

X is for

X – We always struggle for items to put under “X”, especially since Xavi and Xabi Alonso retired, so apologies if some of this looks familiar. But we certainly will NOT be referring to the cesspool that is the social website that uses that letter.

“Xam” Abegglen – Mr X was a pre-war Swiss football player who still is 2nd in the list of all-time goalscorers for Switzerland (with 34 goals). His Christian name was actually Max but for some reason he became known as Xam (= Max backwards). Perhaps he ran backwards a lot.

Xamax Neuchâtel – team in the Swiss Super League that is named after Xam Abegglen (the Xamax bit, that is – the rest being named after Dave Neuchatel, legendary founder of the town).

Xavi Simons – yes, we are cheating by putting him under “X” but he does have an X-rated face! A Dutchman Simons’ family moved to Spain when he was only three so he actually started his footballing career at Barcelona. At age 16 he moved to PSG but only played a handful of games for them before moving to PSV Eindhoven where his career took off. Next stop was RedBull Leipzig and now he is at Tottenham where he plays, sporadically, as an attacking midfield player.



Only 23 he is already on his fourth club which is not a good sign. Nor is the fact that he has a facial expression that suggests he is going to burst into tears at any moment. And as if playing for Tottenham is not bad enough, Xavi ruptured knee ligaments in April which means that he not only misses the World Cup but probably won’t play any football at all for the rest of 2026. Can things get any worse for him?

Xerxes Rotterdam – Dutch club names are wonderful: Ajax, Sparta, Achilles – and Xerxes. Xerxes was a Rotterdam team that as recently as 1966 played in the top division (the Eredivisie) in Holland. Faas Wilkes was a star for them in the 1950s and Wim van Hanegem in the 1960s. Sadly, in 1967 the club folded – like Xerxes the Great – and now only exists in amateur football.

xG – Once upon a time statistics in football were limited to the number of goals and number of points. Then, probably because of growing American interest in ‘soccer’ and since US sport is obsessed with statistics, football in Europe started to collect more stats. And perhaps the nerdiest is xG. xG stands for “expected goals” (*ed: so it should be EG*). In xG, every shot a player has is given a score between zero and one. The higher that number is, the more likely a team is to have scored that particular chance.

Of course, xG is absolute bollocks. If your team loses 3-0 but had an xG of 4.2 – i.e. they should have scored 4 goals – it is meaningless, since you still lost 3-0.....

X-rated tackle – a horrific tackle, of the sort that breaks a player's leg. Comes from the days when in Britain cinema films were classified as being 'X-rated' if they were unsuitable for persons under 18, such as a horror film – thus an x-rated tackle would be suitable for only the toughest person to watch. An “18-rated” tackle just doesn’t sound the same.

Xhaka, Granit – If ever there was a player who confounded the critics it is the Swiss midfielder Granit Xhaka. Swiss born to Kosovan parents (his brother played for Albania) he played for his hometown team of Basel and then Borussia Mönchengladbach before Arsenal paid £30 million for him. However, he was possibly the worst signing made by Arsene Wenger. During one game he was actually booed by his own fans when substituted – which went down well with his calm Kosovan temperament.



In 2023 he moved to Bayer Leverkusen and the transformation from ugly duckling into swan occurred, as he led ‘the Aspirin makers’ to their first ever Bundesliga title.

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He is now back in England as captain of Sunderland and again impressing as a hard tackling defensive midfielder, helping them to an incredible 7th place in the league. He is also captain of the Swiss national team and the most-capped Swiss player with 144 appearances.

Once bizarrely referred to as “little Einstein” – I don’t recall stories of Albert E fouling his opponents - expect the Granite Man to be in the thick of any on-field arguments.

Xuereb, Daniel – RC Lens player who was selected for France in the 1986 World Cup and thus became the first player with a surname beginning with X to play at a Finals.

Y is for

Yakin, Murat – crazy name, crazy guy! Mr Yakin is the manager of the Swiss team. A successful player with FC Basel, he has spent most of his managerial career in Switzerland. He took over as boss of the national team in 2021 and so this is his second World Cup in charge. Clearly he is doing something right.



An amusing anecdote is that Mr Y sent the Northern Ireland football federation 9.3kg of Swiss chocolate after their team drew with Italy which ensured that Switzerland qualified for the 2022 World Cup! (*ed: I don’t see Thomas Tuchel sending anyone 10kg of sauerkraut – which is probably a good thing*).

Record as coach of Switzerland: W24 D19 L12

Yamal, Lamine – Notwithstanding the presence of Lennert Karl and Jordan Henderson (*ed: surely some mistake*) the *wunderkind* that everyone will be watching at this World Cup is Lamine Yamal Nasraoui Ebana.



Still only 18 the attacking midfielder plays his club football for Barcelona and is already a regular in the Spanish national team, having been the youngest-ever player for Spain when capped aged 16. He is Catalan by birth, with a mother from Equatorial Guinea and a Moroccan father (and, judging by his love of blonde hair, a hairdresser from Manchester!).

Expect to see mazy, dribbling runs from the left-footer (and vicious challenges from the Uruguayan defenders when Spain plays them.....). BUT he enters the tournament injured, having damaged his hamstring and is likely to miss some of the early games. Is he, in fact, too injured to play? Muscular injuries can be notoriously difficult to heal.....

Yan Diomande – yes, we should have put him under “D”. Yan Diomande is the exciting Ivorian winger who currently plays for RB Leipzig. He moved from his homeland of Ivory Coast to Florida at age 15 on a student visa to further his football development. This led to him having trials in 2023 with MLS teams and also Glasgow Rangers, but he ended up joining Leganes in Spain. After only half a season the Red Bull scouts spotted him and signed him for Leipzig.

Still only 19 and in this, only his first season, he became the second-youngest player ever to score a hat-trick in the Bundesliga.

Yan is everyone’s tip for the player who is most likely to get a big transfer after the tournament – his value is now estimated to be north of €70 million! (When I googled him to get his picture I found AI images of him in Chelsea, PSG and Liverpool kits.....!)



Yards – for those of you who do not believe that the British invented football then the proof is in the dimensions of the football field. The dimensions of a football pitch are measured out in yards, that most British of imperial measurements (for the yard has proved to be too difficult

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for the Americans to grasp). One yard = 3 feet = 36 inches. With 1 inch = 25.4mm, this makes 1 yard = 914.4mm (*ed: we'll test you on this later in the sweepstake....*)

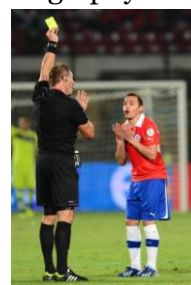
The penalty area is 18 yards long and the 6-yard box is, well, 6 yards long. In addition, the minimum length of a football pitch is 100 yards, and the minimum width is 50 yards, whilst the diameter of the centre circle is 10 yards. Most importantly, the size of the goals is 8 yards by 8 feet. This converts to 7.32 x 2.44m - You didn't seriously think that somebody chose those as logical dimensions in metric, did you? Not even an EC Committee would be that perverse (although it is feasible that the European Commission proposed 10m x 2m and 7.32 x 2.44 was the final compromise of the European Parliament.....)

Yashin, Lev – Goalkeeper for the Soviet Union team that won the 1960 EURO tournament, and the only goalie to have won the 'European Footballer of the Year' trophy. He also played in 3 World Cups.



Yashin was nicknamed 'the Cat' because of his feline grace on the pitch (and his ability to lick his own balls after drinking a saucer of milk). As with many footballers of earlier days persistent knee problems meant that he had to have a leg amputated in later life.

Yellow Card - the younger brother of the red card. A sort of warning to the player to stop spoiling it for the others and behave. Two yellow cards normally equals a red card, and instant dismissal. However, at the 2006 World Cup English referee Graham Poll managed to book Croatian player Josep Simunic three times. (Graham Poll then wrote an autobiography and, with not a hint of irony, called it "seeing red"!). For spectators there is always a frisson of excitement when, after a particularly juicy foul has taken place, the referee reaches into his pocket and one wonders if the card will be red or yellow (or even if he will pull out his bus-pass by mistake).



It is not a shock to learn that Argentina has had the most yellow cards in World Cup games (118 in 123 matches), though it is surprising to note that second on the list is Holland with 98 (in 101 games).

However, the country that averages the most cards per game at the World Cup is Ghana with 35 yellows in 12 games – an average of almost 3 per match!! Other 'dirty' teams (i.e. with high averages) are Ecuador, Cameroon, Croatia and Tunisia.

Yildiz, Kenan – The 20-year old winger for Turkey is another one to watch at this World Cup. Kenen was born in Regensburg to mixed German-Turkish parents and was in the youth academy of Bayern München from age 7. However, when he turned professional he signed for Juventus (where he still plays), and opted to play for Turkey rather than Germany.

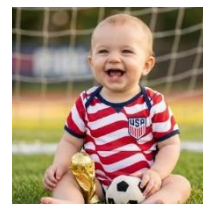
Who? Me ref?

Young Boys – 1) the name of the football team of Bern in the Swiss League (home ground: the equally unfortunately named Wankdorf Stadium). Contrary to rumours, Jeffrey Epstein has never been to a Young Boys game (though he was very interested in their women's team.....).



2) the cause of a serious criminal charge facing many football coaches in England in the 1970s and 80s.

Youngest players – The youngest player at the 2026 World Cup is Mexico's Gilberto Mouro, who is aged 17 240 days when the tournament starts. When he turns 18 in October Mouro will become eligible for a transfer abroad, so he is another player that will be followed closely by the scouts of big European clubs.



Mouro is not the youngest player ever to play at the World Cup. That record still belongs to Norman Whiteside. The Manchester United player was only 17 years and 41 days old when he played for Northern Ireland at the 1982 World Cup in Spain.

The youngest goalscorer at the World Cup is Pele who is also the youngest player to have played in a World Cup final, at age 17 years, 249 days.

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Yorkshire – For those not familiar with the English county of Yorkshire and the strange people who live there, think Bavaria without the money, or Lombardy without the style and charm – i.e. a region that thinks it should be an independent nation and believes it has a proud heritage in sport. The reality is chronic underachievement and Leeds United fans– the less said the better.

For this is the same county that has produced the Yorkshire Ripper, Jimmy Savile, and Liz Truss And to think that the locals have the audacity to call their county “God’s Country”. It’s enough to make you atheist....



Z is for

Z, Row – Row Z is usually the back row in the stand and it appears in football commentaries as a euphemism whenever either a defender makes a powerful-but-inelegant clearance into the stand or, more embarrassingly, a player makes a very wayward shot over the goal. (“He’s just put the ball in Row Z”)

People of a certain age (such as myself) or of a limited football ability (ditto) always appreciate the beauty of a defensive clearance into Row Z. Total football, my arse!

At this World Cup seats in Row Z will still cost \$500 and upwards.

Zabivaka – Don’t tell me that you have forgotten Zabivaka? A vicious wolf with bad eyesight, he was the official 2018 World Cup mascot. He was last seen being taken to the Ukrainian front against his will.....



Zack Zack – Apparently, the ‘must eat’ food if you attend an Austrian Bundesliga game is a Zack Zack. Looks mouthwatering!

Not to be confused with the vegetarian called Zac who leads the UK Green Party (*ed: the Zack Zack contains more brains than Zac Zac.*)



Zaire – Zaire, as the Democratic Republic of Congo was called when it was ruled by the charming President Mobuto – were the first sub-Saharan African team to qualify for a World Cup, in 1970. Unfortunately, their performance prejudiced negatively a whole generation of people against African football. They lost all three of their games, scoring 0 and conceding 14. One of the matches was a 0-9 defeat v Yugoslavia. But the low point was this free kick v Brazil:

[Zaire v Brazil 1974 World Cup. Free-kick](#)

What was he thinking?!!

Zakumi – You don’t remember Zakumi? He (it?) was the leopard mascot for the 2010 World Cup in South Africa. No, I don’t remember it either.... (*ed: enough with the mascots*)

Zampolli, Paolo – Mr Zampolli is the Trump apparatchik, sorry “Envoy for Global Relations” who proposed that Italy replace Iran at the World Cup.

The suggestion was so embarrassing that even Italians ridiculed it. Italy’s economy minister Giancarlo Giorgetti said the idea was “shameful”, while the country’s sports minister Andrea Abodi said: “*Firstly it is not possible, secondly it is not appropriate... You qualify on the pitch.*” And the Italian Olympic Committee president Luciano Buonfiglio said he felt “offended”.

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Zidane, Zinadine – Zinadine Zidane, or Zizou as he was affectionately known, was widely regarded as one of the footballing greats. A Frenchman of Algerian extraction, who was an attacking midfielder, he was a key member of the successful French team of the turn of the Century, and was FIFA World Player of the Year on three occasions.

His entire footballing reputation seemed to have been destroyed following a moment of madness in the 2006 World Cup final when he performed a 'Glasgow Kiss' on Marco Materazzi. It has never been revealed what exactly provoked Zizou to do this. He immediately retired from professional football.

He went to Real Madrid, initially as a "special adviser" to then-coach Jose Mourinho, then coach of their reserve team Castilla. In January 2016, when coach Rafa Benitez was sacked, Real Madrid surprisingly promoted Zizou to be the boss. Remarkably, he then went on to lead Real to victory in the Champions League in three consecutive seasons! And having just achieved that (thanks to a little help from Lorus Karius!) he quit!!



Then he came back! But the second time around is never as good – a league title, but no Champions League success this time, and so in Summer 2021 he quit again, and is currently unemployed!! Where to next? The rumour is that he will replace the Water Carrier as boss of France, but perhaps Juventus may lure him back there.....

Zidane, Luka – Luka is the son of legendary footballer Zinedine Zidane and thus is cursed with never being able to be as good a footballer as his father. (Ditto Jordi Cruyff and Brooklyn Beckham). However, Luka has avoided comparisons with his father by becoming a goalkeeper – currently for Granada in the Spanish 2nd Division. He is sufficiently good at this that he will be at the World Cup – though with Algeria. He has some of his father's 'passion' as he got a two-match ban for "losing it" when Algeria were knocked out of AFCON by Nigeria.

Noting that the racist *Rassemblement national Party* were not thrilled at his father playing for France. I think we can guess what they think of French-born Luka opting to play for Algeria.....

Zlatko Dalic – Zlatko Dalic is the long serving boss of Croatia. He has been in charge of the Chequered Boys since 2017 and, having led them to both 2nd and 3rd place at World Cups, is not only Croatia's greatest manager but, after Didier Deschamps, probably the best international manager at these finals.



A moderate playing career in Yugoslavia was followed by management firstly in the Balkans and then Arabia before being given the chance to manage his home country. Aged 59, contrary to his name, he is no Generation Z! His wife is not a professional hairdresser.

Record as coach of Croatia: W53 D26 L24

Zip – For the civilised world the word 'zip' refers to a type of fastener used to hold together fabrics. For the Americans zip is, seemingly, a number: "In the 3rd minute of overtime the US is down four to zip to England".

The Americans also use the words "soccer" and "field" (instead of pitch). It's sad, really. But like a retarded member of the family one has to humour them (and with two 'u's in humour, too, if you please).

Zola, Émile – As all pub quiz participants will know Zola is famous for being an intellectual football fan (for the intellectually-challenged readers of this alphabet Zola wrote a few books). His book "*J'Accuse*" created controversy in Paris with its condemnation of Thierry Henry's cheating. He demonstrated his love of football by giving all the royalties from his book "*Germinal*" towards the creation of Belgian pro team Germinal Beerschot. His son Gianfranco Zola was a better player, though.

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Zonal marking – If ‘marking’ is the concept of a defender staying close to an opposition attacking player, then ‘zonal marking’ is when the defender doesn’t stay close to an opposition player. Rather, their task is to stay in a particular zone of the pitch and deal with what happens there. It came about thanks to ‘total football’ - where players swapped positions fluidly throughout a game – which meant that it was impossible for defenders to rigidly mark individual opposition players.

Zonal marking is most obvious at corners where defenders seem to be standing around aimlessly, rather than next to players.

Zurich – the city where the FIFA Führerbunker is based.

ZZZZ – What I’ll do when New Zealand plays Egypt at 3am!



And thus comes to an end (at last!) the World Cup Alphabet.

