will head into the tournament with a manager that hasn't been at the helm for long; a mere four months and 20 days from appointment to their opener versus France. This instability has been a major flaw in their preparation for this tournament, just as previously in 2014.

Ange Postecoglu was until recently the team's long term coach. Since Postecoglu steered Australia to 2015 Asian Cup glory, results have been patchy. Postecoglu ended up flagging his resignation during the knock out qualifiers.

Dutch coach **Bert van Marwijk** was named as Postecoglu's successor once the team qualified for Russia. Van Marwijk is a very experienced coach with two major achievements to his name: winning the UEFA Cup in 2002 with Feyenoord and reaching the 2010 World Cup final in charge of Holland.

He is a short term appointment and will be replaced by Graham Arnold after the 2018 World Cup.

### Fixtures

#### → France 16/06



The likes of Paul Pogba, Antoine Griezmann, Ousmane Dembele and Olivier Giroud are likely to be far too strong for the Socceroos to pick up anything from this game.

PREDICTION: AUSTRALIA 1-3 FRANCE

#### → Denmark 21/06



This is where the rubber hits the road. Denmark have some quality players, but will be less likely to blow the Aussies off the park. Australia will come prepared to absorb a lot of pressure and then hit on the counter.

PREDICTION: AUSTRALIA 1-2 DENMARK

#### → Peru 26/06



If the Socceroos have pulled off an unlikely draw in either of their first two matches a win here would secure qualification. However I doubt they'll be in that position, so this will be about future stars playing with freedom.

PREDICTION: AUSTRALIA 1-1 PERU



# AUSTRALIA

By Elisha Pearce

The Socceroos road to Russia was littered with pot holes, speed bumps and a few minor crashes. Leaving Oceania and joining the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) was supposed to help Australia qualify for World Cups easily, by avoiding tricky two-legged series against highly rated opposition. Things didn't work out like that this time.

Things started well in the first round of AFC qualifications. They easily topped a group containing Jordan, Tajikistan, Bangladesh and Kyrgyzstan. In the final group stage, with the top two spots reserved for automatic qualification, the Socceroos dropped their bundle away from home over and over again.

The Socceroos could have overcome goal difference to automatically qualify by thumping Thailand in their last match, but embarrassingly Matt Leckie had to save the match in the 86th minute. Australia would have to progress on knockouts; first up Syria.

Syria's home game, which they hosted in Malaysia, saw Australia cruise for the majority of the match but a Syrian penalty ended the game in a draw. Australia went down a goal in just the sixth minute in the Sydney leg. Step up, Tim Cahill. The old horse scored two goals to secure progression.

The final hurdle to qualification were Honduras and the Socceroos accounted for them much easier with a 3-1 aggregate victory taking them to Russia.

#### Squad and Tactics

Given van Marwijk has only had two matches to show the world what he will do with the Socceroos at the World Cup, it's hard to know what specific tactics he will employ. But some hints are worth exploring.

Under Postecoglu the focus was on possession and ball movement more than under previous coaches. Increasingly the team played with three at the back and overlapping wing players on the flanks. That meant the midfield could be flooded with players tasked with passing and pressuring..

? Australia hold the largest win record in World Cup qualifying, beating American Samoa 31-0 in 2001. Archie Thompson scored ten times.



## Australia Best Bet of World Cup 2018: Tom Rogic top team scorer 10/1

The likes of Aaron Mooy, Massimo Luongo and Tom Rogic all shone in that system.

Despite the emergence of a group of excellent young midfield players the Socceroos still always seemed to rely on goals from their stalwart striker, Tim Cahill, in the big moments.

In 2010 van Marwijk guided Holland to the final by employing a direct and physically brutal style of football. In the second of the Socceroos two matches under van Marwijk the Socceroos were back in a more familiar 4-4-2 shape and played extremely compact in defence.

So there are signs are that a more physical and counter-attacking style may be employed at the world cup. It's unlikely we'll see a Barca-esque performance.

That means Tim Cahill – older and slower now – will need to be utilized in key spots, rather than start every game. But for this new keep-it-tight and blast-on-the-counter Socceroos team to get results in Russia they'll need to defend extremely well. That means the key players in the team are Trent Sainsbury of Grasshoppers FC and Matthew Jurman of the well-renowned Suwon Bluewings!

Finally, it's worth mentioning Tom Rogic of Celtic. He'll play just behind a lone striker, has a decent goalscoring record at club level, and in Australia's last 5 games, averaged more shots and shots on target than anyone else.

### Chances of Progression

Australia drew France (ranked 7 in the world), Peru (11) and Denmark (12) in their World Cup pool. Australia's is ranked 40th at the time of writing.

If you add the rankings of France, Peru and Denmark you get 30. Only three quarters of the way to the Socceroos ranking. Perhaps that is a very crude way to illustrate the relative

strength of the Aussies and the rest of Pool C but it does paint a vivid picture.

Progression for Australia looks like this: minimise the goal difference slide against France in what is probably a loss first up; hold on for a draw against Denmark then line up Peru in the third match and beat them by enough to pass Denmark on goal difference.



### Unheralded Player

Mass Luongo was a revelation at the 2015 Asian Cup, where he burst into the national consciousness in Australia with a string of dominant midfield performances.

At his best he has a bit of everything: tenacious defence, the ability to beat his man, stamina, a strong shot and a good final pass. Since 2015 his performances for the Socceroos haven't reached the same heights as regularly. But his form has been improving over the last 12 months and he won player of the year at Queen's Park Rangers recently.

Given a more compact style of play looks likely for the Socceroos, players like Luongo, who can drive the engine room of a hardworking team but still have enough left in the tanks to dazzle when the opportunity comes up, will be vital to their chances of success.

Other midfielders are arguably classier and silkier on the ball, but Luongo has a positive reputation in Australia as being a bit of a mongrel and an appetite for the big moments.



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AUSTRALIA | GROUP C

# Group C

SAVETHEPUNTER

## The Manager

Coach **Ricardo Gareca** has been in charge since 2015 and has led two successful Copa America campaigns, with a third place finish in the 2015 Copa America, followed by a penalty defeat in the quarter finals to Colombia in 2016.

It appears Gareca has instilled some self-belief in the squad and has a core group of players he has built around and stuck with.

The signs have been good in both recent qualification games and Copa America tournament style football.

Peru should go into this World Cup with a good team spirit and confidence that they can perform on the big stage, something that has been sorely lacking in recent history.

## Fixtures

### ➔ Denmark 16/06



This has the looks of a tight, cagey affair as shown with odds of Under 2.5 goals @ 6/10. Both teams prefer to sit back and know they cannot afford to lose this match. A moment of quality could win it but the draw is likely.

**PREDICTION: PERU 1-1 DENMARK**

### ➔ France 21/06



France are big favourites in the group and Peru getting anything out of this game would be seen as a bonus. France have a pacy defence which will be tough to exploit, and a powerful midfield which will take a big effort to contain. Peru will need their best effort if they are to avoid defeat.

**PREDICTION: PERU 0-1 FRANCE**

### ➔ Australia 26/06



As long as they do not lose the first 2 matches, Peru will still have a chance to qualify with a victory in what is the most winnable game of the group. Peru will likely need goals and the combination of Farfan, Cueva and Flores should cause the Socceroos problems.

**PREDICTION: PERU 3-0 AUSTRALIA**



# PERU

By Peter O'Toole

Peru are making their 1st appearance at The World Cup since 1982 after a dramatic qualifying campaign. Playing in the tough South American qualifying group, Peru finished 5th with 26 points from 18 games, in what was an incident packed journey to Russia.

The Peruvians got off to a terrible start in qualifying losing four of their first six games, but everything turned with an away game in Bolivia. Peru had gone over 12 years without an away win in World Cup Qualification, losing 25 of 27 matches. It was an incredible run, especially considering that Peru are not a team who play at high altitude, such as Bolivia and Ecuador. Peru don't benefit from this environmental familiarity, making their stellar results at home even more impressive.

Back on the pitch they lost 2-0 in Bolivia, but the hosts fielded an ineligible player and the match was awarded to Peru 3-0! That fortune went down as Peru's first away win since 2004, and acted as a catalyst for an improved team and indeed eventual qualification, as they lost only two of the remaining 11 matches. Good home form is typical, so finishing with away Shot and Shot on Target ratios that were identical to Argentina, shows the extent of their away progress too.

### Squad & Tactics

The big drama unfolded towards the end of the qualifying campaign, with a now postponed drugs ban for star striker and Talisman Paolo Guerrero. After a great 0-0 result in Argentina in October 2017, Guerrero tested positive for benzoylcegonine, the main metabolite of cocaine and was handed a one year ban. After appeal, Fifa accepted Guerrero's story that he had drunk tea brewed in the same pot as a traditional Peruvian coca-leaf tea, and had no intention of enhancing his performance.

We have been on the ground in Peru talking to locals. They are ecstatic to be back at the World Cup but feel the treatment of their start striker is unfair. A lot of people suggesting sabotage is at play and not for the first time, but this is merely conjecture. The ban was reduced to 6 months allowing The striker to play at the World Cup and he returned in May with three games for his club side Flamengo. Unfortunately, WADA, in their infinite wisdom decided to appeal to the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS), looking for a full two year ban to be imposed.



The lowest attendance at any World Cup tournament match took place in 1930, involving Romania v Peru, with only 300 spectators.

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PERU | GROUP C



## Peru Best Bet of World Cup 2018: Peru to beat Australia at 11/8

Despite also accepting Guerrero's story and that he was not attempting to enhance his performance, CAS decided to extend the ban anyway. We were almost in the ludicrous position of seeing clear doping occur unchecked in certain other sports, but having Guerrero denied his chance to play at The World Cup. Fortunately, justice has prevailed and the Swiss court has ruled that the ban extension was incorrect.

A goalscorer, Guerrero can also hold up the ball and bring the attacking midfielders into play when Peru are playing on the counter. The 6ft11 thirty-four year old is also vital in the dressing room.

Peru will likely line up in a 4-2-3-1 formation and look to play on the counter attack against Denmark and France. A lot of the squad do not have much experience against European sides and while counter attacking should suit them, the defence could be an issue. Indeed, Coach Gareca has spoken of the dangers if they end up defending too deep. The first game vs Denmark is hugely important. France are big favourites to win the group and Australia are struggling a bit at the moment. Peru don't have any time to feel their way into the tournament. A loss against Denmark would make it very difficult to qualify, but, if they start well and get into the tournament early, they could improve as the games go on. The worry is the lack of World Cup experience in the squad. Many teams in recent years that are lacking experience, seem unable to play their best football in the final group game.

European football fans will recognise Jefferson Farfan after his spells at PSV and Schalke. Farfan still has the pace to trouble defences. Additionally, Peru have some exciting attacking midfielders who can create and score goals. Edison Flores was a revelation in

qualifying with his dribbling and notoriously powerful shooting, scoring five goals. Christian Cueva will be vital in Russia: the Sao Paulo man is a good dribbler, with excellent technique and a great change of pace. He will likely play in behind the striker and will be asked to provide assists, as well as score goals. I have certainly seen worse bets than the 8/1 available with BetVictor for Cuevas to be Top Peru goalscorer.

### Chances Of Progression

Peru are a good side who have the potential to progress from this group. The questions are around the defence and if they can hold up to the pressure playing at a first World Cup in 36 years will bring. The game against Denmark will be huge. Without Guerrero it would have been tough for Peru to score the necessary goals to progress. His clearance to play will buoy an excited nation and Peru can be fancied to make the 2nd round. If you think Peru can perform at their best, then you'll find value in getting 'La Blanquirroja' inside.



### Unheralded Player

A more unheralded name to look for is Renato Tapia. The 22 year old Feyenoord man will look to showcase his talent on the world stage. Tapia is a strong powerful midfielder who will be tasked with breaking up attacks and protecting the defence. He likes a tackle and when he spots the opportunity is a powerful runner with the ball who can transition his side from defence into attack quickly.



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PERU | GROUP C

# Group C

SAVETHEPUNTER

## The Manager

Åge Hareide took over management of the Danish team in December 2015. This was a seismic shift in Danish football, as the previous coach, Morten Olsen, had managed the team for more than 15 years (he left following a failed bid to qualify for the 2016 European Championship).

During his career, Hareide has mostly managed Scandinavian teams such as Brøndby, Malmö, and Rosenborg. He has ample experience, being a manager since 1985, and has won multiple leagues and competed in Europe with his previous clubs.

In the 1990's he was linked with moves to Manchester City, Leeds United and Wimbledon. However, the Norwegian decided to remain in Scandinavia, where he has now amassed over 750 games in management, with a win rate of almost 50%.

Hareide played 50 times for Norway, scoring five times.

## Fixtures

### ➔ Peru 16/06



Denmark should have too much quality going forward for Peru and should pick up three points in their opening match.

PREDICTION: DENMARK 2-1 PERU

### ➔ Australia 21/06



The Australian side lack attacking prowess, and although they may hit Denmark on the counter, expect Denmark to dominate this game and knock Australia out.

PREDICTION: AUSTRALIA 1-3 DENMARK

### ➔ France 26/06



The toughest game for Denmark could see a high scoring game if France potentially play a weakened side after having already qualified.

PREDICTION: DENMARK 2-2 FRANCE



# DENMARK

By Jens Koed Madsen

Having finished second in their group (behind Poland, led by the irrepressible Lewandowski), Denmark qualified for the 2018 World Cup via a 5-1 aggregate win over the Republic of Ireland in a play-off. In these matches, the Spurs playmaker, Christian Eriksen, showed talent, determination and exploitation of space and scored a hat-trick to secure their place in Russia.

As a team, Denmark has not enjoyed much success in recent World Cups: failing to qualify in both the 2006 and 2014 competitions, whilst not managing to get out of the group stage in 2010. Although currently ranked 12th in the FIFA rankings, they will go to the tournament in Russia knowing that unity and discipline will be paramount in the absence of individual stars. Denmark will hope to replicate their performance in 1998 where they reached the quarter final, but progression from the group should be the main aim.

While the Danes have not had much success at World Cups, they managed to beat the odds in 1992 where they won the European Championship, to date the highest sporting achievement of the Danish national side.

#### Squad & Tactics

Since the glorious 1986 World Cup team (with high profile players like Laudrup, Elkjær, and Molby, as well as the coach of 15 years, Morten Olsen), the Danish ethos has revolved around creative, yet very organised and controlled performances. During Åge Hareide's tenure, the Danish team has continued this philosophy whenever possible.

Traditionally, the Danish team, especially under former coach Morten Olsen, have looked to the Dutch style of football. Given the opportunity, the Danes will keep the ball on the floor, play a passing game and move off the ball. However, when faced with stronger teams, realism will necessarily set in, and they will be happy to sit back and rely on structured discipline to counteract teams with more creativity or better players.

Under Hareide, Eriksen, the main player, has flourished on the national team, becoming the leading goal scorer in the qualification campaign with 11 goals. The team has fielded three at the back, providing a strong presence in midfield. If Eriksen has a good World Cup, the Danish team

? Denmark hold the record for fastest goal for a substitute at a World Cup. Ebbe Sand scored after just 16 seconds v Nigeria in 1998.

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DENMARK | GROUP C



## Denmark Best Bet of World Cup 2018: Denmark to beat Australia at 4/5

could progress from the group stage to the knock-out matches.

Kasper Schmeichel (Leicester City) is sure to start in goal. Having made his debut five years ago, he has now become the established number one for Denmark with over 30 caps.

The spine of the team looks somewhat set with Simon Kjær (Sevilla) captaining the defence alongside Matthias Zanka Jørgensen (Huddersfield Town).

William Kvist (FC Copenhagen) will aim to provide defensive solidity in the centre of midfield, with his aim to break up play, pushing the ball forward to creative outlets in the side.

Unfortunately, the one Lord, Nicklas Bendtner, misses out due to injury, so the onus will be on the other attackers like Yussuf Poulsen (RB Leipzig), Victor Fischer (FC Copenhagen) and Nicolai Jørgensen to contribute to the goal tally, alongside Eriksen himself. Jørgensen will probably start up top and he certainly provides a threat, as illustrated by the fact he was Eredivisie's top scorer in 2016/17 for Feyenoord. He uses his strength well and is particularly dangerous in and around the six yard box, or running onto through balls to finish first time with his right foot.

### Chances of Progression

By a distance, France are the strongest team in a group also containing, Peru, and Australia. However, Denmark should aim to progress from the group. They will look to matches against Peru and Australia, both of which are winnable.

Even facing a classy French side, Denmark can look to recent history for inspiration. In 2002 Denmark beat the then World Champions, France, 2-0. The Danes actually topped the Group thanks to that win with goals from Dennis Rommedahl and Jon Dahl Tomasson.

If Denmark manages to qualify for the knockout stage in second place, rankings suggest that they would come up against Argentina in the second round. The Argentines do have their weaknesses. It will be a mix of playing to their maximum and lady luck that gets Denmark into the Quarter Finals.



### Unheralded Player

Two lesser known players, Pione Sisto (Celta Vigo) and Thomas Delaney (Werder Bremen) will provide balance and creative support in the Danish midfield.

Both have made recent successful leaps from the Danish Superliga to clubs abroad (Sisto moved from FC Midtjylland in 2016; Delaney from FC Copenhagen in 2017) and have both progressed as players as a result. William Kvist (FC Copenhagen) will fill the defensive role in midfield that allows the others to flourish.

If the Danish team is to progress in Russia, the balance in the midfield will be crucial. Sisto, and Delaney will be the potential stars to look out for in this Danish side over the summer.

? All of Denmark's 27 World Cup goals have been scored from inside the box.



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# Group D

SAVETHEPUNTER

## The Manager

**Jorge Sampaoli** has been in charge of Argentina since May 2017, having spent the previous season managing Sevilla. Sampaoli boasts pedigree at international level, having previously managed Chile to success in Copa America.

Managing a variety of Peruvian and Chilean domestic sides at the beginning of his managerial career, it was at Universidad de Chile where he made a name for himself, winning the league three times and the Copa Sudamericana in 2011.

Next was a spell as manager as Sevilla where Sampaoli boasted a 51% win record in his one season in charge. He's been in charge of Argentina for less than a year, with a 5-3-3 record. Inspired by Manuel Bisela, Sampaoli likes to experiment tactically, playing 3-3-1-3 regularly when at Sevilla, before lining up his Argentina side in a 2-3-5 formation in a friendly in summer 2017 against Singapore. He will often set his team to press opposition centre backs very high, which has become almost synonymous with his name, and we should expect to see this throughout the World Cup.

## Fixtures

### ➔ Iceland 16/06



Argentina will potentially struggle to break down the high energy Icelandics, and although they have more quality going forward, may labour to a draw.

PREDICTION: ARGENTINA 1-1 ICELAND

### ➔ Croatia 21/06



Another tough game for Argentina comes in their second match. Croatia are likely to try and control midfield with Modric and Rakitic, and Argentina could lose the midfield battle in this match. However, a moment of magic could see them win.

PREDICTION: ARGENTINA 1-0 CROATIA

### ➔ Nigeria 26/06



In a game they may still need points from, I would expect Sampaoli to push for all three points and potentially play an unexpected formation against the African side.

PREDICTION: ARGENTINA 2-0 NIGERIA



# ARGENTINA

By Alex Everson

Although Argentina finished 3rd in CONMEBOL qualification, they barely scraped through, needing a win on the final matchday against Ecuador to grab themselves automatic qualification. A World Cup without Argentina seems almost unthinkable, given they have only missed out on qualification once in the past, back in 1970.

The Albiceleste went through three managers and 42 different players during qualification. The main issue for Argentina during this time was their lack of ability to score; they only managed 19 goals in their 18 games. A lot of this was down to the continued rotation of strikers, with none bar Messi really managing to hold down their spot in the side.

The make or break match at altitude in Quito was luckily against an Ecuador team with nothing to play for. After going 1-0 down in the opening minutes, things looked bleak. Then Lionel Messi did what he does best. A hat-trick from Messi saw them take a 3-1 victory and qualification was ensured.

Argentina go into the finals on the back of being beaten 6-1 by Spain in a friendly in March, with what was a full strength side (with the exception of the absent Messi). The fans in South America are demanding and the squad know that any similar performances in the World Cup will be met with displeasure.

### Squad & Tactics

The squad for Argentina revolves around one man, Lionel Messi. His inclusion however has caused rifts within the squad, with Serie A joint top scorer Mauro Icardi being left out of the squad due to personal issues he has with both Messi and other members of the squad.

Predicting the Argentina line up alongside Messi up front is like picking names out of a hat, with one of Aguero, Higuain or Dybala lining up alongside him. All three have started under Sampaoli, who does not appear to have been able to settle on a standard first choice strikeforce.

? Argentina are the only team to win two penalty shootouts in one tournament. Beating Yugoslavia in the quarter finals, and Italy in the semi finals in 1990.

STP

ARGENTINA | GROUP D



**Argentina Best Bet of World Cup  
2018:  
Under 7.5 tournament goals scored  
5/6**

The midfield will likely see two direct wingers: Di Maria on the left and Lanzini on the right. Central midfield should feature Sevilla's Ever Banega, who will aim to direct the play out wide to the more attacking forces within the side. He will likely line up alongside Lucas Biglia of AC Milan.

The defence for Argentina is the most stable unit of the side - Nicolas Otamendi and Javier Mascherano are both very likely to have starting spots. If Argentina go for three centre backs - we could see Federico Fazio from Roma line up alongside them. They do however have the option of going to a flat back four, with Nicolas Tagliafico playing at left back potentially and Gabriel Mercado coming in at right back, both with European experience for Ajax and Sevilla respectively.

Man United's Sergio Romero has been ruled out, dealing a cruel blow for the goalkeeper who played in the final just four years ago. Argentina are left with little international experience in goal going into the World Cup, with the three keepers they are taking in the squad having less than ten caps between them.

The formation is likely to be 3-5-2 or 3-4-3 it seems, however, it does appear that Jorge is likely to switch these up if it appears they are not working. Their final friendly against Haiti is unlikely to give them much in the way of any answers for a final formation.

**Chances Of Progression**

Argentina have been rated the favourites in group D to qualify and sitting in 5th in the World Rankings, you understand why. However, digging deeper into their issues, there may be some underlying issues with Argentina. What happens if Messi is injured or marked out of the game? Do they even know their best XI?

None of their group games will be straight forward, and it may be that Argentina struggle to break down these mid tier

sides, Croatia, Nigeria and Iceland, in the "group of death". However, qualification out of the group is expected for the Argentinians.

The main path forwards following the group for Argentina relies on them winning the group. If they fail to win the group, they are very likely to be knocked out by arch rivals Brazil in the second round.

To go deep into the tournament, they need former Golden Ball winner Messi to have a tournament where he takes the headlines. If this doesn't happen, Argentina could be one team who fail to live up to expectations and head home earlier than expected.



**Unheralded Player**

Whilst Argentina have many marquee names, one player who could bolster his reputation is Cristian Pavon. The 22 year old currently plays for Boca Juniors and was only called up to the squad for the first time at the end of 2017. However, he assisted two goals in his first two caps playing as an attacking wide player. He once, at the age of 12, compared himself as a replica to Lionel Messi, showing his confidence knows no bounds as a player. Well, we all like to write our own reviews!

Pavon has been directly involved in a goal, be it assist or putting it in the back of the net himself, once every 122 minutes this season, and a strong tournament for him could result in a big money move to Europe in the summer.



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**ARGENTINA | GROUP D**

# Group D

SAVETHEPUNTER

## The Manager

Current head coach **Heimir Hallgrímsson** has now been in and around the Iceland national team for the past seven years, as assistant from 2011-2013, before joining forces with Lars Lagerback (previously sole manager) and becoming joint manager in 2013. This was the case until after Euro 2016 when he took sole charge, as Lagerback left to manage the Norway side.

Hallgrímsson was still working as a part time dentist in his local village in Iceland up until his position as full time coach was confirmed, following the teams successful tournament at Euro 2016.

Prior to working with the Icelandic national side, Hallgrímsson had also managed both the mens and womens IBV teams in respective top divisions in Iceland, coming third two years running in 2011 and 2012 with the mens team and winning the league once with the women's team.

## Fixtures

### ➔ Argentina 16/06



For their very first World Cup match, Iceland may attempt to frustrate Argentina and I think they may succeed in their aims.

PREDICTION: ICELAND 1-1 ARGENTINA

### ➔ Nigeria 22/06



Iceland will go into their second game potentially on the crest of a wave if they avoid defeat, however their second game against Nigeria could see the African side playing the better football and restricting Iceland to counter attacks.

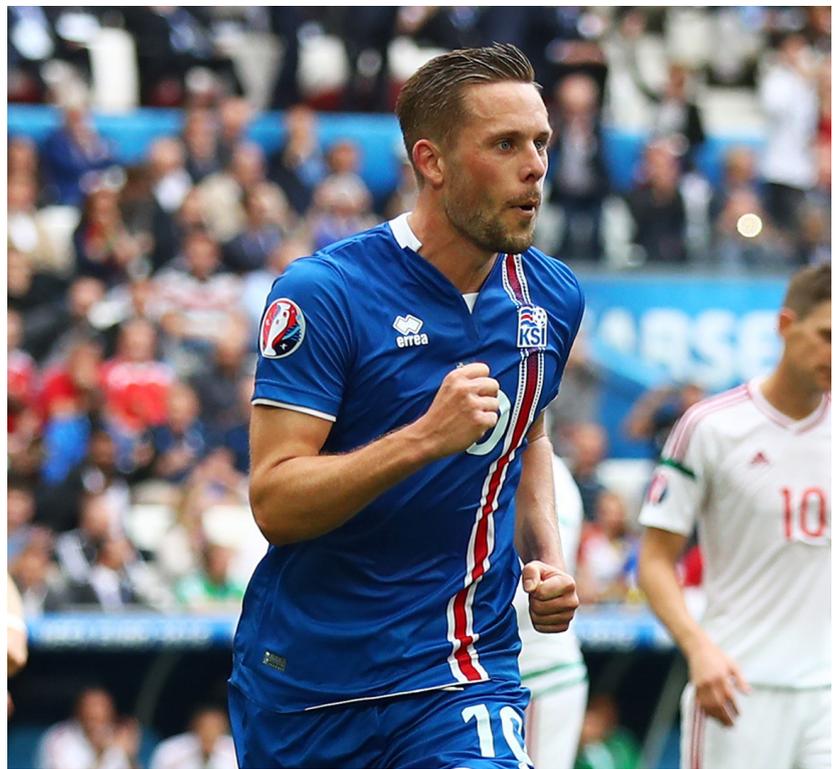
PREDICTION: ICELAND 0-1 NIGERIA

### ➔ Croatia 26/06



This match sees a repeat from the qualifying matches. If Iceland can replicate their last minute goal, they may be heading to the last 16.

PREDICTION: ICELAND 2-1 CROATIA



# ICELAND

By Alex Everson

Iceland make their first appearance this year at a World Cup, following quickly on the back of their international tournament debut at Euro 2016, where they went on an unlikely run, defeating England on the way to the quarter finals. There they were overpowered 5-2 by the host country, France, but this was still a remarkable performance for a small nation of around 350,000 people which, until recently, were genuine minnows.

However, having upset the odds again and topped a qualifying group containing Croatia, Turkey and Ukraine in order to make into this summer's competition, perhaps we should stop being so surprised at the Icelandic success story, which is largely due to a sustained period of investment in coaching and facilities since the mid-2000s.

In their ten games during qualification, the Icelandics scored 22 points, finishing two clear of Croatia in second. They had multiple important moments in qualification, including coming from 2-1 behind at home to Finland and winning 3-2, scoring twice in injury time.

A last minute win at home to Croatia also gave them the edge in the second half of their qualification road, as they won their last three games, jumping over the Croats when Finland scored very late on away in Rijeka, meaning Croatia dropped vital points as Iceland were winning away in Turkey. This left them with the simple task of beating a Kosovo side (who had only scored three goals and picked up one point) to top the group in their final game.

### Squad & Tactics

Iceland tend to line up playing 4-4-1-1, with Gylfi Sigurdsson controlling the number ten slot with Aron Gunnarsson manning the central midfield. They have experimented with 4-4-2 in recent friendlies, with this potentially being due to the loss of Alfred Finnbogason of FC Augsburg, who picked up a calf injury in January. However, they are expected to go back to their trusted 4-4-1-1 which served them so well in qualifying.

Iceland are not traditionally high scorers, with manager Hallgrímsson setting them up to play a fairly defensive, counter attacking style of football, relying heavily on set pieces to try and

? With a population of less than 350,000, Iceland has become the smallest nation to qualify for the World Cup ever. Prior to this, Trinidad & Tobago with a 1.3M population were smallest in 2006.



## Iceland Best Bet of World Cup 2018: Iceland to qualify from Group D 7/2

create chances for their big defenders. Of course, star man Gylfi Sigurdsson, who has been their talisman throughout this and the previous qualifying campaign and has spearheaded the Icelandic burst onto the International scene over the past 3-5 years, is dangerous from direct free kicks.

Other key men include Birkir Bjarnsson, currently playing central midfield for Aston Villa, and Alfred Finnbogason, who was having a very strong season for Augsburg in Bundesliga before coming down with a calf injury in February - although he is looking like he will be coming back in the final month of the season, and Iceland will need him to hit the ground running if they are to spring a surprise in the World Cup.

Should he not make it back in time, it is likely that they will be relying on Reading striker Jon Dadi Bodvarsson to get the goals. Having had a reasonable season with Reading, he may fancy his chances of getting himself a goal at the World Cup this summer.

The captain for Iceland is recently promoted Cardiff City central midfielder Aron Gunnarsson, who alongside Birkir Bjarnsson, will look to ensure play is broken up swiftly, and move the ball towards Sigurdsson and Finnbogason.

Aron Gunnarsson also gives the Icelandic side a weapon going forward and teams will need to watch out for his extremely dangerous long throw ins.

### Chances of Progression

The Icelandic team may struggle to get much from their opener against Argentina, with the critical match in Group D the final game against Croatia. If they are to proceed to the Round of 16, they will need to emulate the match the two played in the second half of their qualifying campaign together, as Iceland won 1-0. No win in their first two matches will see

them struggle to go through, as Nigeria will likely prove a stern test also in their final game and this is reflected by the fact that Iceland are the outsiders in the group to qualify at 4.50.

Should they make it through, it'll likely be at the expense of Croatia and Nigeria, in second place behind Argentina. They would then line up against the winners of group C, which many assume to be France. They would probably end the Icelandic side's first world cup experience..

Odds of 5.00 for Iceland to be eliminated during the Round of 16 reflect this, and it is a struggle to see them getting much further than that stage.



### Unheralded Player

Known to fans of the Premier League, Jóhann (Joey) Berg Guðmundsson has spent the last two seasons playing for Burnley as an attacking winger, proving to be a pivotal player in their extremely successful 2017/18 season.

Guðmundsson has played well over 60 times for Iceland, and will be one to watch out for if Gylfi Sigurdsson does not manage to gain full fitness before the World Cup kicks off, with his potential attacking flair on offer for Iceland when they go forward.

? 66,000 Iceland fans applied for ticket for the World Cup, over 20% of the countries population



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ICELAND | GROUP D

# Group D

SAVETHEPUNTER

## The Manager

Zlatko Dalić is the man who steadied the ship and got Croatia to Russia after Ante Čačić was sacked with one qualification group game remaining.

A former midfielder who retired in 2000, Dalić had short stints at Croatian and Albanian clubs before joining Al-Faisaly. No doubt the reader is abundantly aware of this fairly recently formed Saudi club. Dalić has spent his career since then in Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Perhaps his biggest achievement to date was leading Al-Ain to the AFC Champions League Final in 2016, where they narrowly lost to South Korean club Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors.

Dalić was also the U21 national team assistant manager from 2006-2011 where he managed a number of the current squad including Mario Mandžukić, Nikola Kalinić and Dejan Lovren.

## Fixtures

### ➔ Nigeria 16/06



An opening match which should be very open, which will allow the experienced Croatian midfield to take control of the tie.

PREDICTION: CROATIA 2-1 NIGERIA

### ➔ Argentina 21/06



Messi is likely to be the difference in this match, with Croatia not quite having the same star power up front as the South American side does.

PREDICTION: CROATIA 1-2 ARGENTINA

### ➔ Iceland 26/06



Croatia will be made to work for the points against a well-drilled Iceland. A narrow victory should see them through..

PREDICTION: CROATIA 1-0 ICELAND



# CROATIA

By Kieran McGirr

Croatia, with their distinctive red and white chequered tops, will be making their fifth appearance at a World Cup this summer, having been officially formed in 1990 and previously being part of Yugoslavia. The national side's best performance to date was undoubtedly their debut at France 1998, where a Croatia team that included Slaven Bilić, Mario Stanić and Davor Šuker famously defeated Germany in the quarter finals and took the lead against the hosts in the semi, before Lilian Thuram's double sent the Croats out. The current squad, full of players at top European clubs, will look to emulate that third place finish in 1998.

Croatia endured a bumpy trip on their journey to the finals in a closely contested group. Half way through the campaign, they topped their table having won four and drawn one, but a poor run ensued and they picked up only four points in their next four matches, including scraping a 1-0 win at home to minnows Kosovo and a 1-1 home draw against lowly Finland. The unpopular manager Ante Čačić was promptly sacked and replaced by Zlatko Dalić, who guided the team to the win in Ukraine they needed to secure second place. Vatreni ("The Blazers") then strolled their play-off tie against Greece, winning the first leg away in Athens 4-1, before seeing out a goalless draw at home.

### Squad And Tactics

Part of the problem during qualification under previous manager Čačić was perhaps the inconsistency in team formation and selection. Since taking over, Dalić has tended to go with a 4-2-3-1 and there is enough strength in depth in the squad to create good competition for starting places in most positions. A definite starter will be AS Monaco's number one, Danijel Subašić and the centre back partnership will be formed from two of Liverpool's Lovren, Beşiktaş' Domagoj Vida and the veteran Vedran Corluka, the former Manchester City and Spurs defender, who is currently at Lokomotiv Moscow. Ivan Strinić (AC Milan) and Šime Vrsaljko are the usual starting full backs, although the former has been low on match practice after being frozen out of previous club Sampdoria's starting XI this year.

There are more recognisable names in the midfield, with Barcelona's Ivan Rakitić filling one of the holding slots and the most likely candidate to fill the other berth is Marcelo Brozović, Inter

? In 1998, with six goals, Davor Šuker fired Croatia to third place.

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CROATIA | GROUP D



## Croatia Best Bet of World Cup 2018: Perisic top Croatia goalscorer @ 5/1

Milan's box-to-box midfielder, who became increasingly important in the Nerazzurri's push into the final Champions League slot. Ahead of them, captain Luka Modrić pulls the strings and so much hinges on his ability to control possession and find defence-splitting balls in the final third. Out wide, Dalić has tended to use Ivan Perišić (Inter) and Mandžukić, the Juventus forward who scored one of the great Champions League Final goals in 2017 and who can always be relied upon to run himself into the ground.

Up top, Nikola Kalinić, once of Blackburn Rovers and now at AC Milan, is expected to lead the line. However, he has never been a prolific striker as indicated by this season's return of just six goals in 41 club appearances and Croatia will look to Andrej Kramarić of 1899 Hoffenheim to get goals from the bench. Mandžukić could also be asked to play further forward, with a host of young talent ready to fill the wing slots in that event. One who is generating a lot of attention at the moment is Eintracht Frankfurt wideman Ante Rebić, who scored twice as his club shocked Bayern Munich to win the German Cup recently. Indeed, Rebić scored in the German Cup final in 2017 too, as Frankfurt lost to Dortmund. Blessed with pace and quick feet, as well as a willingness to track back, perhaps the reason he may not be trusted from the start is his hotheadedness - he was sent off as Croatia crashed out of the last World Cup in the final group game.

Because there is no guarantee who will start as the lone striker for this team. Kalinic or Kramaric could lead the line with Mandzukic in behind but there is no guarantee they will play every game. Mandzukic is rightfully the favourite in this market after his 5 goals in qualifying but it may be worth going for Perisic here. Croatia were not prolific scorers in qualifying and it may not take many goals to win this bet. He will play in attack and given licence. He can score from anywhere as we have seen with 11 league goals this season and 17 goals in 64 caps for Croatia.

### Chances of Progression

The Croatian public will be very disappointed if their team does not finish above Nigeria and Iceland to secure a place in the round of 16 along with Argentina.

Likely opponents there would be France and although they are inferior on paper, the Croats have enough talent, especially if Modric is on his game, to cause an upset against one of the tournament favourites.



### Unheralded Player

Atletico Madrid right-back Šime Vrsaljko may well be the new star to emerge from the Croatian team this summer. An astute defender and full of stamina, Vrsaljko is a handful going forward, using his pace to make marauding runs down the right side and he is adept at picking out teammates in the box; expect his attacking threat to pin back some opposition left wingers.

He is a leader on the pitch too, having captained his country against Argentina back in 2014, aged just 22. Vrsaljko also has an edge to reel in, having recently been sent off in the Europa League semi final against Arsenal for a bad challenge on Lacazette.



There have been five red cards in Croatia's last four World Cup matches



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# Group D

SAVETHEPUNTER

## The Manager

Nigeria have a non-traditional management structure with German **Gernot Rohr** as Technical Advisor, who takes charge of match days and **Salisu Yusuf**, a former Eagles international, as Chief Coach.

Yusuf is aged 54 and has managed domestically, winning two Nigerian FA Cup titles and led the Kano Pillars to the Nigeria Premier League title in 2008. Yusuf's qualities were recognised after the quarter final of the African Cup of Nations in 2017 with goalkeeper Ezenwa praising his "composure and enduring belief" in his players even after they fell behind.

Rohr is aged 64 and has managed in France, Switzerland and North Africa. In 1996, he led Bordeaux (and a young Zinedine Zidane) to the UEFA Cup final, losing to a Bayern Munich team that contained the likes of Khan, Matthäus and Klinsmann. Nigeria are the fourth African nation that he has managed, beginning in 2010 with Gabon, where he was for two years before spending another two with Niger, after which came a period managing Burkino Faso in 2015.

## Fixtures

### ➔ Croatia 16/06



Nigeria will play a very expansive match first time out, however may struggle to keep up with the higher quality Croatian midfield of Modric and Rakitic.

PREDICTION: NIGERIA 2-1 CROATIA

### ➔ Iceland 22/06



In what is likely to be a game that is dominated by Nigeria, and their pacy football, they will look to limit Iceland counter attacks and chances from set pieces.

PREDICTION: NIGERIA 1-1 ICELAND

### ➔ Argentina 26/06



Argentina may need to win in their final game to seal qualification, and Nigeria are likely to struggle with the star power of Messi. Their defence containing Otamendi may also be tough to break down.

PREDICTION: NIGERIA 1-2 ARGENTINA



# NIGERIA

By James Obi-Doncaster

Nigeria's road to Russia began with an inauspicious start away in Swaziland where they were held 0-0. Nigeria's form improved and they were the first African team to qualify for the football fiesta finishing first in a group containing Algeria, Zambia and long-time rivals Cameroon. The Super Eagles soared to a 4-0 victory over the Cameroonians with recognised talents Odion Ighalo, John Obi Mikel, Victor Moses and Kelechi Iheanacho all on target.

Nigeria have now qualified for all but one World Cup since making their debut in 1994, having missed only Germany 2006. Their last match at the finals was at Estádio Nacional de Brasília in 2014 against France in the round of 16. The Nigerian resistance lasted for 79 minutes until Paul Pogba breached the back line and an own goal in stoppage time meant the Super Eagles could fly no more.

## Squad & Tactics

Nigeria have traditionally played a 4-3-3 formation and use their attributes of strength and pace to close down opponents.

However, in a recent friendly with Argentina, their final Group D opponent, they showed capability to switch styles. When trailing 2-0 the Super Eagles changed formation to a 3-5-2 set-up giving a greater width, with Victor Moses switching to his Chelsea position of wingback. Argentina played a strong team that day including Di Maria, Agüero, Otamendi and Dybala and at first Nigeria had failed to deal with the high pressing game. Initially, Nigeria opted to attempt a short passing game but lacked the precision and finesse of the Argentines and their mistakes were punished. The 3-5-2 formation offered options for counter attacks and the Super Eagles fought back and won the game 4-2. This should give the players a huge confidence boost and demonstrates a battling spirit.

Super Eagles captain John Obi Mikel has over 80 caps and his experience and composure will be vital to balance the exuberance of youth. A Champions League winner who leads on the pitch and can rise to the big occasion. Mikel is a midfield marshal, breaking up attacks and protecting the defensive line.

? Nigeria have played in six tournaments including the 2018 World Cup. In these six tournaments, they will have faced Argentina in the group stage five times.

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NIGERIA | GROUP D



## Nigeria Best Bet of World Cup 2018: Victor Moses top team goalscorer 6/1

Mikel may be used in a more advanced role at times where he has shown he can also offer an attacking threat, scoring twice in his last nine internationals.

Nigeria have many well known Premier League names including Alex Iwobi, Victor Moses and in attack they have some talent to trouble any defence. Watford's Odion Ighalo has performed well and Kelechi Iheanacho, now at Leicester City, can be a clinical finisher.

A player with a history of goal scoring in Russia, when at CSKA Moscow, is Ahmed Musa. Musa also has history of scoring against Argentina at the World Cup, bagging a brace in 2014 and The Super Eagles may look for this impact once more if they are to go far at this summer's tournament.

### Chances of Progression

In the recent friendly defeat against England at Wembley, the first half performance from Nigeria was distinctly abject, although they were much improved in the second half and they will need to build on this as their first World Cup game approaches, against another European side, Croatia.

This will be the first time that the Super Eagles will have played against the distinctive red and white check shirts of Croatia, who are ranked 14 by FIFA. Favourites to win the group, Argentina, boast a most prodigious attacking proposition, so the Nigerians must surely target their second game versus Iceland on 22nd June as a must win if they stand a chance of progression. The Nigerians are third favourites with bookmakers to progress into the knock out stages of the competition from their group.

Given their opposition in Group D they will need to defend well against Argentina and Croatia and will be able to use their pace to spring counter attacks, so the adaptable formation as shown in their November friendly against Argentina will be key.



### Unheralded Player

One to look out for is Moses Daddy-Ajala Simon, known as Moses Simon. A direct winger favouring the left side position, Simon has a low centre of gravity and quick feet. Simon spent time in the Ajax youth system and signed for Slovak club AS Trenčín in 2014. Simon impressed KAA Gent after scoring 13 goals in 33 games for Trenčín and he signed for the Belgians the following year.

Simon has scored internationally, including the crucial opening goal in Nigeria's toughest qualification game in Cameroon, where they drew 1-1 on the night. Simon has been affected by injuries this year and in a recent interview with Gaber Sports he said that he is likely to leave Gent with England being his preferred destination to further his career. Simon will be in the shop window and looking to impress new managers while playing in the World Cup.

Despite forfeiting their final qualification match due to fielding a suspended player, Nigeria still topped their group.



# UNDERDOG CHALLENGE

SAVETHEPUNTER

## SAUDI ARABIA

Dependable and defensive minded. They have a slim chance of getting out of a weak Group A. Just don't expect too many goals from The Falcons.



## JAPAN

An ever-present team since '98 but an ageing squad counts against them. A perfectly behaved bunch of fans who are welcome to any tournament.

## TUNISIA

Have not announced themselves on the world stage following four group stage exits, but will be looking to improve on that after a 12 year absence from the finals.

## PERU

Their fans will hark back to the halcyon days of the 70's when they were a force in world football but a 26-year absence means Peru will be almost like newcomers and will hope to make an impact.

Your team might not have made it to want an underdog to get behind. Take your underdog personality takes you.

You're 200 metres down the road and think you may have forgotten to double-lock your front door. Do you:

- A). Go back and check. You can never be too careful
- B). Carry on down the road. There's not much to steal anyway.

## START

You're at a house

- A). Spend most of to friends in
- B). Crank up the st living room into
- C). You're too old f so you show your home when no
- D). Drink the entire drinks cupboard d advocaat leftover

You've booked a holiday for 16th July to relax after the stress of the World Cup.

When do you pack?

- A). The suitcase is already packed and ready to go.
- B). Probably not till the 16th. I don't have to be at the airport until 8am.

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UNDERDOG CHALLENGE

this years tournament, or perhaps you just  
e our Underdog Challenge and find out where

## HERE

e party. Do you:

the time chatting  
the kitchen

ereo and turn the  
a dancefloor

for house parties,  
face and sneak  
body notices

e contents of the  
ry (including the  
from Christmas)

It's 5 minutes to the fantasy football  
deadline and you've forgotten to make  
your transfer. Do you:

- A). Quickly log in and make a transfer on  
instinct.
- B). Not bother logging in. After all it's only a  
game

## COSTA RICA

Were a surprise package in 2014  
when they got to the quarter  
finals. With nicknames of 'The  
Selection' and 'Death', they will  
be looking to cause more  
upsets.

## PANAMA

First time at the finals and not  
much hope of progressing past  
their group. So they are going to  
have a party and enjoy every  
minute of their time in Russia.

## AUSTRALIA

Always a great addition to the  
finals as the fans really get  
behind their team vocally. The  
golden age has come & gone so  
will have to rely on grit &  
determination rather than flair.

Your teams is in the final and it has  
gone to sudden death penalties. Do  
you:

- A). Not watch. You can't bear the tension
- B). Stare intently and with full belief that  
your centre-back, who can't pass the ball  
five yards, will definitely slot this home.

## ICELAND

They brought a real ice-cool  
breath of fresh air to Euro 2016  
and are sure to do the same at  
their maiden World Cup. The  
Viking Clap is sure to send  
shivers down their opponents  
spine

# WORLD CUP QUIZ

SAVETHEPUNTER



1. Who has scored the most World Cup finals goals?
2. What was the name of the dog which found the World Cup Trophy after it was lost in March 1966?
3. Who was the captain when France won their first World Cup in 1998?
4. Which team scored the final golden goal whilst it was used in World Cup tournaments?
5. Which player has played in the most games at World Cups?
6. Which team has lost the most World Cup games in total?
7. What year was the substitute rule introduced into World Cups?
8. Which team has lost the most World Cup Finals, but never won the trophy?
9. Which African player has scored the most World Cup tournament goals in total?
10. Who is the oldest player to have ever won a World Cup?
11. Which team has the highest FIFA world ranking that will not be playing in Russia?
12. Which two players are the only players to receive more than one red card?
13. Which goalkeeper is the only player to have received the Golden Ball award?
14. Which country holds the record for fewest World Cup matches played?
15. Which team has been knocked out of the first round a record eight times without progressing?

1. Miroslav Klose 2. Pickles 3. Didier Deschamps 4. Turkey (Scored by Ilhan Mansiz, Defeating Senegal in 2002) 5. Lothar Matthaus (25) 6. Mexico (25) 7. 1970 8. Netherlands (1974, 1978, 2010) 9. Asomah Gyan (6 goals) 10. Dino Zoff 11. Chile (ranked 9) 12. Rigobert Song & Zinedine Zidane 13. Oliver Khan 14. Indonesia (1 in 1938) 15. Scotland

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WORLD CUP QUIZ

# WORLD CUP HAIRCUTS QUIZ



Answers: 1. Ronaldo 2. Cristiano Ronaldo 3. Chris Waddle 4. Carlos Valderrama 5. Tarbio West 6. Roberto Di Baggio



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WORLD CUP HAIRCUTS QUIZ

# Group E

SAVETHEPUNTER

## The Manager

The man tasked with bringing the trophy back to South America is head coach **Tite**, who took over in June 2016 following a third early Brazilian exit under Dunga in as many years at international tournaments. The latter being an elimination at the group stages after a 1-0 loss to Peru in Copa America.

The 56 year old has an impressive record of losing just one of his 17 matches in charge, to arch-rivals Argentina.

As manager of Corinthians (when he beat Chelsea to win the Club World Cup in 2012), Tite was renowned for winning games 1-0. He has been more attacking minded than that with Selcao. One would suggest this is the correct approach given the propensity of Group E opponents to play very defensively when upon against Brazil.

Previous to that Tite has had 17 managerial spells domestically, including 3 stints at Corinthians!

## Fixtures

### ➔ Switzerland 17/06



I expect Brazil to open their campaign with a hard fought 2-0 win over a Swiss side that won't roll over easily.

PREDICTION: BRAZIL 2-0 SWITZERLAND

### ➔ Costa Rica 22/06



Costa Rica will be the whipping boys of Group E and I fully expect Neymar and co to run riot and win by a comfortable 4-0 margin.

PREDICTION: BRAZIL 4-0 COSTA RICA

### ➔ Serbia 27/06



The final game against Serbia is a tricky one to call as Brazil should've already qualified and the Serbians might need something to make it through to the last 16. I am still taking the Brazilians to maintain their 100 per cent winning start with the reserves edging this 1-0.

PREDICTION: BRAZIL 1-0 SERBIA



# BRAZIL

By Nigel Seeley

Four years ago Brazil were the overwhelming bookies favourites to win the World Cup in their own backyard. Alas, their attempt to win a record breaking sixth crown ended in embarrassment, with an astonishing 7-1 defeat against Germany in the Semi Finals and have spent the past four years trying to bolster their damaged reputation.

Roll on four years and this latest carnation of Seleção are again the bookies favourites at 9/2 to win a tournament that they are always "expected" to win. Although with public money guaranteed for the South Americans they are always artificially too short in the betting, for me anyway!

### Squad & Tactics

Although the first XI mainly picks itself for Brazil, they have a lot of strength in depth and will have multiple players such as Firmino or Willian who will be able to provide quality from the bench if Brazil are in need of a game changing moment.

Brazilian hopes rest heavily on the slender shoulders of starman Neymar and the PSG striker in recent years hasn't been the kind of guy you want to be stuck in the trenches with when things are tough. That's before we consider the question marks over his fitness after a foot injury. However you can't complain with his impressive international record of 53 goals in 83 appearances.

Philippe Coutinho and Roberto Firmino also offer goal scoring threats, however Firmino is likely to end up on the bench behind the aforementioned Coutinho. He will be flanked alongside the worlds most expensive player in Neymar, who together are likely to line up as shadow strikers behind their new number nine, Gabriel Jesus.

The Man City player has had an excellent goalscoring season (20 goals in 39 games for his club), and has already got nine goals for his country in just 15 caps, with seven of these goals coming during qualification for the tournament in Russia. It was a huge gamble to give Jesus the No 9 shirt, but their prayers have been answered as the 21 year-old has nine goals in 14 starts for the senior side and it is very possible that he could upstage Neymar by becoming his nations top goalscorer in the tournament.

? Brazil are the only team who have participated in every World Cup. They have gone on to win in five of the twenty tournaments.



## Brazil Best Bet of World Cup 2018: Quarter Final elimination 7/2

We all know how good this Brazilian side is going forward but their strength is probably in a defence marshalled superbly by PSG defender Marquinhos. Thiago Silva, of PSG, has 69 caps and ample experience next to him.

Just like Taffarel, Julio Cesar and Dida before him, Roma's Alisson is superb goalkeeper. The 25 year old stopper is in part responsible for the 14 clean sheets in Brazil's last 20 matches and with him they are probably a decent bet to win each of their Group E matches to nil.

That is even with the uncertainty at right back, as serial winner Dani Alves misses out through injury. Danilo of Man City could play there instead and could provide a bit more stability than the attacking-minded Marcelo will on the left.

Former Spurs man, turned Barcelona revelation Paulinho and Real Madrid's Casemiro will likely be two of the three central midfielders. The third player will probably be Willian or Fernandinho, depending on the quality of the opposition and Tite's willingness to take the game to them.

### Chances of Progression

Brazil have been handed a peach of a draw in the weak Group E alongside Switzerland, Costa Rica and Serbia and it's no surprise that they are 1/3 to win that section and a very short price of 1/16 to progress to the knockout stages. Brazil should coast through to the last 16 as they are the best flat-track bullies in the business.

However, if either Brazil or Germany don't top their respective groups, the two sides would face each other in the Quarter Finals, and the Germans once again could be too strong.

The big problem for Brazil is after that night in Maracana four years ago they don't scare the big nations anymore and with more expectation on them to deliver than any other team in the competition, this may be another tournament of heartache with the Brazilians failing to get past the quarter-finals stages.



### Unheralded Player

It is hard to say who could be a surprise player as even the back-up Brazilians are well known. However, Fred, the Shakhtar Donetsk midfielder -who has been heavily linked with a move to Manchester United-, could be a surprise. Fred has been -perhaps unfairly to both- been compared to N'Golo Kante. In actuality, Fred is comfortable both defending and getting on the ball to lead counter attacks. With just seven caps to his name, Fred will hope for opportunities to impress from the bench..

**?** Brazil have the most World Cup match wins of all time, with 70 victories.



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# Group E

SAVETHEPUNTER

## The Manager

Vladimir Petkovic was appointed after World Cup 2014, when Ottmar Hitzfeld retired. Previously, Petkovic has managed multiple Swiss teams, along with Lazio.

After rumours emerged that he was in discussions to take over the Switzerland job in December 2013, the president of Lazio, Claudio Lotito, didn't take kindly to this and promptly sacked Petkovic, leaving him in limbo until after the World Cup in summer of 2014.

His managerial career has not been a great success, with just the one league triumph as a club manager, as he took a fourth tier Swiss side to a title back in 2004. Following this his only other success was a Coppa Italia win with Lazio.

Petkovic has taken Switzerland to successive international tournaments and to their highest world ranking in twenty years.

## Fixtures

### ➔ Brazil 17/06



Switzerland will struggle to break Brazil down in their opening game, and the famous Yellow and Greens will take three points fairly comfortably against the Swiss.

PREDICTION: SWITZERLAND 0-2 BRAZIL

### ➔ Serbia 22/06



Serbia is the pivotal match-up for The Rossocrociati if they are to qualify. Expect Shaqiri to be a key player in this game if the Swiss are to get an essential three points.

PREDICTION: SWITZERLAND 1-0 SERBIA

### ➔ Costa Rica 27/06



Costa Rica will struggle to score past Sommer, and are perhaps the weakest team in the group. Although Navas is a very good goalkeeper, Switzerland should find a way past him.

PREDICTION: SWITZERLAND 2-0 COSTA RICA



# SWITZERLAND

By Alex Everson and Parris Barron

The Swiss are largely forgotten about in international football, despite their improvement since the mid-2000s; they have only missed one major tournament since 2004. However, they have so far failed to make these appearances count, perennially going out at the group stages or first knockout round and the Swiss are yet to make a quarter final in the 21st century.

Switzerland were coasting through their qualification group stage with nine wins on the bounce, before a 2-0 defeat in Lisbon meant they finished second behind the Portuguese on goal difference.

The Swiss then won a tightly contested playoff tie against Northern Ireland, with a controversial penalty the only goal separating the sides over the two legs.

This ease of qualification has come about largely due to their favourable draws; they have wisened up to play friendlies against weaker teams, or sometimes not play at all, in order to serve their world ranking. This means they currently sit inside the top ten, a position many football fans would not expect when looking at the squad available to them.

### Squad & Tactics

The Rossocrociati (Red Crusaders) have developed a very stout and solid 4-2-3-1 formation, with two defensive midfielders sitting deep, complimented by three attacking midfielders whose job it is to play off the main striker's knock downs and hold-up play.

The key man for this experienced team is Granit Xhaka of Arsenal, who will play alongside either Gelson Fernandes or Remo Freuler. Between them they will look to break up the play in front of the very experienced and settled defence and move the ball forwards to their creative outlets.

The main creative outlet in this side comes from Xherdan Shaqiri, who will operate on the right wing for Switzerland. His goal record for the national side is strong, with twenty goals in only 68 caps. Alongside him will be Blerim Dzemaili, who plays for Bologna. Dzemaili is an experienced central midfielder who has sifted around Italian teams, but also moved around Europe, taking in spells in Turkey and very briefly England (at Bolton), having started his career at FC Zürich.

? Although they have competed in half of all World Cup tournaments, Switzerland haven't gone past the Round of 16 since they hosted in 1954.

STP

SWITZERLAND | GROUP E



**Switzerland Best Bet of World Cup  
2018:  
Eliminated in round of 16 at Evs**

Playing in front of Shaqiri and Dzemali is Haris Seferović. He has struggled however this season with his new club Benfica, only managing to score four goals in the league. Despite this, the Swiss team still use him as a hold up player up front; he is a bulky 6ft 1in and capable of bringing those attacking midfielders into the game. Given his record of 11 in 49 for the Swiss, Seferović can't be relied on to grab many goals himself.

Lining up as a right back for the Swiss at the World cup will be current captain Stephan Lichtsteiner, who will be looking to break the 100 cap mark over the summer. The Arsenal target leads the national side after ending a seven year spell at Juventus recently, and will bring organisation to the team.

Fabian Schar will be the key man in the centre of defence. He appeared in all but one of the qualification matches and is currently contracted to recently relegated Deportivo La Coruna; a strong tournament may be what he needs in order to get a move back to top flight football. Johan Djourou is expected to start alongside Schar. Now at Antalyaspor, he has always been viewed as somewhat of a liability at the back and indeed scored an own goal in the crucial qualification loss to Portugal.

Borussia Mönchengladbach keeper Yann Sommer starts in goal. Although named in the 2014 squad, he remained on the bench and it is only since then that he has become the clear number one choice for Switzerland. He brings composure and sharp reflexes to the team.

**Chances of Progression**

Switzerland find themselves with a strong chance of progressing from Group E. Costa Rica should cause the Swiss no issues in their final match, whilst they could spring a small surprise against Brazil with their solid defensive capabilities. Picking up a win against Serbia in their second match will be critical for their tournament.

The bookies rate them as an evens chance to qualify which seems generous, given the Serbs relative lack of quality going forward -apart from Mitrovic who has had a very strong end to the season with Fulham on loan.

Should they qualify, unless they win the group, it's likely they will fall at the same hurdle as they did the last World Cup, as Argentina would be their likely opponents. The Swiss, although a very solid unit, lack the real firepower to drag them through to later rounds and of course, they, by design, do not have experience against top opposition.



**Unheralded Player**

Towering centre back Manuel Akanji has already earned his big move, transferring to Borussia Dortmund in January 2018 after a string of good performances for Basel. We memorably saw him keep a clean sheet in a faultless display against Manchester United. The atmosphere was rocking, and with scouts there to impress, Akanji kept Lukaku and then sub Ibrahimovic, quiet.

The twenty-two old has only won four caps so far for his country, but all coming during qualifying matches for the World Cup.

Petrovic has previously been adverse to using younger players, opting for more experience on the field. However Akanji may force his way into the side and play a big part for the defensive unit.



# Group E

SAVETHEPUNTER

## The Manager

Oscar Ramirez became Costa Rica manager in 2015 receiving a swift promotion from assistant manager.

He came in to replace previous manager Paulo Wanchope, when the former Premier League legend was forced to resign after he brawled with a steward at an U-23 match. How opportune for Ramirez, who had only been the assistant for 7 days!

Ramirez had formerly managed the club that he was most successful at as a player, Alajuelense. His five years there was over two spells, after a brief resignation split these stints. His tenure was incredibly successful though as he picked up five league titles.

Capped 75 times as a player, Ramirez played for Costa Rica back in Italia '90 and will look to use that tournament experience to relate with his players, many of whom made World Cup debuts in 2014.

## Fixtures

### ➔ Serbia 17/06



Probably the game where both teams will consider themselves to have the best chance. Expect low scoring game and whichever key player has the best moment, will turn the game

PREDICTION: COSTA RICA 0-1 SERBIA

### ➔ Brazil 22/06



This game all depends on an early goal. If Costa Rica go down within the first half hour, it will be trouble. Best case scenario, they frustrate Brazil and hit them on the counter later on in the game and try to park the bus.

PREDICTION: COSTA RICA 0-4 BRAZIL

### ➔ Switzerland 27/06



Could be either a very important or irrelevant game, depending on previous results for both teams. Expect another tight game, decided by a moment of magic late on.

PREDICTION: COSTA RICA 0-0 SWITZERLAND



# COSTA RICA

By Cain Bradley and Kleran McGlrr

Costa Rica are looking to repeat their sensational performance at the last World Cup which saw them come within a penalty shootout of making the semi finals. That 2014 run saw them win a Group of Death, containing Italy, England and Uruguay and then progress in the Round of 16 by defeating Greece on penalties. They remained unbeaten in open play but would eventually fall in the quarter finals, to Netherlands in a penalty shootout, but they won the admiration of fans around the globe.

This time around, Costa Rica have qualified finishing second of six, behind only Mexico. This came after winning their group in the fourth stage of qualification, where they entered as a high seed. They won five of six at that stage, only drawing to Jamaica. In the final stage they beat USA home and away to cement their place in the World Cup and knock out their rivals. Their losses came away to Mexico and in the final group game, against Panama. Throughout the final stage, they looked like they would qualify comfortably and seemed to be the obvious number two team behind Mexico.

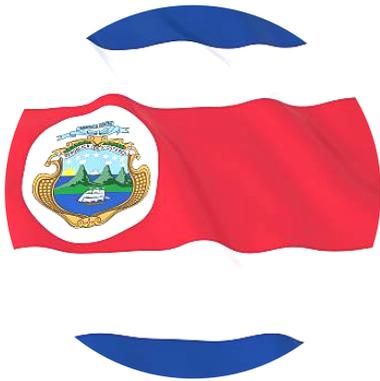
### Squad & Tactics

Jorge Luis Pinto, who masterminded that run in 2014, left to manage Honduras, but outside of that, it is a very familiar team. They play the same formation, a defensive 5-4-1 which concentrates on keeping it tight at the back.

They only conceded eight goals in the final stage of qualifying, a large part of that is due to the fact they have Keylor Navas in goal. The Real Madrid man was superb in Brazil and is still one of the best goalkeepers in the world. He is an incredible shot stopper and if the game comes down to a penalty shootout, Navas is one of the first men you would put in goal.

Two key players in the back three are Giancarlo Gonzalez and Johnny Acosta. Gonzalez seemed to grow in stature during the 2014 World Cup and those performances earned him a move to Serie A team Palermo where he stayed for three seasons before moving on to Bologna last summer. Acosta, of Águilas Doradas, made two appearances in the knockout stages last time out and has been an assured figure throughout the qualification process.

? Three of this year's squad have scored in the Premier League: Bryan Oviedo (2 for Everton), Joel Campbell (3 for Arsenal) and Bryan Ruiz (8 for Fulham). Paulo Wanchope trumps them with 50 for Derby, West Ham and Manchester City.



**Costa Rica Best Bet of World Cup 2018:  
Under 2.5 tournament goals 4/7**

A couple of problems come with having a very similar team. It has aged. They have the second oldest squad at the World Cup behind Saudi Arabia. Also, they still lack the attacking talent that most nations seem to possess.

Captain Bryan Ruiz is a talismanic figure who will be tasked with leading the attack. He scored two of the five goals that Costa Rica managed at the last World Cup and a repeat could be necessary. Joel Campbell, still on the books at Arsenal despite being loaned out to six different clubs since signing in 2011, gives the team more options in terms of counter attacking, given his lightning pace. However he is incredibly injury prone and just as inconsistent. You would imagine the Costa Rican hopes rely on their star players. If Ruiz and Campbell turn up, they can get the goals necessary to propel their team to victory and rely on their proven unit of a defence to hold the opposition.

However, another worry for Costa Rica is their poor form which has seen them win only one of their last five and that was only a narrow 1-0 victory over Scotland.

This trend needs to be reversed quickly as a slow start in Russia will see them heading home. A lot of their players are based in the MLS which could be a positive or negative depending on how you look at it: the standard of club football in the States will be a disadvantage against elite international teams, but at least they will not be drained, having only played half a season. After the last World Cup though it would surprise me if Los Ticos are underestimated, a factor which many suggest helped them come through in 2014.

**Chances Of Progression**

The draw has not done Costa Rica any favours. This hard working team would be at its best against a team who attacks them and they can look to counter attack effectively.

Brazil will no doubt offer them that opportunity, but should have enough magic to get past them fairly comfortably.

Switzerland and Serbia are both effective units who also look to keep it tight at the back. A group with flashier attacks may have been a better way for them to qualify.

They are a team who will struggle to a huge extent if they go behind. A good bet involving Costa Rica will likely be low scoring affairs. Look for them to be involved in matches with under three goals.



**Unheralded Player**

Marco Ureña could be the man whose performance defines the Costa Rican tournament. He will likely be given opportunities to play as striker and scores once every four games for his country, with 15 goals in 60 appearances.

Perhaps most importantly he scored goals in key qualification games against Mexico and United States. Ureña was the third pick in the late 2017 MLS expansion draft for Los Angeles FC.

He is a good dribbler who is an effective counter attacking weapon. However, having recently undergone surgery for facial fractures whilst playing for LAFC, he is in a race against time to be fit in time for the opening match.



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# Group E

SAVETHEPUNTER

## The Manager

**Mladen Krstajić**, capped 59 times by his country, is in his first ever managerial role. Slavoljub Muslin was dismissed after qualification by the Serbian FA over his decision not to include Lazio's young box-to-box midfielder Sergej Milinković-Savić in his plans.

Krstajić has presided over four fixtures so far, wins over China and Nigeria, a draw with South Korea and a defeat to Morocco hardly set the pulses racing. It appears that the Serbian FA are more interested in the popularity of Milinković-Savić than team consistency. Although if they are looking to build to the future then they've made the correct decision to relieve the manager of his duties, despite an impressive qualifying campaign.

Tactically Mladen Krstajić is likely to be less expansive than his predecessor. The 3-4-3 formation has been ditched for a 4-5-1/4-2-3-1 setup. This caution shouldn't come as a surprise, Krstajić was part of the Serbian "Famous Four" which included Nemanja Vidić and conceded just one goal during the 2006 World Cup qualifying campaign.

## Fixtures

### ➔ Costa Rica 17/06



This could be a low scoring affair in Samara first up for Serbia, where both teams could struggle to create enough to win.

PREDICTION: SERBIA 0-0 COSTA RICA

### ➔ Switzerland 22/06



The pressure will likely be on The Swiss if they haven't got anything from their opener v Brazil. We think they could sneak this game in another low scoring affair.

PREDICTION: SERBIA 0-1 SWITZERLAND

### ➔ Brazil 27/06



With Serbia perhaps in desperate need of 3 points to avoid an early exit, we wouldn't be surprised to see goals for both sides.

PREDICTION: SERBIA 1-3 BRAZIL



# SERBIA

By Ash White @cherryanalysts

This will be Serbia's second appearance at The World Cup, as a solo nation. Previous to 2010 they had played as Serbia and Montenegro at international tournaments. Serbia qualified for this tournament after winning UEFA Group D which contained Wales, Ireland and Austria so on the face of it, they performed well to qualify with the loss of only a single game.

However on closer inspection both Wales and Ireland also only lost a single game each. Playing a more open game under their previous manager Serbia managed 90 shots at goal in qualifying, with 50% of these on target and 22% of shots resulting in a goal. Although it's small sample size, it is unlikely they can produce those numbers long term.

With the change of manager and the implementation of a more defensive shape, it is unlikely they will be amongst the goals at this World Cup.

### Squad & Tactics

Aleksandar Mitrović will be leading the attack. The Newcastle forward, on loan at newly promoted Fulham, will find this tournament significantly tougher than what he has faced in The Championship this season where he scored twelve times in seventeen league appearances.

Southampton's Dušan Tadić and Hamburg's Filip Kostić will be expected to provide the ammunition for Mitrović. Neither of those players have had a good season, with Hamburg being relegated and Southampton surviving by the skin of their teeth. Adem Ljajić is an alternative; the Torino playmaker managed to get on the score sheet six times in Serie A this season. However his main contribution was the 68 key passes, resulting in ten assists.

The Orlovi (Serbian for "Eagles") potentially have the players to trouble nations, however the change of management and style has to be a concern. Mitrović is currently no more than an average international striker. At the age of 23 he has the scope to improve and with the potential goal-scoring threats Serbia have behind the lone frontman they could pose a threat going forward. The current Serbian Tournament Total Goals line is set at 3.50-3.80, I'm a seller on that line as I feel they're more likely to score three than four.

? After qualifying for the World Cup, Slavoljub Muslin was fired, apparently due to a lack of attacking football and willingness to bring through youth. He was replaced by Mladen Krstajić.



## Serbia Best Bet of World Cup 2018: Serbia to finish 4th in Group E 5/2

The Serbs excel in the centre of midfield: Nemanja Matic of Manchester United, Crystal Palace's set-piece specialist Luka Milivojević and Sergej Milinković-Savić all provide a solid base. These three players, backed up with a defence containing Branislav Ivanović, currently at Zenit Saint Petersburg and Roma's Aleksandar Kolarov, should ensure a safety first approach.

The 34 year old goalkeeper Vladimir Stojković is set to be the number one in Russia. In the 2016/17 season he conceded 36 goals in 20 Championship appearances for Nottingham Forest, with the only side that failed to score against him being Ipswich Town.

This would have to be a concern that despite a solid midfield, the ageing back line and poor quality goalkeeper will leave them vulnerable, especially to the counter attack. This will be detrimental to their chances of getting out of the group.

In a group containing Brazil, Switzerland and Costa Rica they may not need to be overly cautious. With a novice former defender as manager, tasked with the job of at least reaching the last 16, Serbia will be setup in a manner to not concede but this may be detrimental to their chances of getting out of the group.

### Chances Of Progression

Victory over Costa Rica would appear to be a must, yet as we saw in 2010 this Costa Rican side with Real Madrid's Kelyor Navas in goal, will not be a pushover. The mental side of that opening fixture may/will kick in the longer it's at 0-0 due to the idea it's more important to not lose your opening fixture than to actually win it.

A draw with, or even a defeat, for Serbia against Costa Rica would ramp up the pressure on their next fixture against

Switzerland, who are above The Serbs in both the FIFA and ELO Rankings. This could turn into a cagey affair with both sides scared to lose. In a low scoring fixture, between two 'defensive' sides, I would have to favour The Swiss.

With Brazil in their final group fixture, Serbia really do need to have enough points on the board and avoid heavily damaging their goal difference in this match; how many they concede against Brazil could be the difference between them finishing bottom of the group or finishing second.; it would not be a huge surprise if all the Group E games not involving Brazil end in draws.

If Serbia do make it through the group then it's difficult to see them progressing any further. The runners up of Group E are scheduled to play the winner of Group F, which in all likelihood will be Germany. If they do exceed expectations then a quarter-final against either Belgium or England would be on the cards.

### Unheralded Player

Sergej Milinkovic-Savic may not be a household name but he soon will be. The transfer rumours are already starting with Manchester United prepared to break their record fee for his signature. His friendship with Nemanja Matic is something Jose Mourinho believes he can exploit. The 23 year old Lazio central midfielder, has had a breakthrough season with 12 goals from 91 shots. His key strengths are his aerial ability, passing and willingness to track back. It remains to be seen if he'll be afforded the same freedom in this side, as Simone Inzaghi allows him at Lazio. Milinkovic-Savic has the ability to be one of the stars of The World Cup, but there's a great deal of pressure on him. Last season, he committed the 7th highest number (58) of fouls in the league, for midfielders. He also picked up 8 yellow cards. Tackling isn't his strong point and with the pressure on him to perform growing weekly, it remains to be seen if he can live up to the hype.



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SERBIA | GROUP E

# Group F

SAVETHEPUNTER

## The Manager

When **Joachim Löw** took charge after Jürgen Klinsmann's departure in 2006, he inherited a consistent albeit uninspiring team in transition. The German national performances between 1998 and 2006 have lately come to be seen as the country's worst ever (despite reaching the 2002 World Cup Final) and Löw's appointment was therefore necessary.

Löw was only the third person to become Germany's head coach having never represented the senior team as a player.

His first tournament came in Euro 2008 when the German team, despite mediocre performances, bafflingly enough reached the final. Furthermore, he led the team to the semi-finals of both World Cup 2010 & Euro 2012, before winning the last World Cup in 2014.

Currently Löw is the best coach in Germany's history with a record of 106 wins, 30 draws and 24 defeats in 160 games. That's a superb win ratio of 66%.

## Fixtures

### ➔ Mexico 17/06



Germany will look to get off to a strong start, however Mexico will be tricky opponents who are prone to giving strong sides close games, however the Germans class should shine through here.

PREDICTION: GERMANY 2-1 MEXICO

### ➔ Sweden 23/06



An all European tie for Germany in their second game should be a relatively straight forward victory for the Germans against a Sweden team who do not excel at the back, or going forwards.

PREDICTION: GERMANY 2-0 SWEDEN

### ➔ South Korea 27/06



Germany may play a weaker side against the South Koreans in their final match, which should still prove too much for South Korea.

PREDICTION: GERMANY 1-0 SOUTH KOREA



# GERMANY

By Markus Breuer

The road to Russia was fairly easy for the reigning World Cup Champions. After impressively winning all their qualification games with 30 points from 10 matches, the German juggernaut outscored their opponent by scoring 43 goals to four in the campaign.

In all fairness, the group was fairly easy, comprised of Norway, Northern Ireland, Czech Republic, Azerbaijan and San Marino. The Germans made appropriately light work of it. Thomas Mueller and Sandro Wagner were the leading goal scorers with five goals each.

## Squad & Tactics

Löw's philosophy has been about going back to basics: "we need to make the simple into the very special: the passing game, the timing, the pressing and trapping, the game without the ball, how we deal with one-on-one situations, how we quickly find solutions in small spaces."

This was also the cornerstone behind Germany gradually shifting from 4-4-2 to a fluid 4-2-3-1. In this new formation, the goalkeeper has a clear role to play as a ball-playing sweeper which Manuel Neuer will do superbly, presuming he can put injury behind him. This makes it easier for the defenders to play a high line. Marc-Andre ter Stegen of Barcelona can easily perform this role if Neuer runs out of time to prove his fitness. The two centre backs in this system are quite static and follow a clear pattern: the one who is better with his feet (currently Mats Hummels) lies a bit deeper than Jerome Boateng.

The system is aided by the fact that Joshua Kimmich and Jonas Hector are extremely dynamic wing backs. Kroos is the mastermind in midfield with the energetic Khedira alongside him behind Mesut Özil, one of the best creators in the world, who picks out passes for the wide players.

Providing the cutting edge is the quick and complete Timo Werner. This style was created to bring the perfect balance. The Mannschaft (team) has depth at every position. Germany could field two or three completely different starting line-ups without affecting the result that much (as they proved at last year's Confederations Cup which they won without many first choice players). For example, Thomas Müller, Mario Gomez or Marco Reus could fill in as the lone striker pretty seamlessly.

They also have tremendous depth on the wings; so much so that Leroy Sane has been left out. What other nation can boast Julian Brandt, Marco Reus and Julian Draxler to play out wide. And in a more central creative role Germany have an abundance of quality in Özil, Ilkay Gündogan and Leon Goretzka.



Germany are the only team to boast a 100% win record in multiple penalty shootouts. They have won four from four.



## Germany Best Bet of World Cup 2018: Germany to reach the final 5/2

One of the key players during the qualification campaign was Toni Kroos, the architect of the German team who pulls the strings in the midfield. His ability to read the game, change speed and open-up the space is unmatched and has made him one of the best midfielders in the world; almost every coach would love to have him on their team. Since swapping Munich for Madrid, Kroos has continued to mature, lifting the Champions League on multiple occasions and winning La Liga. Furthermore, Kroos was selected in the Team of the Tournament in consecutive major international tournaments.

Another crucial player for the German side will be Joshua Kimmich. The Bayern Munich player had big shoes to fill after replacing Philipp Lahm (who retired in 2014 after leading his team to World Cup glory, winning 104 caps during his career). However, Kimmich was quickly able to make his own mark for club and country. He got goals in both legs of Munich's Champions League semi final defeat to Kroos' Real Madrid. At international level Kimmich scored twice and had a remarkable 10 assists during the World Cup Qualification campaign. It will be exciting to watch him continue to raise his game at the finals itself.

Apart from the tactical changes he has made, Joachim Löw is also known for his motivational techniques – telling Mario Götze before he sent him on in the 2014 final: "show the world that you are better than Messi. Show them that you can decide the World Cup", will go down in history, as Götze scored the only goal to beat the Argentines.

### Chances of Progression

The bookies love Germany and it is no surprise that the reigning World Cup Champion are shorter than 1/2 to win Group F. As long as both Germany and Brazil top their respective groups, Germany should be too strong for whoever finishes 2nd in Group E.

The Quarter-Finals, likely against neighbours Belgium, will be more of a challenge. Global stars such as de Bruyne, Hazard and Courtois give Belgium genuinely world class talent. Regardless "die Mannschaft" can advance to the Semi-Final, and with the right mix of fortune and a good day at the office, yet another World Cup Final should be Germany's aim.



### Unheralded Player

A lot of eyes will be on the pacey young Leipzig number 9, Timo Werner, burdened with the heavy responsibility of filling the void left by previous great centre forwards such as Jurgen Klinsmann, Oliver Bierhoff and Miroslav Klose. It certainly will be a platform where Timo either sinks into insignificance or sails towards super stardom.

However, another young budding starlet with far less pressure on his shoulders hoping to signal his arrival on the big stage, will be Leon Goretzka. Having just completed a very solid season with Schalke, bagging four goals and four assists from midfield, aiding his team to a surprise runners-up spot in The Bundesliga. It was indeed his parting gift for the Gelsenkirchen outfit as he will now move to Bayern Munich on a free transfer, despite being hotly pursued by both Liverpool and Man United.

A tall, strong midfielder with great technical ability, Goretzka brings fantastic versatility to the German Team - able to play as a holding or box to box midfielder, behind the striker or sometimes out wide. He will give Löw the ability to change formations from 4-2-3-1 to 4-3-3 seamlessly. Expect the 22 year old to replace Ozil if he has a quiet game.

SAVE THE PUNTER

IN SUPPORT OF

CAMPAIGN AGAINST LIVING MISERABLY CALM

STP

GERMANY | GROUP F

# Group F

SAVETHEPUNTER

## The Manager

'El Tri' are coached by the Colombian Juan Carlos Osorio who has been in charge since 2015. Previously, Osorio has been on Manchester City's coaching staff, under Kevin Keegan in the early 2000s, and since then has managed all over the Americas.

His most successful spell was in his home country where he led Atletico Nacional to successive championships. He is known as a real tinkerman who does not hesitate to make changes or adjust formations to suit certain opponents.

Three years counts as an eternity in the Mexico job as they had gone through eleven coaches in the nine years before he was hired. It is one of the most pressured jobs in world football with some high expectations from passionate Mexican supporters.

## Fixtures

### ➔ Germany 17/06



Mexico are no strangers to big matches in the group stage as they have drawn the hosts in the last 2 world cups and were able to draw both matches, in 2014 they held Brazil. Germany may not be firing on all cylinders for the opener.

PREDICTION: MEXICO 1-1 GERMANY

### ➔ South Korea 23/06



This is a game Mexico know they must win. South Korea have not been tight at the back in recent friendlies, conceding 5 goals in their last 2 matches vs Poland and Northern Ireland. If Mexico press high they can force defensive mistakes and stifle the Korean midfield

PREDICTION: MEXICO 3-1 SOUTH KOREA

### ➔ Sweden 27/06



The first 2 group matches will decide how this game is played. If Sweden are ahead before kick off, it will be bad news. However if Sweden need to win, Mexico should be able to exploit space as the Swedes push forward.

PREDICTION: MEXICO 1-1 SWEDEN



# MEXICO

By Pedro Otola

Mexico head to Russia for their 16th World Cup appearance after a comfortable qualification campaign where they topped the CONCACAF standings. They have progressed to the Round of 16 in the last 6 tournaments but have only ever won one knockout match in World Cup play which came on home soil in 1986.

Pitted against Germany, Sweden and South Korea, the Mexican press were both over-confident and lacking faith at the same time. They almost see it as a given that they will advance from the group, but in second place. This would lead to a last 16 tie against Brazil where they would likely be knocked out yet again.

Making it to Russia was straightforward for Mexico, going unbeaten until the last game when they had already qualified. The CONCACAF section is the easiest to qualify from and it would be a travesty were Mexico to miss out. We have seen the anger in the USA after they failed to make it to Russia.

Looking at qualifying will not show how strong this squad is; in 2014, Mexico had a terrible qualification run and only just scraped through to Brazil but they were able to come together and put in a solid showing before they succumbed to the Netherlands, conceding two late goals in the second round

### Squad and Tactics

The squad is deep and filled with experience. 39 year old Rafa Marquez, formerly of Barcelona but now playing back in Mexico at Atlas, has made the preliminary squad and will be looking to play in his fifth World Cup despite recently being under US Investigation for aiding a drug kingpin. 14 of the 27 players named so far have over 50 caps so if they do not meet expectations it will not be due to a lack of experience. Despite the high number of caps the squad is not filled with players in their mid to late thirties who are past their prime.

Mexico are expected to lineup in a 4-3-3 formation, at least initially for the opening game against Germany. They are led by a solid spine of good experienced players through the middle of the side with a couple of exciting youngsters mixed in. Guillermo Ochoa of Standard Liège in goal,

? Mexico have been eliminated in each of the last six tournaments in the Round of 16; despite this, they've only won their group once in this time.

STP

MEXICO | GROUP F



## Mexico Best Bet of World Cup 2018: Mexico to qualify from Group F @ 11/10

Real Sociedad's Héctor Moreno at the back, Héctor Herrera (Porto) and Andrés Guardado (Real Betis) in midfield, and Chicharito, now at West Ham, in attack have played together for a number of years and helped to create good team cohesion.

Mix in some exciting youngsters like Jesús Corona, a winger with Porto and Hirving Lozano, a striker who bagged 19 goals this season for PSV Eindhoven. It is hoped that everything can come together to create a team that performs better than the sum of its parts.

The opening game vs Germany will clearly be the toughest test. Getting anything out of that game will be seen as a bonus. What they must avoid in that clash is a heavy defeat that would heap even more pressure onto them for the 2 remaining games, which they will be expected to win regardless.

Although they do not possess any real world superstars this looks like a complete team with no real weaknesses. They will look to play with a high tempo and Osorio will adapt his tactics to exploit opponent's weaknesses.

Hirving Lozano will look to build on a great season for PSV by announcing himself to the World with the national team. He enjoys cutting inside to shoot from distance, is an excellent set-piece taker and will be looked upon to contribute goals.

At the back Carlos Salcedo should bring confidence into the first game after getting the better of a number of Germany's stars when Eintracht Frankfurt won the German Cup 3-1 over Bayern Munich.

In Miguel Layun of Sevilla they have a good full back, who although not the most natural defender is outstanding going forward. He loves to get forward and support the winger ahead of him, keeps the ball well and is a superb crosser from deep. He can also get goals and knows his job inside-out.

### Chances of Progression

Looking at Group F again it could end up being a good draw for Mexico. They are clearly the 2nd most talented team in the group. It does not appear to be a vintage South Korea squad and Sweden are a solid defensive side, highlighted when they knocked Italy out in the playoff.

This Mexico squad have a number of players who have been to World Cups before so should not get too fazed if they lose the first match. They will be favourites for the games v Sweden and South Korea and will need to avoid costly mistakes.

All things considered Mexico look good value to progress @ 2.10. You can even get 2/1 for Mexico to be eliminated at the last 16 stage which has happened in each of the last six tournaments.



### Unheralded Player

A player who sometimes doesn't receive all the plaudits but does an excellent job for the team is Hector Herrera. A complete midfielder, equally adept in attacking and defensive play.

The Porto man does a sterling job protecting his defence but also has an excellent range of passing and can really open up defences. He had an commendable tournament four years ago in Brazil.



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CALM

# Group F

SAVETHEPUNTER

## The Manager

Janne Andersson is a highly experienced manager. The 55 year old has been managing in the Swedish leagues since 1988. Andersson often walks 7.5 miles to work and interestingly Swedish bookmaker Oddset have installed digital signage along his route.

"I walk the 12 kilometres to work quite often. That gives me two important hours in which I have peace and quiet to think and process thoughts about the national team's activities. I know there are plenty of 'national team coaches' all over Sweden".

It appears that Janne Andersson, a thoughtful and tactical man, understands how important his job is to the Swedes. He will plan every last thing that's within his control down to minute detail. He already has tasted success with limited resources, in 2015 he led IFK Norrköping to their first Allsvenskan since 1992, clinching it by beating previous champions, Malmö FF, 2-0 away on the final day of the season. He was given the opportunity to manage the national side in June 2016.

## Fixtures

### ➔ South Korea 18/06



Sweden open up against South Korea, a game which they likely will need all three points from. Their solid spine through the team should ensure they keep it tight at the back.

PREDICTION: SWEDEN 2-0 SOUTH KOREA

### ➔ Germany 23/06



An experienced and talented Germany side will be too strong in Sochi for Sweden, who do not have the star quality of the German side who are likely to win the group.

PREDICTION: SWEDEN 0-2 GERMANY

### ➔ Mexico 27/06



Yekaterinburg could host a wonderfully poised final group game which may go either way. A narrow Sweden win is not out of the question, however this game will be very up in the air with qualification likely awaiting the winner.

PREDICTION: SWEDEN 1-0 MEXICO



# SWEDEN

By Ash White @CherryAnalysts

It was seen as a shock to the media and general public when Sweden defeated Italy in their qualification play-off, but not to the betting community. Many shrewd judges were on the Swedes in that tie. They finished second in their group, ahead of Holland on goal difference. An impressive 4-0 away win in Belarus was followed up by an 8-0 victory over Luxembourg. Those two results meant they were able to go to Amsterdam in the final group game knowing that as long as they avoided a six goal defeat they'd finish second.

Sweden's best World Cup result was in 1958, when as hosts they finished runners-up. They took the lead against Brazil in the final, but lost 5-2. They've also finished third on two occasions, 1950 and 1994.

This will be their first World Cup since 2006, where they finished second in their group behind England, against whom Henrik Larsson scored a late equaliser to salvage a 2-2 draw, a match remembered for Joe Cole's stunning volley. They crashed out to Germany and a Lukas Podolski double in the next round.

### Squad & Tactics

None of Sweden's twenty-three man squad plays their club football in their homeland. With an average age of 27.6, they have a good blend of youth and experience. Zlatan Ibrahimovic isn't in the squad, with Janne Andersson not even bothering to try and lure their leading all-time goal scorer out of retirement, possibly to make the point to the other players that the team is more important than the individuals and Zlatan's personality could have been a distraction.

They will, however, be weaker going forward, with their 4-4-2 fronted by 31 year olds Marcus Berg who plays for Al-Ain in the UAE and Ola Toivonen of Toulouse (recently relegated from Ligue 1). The pair have over 100 caps and thirty goals for their country between them. To counter their lack of firepower Sweden will be rigid and defensively organised, a tactic that paid dividends in qualification. With two six foot plus strikers, they will be playing simple route one football. It's not pretty but it's effective.

The future looks bright for Sweden they won the Under 21 European Championships in 2015, which came on the back of a 3rd placed finish for the Under 17 side in 2013 World Cup.

? The Swede's most successful tournament came at home, back in 1958 when they finished runners up, losing 5-2 to a Pele led Brazil.



## Sweden Best Bet of World Cup 2018: 'Draw No Bet' vs Mexico @ 11/10

Manchester United and Weder Bremen defenders Victor Lindelof and Ludwig Augustinsson both lined up in that 2015 success, where Sweden conceded a total of four goals.

They faced Portugal (twice), England, Italy and Denmark in that tournament. The first three of those nations have considerably more resources available to them.

We can expect Augustinsson and Lindelof to be part of the back four. Andreas Granqvist will provide an experienced head in between them and he also has the knowledge of playing in Russia after just completing his fifth season with Krasnodar.

Celtic's Mikael Lustig will completed the back-line. Robin Olsen plays in goal, the 28 year old had won back to back domestic doubles with his club side FC Copenhagen prior to this season.

Olsen did miss the last two months of the season, with a fractured cheekbone ,but should be fit to resume national service.

### Chances of Progression

After being handed the toughest qualification route possible, it hasn't got any easier. Group F has paired them with Germany, a side who I believe are the most likely winners of the entire tournament.

Mexico, the perennial underachievers (15 world Cups, population of 120m but have never made a semi-final) and South Korea complete the line-up. Despite the harshness of the draw I think it may work out well for them. They won't be expected to attack sides, so they can play their natural game. Mexico and South Korea are both weak defensively and Sweden are capable of exploiting this.

The key fixture in this group is the last fixture: the winner of Mexico v Sweden will go through to the last 16.

Although it's not technically a knockout game, it's interesting and pretty amazing that Mexico have never won a World Cup knockout fixture on foreign soil. The pressure on them in that match will be immense, which plays to Sweden's strengths even more.

If Sweden do make it through the group, their already tough campaign only gets more difficult. The likely round of 16 opponents are Brazil. If they come through that test I think they'd end up facing England. It doesn't really feel like a tournament if England doesn't meet Sweden at some point!

As highlighted, it really is an uphill struggle for Sweden to progress far and it won't be something that this author will be backing.



### Unheralded Player

Emil Forsberg is the key creator in this side. The highly rated RB Leipzig winger/attacking midfielder will be the one to provide the ammunition to the front pair.

He's had a poor season scoring only twice in the league and providing two assists. But, the season before, he mustered eight goals and twenty-two assists and will need to regain that form if Sweden are to progress.

The oldest goalscorer in a final, Nils Liedholm scored against Brazil in 1958 in a 5-2 loss.



# Group F

SAVETHEPUNTER

## The Manager

49 year old **Shin Tae-Yong** has been in charge since 2017, but was part of the international set up since February 2015 when he took charge of the under-23 team.

Shin played football himself as an attacking midfielder and spent time at Queensland Roar in the Australian A-League, briefly as a player, but mainly as assistant manager.

Shin managed Seongnam FC who beat Iranian club Zob Ahan FC 3-1 in the final of the 2010 AFC Champions League.

After a credible performance in charge of the U23 team at the 2016 Olympics -reaching the Quarter Final-, Shin inherited the senior team from German Uli Stielike, who was sacked by the Korean F.A. during the qualification campaign for the World Cup following a string of bad results.

Shin has presided over five wins, four draws and 2 defeats in his 11 games in charge.

## Fixtures

### ➔ Sweden 17/06



Sweden are likely to take the game to South Korea in the opening game and will most likely take a closely fought win.

PREDICTION: SOUTH KOREA 0-1 SWEDEN

### ➔ Mexico 23/06



Mexico should be able to utilise their attacking talent to break down the South Korean side and it would be a shock result if Mexico didn't gain three points here.

PREDICTION: SOUTH KOREA 1-2 MEXICO

### ➔ Germany 27/06



Despite Germany potentially playing a weaker side in their final match, they should have too much quality for South Korea, who will likely be heading home after this match.

PREDICTION: SOUTH KOREA 1-4 GERMANY



# SOUTH KOREA

By James Doncaster

South Korea will make their tenth appearance in a FIFA World Cup competition, when they face Sweden on 18th June 2018 at the Nizhny Novgorod Stadium. The Koreans have had setbacks even before they encounter what many describe as the tournament's hardest group.

South Korea's qualification campaign was anything but swashbuckling. After a 100% record in the first group stage, South Korea's performances and results in the third round were the model of inconsistency. Manager Uli Stielike was finally sacked following an embarrassing defeat to bottom of the group Qatar. Shin Tae-yong oversaw two goalless draws in the remaining matches to ensure an unconvincing automatic progression. The Taeguk fans must surely have different expectations than in 2002 where they co-hosted the tournament and reached the semi-finals under Guus Hiddink.

It may not be all doom and gloom. Korea have improved under their new coach, showing good form since November 2017, including beating Colombia and drawing with Serbia.

#### Squad & Tactics

There is attacking talent in Son Heung-Min who has starred for Tottenham Hotspur in the Premier League and UEFA Champions League this season scoring 18 goals in all competitions and "Sonaldo" is desperate to impress in the World Cup. Captain Ki Sung-Yeung, who has parted company with recently relegated Swansea, usually responds to the extra responsibility placed on him at international level and will be looking to secure a contract for next season.

There may be a reliance on these outstanding performers, with Son likely to be deployed as a forward, as illustrated in the recent friendly matches versus Serbia and Colombia. However, Shin is also an advocate of a fluid back-three system.

Hwang Hee-chang of Red Bull Salzburg could be the other striker. Whereas if Shin wants more aerial prowess, Shin-wook of Jeonbuk Motors is as close to a traditional target man that South Korea can call upon.

? In 2002, South Korea co hosted the tournament with Japan. They made a historic run to the semi finals, before being defeated by Germany.



**South Korea Best Bet of World Cup 2018:  
To score zero points 4/1**

There have been poor defensive displays during qualification and lapses of concentration at the back that mean a simple ball over the top can send the back line into panic. There have also been individual errors at times from the defenders and that will be punished at the showcase tournament. Kim Seung-Gyu has the number 1 shirt, but has a reputation of making mistakes.

Set pieces are a real problem too and Sweden, Mexico and Germany will be eager to attack and make use of the dead ball. Stalwart at the the heart of the defence will be Guangzhou Evergrande's Kim Young-Gwon, but he was heavily criticised for poor performances at World Cup 2014, especially in South Korea's 4-2 loss to Algeria.

Alongside the aforementioned Ki in the centre of midfield will probably be Koo Ja-Cheol, who plays for German side FC Augsburg and will look to get forward and support Son as much as possible, leaving Ki to hold. Lee Jae-sung of Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors will expect to start on the left and that side will be the more dangerous as club teammate left full back Kim Jin-Su will look to overlap.

Unfortunately, their star midfielder Kwon Chang-Hoon will miss out after sustaining an Achilles injury. Whilst playing for French top flight outfit Dijon FCO and with just 14 minutes remaining of the domestic season, Kwon left the pitch with a suspected ruptured Achilles with Korean media reporting that he will be out for some time, joining a long list of absentees from the preliminary squad through injury.

**Chances of Progression**

The Korean Warriors will need every weapon at their disposal and they will need to cut out all defensive mistakes to have any chance of progression. However, the third game that South Korea play is against many people's tournament favourites Germany, who may well have secured their passage to the knockout phase, so there is a possibility they will rest key players.

South Korea are 750-1 outsiders for the tournament. Only Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and Panama are longer odds. With the group South Korea have found themselves in, it is fairly easy to see why.



**Unheralded Player**

Koo Ja-cheol is an experienced midfielder who spent his early career in the South Korean league with Jeju United. Jeju finished runners up with Koo winning a personal award for his assists during the 2010 season.

Koo's performances attracted European clubs and the Bundesliga was his next destination where he joined Wolfsburg the following year. Koo was loaned out to Augsburg in 2012 and he scored 5 goals in 15 appearances which contributed in their successful bid to avoid relegation.

Koo returned permanently to Augsburg in 2015 after a spell at Mainz. At six feet tall, Koo is a threat at set pieces and will look to impress with his technique and vision. Koo has 19 International goals in his 65 appearances with four of those goals coming in this World Cup qualifying campaign.



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# Group G

SAVETHEPUNTER

## The Manager

Having guided Swansea up to the Championship and led Wigan to an unlikely FA Cup success against Manchester City, **Roberto Martinez's** stock was certainly high before he arrived at Goodison Park in 2013.

His possession based, easy-on-the-eye attacking football won admirers around Europe. However, Everton fans have mixed feelings on the Spaniard after he failed to make the best use of funds available to achieve entry to the Champions League. Nor could Martinez end The Toffees long wait for a trophy. Fans were also unconvinced on whether the free-flowing style they had been promised had in fact been delivered.

It was, therefore, a slightly left-field move from the Belgian FA to appoint him in August 2016, although he has been nobly assisted by Thierry Henry, who no doubt can connect well with current players, even despite being retired for a number of years now.

## Fixtures

### ➔ Panama 18/06



One of the biggest mismatches in the group stages, this one could get ugly for Panama if Belgium find their rhythm.

PREDICTION: BELGIUM 5-0 PANAMA

### ➔ Tunisia 23/06



This match should be another routine win for the Belgians who have tucked away poor teams with relative ease. They may make changes to keep players fresh for later in the tournament.

PREDICTION: BELGIUM 2-0 TUNISIA

### ➔ England 28/06



We may see more changes in the final Group G match. However a draw should be enough for Belgium to claim top spot.

PREDICTION: BELGIUM 0-0 ENGLAND



# BELGIUM

By Kieran McGirr & Parris Barron

Belgium are swiftly taking over from England as international football's perennial underachievers, having entered the last two major championships with one of the best squads on paper. On both occasions they've come up short at the Quarter Final stage, to Argentina and an inspired Wales team respectively. Belgium are littered with players who have more than 60 international caps and even the newer players seem to have bedded in reasonably well.

Belgium strolled through a very poor qualification group (they got given the weakest teams in the second and third pots in the draw), dropping only two points at home to Greece. If it wasn't for a late Romelu Lukaku goal, it would have been worse. With a deserved reputation as a flat-track bully, Lukaku helped himself to 11 goals in 8 qualification games. Eden Hazard and Dries Mertens chipped in with six and five goals respectively, helping propel Belgium to breaking the record -along with Germany- for most goals scored in a qualification campaign: 43.

## Squad and Tactics

The Belgian formation and starting line-up is one of the most settled of all teams in the competition. Martinez, although tinkering sometimes with formation, appears to have decided to go with a 3-4-3.

The Spurs/Man City/Spurs back three of Toby Alderweireld, Vincent Kompany and Jan Vertonghen have over 200 caps between them and offer discipline and strength at the back, ahead of one of the world's best goalkeepers in Chelsea's Thibaut Courtois.

The right wing back slot will be filled by Thomas Meunier, who managed to score a hat trick during qualification (OK, yes, it was Gibraltar, but they all count don't they?). The PSG man has fallen down the pecking order to Dani Alves and will be looking to force a summer transfer. On the other side is Yannick Carrasco, recently of Atlético Madrid and now at Dalian Yifang in China, who holds attacking pedigree but can be inconsistent.

In midfield will be Axel Witsel, also now playing in China, who anchors the team and breaks up play, inevitably giving it straight to midfield partner Kevin de Bruyne. The Man City man blew



Belgium, despite never having got to a final of any major international competition were ranked first in the world in 2015. They currently sit third.

STP

BELGIUM | GROUP G



**Belgium Best Bet of World Cup 2018:  
Belgium to concede 0 goals in the  
group stage 9/2**

away Premier League opposition this season, finishing with most assists, most through balls and most crosses, as well as getting on the score sheet regularly.

What's just as terrifying for opponents is that De Bruyne has a trio of attacking talent to supply. With Michu Batsyuashi returning from injury and Benteke out of form, Belgium's all time top scorer Lukaku will start up top, although doubts remain about his ability to score consistently against the best.

Next to Lukaku, Dries Mertens, the Napoli midfielder-turned-striker, has struck 56 times in 96 club matches in the last two seasons without quite replicating that form at international level. Completing the starting line up is Chelsea man, Eden Hazard. Unquestionably one of the best in the game, the Belgian captain can rip teams apart single-handedly with his astonishing pace and dribbling skills, not to mention finishing. If he is on his game, the Red Devils could and should go far into this tournament. However too often he can tend to slow down the pace of the game and flatter to deceive in the biggest occasions.

**Chances Of Progression**

Belgium will have been delighted with this draw and will expect easy wins against Panama and Tunisia before the match against England. Anything less than a Quarter Final appearance would be seen as failure back home and neither of the likely opponents in the Round of 16, Poland or Colombia, should strike fear into Belgium's coaching staff.

Beyond that, the key lies in whether Roberto Martinez can get the most of this talented group of players. Already, Martinez has caused controversy by leaving out Roma playmaker, Radja Nainggolan and it remains to be seen if he has the ability to maintain the confidence of the squad if things do not immediately go to plan.

Since Euro 2016, Belgium have not played much in the way of

true competitive football, with such an easy qualifying group, and friendlies that haven't exactly tested the Red Devils, they may struggle if they come up against quality opposition later in the tournament. They have not played any team inside the top ten of the world rankings since November 2016. The best team they played resulted in a high scoring 3-3 draw with 15th ranked Mexico in November 2017.



**Unheralded Player**

Belgium have strength in depth with players such as Batshuayi, Spurs' Moussa Dembélé, Man United's Marouane Fellaini and West Brom's Nacer Chadli all in the squad. Dembélé in particular has had an impressive season in the Premier League, with his power and strength coming to the fore. And of course, Fellaini can just be thrown on in the dying minutes to cause havoc in the opposition area.

However, one player Roberto Martinez may turn to in order to change things might be Youri Tielemans. Although primarily employed as a defensive midfielder at current club AS Monaco, this highly rated 21 year-old would offer a more attacking threat than Axel Witsel having scored 18 goals in all competitions in 2016/17 for Anderlecht, earning him the move to the principality.

? Belgium finished 4th in 1986, despite only winning one game in normal time.



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# Group G

SAVETHEPUNTER

## The Manager

After his playing career as a defensive midfielder, **Hernán Darío Gómez**, also known as El Bolillo (The Baton), could perhaps be seen as a national team specialist manager, with Panama being his fourth national side since becoming a football manager in 1991, after previously leading Colombia (twice), Ecuador and Guatemala.

El Bolillo took charge of the Panama national team in October 2014 and in achieving Panama's debut appearance this time round, he set a joint World Record as one of only four managers to guide three teams to the World Cup finals after doing so with Colombia (1998) and Ecuador (2002 and also their debut appearance).

He was named the 2015 CONCACAF Men's coach of the year. Domestically El Bolillo found success leading Atlético Nacional to the 1991 Colombian Primera A title in his first season as a manager.

## Fixtures

### ➔ Belgium 18/06



Panamanians around the World, or just in Panama, will tune in for this historic first ever World Cup game.

PREDICTION: PANAMA 0-2 BELGIUM

### ➔ England 24/06



The gulf in class will tell as England should dispatch Panama with the minimum of fuss.

PREDICTION: PANAMA 0-2 ENGLAND

### ➔ Tunisia 28/06



This author may be optimistic when predicting Panama's first ever goal and point at a World Cup

PREDICTION: PANAMA 1-1 TUNISIA



# PANAMA

By Oliver Wells

Going into their final match, Panama's chances of automatic qualification looked bleak to say the least, with USA requiring only one point away to the weakest team vying for qualification, Trinidad and Tobago, who had lost eight of their previous nine qualification fixtures. Therefore, in order to finish fourth and advance to a playoff against Australia, Panama had to match or better the result of Honduras who were home to first placed Mexico.

Inconceivably, Trinidad and Tobago picked up just their second win of the qualifying stage, beating USA 2-1. Honduras were 3-2 ahead against Mexico on the hour mark, with Panama drawing 1-1 against Costa Rica at the same stage, after scoring a highly controversial equalising goal where replays showed the ball did not cross the line.

As things stood with just 30 minutes of qualification remaining, Panama would miss out altogether on World Cup qualification, along with missing out potentially on even a playoff match. Panama certainly didn't make life easy for themselves, but in the 88th minute, history was made as star centre back and captain, Roman Torres, latched onto a flicked on header from Luis Tejada, firing past the goalie and sending Panama to their first World Cup Finals.

#### Squad and Tactics

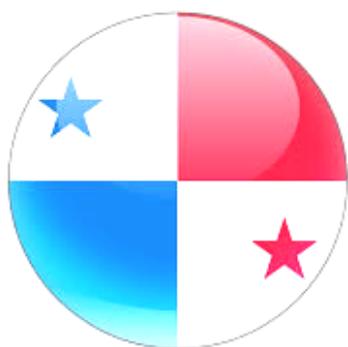
At the time of writing, Panama are yet to confirm their final World Cup squad, instead electing to cut down from a 35 man squad in early June, just before the FIFA deadline.

The central American side are likely to line up in a trusted 5-4-1 formation and try to stifle the more experienced Belgian and English sides in the group. Although they may come out of their shell in the final game against Tunisia, this will likely be too late to affect their length of stay at the World Cup.

Very few team previews will highlight a centre back as a player to watch out for, however Panama are likely to spend a lot more time defending than they are attacking. 32 year old Roman Torres of the Seattle Sounders and the hero whose goal got them to Russia, is a player you can't possibly miss. Standing at six feet two inches, as wide as a truck and with



In 2014, USA scored late on in their final qualification match to eliminate Panama from qualifying. 2018 saw an exact reversal as Panama scored late to knock out USA.



## Panama Best Bet of World Cup 2018: Zero Tournament goals scored 9/2

highlighted dreadlocks, he makes a unique impression on a football pitch. A pivotal member of Panama's back four over the last decade with more than 100 caps to his name and ten goals to boot, Panama will need Torres at his best if they are to have any hopes of progression.

Elsewhere, the Panamanians will at least have experience on the pitch. For example, journeyman goalkeeper Jaime Penedo, currently at Dinamo Bucharest, has more than 130 caps.

With Blas Perez and Luis Tejada, the two frontmen likely to start and also their nation's joint top scorers (both on 43 goals), aged 37 and 36 respectively, Panama won't be relying on through balls and pace to get behind the opposition's defence.

Instead, Los Canaleros (The Canal Men) will primarily look to harvest their strength and size as well as the frugality of their defence. Any hopes of a goal will likely be pinned on set pieces where Roman Torres' aerial prowess will pose a threat. Expect Panama to be tough to break down, using any opportunity to waste precious seconds to hold on to a result as well as the occasional tough tackle and simulation. There's a good chance that they will receive more red cards than goals for in their debut at the world's biggest stage.

### Chances Of Progression

Unsurprisingly with odds of 1000/1 to win the World Cup, their campaign is not expected to outlast the Group Stage. Unless Panama could pull off a gargantuan shock and beat Belgium or England in either of their first two games, the underdog's only realistic hope for qualification would be to salvage draws against the two strongest teams Belgium and England and hope to defeat Tunisia in their final group game on the 28th of June.

My bet for Panama in the World Cup is "0 Goals Scored" at 9/2. In all likelihood, Panama will be outclassed by England and Belgium in their opening games which would hopefully leave a tremendous value bet of 9/2 for Tunisia to keep a clean sheet in their final match, which could be hedged accordingly in order to guarantee a profit.



### Unheralded Player

One potential player to watch from a team that is likely to be a team who spends a lot of time in their own half is right back Michael Murillo.

He is currently playing for New York Red Bulls, having joined them for the 2017 season on loan and he has impressed, making 17 appearances, with New York announcing they had signed him on a permanent deal after the season had finished. He will be unlikely to get any goals or the opportunity to attack, however will have a chance to try and make his mark as he comes up against attacking talents such as Sterling, De Bruyne and Hazard in the group.



With an average age of 29.4, Panama had the oldest team out of all qualifiers for the World Cup.



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# Group G

SAVETHEPUNTER

## The Manager

Nabil Maâloul has been managing the Northwest African side since April 2017, this being his second spell in charge of the nation that he appeared for 74 times as a player. He previously managed the national side in 2013 and resigned after failing to take them to the World Cup. Since then he has also managed the Kuwaiti national side.

Maâloul has also managed club sides and his greatest success was when took ES Tunis, his home town side, to the treble in 2011 (League, Cup & African Champions League). Not many managers can claim to have won a continental treble, with only seven teams in CAF ever managing this feat.

Tunisia, nicknamed The Carthage Eagles, are yet to suffer defeat under the current boss during the second spell in charge - although this only spans across seven matches. He becomes just the second Tunisian-born manager to take a side to the finals after Abdelmajid Chetali in 1978.

## Fixtures

### → England 18/06



Tunisia will likely struggle to match the English quality in their evening opener in Volgograd.

PREDICTION: TUNISIA 0-2 ENGLAND

### → Belgium 23/06



Belgium with their Premier League stars are likely to prove too tough for Tunisia who will probably be eliminated after this match.

PREDICTION: TUNISIA 0-3 BELGIUM

### → Panama 28/06



The final match for Tunisia gives them the opportunity to beat the World Cup debutants, and perhaps pick up their first points of the tournament.

PREDICTION: TUNISIA 3-1 PANAMA



# TUNISIA

By Alex Everson

Tunisia breezed through qualification to the World Cup and were unbeaten in the eight matches they played in total to qualify. After dispatching Mauritania 4-2 in the second round, their round robin consisted of six matches against DR Congo, Libya and Guinea. The eleven goals scored in the round robin were widely shared, with no player scoring in more than one match.

Although they had to wait until their final match for qualification, they needed just a point at home to Libya to seal their spot, and a 0-0 draw in front of 56,000 fans saw them confirm top spot in the qualifying group and ensure that they would be travelling to Russia to compete in their fifth World Cup.

The key match for Tunisia came in the middle of qualification, away to the side second seeded in their group, DR Congo. Tunisia found themselves 2-0 behind, however managed to rally back with two goals in the space of three minutes in the second half to gain a vital point which would ensure they topped the table by a solitary point come November 2017.

### Squad & Tactics

The Tunisians were dealt a hammer blow in April as their star player Youssef Msakni went down with a knee ligament injury ruling him out of the World Cup, with manager Maâloul stating it was like Argentina losing Messi.

With the talismanic Msakni out injured, additional pressure is put onto Whabi Khazri, currently playing for Rennes on loan from Sunderland, who will likely play up front in a 4-2-3-1 formation and will be the only player in the squad who is in double figures for international goals. With his parent club going down to England's third tier, they will be looking to get Khazri off the books and this should create extra incentive for him to perform. He has already caught the eye of French clubs, having bagged twelve goals and two assists from 29 games for Rennes this season.

Behind him, Tunisia will be reliant on experienced centre back Syam Ben Youssef to keep the defence organised. He has 33 caps for his country, and standing at just over 6ft, is likely to impose himself upon his group G opposition strikers.

? Tunisia won their very first World Cup match in 1978 v Mexico. Since then, they have played eleven, not winning any and losing seven of these.



## Tunisia Best Bet of World Cup 2018: Tunisia to beat Panama 13/10

The spine of the team also contrains defensive midfielder Fejani Sassi. Sassi has previously played his club football at FC Metz and ES Tunis before transferring to Saudi Arabian side Nassr in January 2018.

The goalkeeper for Tunisia is Aymen Mathlouthi, regarded as one of the best African goalkeepers of all time, who had played in Tunisia his entire career for Etoile Sahel before transferring to Al-Batin in Saudi Arabia in January 2018. He will captain the Tunisian side and will be critical for the team if they are going to manage to spring any upsets in the World Cup.

To combat Maâloul's concerns over the side lacking experience outside of Tunisia, the manager has given debuts recently to a few dual-nationality players playing within France and England to try and inject some additional talent and know-how to the squad.

The most notable of the more recently utilised players is Yohan Benalouane of Leicester City, who made four appearances in their title-winning season after signing for £7m from Atalanta (he did not get a Premier League medal - you need to have played five times). The right back has previously represented France at U-21 level. There will also be interest in how the trio of France-based, young midfielders Saif-Eddine Khaoui, Ellyes Skhiri and Bassem Srarfi perform.

### Chances of Progression

Odds of 11/2 for Tunisia to progress from the group stage imply how difficult the task is for the African side. It is tough to see them scoring enough goals past England and Belgium in their two opening matches to give

themselves a chance of progression going into the match against Panama. The likely scenario is both sides already eliminated and this turning into a chance to restore a little pride. Tunisia really should be too strong for Panama and the 13/10 on offer for an African win can be taken.

Now if indeed Tunisia somehow manage to avoid defeat first time out against England, and end up making the Round of 16, their journey would likely end there.



### Unheralded Player

Naim Sliti will be one to watch out for this summer, if he gets an opportunity to get onto the field. The attacking midfielder signed permanently for Lille last summer after spending the 2016-17 season there on loan. He was then immediately dispatched out on loan to Dijon last season where he netted 5 goals for the Ligue 1 outfit.

The fact that he started the two friendlies in March may point to Maâloul looking to Sliti to add a bit of spark to their attacking threat. Having said that, if Tunisia aim to line up in a more defensive style against England and Belgium, he will be unlikely to start and will need to an impact from the bench.

His performances this summer may lead him to be pushing for his spot in the Lille first team next season, with Lille looking to improve hugely on the disappointing 17th position that they managed this year.

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TUNISIA | GROUP G

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# Group G

SAVETHEPUNTER

## The Manager

Gareth Southgate wasn't a popular choice when appointed in November 2016 on a 4 year deal. The governing body felt they needed a clean-cut image in charge of the team after Sam Allardyce was 'sacked' following an undercover sting story. A typical example of the English media doing their own country no favours by getting rid of a manager who had only been in charge for one qualifying game.

As a player for England, Southgate won 57 caps, but will always be remembered for missing that penalty in the Euro 96 semi-final against Germany. His management career started at Middlesbrough, where he retired as a player. He didn't enjoy success: finishing 12th in his first season in charge, with relegation coming the following campaign.

4 years later, and after a spell as 'Head of Elite Development' for the FA, Southgate took the helm of England's U21 side. They finished rock bottom of their group in the Euro U21 finals in 2015.

## Fixtures

### ➔ Tunisia 18/06



A typically low key success for England against an inferior African nation.

PREDICTION: ENGLAND 1-0 TUNISIA

### ➔ Panama 23/06



Not the demolition job the traditional loud-mouthed fellow Englishman will be looking for.

PREDICTION: ENGLAND 2-0 PANAMA

### ➔ Belgium 28/06



A high scoring game to decide the winners of Group G in Kaliningrad, edged by Belgium.

PREDICTION: ENGLAND 2-3 BELGIUM



# ENGLAND

By Parris Barron

England won their group unbeaten. Although not only was it a weak group, we should also note that recent qualifying campaign successes have given no indication of how well England will do in the tournament itself. England were knocked out of the group stages at Brazil '14, and only reached the last 16 at South Africa '10 after qualifying well for both tournaments.

Whilst never looking in danger of not making it to Russia, The Three Lions still underwhelmed, with draws away to Slovakia and Scotland, and one-goal margin victories against Slovenia and Lithuania. England still suffer when trying to break down inferior nations, whose defences sit deep and get men behind the ball.

None of this gives any clues as to Southgate being a particularly good manager. There's no doubt it was opportune timing that saw him get this role, but it's fair to say he's slowly winning the mood of the nation over with some credible performances. However these have mainly come in four unbeaten friendly matches vs Germany, Brazil, Italy and Holland. It really is nothing to get too excited about from an attacking point of view as only two of these fixtures featured an England goal.

### Squad & Tactics

Southgate seems to have settled on a three at the back formation which he's only started using in the recent friendlies. Kyle Walker looks set to be on the right of that, meaning his incredible pace and drive will be missed out wide. The positive is his recovery runs will help what is likely to be inexperienced centre half partners.

With John Stones and Gary Cahill not getting enough playing time for Man City and Chelsea respectively due to injuries and form, Leicester City's Harry McGuire could be set for an unlikely starting space. Equally, Manchester United's Phil Jones could be returning to the limelight at the opportune moment.

Danny Rose doesn't merit a place in the squad given his lack of playing time, but has still been selected. Ashley Young is a credible and versatile back-up, while Southampton's Ryan Bertrand



England hold the worst record in penalty shootouts at the World Cup, with a 100% loss record from three shootouts.



## England Best Bet of World Cup 2018: England knocked out in quarter finals 5/2

twis unfortunate to miss out. Kieran Trippier looks nailed on for the right hand side, with uncapped 19 year old Trent Alexander-Arnold also called up, likely as his understudy.

In midfield, three from Jordan Henderson, Eric Dier, Jesse Lingard and Dele Alli are likely to start. Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain's season-ending injury means Ruben Loftus-Cheek is the wildcard to feature.

It's likely that after a superb season for champions Manchester City, Raheem Sterling will be used centrally behind Harry Kane. Jamie Vardy and Marcus Rashford will make hope to make an impact from the bench.

Jordan Pickford should start in goal, backed up by Jack Butland of Stoke. Experience ultimately didn't count for Joe Hart, being unceremoniously omitted in favour of Nick Pope, who hasn't played a minute of international football.

In summary, few of the starting XI positions are certain, and the system England will play is not set in stone. Such issues will become clearer after the pre-tournament friendlies against Nigeria and Costa Rica.

### Chances of Progression

There's a distinct lack of star quality compared to the teams at 1998, 2002 and 2006. At odds of 18-1, England's 2nd highest price ever, the market recognises this weakness.

With only Harry Kane, Sterling and Kyle Walker likely to get into a composite starting XI with Belgium, it's fair to say England are only the second best team in their group. By the time the two sides meet, it's quite likely both will have six points already from the matches against Tunisia and Panama. The last 16 opponents could likely be Colombia or Poland from Group H. Next up would likely be either Germany or Brazil in the quarter finals, and realistically there really is no need to look further than that.

The best bet is England to be knocked out in the quarter finals which is 5/2.

They are odds on to make the quarter final itself, and surely would not be favourites to beat Germany or Brazil, their two most likely opponents.



### Unheralded Player

Given the high profile of Premier League football globally, none of England's 23 man squad will be unfamiliar to watching fans.

But perhaps foreign media might not be as aware as the watching English public of the ability of Jesse Lingard to consistently make probing runs on and off the ball to help create and score. He's steadily improved in each of his last 4 seasons at Manchester United and provided many important goals last season.

His performances have earned such praise that there's even talk of him possibly replacing Dele Alli in the Southgate's preferred XI.

**?** Peter Shilton went ten games - from 1982-1990- without conceding a goal in the World Cup.



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ENGLAND | GROUP G

# Group H

SAVETHEPUNTER

## The Manager

**Adam Nawalka** is a former midfielder, playing 34 times for Poland. Now 60 years of age, Nawalka had previous international experience as Assistant Coach of the Polish national team between 2007 and 2008, before taking over as manager in October 2013. He has had quite a varied career which includes holding a number of posts at Wisla Krakow, such as sports director, head of scouting and interim head coach, as well as other managerial posts in Poland. He has a win percentage of 53% (from 45 games) which includes an impressive win over Germany in the Euro 2016 qualifiers, who they also held to a 0-0 draw at the tournament itself.

For all of the qualifiers, Nawalka set up Poland with a flat back four and switched between a four or five-man midfield as he saw fit, with the additional striker being sacrificed to add the extra bit of protection in the middle of the park. In the friendlies since the end of the qualifying campaign, Nawalka has experimented with wing-backs to limited success which may see him revert to the formation which worked to great effect in getting Poland to the finals.

## Fixtures

### ➔ Senegal 19/06



Keeping Sadio Mane quiet and competing with Senegal's industrious midfield will be key to this tie. The Polish defence should be up to this and Lewandowski will only need one chance to put this game away.

**PREDICTION: POLAND 1-0 SENEGAL**

### ➔ Colombia 24/06



The return to fitness and form of Radamel Falcao and the creative talents of James Rodriguez and Juan Cuadrado will prove a stern test for the Polish defence but they should be able to limit this threat and secure a draw.

**PREDICTION: POLAND 1-1 COLOMBIA**

### ➔ Japan 28/06



Poland should prove too strong for a limited and now ageing Japan team. I expect Poland to secure a route to the knockout stages in style where the prospect of playing either Belgium or England will be awaiting them.

**PREDICTION: POLAND 3-0 JAPAN**



# POLAND

By John O'Gorman

Russia 2018 will be Poland's eighth outing at the World Cup finals. Their best finish has been third place in both the 1974 and 1982 editions. More recently they have failed to qualify for five out of the last seven tournaments and in the two that they did qualify for, 2002 and 2006, they failed to get out of the group stage.

Poland were seeded first in Group E of the European Qualifying and proved their worthiness of this seeding by ending with a record of W8 - D1 - L1. However, anything less than topping a group consisting of Denmark, Romania, Montenegro, Armenia and Kazakhstan would have been a disappointment for a team that reached the quarter finals of Euro 2016. Their run in that tournament being ended by the eventual winners, Portugal, on penalties.

Things did not start off as expected in their qualifying campaign though. Poland led Kazakhstan 2-0 but let that lead slip with the score ending 2-2. Poland then bounced back with a 3-2 win over Denmark thanks to a Robert Lewandowski hat-trick. They were another four wins for Poland before a 4-0 rout at the hands of Denmark. With seven games played, Poland were still top of the group and won all three remaining games, scoring thirteen goals in the process, to clinch the automatic qualification spot.

Post-qualification, Poland have played friendlies against opposition that are similar to their Group H. These games have not been successful for Poland with their only victory being a 3-2 win over South Korea. They failed to score in their other three games where they record 1-0 losses against Nigeria and Mexico and following a frustrating 0-0 draw with Uruguay in which neither Lewandowski or Suarez featured.

### Squad & Tactics

Two ex-Arsenal goalkeepers are battling for the no. 1 jersey, which looks likely to fall on Lukasz Fabianski's shoulders. Although Swansea were relegated from the Premier League, Fabianski had a good season and was one of his team's better performers. This is in contrast to Wojciech Szczesny, who made 21 appearances in all competitions for a title-winning Juventus side but the majority of these appearances came before the turn of the year whilst Buffon was injured.

? Lewandowski is the top Polish goalscorer of all time, and will move into the top 3 of capped Polish players during the summer.



## Poland Best Bet of World Cup 2018: Eliminated on penalties 11/1

Monaco's Kamil Glik started all but one of the qualifiers and the robust centre-back is likely to be paired with Michal Pazdan. This centre-back duo worked to great effect at Euro 2016 in conceding only two goals in the five games played at the tournament, including a clean sheet against Germany. It is unlikely that Nawalka will move away from this successful partnership. The right-back spot will be filled by Lukasz Piszczek of Borussia Dortmund with the left-back position not completely nailed down. Maciej Rybus has the edge over Artur Jedrzejczyk but Nawalka may opt for Jedrzejczyk if he wants a more defensive approach. Rybus is a great weapon going forward and these attributes may have been behind the thinking of Nawalka switching to a wing-back system to accommodate him.

The defensive midfield role will go to Grzegorz Krychowiak. The combative midfielder got a dream move to PSG in 2016 but failed to make an impact and spent the 2017-18 unsuccessfully battling relegation on loan at West Brom. He will be looking to make an impact to revive his career. Piotr Zielinski will add the creativity to Krychowiak's tenacity. Jakub Blaszczykowski will operate on the right-hand side and stands to pick up his century of caps during the tournament (he is currently on 97).

The left-wing role should fall to Kamil Grosicki of Hull City, currently playing in England's second tier. On the face of it, this may seem like a weak link but Grosicki made an immediate impact when he joined half-way through Hull's spirited, but ultimately doomed, relegation campaign. He has continued this good form and netted nine times this season for his club whilst chipping in with three goals and three assists during the qualifiers.

Robert Lewandowski is widely regarded as one of the deadliest finishers in Europe and will lead the line. The Bayern Munich man was joint top-scorer in the World Cup qualifiers, along with Al-Sahlawi and Khalil, with 16 goals (including two hat-tricks). Poland will need their captain to

continue in this rich vein of form if they are going to reach the latter stages of the tournament. If Nawalka plays two up top, Lewandowski is likely to be partnered with Arkadiusz Milik with Milik likely to be sacrificed for either Linetty or Maczynski if Nawalka opts for a five-man midfield.

### Chances of Progression

Poland were 6th in the FIFA rankings at the time of the draw and, as such, avoided the traditional footballing super-powers and find themselves in a winnable group. Whether they win their group or come second should not matter a great deal as there is not much difference between the strengths of England or Belgium, their likely opponents in the last 16. From there the future looks bleak as one of the joint-favourites, Brazil or Germany, will lie in wait for them.

To get eliminated by penalty shoot out is 11/1 - with with no round specified- looks to be a good bet. Both their knockout matches in 2016 went to penalties. If they qualify from the group, it's likely any match against England or Belgium would be tight, possible going to extra time, giving a good value trade out.



### Unheralded Player

Although Zielinski moved to Napoli as a 22-year-old for an impressive 16 million Euros in 2016, he is probably overshadowed by Napoli's abundance of attacking talents.

Zielinski has already attracted attention from Liverpool and a successful tournament could really boost the reputation of this rising star. His close control and trickery means he can drive at defences drawing in defenders for Lewandowski to exploit. It could be said that he needs to improve on his goals to games ratio but, with Lewandowski being so deadly, the Polish fans will settle for his flair and creativity.



# Group H

SAVETHEPUNTER

## The Manager

Aliou Cisse may be known to some Birmingham City & Portsmouth fans, having played there in the mid 2000's, before retiring in 2009. He has been around the national team set-up since 2012, beginning with the U23's and in 2015 was appointed manager of the National Team, at the young age of only 39.

Surprisingly, for a head coach at a World Cup, this is Cisse's only management job to date. Having only spent time as a coach at third tier French side Louhans-Cuiseaux FC, he's pretty inexperienced. However, so far his record with the African side has been good. Cisse has lost only three of his 26 matches in charge

Cisse, despite his relatively long tenure for a Senegal head coach, is the lowest paid manager going into the World Cup. His contract pays him only €200K, the lowest by more than €60K.

## Fixtures

### ➔ Poland 19/06



Senegal open their tournament against Poland in the secondary Moscow stadium, Otkritie Arena, home of Spartak, and I would expect the African side to scrap their way to a point if they can limit the chances of Lewandowski.

PREDICTION: SENEGAL 1-1 POLAND

### ➔ Japan 24/06



Senegal will need to beat Japan most likely in order to qualify, and I expect the pace of Mane to breeze past the aging Japanese side, and gain them three points.

PREDICTION: SENEGAL 2-1 JAPAN

### ➔ Colombia 28/06



This could be a very feisty fixture if all four teams are still in qualification contention, however I think Colombia will have their star talent, Falcao and James Rodriguez, shine through in this match.

PREDICTION: SENEGAL 0-2 COLOMBIA



# SENEGAL

By Alex Everson

Senegal return to the World Cup after a sixteen year wait since their debut, back in 2002. Back then, the Lions of Taranga shocked the football world by beating reigning champions France, thanks to a Papa Boupa Diop goal. They defeated Sweden in the round of 16, before going out at the quarter final stage to Turkey, when Ilhan Mansiz scored what is the final golden goal ever at an international tournament.

Senegal qualified for the tournament this summer with relative ease, finishing the 2nd stage group unbeaten. Tame opposition such Burkina Faso and Cape Verde Islands, meant Senegal conceded only three times in six matches.

In attack the Senegalese scored two goals in five of their six games, with only Burkina Faso stopping them from hitting the back of the net. During qualifying, FIFA ordered their 2-1 loss to South Africa be replayed, due to match manipulation by referee Joseph Lamptey, who was later banned for life. Senegal won the rerun 2-0.

### Tactics and Squad

Throughout qualification, head coach Aliou Cisse lined Senegal up in fairly similar fashion, favouring an attacking 4-3-3 formation. This 4-3-3 is more similar to a counter attacking 4-5-1 when they are not in possession and is a relatively solid formation, allowing Senegal to spring quickly from defence to attack through Keite Balde or Sadio Mane.

Leading the line, Moussa Sow is likely to be key to the Senegal side attempting to get themselves out of the first round. The Bursaspor striker has scored 15 goals in 45 appearances for his country, although he only scored once during the qualifying period. Alongside him will be a familiar name to those who follow the Premier League, Sadio Mane. Mane has had an excellent season for Liverpool, scoring ten league goals, and assisting seven, proving time and again that he is a pacey, tricky winger who is likely to want to take his man on and run at them. However, he is sometimes criticised for his defensive contributions, and may come across as slightly weak, having had multiple injuries this season.



Senegal have only competed in one World Cup, equaling the best performance by any African side making the quarter finals.



**Senegal Best Bet of World Cup 2018:  
Senegal eliminated at Round of 16  
5/2**

More recently a Liverpool physio has accompanied Mane on travels with his country team to ensure his hamstring in good shape, after picking up an injury whilst on national duty in October 2017.

In central midfield is captain Cheik Kouyate of West Ham. Since his debut in 2012, picking up 39 caps along the way, Kouyate has embodied the spirit of the Senegal team. Alongside his physical presence is fellow Premier League player Idrissa Gueye of Everton, who had the second most tackles in the Premier League this season (behind Leicester and Nigeria's Wilfred Ndidi). Between them they form a very tough midfield partnership, and will recycle the ball forwards towards Mane and Keita Balde of Monaco.

Starting in defence is likely to be Square, the Crystal Palace player who was injured in a car crash before coming back into the national side in March 2018. He will line up at left back, with Lamine Gassama lining up on the opposite side. The right back has played Champions League football in the past for Lyon, however has now surfaced for Alanyaspor in Turkey, joining there in 2016.

The two centre back partnership is likely to involve Koulibaly, who was part of a Napoli defence that only conceded 29 goals in Serie A this season. Alongside him will be the slightly less experienced Papy Djilobodji, who is currently contracted to Sunderland, although he has not played for them this season, instead spending the season on loan at French team Dijon in Ligue Un.

Senegal overall are a relatively young squad however, and at an average age of 26.4, were the fifth youngest of team's that qualified.

**Chances of Progression**

Finishing above either Colombia or Poland is a tall order, but it's what Senegal will have to do to qualify. At odds of 6/4, the market is not on their side to make it through.

However, even if Senegal do qualify, it is probable they will be outclassed by the winners of Group G, likely to be Belgium or England. Taking odds of 5/2 for a Round of 16 elimination is enticing.



**Unheralded Player**

A rising star in European football, Keita Balde is likely to be one to keep an eye on this summer. Having made over 100 appearances for Lazio in Serie A, he transferred to Monaco in summer 2017 for a substantial fee. Keita is a graduate of La Masia, the Barcelona youth academy.

He is a crafty winger, similar to Sadio Mane, who is not afraid to take on his man, and not afraid to shoot, scoring eight goals for Monaco this season in 23 league appearances, following on from having scored 16 goals in 31 Serie A appearances the season before.

This world cup has the potential for Keita to show he can mix it with the elite and with a good cup performance, there may be interest from other European sides during the summer transfer window.



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# Group H

SAVETHEPUNTER

## The Manager

World Cup 2014 was deemed a great success from Argentinian born newly naturalized Colombian coach **Jose Pekerman**.

For an encore, a second successive qualification to a World Cup ensued. 2014 had in fact been the first appearance to a Finals in 16 years for Colombia. Since Pekerman took charge in 2012, Colombian fans have had little to cry about from their cerebral coach in terms of results.

Back to back trips to the World Cup is a great achievement, as is Colombia's 55.5% win ratio under him. However, he is a man who often likes to tinker with formations and personnel. Some criticism has come in after a less than smooth qualification amidst an understandable surge in expectation and an apparent pragmatism in style of play.

## Fixtures

### ➔ Japan 19/06



Colombia should have too much ability for an uninspiring Japan side. Great opportunity for Star players James and Falcao to get off the mark.

PREDICTION: COLOMBIA 2-0 JAPAN

### ➔ Poland 24/06



A tough and rigid Polish backline may make things hard work with an eventual solitary goal winning it late.

PREDICTION: COLOMBIA 1-0 POLAND

### ➔ Senegal 28/06



Colombia may rotate the squad a little. A physically very strong and dynamic Senegal team with a lot still left to play for may edge this one.

PREDICTION: COLOMBIA 2-1 SENEGAL



# COLOMBIA

By Eric Polese-Lopez

After decades of under-achievement, corruption and lovable yet unreliable personalities, such as Higuita (Scorpion kick) and Faustino Asprilla (Champions League hat-trick against Barcelona), the last World Cup Finals in Brazil showcased on a global stage the first credible and inspiring tournament performance from a Colombian side in recent history. It instilled pride in their fans, connecting them closer than ever before to their National team.

Reaching the quarter finals and narrowly exiting to the hosts without star striker Falcao, who missed the competition through injury, "Los Cafeteros" captivated a nation in dire need of sporting positivity as well as attracting many new foreign admirers and fans. None more so than attacking midfielder James Rodriguez who took home the Golden Boot with 6 strikes in the tournament and whose exquisite volley against Uruguay was shortlisted for the best goal, culminating in a dream Galactico transfer to Real Madrid.

Colombia secured the fourth and final qualifying spot on the last day from the notoriously difficult CONCACAF World Cup group, which contains perennial tournament contenders Brazil and Argentina as well as a reemerging Uruguay and the recently dominant Chilean force, not to mention the challenging away trip to La Paz, Bolivia, where they play 3,637m above sea level. Seven wins, six draws and five losses left a lot to be desired but qualification was achieved, leaving several lacklustre performances in the mire.

### Tactics and Squad

Probably the most worrying factor to come out of the qualification process was the lack of an established back line. Ospina enters as the definite number one in goal. But there are a host of defenders, including established international Cristian Zapata, plus highly promising starlet Davinson Sanchez, who has had such an impressive debut season in the Premiership for Spurs. As well as new Barcelona signing Yerry Mina all vying for positions in the heart of that defence.

The midfield has been far more settled with Aguilar and C. Sanchez doing the dirty work and controlling the tempo of the game, while James and Cuadrado are responsible for the creative endeavors. Left wing has proved problematic with no one player being able to nail down the position as of yet; who will start there for Colombia's 1st game on June 19th remains unclear.

? Colombia are the only team to have scored directly from a corner kick in World Cup history, back in 1962.

STP

COLOMBIA | GROUP H



## Colombia Best Bet of World Cup 2018: Colombia to reach the Quarter Finals 2/1

The return and relatively solid performances of Radamel Falcao up front for both club and country should bring stability and confidence in the attack, with the more than competent Carlos Bacca and Luis Muriel providing good cover.

Whether Pekerman relies on his veterans for experience or gambles with youth for athleticism could well determine Colombia's style of play and consequently their success. Ultimately, whether a straight 4-2-3-1 or a hybrid 4-4-1-1 / 4-2-2-2 are employed this Summer, there is little doubt that Colombia enter the tournament as favourites to top their Group consisting of Poland, Senegal and Japan, with expectation to cause some havoc in the knockout stages. It is a position that this squad and indeed nation finds itself in for the very first time. Leaving behind the lovable, colourful underdog garments that fitted so snug 4 years ago, a nation now expects and demands.

### Chances of Progression

Qualifying top of Group H would seemingly be critical in order to avoid the heavily favoured winners of Group G and one of the tournament "dark horses" Belgium. If Colombia and Belgium do in fact finish atop their groups then the far more straightforward mission, so it would seem, of defeating persistent underperformers England would lie ahead.

A successful navigation though the Round of 16 would present, in the most likely of scenarios, the defending champions and joint tournament favourites Germany as the opposition. No shame would befall any nation for bowing out of this summer's tournament to the Joachim Löw led juggernaut of world football.

If however, Colombia somehow finish runners up of their group and consequently manage to send the "Red Devils" packing, the probable opponent waiting at the quarter final stage would be record World Cup winning powerhouse Brazil.

Even the most optimistic and romantic of football fans would pit Colombia as the longshot in that contest.

Thus, it seems that Colombia are destined for a repeat quarter final appearance. Anything less would be verging on a catastrophe, anything more would be celebrated with much fervour and Aguardiente (Colombian spirit translated as "Fire Water").

Whether Pekerman's squad overachieve or underwhelm, much will be learnt about the Coach's tactical abilities as well as the characters of the players, in their quest to cement themselves as genuine title contenders and a footballing power.



### Unheralded Player

There have been sections of fans and media outlets clamouring for 24 year old Wilmar Barrios to be given ample playing time in the holding midfield role, with some adamant he should indeed take over from 33 year old Aguilar as the first choice.

The athletic and technically proficient Barrios is having a wonderful season; currently plying his trade at Boca Juniors, who sit comfortably atop of the Argentinian Superliga, he has looked assured and comfortable while playing in Colombia's recent games picking up 10 caps since his debut in September 2016.

His ability to positively affect the game with both simplicity of passing and a tenacity in recovering the ball defensively, not to mention his slight frame, have many labelling him the "Colombian Kante".



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# Group H

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## The Manager

**Akira Nishiro** is the newest manager at the World Cup, having only been appointed in April. It was described as an "emergency measure" after removing Vahid Halilhodzic; it appears the Bosnian had lost the confidence of the players, with communication problems also rumoured and that the team did not enjoy Halilhodzic's negative tactics.

Nishino is considered one of the greatest Japanese managers after steering Gamba Osaka to their first Asian Champions League title in 2008 and helping Japan beat Brazil at the 1996 Olympics.

Nishiro was appointed from within having previously been technical director at the Japanese FA and will need to adjust to the new role quickly. On his appointment, Nishiro has insisted that a fast, attacking style would be employed. It's worth noting Japan have won only three of their past ten fixtures and lost four of their last five played outside of Japan.

## Fixtures

### → Colombia 19/06



The game where we find out what this Japan team looks like. Colombia are a very good team though and it would be a shock if Japan could win.

PREDICTION: JAPAN 1-2 COLOMBIA

### → Senegal 24/06



Senegal have the greater star power which makes me favour them.

PREDICTION: JAPAN 0-1 SENEGAL

### → Poland 28/06



Poland have a potent attack, which Japan will struggle to nullify. It could be a long afternoon in Volgograd.

PREDICTION: JAPAN 1-3 POLAND



# JAPAN

By Cain Bradley

The 2014 World Cup was disappointing for Japan as they left Brazil with no victories and a fourth place finish in their group despite it being winnable. They came up against Colombia, who they've drawn again, but who beat them 4-1 last time out. Draws against Greece and Ivory Coast saw them end with two points and crash out early.

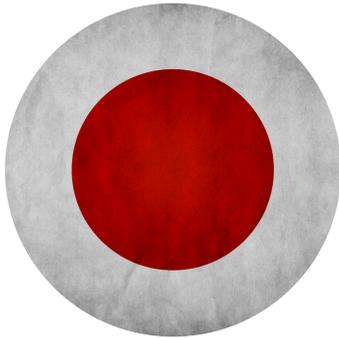
Japan qualified for their sixth consecutive World Cup by winning Group B in the final round, topping the table above Saudi Arabia and Australia. They lost only two games during the qualifying campaign, one in their first match against United Arab Emirates and then in their final game against Saudi Arabia, when they had already guaranteed top spot. Strong defensive performances saw them only concede seven goals in their ten matches, including keeping four clean sheets.

### Tactics and Squad

Japan will look to maintain a tight ship at the back, which starts with Eiji Kawashima, the Metz goalkeeper, who has amassed over 80 caps for his country and roughly concedes a goal a game. They have tended to play in a 4-2-3-1 but in their latest friendly against Ghana they played a 3-4-2-1. Nagino referred to it as an attempt to increase the teams options. He described a four man defence as being "ingrained for better or worse." They went 2-0 down before switching back to a four man defence and their performance was described as "lacking cohesion." You imagine they will start with a four man defence in the tournament and can make changes from there.

The defence is marshalled by two players who ply their trade in Europe. The first of these being Maya Yoshida, who has impressed in the Premier League for Southampton and is a decent goal threat as well, picking up a goal every eight games for the national team. Alongside him will likely be Tomoaki Makino of Urawa Red Diamonds. Yuto Nagatomo of Inter Milan, who has bags of experience with over a century of caps and who has already represented the Samurai Blue at the last two World Cups, will play on the left while Hiroki Sakai or Genki Haraguchi will likely be on the right depending on formation and attacking intentions. The midfield will be anchored by Makoto Hasebe, the captain with over 100 caps. He has played over 250 games for Frankfurt in the Bundesliga and also offers versatility given he can play part of a three man defence. It will

? Japan, along with South Korea, co-hosted the first World Cup to be held in Asia.



# Japan Best Bet of World Cup 2018: Japan to finish bottom of Group H 6/4

also likely see Hotaru Yamaguchi, a defensive option, or Ryota Oshima in the midfield.

Typically, Japan have played a possession based game with a tough edge and under Halilhodzic, the more stylish players such as Keisuke Honda (who now plays at CF Pachuca in Mexico), Leicester's Shinji Okazaki and Shinji Kagawa of Borussia Dortmund often found themselves at odds with the manager over how they would fit in to this rigid and drilled style. Honda did get seven goals though, in the qualifying rounds, and will need to be in that type of form here. Without seeing how Nishiro will plug these players in, it becomes difficult to project a playing style but it is clear that Honda, Kagawa and Okazaki are all quality players who in the right system could be part of a dangerous team.

Other attacking options include Yūya Asako, who has seven goals in 26 for Japan. Genki Haraguchi will likely be a winger if they play four at the back and his pacy, dribbling can be a threat. Takashi Usami was given the start in the friendly with Ghana but the counter attacking pace of Takuma Asano could be key against teams who will pressure Japan .

### Chances of Progression

The aforementioned uncertainty over Japan's tactics, players and manager means the 6/4 on offer for them to finish bottom of the group is attractive. The last 5 World Cups have been the only times Japan has made the finals and they have finished bottom on three of those occasions.

Colombia, Senegal and Poland will be delighted to have Japan in their group and as we go to press Japan have just succumbed to a meek 2-0 loss to Ghana in a pre-tournament friendly. It will be a quiet flight home on the 29th June.



### Unheralded Player

Takuma Asano is only 23 but has already enjoyed a good amount of success in his career. Arsenal signed him in 2016 following him becoming the J-League Rookie of the year and he has spent two seasons on loan at Stuttgart scoring five goals in 41 games.

Asano is comfortable operating as a false nine, a winger or a striker and his pace allows him to get behind defences and could be key if Japan needs to play on the counter. He was the man to put them 1-0 up against Australia in the game that saw them seal qualification. He is a better finisher than his goalscoring ratio suggests. Playing off a front man means he doesn't get a lot of chances, but can find that bottom corner.

**?** Keisuke Honda is the top Japanese goalscorer at FIFA World Cups with 3 goals. This year is his third tournamen.



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