

THE 2026 WORLD CUP ALPHABET

A is for

Aardvark – In the English language, it is obligatory that an alphabet begins with the word aardvark. (The Flemish version of this alphabet begins with Aardappel – but who wants to look at a picture of a potato?). Sadly, whilst there is a pop group, a jazz band, a type of military aircraft, a kind of African cucumber and, of course, an odd-looking animal all called aardvark, there is no football team called the aardvarks. Shame – the Arsenal Aardvarks has a ring to it...



Abandonment and AI – Should the 2026 World Cup have to be abandoned because of World War III (an unlikely scenario, given the effectiveness of the FIFA Peace Prize in bringing about a more peaceful world) a contingency plan is in place that will replace the actual matches with AI simulations.



We can reveal that in the AI World Cup Team USA will beat Israel in the final, with Donald J Trump scoring the winning goal (*ed: hopefully not a header, otherwise there could be some "hair malfunction"!*).

Absent Friends – sometimes the best way to look forward is to look back. So it is appropriate that we commence the alphabet by looking back and thinking of all the friends of football who, unfortunately, will be absent at the 2026 World Cup.

Yes, we are only into the 3rd topic and we can already mention that Italy is not at the World Cup! Fancy that! It's probably as well, as I doubt the Azzuri could survive six weeks of Chicago-style pizza.

Despite expanding the World Cup to 48 teams not all the best teams made it. The highest FIFA ranked teams not at this World Cup are Italy (ranked 12 in the world) Ukraine (28), Poland (31) and Wales (32). Also absent from the World Cup are Serbia, Greece, Hungary, Peru, Chile, Nigeria, Cameroon, India, China, Ireland (both of them), Romania, Slovakia and, of course, Russia. As they are prohibited to attend because of sanctions their players will spend July sitting on the naughty Steppe.....

Amongst the world-class players that we won't see playing at this World Cup are Jan Oblak, Robert Lewandowski, Gianluigi Donnarumma, Kvichia Kvaratskhelia, Victor Osimhen, Dominik Szoboszlai, Sandro Tonali, Bryan Mbuena and Raheem Sterling (*ed: surely some mistake? Tuchel must select Raheem.....*).

We also await to see if Ghana will select Thomas Partey who is facing seven charges of rape, though it did not prevent them, nor his clubs (Arsenal and Villarreal) from picking him thusfar....

Achilles Tendon – Tendon in the heel of the foot that enables one to move the foot vertically. A ruptured Achilles tendon is a serious, debilitating injury for footballers. Named after Achilles who suffered the injury during the Greek Cup Final of 458BC when he was hit by an arrow from the crowd.

Active – prior to 2003 the only time that the word "active" would have been used to describe a footballer would have been commenting on his antics in nightclubs. However, in 2003 the term active (and its homonym passive) suddenly became, er, active in football parlance thanks to geniuses deciding to change the way that offside should be interpreted. Thus in order to be offside a player had to be "active" ie attempting to play the ball or getting in the way of someone who was, and not simply lingering aimlessly on the pitch.

As some wise ex-player pointed out: if you are on the pitch then you should always be active..... (*ed: what a depressing word to start the alphabet with*)

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Added Time - A football match lasts 90 minutes (For women readers 90 minutes = 3 episodes of a tv soap / three-quarters of a cycle of the dishwasher / half a telephone call with your mother).

The ball is not in play for the entire time. To make up for the 'lost' time in a football match time is to be added on when play has stopped for the following reasons:

- Substitutions
- Assessment of injured players
- Removal of injured players
- Time wasting
- Disciplinary sanctions being issued
- Any medical stoppages allowed by the rules, such as those for a drinks break
- Any delays added for VAR checks
- Other causes deemed relevant by the referee, such as a stalker or excessive goal celebrations (*ed.: what about a player celebrating his goal by streaking??!!*)



It is the task of the referee (or, in professional matches, the spare ref – or 4th official, as he likes to be called) to add up all of this added time and, er, add it to the end of each half.

So, that is the theory. In practice, the 4th official usually signals an extra 1-2 minutes at the end of the 1st half, and 3-4 minutes the end of the 2nd half (even if, as is now frequently the case, the ref has wasted 5 minutes looking at VAR replays.....).

If that sounds cynical a study of 32 matches at the 2018 World Cup noted that an average of 6 minutes and 59 seconds was added to each game. Using FIFA's own guidance on the matter, the actual average time that should have been added was 13 minutes and 10 seconds. Stoppage time, then, was roughly half what it actually should have been.

Of course, added time means that the person who paid for match ticket gets their money's worth, whereas a game finishing promptly is far better for the TV companies and advertisers.....

Addo, Otto – In the alphabet we shall be naming the 48 team coaches/managers. First up was supposed to be Ghana's boss, Otto Addo. Except that he was sacked only 78 days before the World Cup. *"I'd just finished packing my bags and was already taking orders from friends for Duty Free purchases when I got the news"*, a tearful Otto told us.



German by birth (probably explaining his first name) but with dual nationality, this was the second time Addo had led Ghana and was in charge of them at the 2022 World Cup. He was sacked after 'the Black Stars' lost five games in a row – hardly ideal preparation for the World Cup. Said a Ghanaian FA official: *"We could tolerate Ghana not qualifying for the 2026 AFCON finals. We even accepted getting walloped 1-5 by Austria, for they are a good team. But the final straw was losing to Germany – and having Kai Havertz score against us. That's a humiliation that no country can tolerate"*.

Adidas – Founded by the Dassler brothers in 1924 [*see Dassler for the full story*] in the Bavarian town of Herzogenaurach, the German company will be kit providers for 14 of the 48 teams at the World Cup, as well as being the official ball manufacturers. This puts them ahead of Nike (supplying 12 teams) and Puma (11).

Advocaat, Dick – Sadly, the 78 year-old Dutchman nicknamed 'the Little General' will not be attending his third World Cup. After previously leading Holland (way back in 1994) and South Korea he has taken lowly Curacao through the qualification stages to get them to the World Cup for the first time in their history. However, because of his daughter's health issues he stepped down as boss in Spring of this year.



It's such a shame as we had so many name-related puns lined up: for the boss of a team called curacao he is the only football coach to have had a

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sickly, egg-based liqueur named after him. (*ed: combine curaçao and advocaat and you will get a green drink and a massive headache and dry-cleaning bill*)

A protégé of the great Dutch coach Rinus Michels Advocaat managed no fewer than eight national teams: Curacao, United Arab Emirates, Serbia, Russia, Belgium, South Korea, Iraq and Holland (who he led three times!). As a club manager his greatest success was with Glasgow Rangers where he won the league twice plus three cups. (*ed: hardly the most glowing recommendation in a cv*).

His record as coach of Curacao was an impressive: P121 W11 D6 L3

Aguirre, Javier – Javier A is the coach of Mexico. Although Mexican his nickname is “El Vasco” (The Basque) due to his parents Basque heritage. Aguirre had a respectable career as a player – mostly in Mexico – winning 59 caps. As a coach his biggest club as Atletico Madrid (he has coached no fewer than 6 La Liga teams) and this is his second spell at boss of Mexico.



Current record as coach of Mexico: W11 D5 L3

Alexander-Arnold, Trent – In 2024 when Liverpool won the Premier League and England did ok at the Euros there was incessant media coverage about what a great player Trent is (even being referred to always by his first name). Two years later and now at Real Madrid Mr AA is barely in the England squad.

Objectively, he is the archetypal modern full back: great at attacking and providing assists (*ed: call them ‘passes’*), as well as being a superb free kick taker. But ask him to mark a man, or tackle and he’s useless.....

Alisson – A girl in the World Cup Alphabet? Whatever next – votes for women? In fact, despite his “trans” name, Alisson – or to quote his full name, *Alisson Ramses Becker* - is the first choice goalie for Brazil. He will be one of the best goalkeepers at the tournament and can also boast of having scored with a header in a Premier League match!

Al Ashqar, Leena – Who is Leena Al Ashqar, you ask? She is the Lebanese wife of FIFA President Gianni Infantino. This explains why Infantino has both Swiss and Lebanese citizenship (which is yet another reason why you would never trust him....)



Alfaro, Gustavo – This gentleman is the coach of Paraguay. An Argentinian, he spent most of his coaching career in his home country but has experience of being at a World Cup, having led Ecuador in Qatar in 2022. Known by his mates as Alf.



Record as coach of Uruguay: W6 D6 L3



Algeria – the Fennec Foxes (yes, that is their nickname!) qualified comfortably for their fifth World Cup appearance. The last time was 2014, but they did get beyond the Group stage then. Not surprisingly, many of their squad play their football in France. Algeria failed to impress at AFCON – the African Cup of Nations – at the start of 2026 and may struggle to qualify from Group J.

They are led by the much travelled Bosnian coach Vladimir Petkovic.

World Cup record: Played 13 W3 D3 L7

Current FIFA World Ranking: 35th

Star Player: Riyad Mahrez (Al-Ahli)

Al Nassr – I never expected to be having feelings of sympathy towards a Saudi Arabian football team financed by the dictatorial State regime but one has to shed a small tear for Al Nassr. You spend a small fortune – well a large fortune of \$200 million a year, actually – on signing Cristian Ronaldo and he had the cheek to go on strike! And it’s because you are not spending enough money on other players to make him look good!! It’s enough to make you want to kick a camel.

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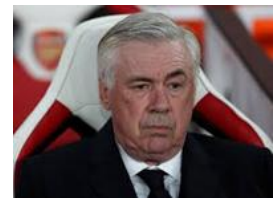
Amnesty International – The Nobel Peace Prize-winning human rights organisation Amnesty International recently warned that football fans attending this summer’s World Cup risk being confronted with “troubling attacks on human rights”. They have highlighted how Mexico has mobilised 100,000 security personnel, and, of course focuses a great deal of criticism on the USA with its “discriminatory immigration policies” and “mass detentions and arbitrary arrests by masked, armed agents from U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and other agencies.”

Now, far from wishing to criticise the work of AI, I do feel that they probably wrote identical reports prior to the World Cups in Qatar and Russia and, contrary to the fears of many, they did turn out to be ok.....

(To show what ‘moaning minnies’ Amnesty is, they criticised Canada for closing a winter warming centre providing shelter for people experiencing homelessness, as the venue had been pre-booked for use by FIFA – hardly a major issue during a summer World Cup!).

Ancelotti, Carlo – Thanks to Carlo there will be at least one Italian at this World Cup! (ed: there are actually three Italian coaches at the finals). Mr Ancelotti is the Italian coach of Brazil. This is his first job as an international manager, following a stellar career as both a player and a club manager. He is one of only seven people to have won the European Cup/Champions League as both player and manager and the only manager to have won the league title with teams in all of the top five European leagues, and won the Champions League five times as manager – a record. He even managed Everton! (needless to say, he won nothing with them, but had his house in Liverpool robbed repeatedly as the locals looked for his silverwear!!).

His managerial success has led to his football style being described as “versatile” which, for a less successful manager, might be described as letting the players do as they wish. Ancelotti’s undoubted strength is his ability to develop strong relationships with his players. Whether he will be able to do that at the international level when he spends relatively little time with his players remains to be seen.



He seems to be a nice guy, though has one eyebrow permanently arched giving him the look of a Bond villain! We can be sure that he will want to add the World Cup to his glittering C.V.

Record as coach of Brazil: W4 D1 L2

Antony – Some players seem to be actually enjoying their job as footballers. Then there are a few who just look so miserable. One of these is Brazil’s Antony. Antony Matheus dos Santos – to give him his full name – plays with a perpetual scowl on his face.



The ex-Ajax Amsterdam and Manchester United player is now successfully plying his trade as a winger at Real Betis of Seville but still breaks mirrors every time he looks at one. He disproves the theory that all Brazilians play football with a smile on their face. Perhaps he is simply regretting the large number of bad tattoos that cover his body.

Appearances, most at the World Cup – In the first of what will be an unbearable number of statistics featuring in the alphabet, no fewer than 80 national teams have played at the World Cup. No prizes for guessing that the country who has been at the most finals (indeed the only country to have played at all of the finals) is Brazil.

The player who has played the most games at the World Cup is Lionel Messi – 26 games to date. His nemesis Cristiano Ronaldo has played 22 times. Both of these players will become the first to play at six World Cups if they are selected this summer.

The coach/manager who has been in charge of most games at the World Cup is Helmut Schoen, having led West Germany in 25 matches. He also has the record for most wins (16). Both records will be broken by Didier Deschamps if he can lead France to the quarter finals (or further).

Arenas and Advertising – the World Cup will be played at 16 different arenas. However, all will have to change their names! Why? Because all of them have sold their naming rights as advertising revenue, yet FIFA will only allow advertising that they have sold. Thus, the

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Mercedes-Benz Stadium will, for a few weeks, be called the Atlanta Stadium, the Hard Rock Stadium becomes the Miami Stadium, it will be Kansas Stadium instead of the poetically-named 'GEHA Field at Arrowhead Stadium', etc. This is what happens when everything has a price and capitalism comes face-to-face with, er, more capitalism.

And if you think that changing the names of arenas is the policing of advertising gone too far, then woe betide you if you try to enter a ground wearing a t-shirt advertising a beer or soft drink that is not one of the World Cup sponsors, as you will be refused admission!!! You can forget 'freedom of speech' rights when corporate advertising is involved.

Architects – Architects are one of the banes of the 21st century. Instead of designing things that a) people want and b) can actually be constructed (and can be maintained easily) they design huge vanity projects that look fantastic in the drawings but are completely impractical in the real world.

Sport is not immune to the vanity of architects, as this design (pictured right) for a new stadium for Birmingham City FC shows:

Yes, those are fake chimneys because nothing says more about 2nd division football than playing in a ground that is disguised as a factory. It makes the giant circus tent that another architect is proposing as the new stadium for Manchester United look restrained in comparison.



Argentina - No 3 in the all-time list of World Cup appearances – this will be the 19th time – and three times winners the “*Albiceleste*” (“the White and Sky Blues”) are, of course, defending champions. As well as their triumph in Qatar in 2022, Argentina won Copa America in 2021 and 2024 – meaning the last major tournament they played in and didn't win was the 2019 edition of South America's continental championship.

But they definitely won't win this World Cup!! Why? Because only one country – Italy in 1938 – has ever retained the World Cup. And if you have a carthorse like Nicolas Otamendi in your defence then you will always concede goals. But their World Cup pedigree is impressive – you have to back to 1974 for the last time they failed to get past the group stage.

As with Brazil, Argentina's problems are usually off the field, with expectations often too high. This time round it is inevitable that much of the focus will be on Lionel Messi. If he is picked in the squad and the team does badly was he too old (he will turn 39 during the tournament)? Conversely, if he is not picked and Argentina does not win the tournament was it a mistake?

Add to this quite appalling World Cup preparation – since completing qualification the only teams they have played/will play before the World Cup are Venezuela, Puerto Rico, Angola, Mauritania, Zambia, Honduras and Iceland: not one of which is ranked higher than 66th in the world. It's almost as if they don't care about winning the World Cup. Big pressure on the players and boss Lionel Scaloni.....

World Cup record: PL88 W47 D17 L24

Current FIFA World Ranking: 2nd

Star player not called Messi: Julian Alvarez (Atletico Madrid)

Argentinian Coaches – Whilst Brazil is considered the breeding ground for the best players it is undoubtedly the case that Argentina is the best for producing international coaches! At this World Cup is the number of teams that have Argentinian coaches. No fewer than 5 of the teams at this World Cup are led by Argentinians – Argentina, Ecuador, Uruguay, Paraguay, Colombia. (*ed: that is five more than there are Brazilian coaches....*)

The next highest number of coaches from a single country is three, from Germany (coaching Germany, Austria and, sadly, England) and Italy (with Brazil, Turkey and Uzbekistan),

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meaning that there are also more Italian coaches than Italian players at this World Cup (*ed: again!!*).

Arnold, Graham – Arnold is the Aussie coach of Iraq. He has a considerable World Cup pedigree having previously led Australia at the 2022 World Cup as well as being their assistant manager at the 2006 and 2010 finals. He took charge of the Iraq team in May 2025 when their World Cup campaign was going astray and successfully got them to the finals via a playoff.



Record as boss of Iraq: Pl13 W8 D2 L3

Artificial intelligence – Another name for footballers agents, who have to do the thinking for them.

Assists – probably due to the growth of football in the USA the game has become more obsessed with statistics. The best example is ‘assists’. An assist is a pass that leads directly to a goal. Today the media ranks players by how many assists they give.

But it is a stupid statistic – if Kevin de Bruyne makes brilliant passes to Romelu Lukaku but Lukaku keeps missing the goal then the statistics do not show this. Equally, if Lukaku gives an ordinary pass to de Bruyne who then makes a fantastic 50m run to score he gets credited with an assist. As former Argentinian player Hector Enrique jokes about Maradona’s “goal of the century” against England at the 1986 World Cup. “With a pass like that from me he could hardly miss!!”.

So, by all means use the phrase “what a great assist” when in a pub conversation, but don’t take the statistics about assists too seriously.

Assistant Referee - Bloody stupid FIFA term for linesman. A bloke who is deemed so incompetent that he is not even fit enough to referee the game. Cannot be trusted with a whistle, so they give him a flag with which to amuse himself with. (For other bloody stupid FIFA terms see also *'Technical Area', 'Added Time'*).

Atlanta – Atlanta will be host to eight World Cup games, including one semifinal. The venue will be (what is not permitted to be called) the 71 000 capacity Mercedes-Benz Stadium. Built in 2017 it has a retractable roof comprising of 8 triangular panels which open, petal-like, in 8 minutes. However, it unlikely that they will be opening the roof during the hot sultry months of June and July. The stadium cost \$1.2 billion to build, most of which came from taxpayers in Georgia - though all the profits from the stadium go to the owners of the football and soccer teams. Well, it’s better to use public money to subsidise private sports companies rather than waste it on free health care.



It is one of the few US venues that actually does host regular football games (being the home to Atlanta United – who hold the record for the highest attendance at an MLS game).

Attendances – With the exorbitant prices being charged for match tickets, plus concerns that the US authorities may not let all potential visitors into the country some are worrying that the attendance at this World Cup will be low. This is probably a mistaken view since US sports fans are willing to pay stupid prices for tickets and there are sufficient expats in a country the size of USA to ensure decent attendances at every match – though Austria v Jordan and Switzerland v Qatar will probably struggle to fill a 68 000 seat stadium (ironically, both matches will take place at the same venue).

In any case the record for lowest attendance is unlikely to be broken. That happened at the first World Cup in 1930 when Romania vs Peru was watched by an estimated 300 people at Montevideo's now-demolished Estadio Pocitos. (for the record Romania won 3-1).

The record for highest attendance is also safe. During the 1950 World Cup in Brazil no fewer than four matches at Rio’s Maracana Stadium had crowds of over 130 000. The final match – Brazil v Uruguay – had an official attendance of 178 500, though it is widely believed to have exceeded 200 000! (*ed: and if Donald Trump had been counting it would have been 300 000*)

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Average length of a match – We've already covered the theory of *added time*. However, in practice, in the average game of football, the ball is in play for only around 60 minutes!! So 1/3rd of the time is "dead". Thus, if one wanted to see 90 minutes of football then the average length of a match would have to be 135 minutes!!

Australia – the Socceroos have been to the last six previous World Cup finals. For arcane reasons of FIFA politics they play in the much harder Asian qualifying group rather than Oceania.

One of several countries where the women's football team is arguably better than the men's.....

At the finals Australia has never done much of note, though it did get through to the group stage for the first time in Qatar. Coached this time by Tony Popovic, he will be hoping that they can do that again as they are in a weak group comprising of USA, Paraguay and Turkey.

World Cup record: Played 20 W4 D4 L12

Current FIFA World Ranking: 26th

Star Player: Jackson Irvine (St Pauli)

Austria – die Lederhosen Boys will be appearing at their eighth World Cup, and the first since 1998. They claim an unusual record in having played the most games at the World Cup without ever drawing 0-0: a total of 29 games.

Austria is a team of no real stars, which suits manager Ralf Rangnick. Under his astute leadership they did well in winning their qualifying group, containing as it did Bosnia and Romania. Despite this FIFA has them ranked only 24th – even below Denmark.

Austria will certainly not be challenging the win the World Cup (though they did finish 3rd at the 1954 World Cup), but with their very disciplined style of play based on counter-attacking football they will be a very difficult team to beat in the group stages – and their 2-1 loss to Turkey was probably the most entertaining game at EURO2024.

World Cup record: Played 29 W12 D4 L13

Current FIFA World Ranking: 24th

Star Player: (when fit) David Alaba (Real Madrid), otherwise Konrad Laimer (Bayern München)

Azzuri – The nickname of the Italian football team, deriving from

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