

FIRSTTOUCH

WORLD CUP OVERVIEW



Focus: Group G



BELGIUM



PANAMA



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FIFA WORLD CUP
RUSSIA 2018

BELGIUM



The Red Devils squad boasts of top quality players, with many of them plying their trade in the acclaimed English Premier League. They powered to Russia finals by claiming top spot of Europe's Group H, finishing the qualifying campaign unbeaten. Their 3rd place global ranking tells you a lot about how much potential they have to win the tournament - both experience and talent. They play entertaining attacking football, scoring goals for fun but are still without any major trophy. They have won nothing. Many people have dubbed them perennial underachievers and what surprises many is that they seem to have it and yet have nothing-quality in all the right areas, from Thibaut Courtois to Toby Alderweireld and Eden Hazard. What is also true is that perhaps more than anyone - the likes of Eden Hazard and Kevin De Bruyne possess the winning DNA reflected in how they have carried their clubs over the past few years and will be eyeing the world cup gold to put an end to all the misfortunes.



COACH: Roberto Martinez

The Spaniard succeeded Marc Wilmots as the Belgium national team coach in 2016 in a rather surprising fashion. This was after he had been sacked by Everton. He however won the Football League one with Swansea in 2007/08 season, famously led Wigan Athletic to an unlikely FA Cup victory over Manchester City

in the 2012/13 season. The 44-year old controversially left Roma's midfielder Radja Nainggolan from his preliminary world cup squad citing tactical reasons. This will be the first time Martinez will appear at the FIFA world cup, as a player or manager.



CAPTAIN: Eden Hazard (Chelsea)

The 2017 Belgian Golden shoe winner and 2015 Ballon d'Or 8th place finisher is one of the most exciting forwards in world football. I am not sure about his leadership skills but in terms of getting goals on the scoresheet and grinding results, not many can beat him to that. He is pacey, creative, difficult to mark and full of trickery. In Belgium's qualifying campaign, he served up six goals and five assists. Not everyone can emulate his skill but perhaps his fighting spirit and strong mental balance is something that can arrest the entire Red Devils squad and lead them to victory.

COUNTRY PROFILE

World Cup appearance: 13th

Best World Cup finish: 4th place (1986)

2014 finish: Quarter-finals

Qualifying: Topped Europe's Group H Qualifying Round

Schedule: Panama (Monday, June 18), Tunisia (Saturday, June 23), England (Wednesday, June 28)





X-Factor: Kevin De Bruyne (Manchester City)

KDB narrowly missed out on the PFA Player of the year award to Mohamed Salah after playing a central role in Manchester City's record breaking season winning the Premier League title and Carabao cup in the process. He is the complete modern midfielder who is good off and on the ball.

He served up 20 assists and scored 13 times in the 2017/18 campaign, also claiming a whopping eight Premier League man of the match awards. He will definitely be pulling strings in the Belgium midfield, picking out passes with his hooker like right foot and firing in some long-range shots once in a while. The outspoken Barcelona legend, Xavi made the following comments on KDB's abilities:

"Pep's teams win as teams, but even the most special sides need that player to look to when they need something special. At Barcelona, we had it with Messi and this team Manchester City have it with De Bruyne. Every time he has the ball, you get the feeling that he is going to do something special with it."

How will they play?



Martinez will probably deploy the Belgian troops in a 3-4-2-1 set up, most notably lining up the dynamic forward Carrasco as left wing back. They have one of

the strongest backline in the form of the Tottenham duo protected by the immovable Mousa Dembele. KDB will link up with Hazard and Mertens to give Lukaku the right service to bang in goals.

Top U23 Player: Youri Tielemans (AS Monaco)

The 21-year-old born to a Congolese mother and Flemish father chose to play for Belgium and boy what a win that could have been for the Congolese national team. He is an exciting, dynamic midfielder with a lot of Kevin De Bruyne resemblances, with



a bit more pace. He started his club career with Anderlecht in 2013 and was signed by Ligue 1 side, Monaco in 2017. Tielemans took home the Belgian Young Professional Footballer of the year award in 2013/14 and 2014/15 seasons. He also bagged the 2017 Belgian Professional Footballer of the year award when he was still at Anderlecht.

Projected Line-Up

Projected lineup (3-4-2-1): Thibaut Courtois (Chelsea); Toby Alderweireld (Tottenham); Vincent Kompany (Manchester City); Jan Vertonghen (Tottenham); Thomas Meunier (Paris Saint-Germain); Kevin De Bruyne (Manchester City); Mousa Dembele (Tottenham); Yannick Carrasco (Dalian Yifang); Eden Hazard (Chelsea); Dries Mertens (Napoli); Romelu Lukaku (Manchester United).

If Kompany succumbs to injury, he might be replaced with Thomas Vermaelen.

Breakdown

Why root for them?: It's quality on show when Belgium play.

Why root against them?: Martinez snubbed Nainggolan who has tattoos that most of us love

If you're going to watch one game ... **against England, it's like Tottenham vs Tottenham in some shape or form.**





PANAMA



Theirs is not a story about chasing the world cup glory but that of living in that glory. Los Canaleros booked their ticket to Russia in a fairytale style. A country of four million people had their world cup dreams fulfilled at the expense of the 320 million people in the mighty USA. That is not actually where the story starts. In the final qualifying match for the 2014 Brazil World Cup, Panama was leading 1-0 against the United States, a result that would guarantee them qualification. It only took four minutes for the USA to overturn the result and snatch the qualification. Even the route to Russia had a couple of hurdles for the Canal Men, including the murder of their teammate who was shot in a coordinated attack whose perpetrators are still at large even to this day. With two minutes from the final whistle on again the final match of qualifiers, Roman Torres hammered the winner against Costa-Rica and sent the whole nation into ecstasy. The President declared the following day a public holiday allowing the celebrations to continue. For Panama, they are heading into the Russia finals with nothing to lose but everything to gain in their first ever world cup appearance. Such a team puts no caution to the wind and most likely leaves everything on the pitch. A very dangerous team to play I might add.



TEAM CAPTAIN ROMAN TORRES



COACH: Hernán Darío Gómez
The controversial Colombian previously coached his nation to the 1998 world cup and repeated the feat with Ecuador in 2002. He resigned from his second spell as the Colombian coach after public uproar following up an incident in which he punched an unidentified woman, accompanying his resignation with an apology statement. He is

nickname El Bollilo (The Truncheon) and has become one of the four people in this world to have led three different teams to world cup finals. In 2016, he was named the CONCACAF Men's Coach of the Year.

CAPTAIN: Roman Torres (Seattle Sounders FC)

The 32-year old centre back is based in the USA playing for Seattle Sounders FC. He is a vastly experienced player with 108 appearances for his nation, scoring ten goals in the process. He put in gutsy performances in Panama's qualification matches and its this attitude that Panama would be looking to keep up as they seek to continue defying the odds. To imagine that he is the winner who scored the winner that sealed qualification for Panama coming from a defensive position, tells us a lot about the kind of person he is.

COUNTRY PROFILE

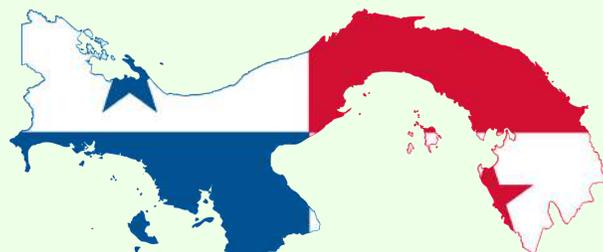
World Cup appearance: 1st

Best World Cup finish: N/A

2014 finish: N/A

Qualifying: Finished 3rd in the CONCACAF World Cup Qualifying Hexagonal

Schedule: Belgium (Monday, June 18), England (Sunday, June 24), Tunisia (Wednesday, June 28)





X-Factor: Luis Tejada (Sports Boys)

The 36-year-old is in the twilight of his career just as many Panama internationals but uniquely possess a keen eye for goal. He is the all leading goal scorer for Los Canaleros, sitting at 43 in 104 appearances. He is quite a globetrotter, having represented over 19 clubs in his career and it is that kind of experience that can help them get something in the Russia finals.

Top U23 Player: José Luis Rodríguez (Gent)

Jose made his debut for Panama in a friendly against Northern Ireland in May 2018. The 19 year old was selected in Gomez's final 23-man squad for the tournament. He possess a lot of talent and is undoubtedly the future of Panama football.



How will they play?



Coach Gomez will most likely favor a traditional 4-4-2 formation though he has shown that he is willing to try out different things in their 0-0 draw with Northern Ireland where he used a 4-1-4-1 formation.

Projected Line-Up

Projected lineup (4-1-4-1): Jaime Penedo (Dinamo Bucharest); Luis Ovalle(CD Olimpia); Fidel Escobar(New York Red Bulls); Roman Torres (Seattle Sounders); Adolfo Machado(Houston Dynamo); Gabriel Gómez(Bucaramanga); Edgar Yoel Barcenas (Cafetaleros de Tapachula); Anibal Godoy(San Jose Earthquakes); Armando Cooper(Club Universidad de Chile); Jose Luis Rodriguez(KAA Gent); Luis Tejada (Sports Boys).

Coach Gomez may switch to a traditional 4-4-2, removing Gomez and adding Blas Perez to partner with Tejada upfront.

Breakdown

Why root for them?: Their story is really touching.

Why root against them?: Their squad is not exactly young

If you're going to watch one game ... against England, it would super funny if the Three Lions should fall victim to another fairytale team after Iceland loss.





TUNISIA



The Eagles of the Carthage are ranked 14th in the world, one place behind England and they are the top team in African football according to similar rankings by FIFA and Coca-Cola. They secured qualification for Russia by narrowly edging out DR Congo by a single point in group A though they themselves finished the campaign unbeaten. It is only but their 5th world cup appearance, the first in 12 years and will be looking to reach the knockout stage for the first time in their history. They will, however, be without their talisman, Youssef Msakni who was sidelined with a cruciate ligament injury. Msakni's supreme talents will be missed as he has been described as the "Messi," "Ronaldo" or "Salah" of the Tunisian team but they still have enough quality and heart to cause problems for their opponents.



COACH: Nabil Maâloul

The 55-year old was appointed Tunisian coach in April 2017 after the country's far from ideal show at the AFCON tournament. He represented the The Eagles of the Carthage in the 1980s and 90s playing as a midfielder. He is infamous for leading Esperance Tunis to a treble in 2011 after they won the League, Tunisian Cup and the CAF Champions League trophy. His win rate percentage stands at 55.56% and the mentor has masterminded Tunisia's first world cup qualification in 12 years.



TEAM CAPTAIN WAHBI KHAZRI

CAPTAIN: Wahbi Khazri (Rennes on loan from Sunderland)

The 27-year old Wahbi played a pivotal role in Tunisia's qualification campaign scoring important goals against Mauritania and Libya. The midfielder has actually just had the best season of his career with Rennes where he netted eleven times and served up two assists in thirty games. He is a figure that everyone in the dressing room respects with 36 caps under his belt, he possess good enough experience to lead the North Africans.

COUNTRY PROFILE

World Cup appearance: 5th

Best World Cup finish: Group Stages

2014 finish: N/A

Qualifying: Finished 1st in Group A of the CAF Qualifiers

Schedule: England (Monday, June 18), Belgium (Saturday, June 23), Panama (Wednesday, June 28)





X-Factor: Wahbi Khazri (Rennes on loan from Sunderland)

It has to be the captain. The midfielder knows what it takes to score goals and is one on which you can bet on finding the back of the net anyway for the Eagles of the Carthage.

Top U23 Player: Bassem Srarfi (Nice)

With just two caps under his belt, Bassem was named in Tunisia's final 23-man squad. The 20-year old is just starting out his career with Nice first team but his quality and skill is undeniably evident. He is one such kid to watch out for in Russia and to keep tabs with in the few coming years.



How will they play?



Maaloul will likely employ a traditional 4-3-3 with the three midfielders being instructed to be very cautious going forward as he might opt for a more defensive minded team against opponents of England and Belgium's quality.

Projected Line-Up

Projected lineup (4-3-3): Aymen Mathlouthi; Dylan Bronn; Syam Ben Youssef; Yassine Meriah; Ali Maâloul; Saif-Eddine Khaoui; Ellyes Skhiri; Ferjani Sassi; Anice Badri; Wahbi Khazri; Naim Sliti.

Breakdown

Why root for them?: They are the highest ranked African team.

Why root against them?: Their group is so tough.

If you're going to watch one game ... **against England**, they will surely put up a good fight against the not always inspiring English side.



ENGLAND



It is hard to believe that the Three Lions have not won any major tournament since the 1966 World Cup triumph. The truth of the matter is they are not actually as great as we all think they are. It is true that their domestic league is one of the most competitive if not the most competitive in the world boasting of quality players from all over the world. England itself has not been very gifted with a lot of quality players especially in the final third in recent years. They will always seem to lack the creativity to unlock defenses and create special moments that define champions though they get most things right. Will this year be any different given the ruthlessness of Harry Kane and the dynamism of Dele Alli in the middle of the park? They cruised to the Russia finals unbeaten in a group which hardly tested their resolve to dominate the world and did fall to Iceland in the European Championships in 2016. In summary, England is a nation desperate to prove a point in the face of ever-increasing public scrutiny and could they possibly silence all their doubters?



COACH: Gareth Southgate

The former English defender took over from Sam Allardyce in September 2016 and has focused heavily on building and banking on youth talent to steer the country forward. The 47-year old has previously managed Middlesbrough from 2006-2009 and England U21 side from 2013 before assuming the role of the

national team. He has not won any major trophies as a manager but boasts of a 52.9% win rate with the current Three Lions team. He knows a thing or two about the world cup, having represented his nation in the 1998 and 2002 tournaments.



TEAM CAPTAIN

HARRY KANE

CAPTAIN: Harry Kane (Tottenham Hotspur)

The appointment of the Tottenham man as the captain for the Russia finals came as a surprise to many but maybe perhaps a development that could be key in their pursuit of glory. Kane has defied stereotypes in the past three seasons at Spurs, scoring over twenty goals in each of the seasons and winning the golden boot two consecutive times before the arrival of Mo Salah. He has proven to be one of the best strikers in the world of this generation. Such restless pursuit of excellence is perhaps what the rest of the England team need to emulate and steer the nation forward. He really is superb guiding light.

COUNTRY PROFILE

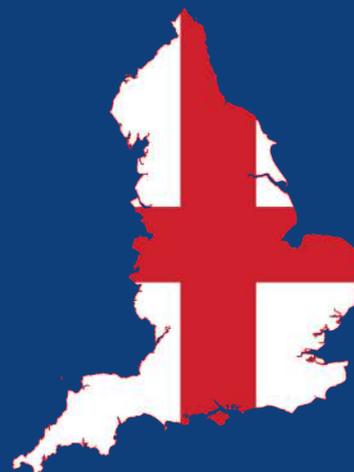
World Cup appearance: 15th

Best World Cup finish: Champions (1966)

2014 finish: Bottom of group D

Qualifying: Topped Europe's Group F Qualifying Round

Schedule: Tunisia (Monday, June 18), Panama (Sunday, June 24), Belgium (Wednesday, June 28)





X-Factor: Harry Kane (Tottenham Hotspur)

It's him again. This past campaign, Kane netted 44 times in 51 matches and registered 4 assists. In the entirety of 2017 in Europe's major leagues, no footballer scored more goals than him(56 goals) , not even Messi or Ronaldo. All he needs is a half-chance to gun down teams and if England can provide those regardless of their creativity levels - he would literally carry them throughout the tournament.

Top U23 Player: Dele Alli (Tottenham Hotspur)

We actually forget just how young this boy is because of how good he has become. At only 22 years of age, Dele has become an integral part of both his club and country's midfield. His technical ability, strength and speed is huge positive for the Three Lions as



nation which has been deprived of creative talent in recent years. His understanding with Spurs teammate Kane could also be key as the two lead an attacking front line entrusted to bag goals for England. He has won the PFA Young Player of The Year Award in two consecutive seasons, 2015/16 and 2016/17.

How will they play?



Southgate will most likely use the 3-4-2-1 formation with Kane being the solitary marksman supported by pacey Sterling and Alli.

Wingbacks in the form of Trippier and Young will also be used to add to the attack going forward and to support the defense whilst retreating.

Projected Line-Up

Projected lineup (3-4-2-1): Jordan Pickford (Everton); John Stones(Man City), Kyle Walker(Man City), Phil Jones(Man Utd), Kieran Trippier (Spurs), Eric Dier(Spurs), Jordan Henderson(Liverpool), Ashley Young(Man Utd), Dele Alli (Spurs), Raheem Sterling(Man City), Harry Kane (Spurs)

In the search for more creativity, Southgate might replace Henderson with Jesse Lingard, switching to a 3-1-4-2 formation with Dier sitting in to protect the back three.

Breakdown

Why root for them?: Because they are the unwanted child

Why root against them?: Spurs DNA runs through them and it's not really a trophy-full one.

If you're going to watch one game ... **against Belgium, friends will be pitted against each other and the group winner will most likely be decided by that result.**



FIRSTTOUCH FIFA WORLD CUP 2018 OVERVIEW IS HERE...

GROUP A

-  Saudi Arabia
-  Russia
-  Uruguay
-  Egypt

GROUP B

-  IR Iran
-  Portugal
-  Spain
-  Morocco

GROUP C

-  Peru
-  Denmark
-  France
-  Australia

GROUP D

-  Argentina
-  Nigeria
-  Iceland
-  Croatia

GROUP E

-  Serbia
-  Costa Rica
-  Brazil
-  Switzerland

GROUP F

-  Mexico
-  Germany
-  Korea Republic
-  Sweden

GROUP G

-  Panama
-  Tunisia
-  England
-  Belgium

GROUP H

-  Japan
-  Poland
-  Senegal
-  Colombia



FIFA WORLD CUP
RUSSIA 2018