

## 2026 WORLD CUP ALPHABET

### S is for

**Saeta** – Saeta are a Colombian sportswear company who are the manufacturers of Haiti’s kit. Available on all the best market stalls....

**Salah, Mohamed** – The Liverpool striker is by far the biggest sports star in Egypt. He led his team to the Premier League title in 2025, in part thanks to him being the top scorer in the league with 29 goals.

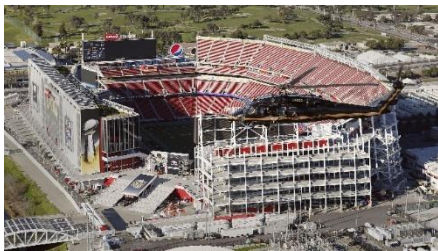
He has scored 63 times in 108 appearances for Egypt, but his World Cup career has been a story of frustration. He struggled with a shoulder injury in 2018, while Egypt missed out on qualification entirely in 2022. At 33, this is his last chance to showcase his elite level on the global stage but he comes into the tournament after having had a very poor season for Liverpool. A transfer to the Saudi Arabian Retirement League beckons.....

**Sandwiches** – the sandwich is, of course, both a British sporting- and culinary invention. Some may say it is the only culinary delight to come out of the UK.



Its 18<sup>th</sup> Century creator was the 4<sup>th</sup> Earl of Sandwich who did not wish to leave the card cable in order to eat and so invented the ultimate fast food snack. This was, of course, in an era when UberEats and Deliveroo did not exist.

**Santa Clara** – the Silicon Valley town of Santa Clara will be home for six World Cup games.



The venue is euphemistically described as “the San Francisco Bay Area”, though it is 60km south of SF. The 68 000 seat Levi’s Stadium (yes, the jeans originate in San Francisco) is home to NFL team the San Francisco 49ers who relocated here from San Francisco in 2004 when the city didn’t offer the team’s owners enough public money to stay in San Francisco!

The weather in this part of California is generally pleasant and none of the games have been scheduled to kick off in the middle of the afternoon, which will help in the open stadium.

**Sartre, Jean-Paul** –The French existential philosopher, playwright, novelist, screenwriter, political activist, biographer, and literary critic is probably the only winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature to have also been a football fan.



**Saudi Arabia** – Saudi Arabia (nickname “the Beheaders”) will be appearing at their eighth World Cup – and, thanks to the transparent FIFA system, they have bought the 2034 World Cup. However, despite ploughing billions of dollars into football the Beheaders have only once got beyond the group stage – way back in 1994 (ironically, also in the USA in those pre-9/11 days when Americans trusted Saudi pilots). Nonetheless, their beating of eventual winners Argentina on the opening day of the 2022 World Cup was for them probably equivalent to winning it (and saved coach Herve Renard from a public flogging – or worse - had they lost all three games). Renard remains Saudi coach (*ed: they’ve probably not given him back his passport*).

They struggled to qualify from the Asian group – making it only via the playoffs - and virtually all of their players play in the Saudi league which is not a sign of strength. Note also their low FIFA ranking. Expect them to go out at the group stage once again, unless Mr Infantino and/or Mr Trump pull some strings to help them.

*World Cup record:* Played 19 W4 D2 L13

*Current FIFA World Ranking:* 60<sup>th</sup>

*Star Player:* none!

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**Scaloni, Lionel** – Leo is the boss of Argentina and led them to victory in 2022. He spent most of his playing career in Spain and Italy – with a brief loan stay at West Ham United (*ed: most good players only stay briefly at West Ham!*).

He began his coaching career as assistant to “mad” Jorge Sampaoli, first in club football and then for Argentina. When Sampaoli was sacked following Argentina’s abysmal performance at the 2018 World Cup Scaloni was promoted. And he has been in the job ever since! And he’s doing ok, with two Copa Americas and one World Cup won!

Given that he’s only 47 and has done everything with Argentina it is to be expected that Scaloni will be linked with jobs at big clubs once the World Cup is over.



*Record as coach of Argentina: W65 D18 L9*

**Scotland** – The fans nickname is “the Tartan Army”, but the team is better known as delusional fantasists with their persistent belief that they are actually any good. This will be “the haggis eaters” ninth World Cup (and their first since 1998).



Scotland is the team that has played at the World Cup the most times without ever getting past the first round, having been eliminated in the group stage in all eight of their appearances at the competition, winning a grand total of four matches – and never more than one at any tournament. And that was back in the day when both the Scottish league was quite good and every top English team had Scottish players: neither of which is true today. Thus expect Scotland to be embarrassed by Haiti, humiliated by Morocco, and probably then draw v Brazil.....

To give praise where it is rightly deserved, Scotland’s manager Steve Clarke has worked miracles in getting this ragbag squad of players to both Euro2024 and the World Cup.

*World Cup record: Played 23 W4 D7 L12*

*Current FIFA World Ranking: 36th*

*Star Player: Scott McTominay (Napoli)*

**Schön, Helmut** – Helmut managed Germany at four World Cups and led them to 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> place (*ed: not at the same tournament!*). He currently still holds the record for managing the most games (25) at the World Cup, as well as being the only World Cup winner to wear a proper cap.



**Seattle** – of all the World Cup host cities Seattle will be the most pleasant for European teams with its mild climate: in July it should only be in the low 20°s.



Lumen Field is a ‘proper’ football stadium as it is the home of MLS team Seattle Sounders, as well as the NFL gridiron team the Seattle Seahawks, and has a capacity of 69 000.

It has a mention in the Guinness Book of World Records for loudest crowd roar at an outdoor stadium, by Seahawks fans in 2014! It remains to be seen if this record can be broken when Belgium plays Egypt.....

**Second Phase** – as with ‘active’ second phase is something to do with deciding when a player is- or is not offside. Sadly, only three people in the world understand the current offside rule in full and, since I am not one of them, I cannot give you a more detailed explanation on what “Second Phase” actually means. But expect tv commentators to use the term pretending that they understand it.

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**Sellami, Jamal** – Mr Salami is the coach of the Jordan national football team. A Moroccan he had a relatively short playing career in Morocco and Turkey, though was a player at the 1998 World Cup. His managerial career was in his home country, before he took the Jordan job in June 2024. Did well to take his unfancied team to their first ever World Cup.



*Record as coach of Jordan: W11 D11 L7*

**Semi-automated offside** – we've already featured the offside rule which, like the legendary Schleswig-Holstein problem, is only understood by three living people (none of which are referees). In a rare moment of logic FIFA has realised the stupidity of this situation and has tried to rectify matters by introducing automation, using cameras taking 50 pictures a second to detect if a player is offside.



However, the Referee's Union has insisted that there should be no job losses so a "video referee" reviews the pictures and then decides if the camera never lies. Hence the term 'semi-

automated offside'.

**Semiquintennial celebrations** – 2026 is the 250<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the rebellion of anarchist insurrectionists that led to the founding of the USA. So, during the World Cup, it is expected that President Trump will be celebrating having a semi. Precise plans are, at the time of writing this, vague though Trump has announced a UFC fight on the South Lawn of the White House to take place on June 14! (Sadly, it is not between him and New York Mayor Mamdani). There are also plans to have "Freedom Trucks" – trucks with big US flags on them – at the World Cup fanzones. It has yet to be confirmed if the Freedom Trucks will be used to transport illegal immigrants out of the country once the World Cup is over.....

**Senegal** – The Senegal football teams are nicknamed "the Lions of Teraanga". Contrary to what you may think, Teraanga is not a very rough suburb of Dakar where the players come from. Rather Teraanga is a word in the wolof language meaning hospitality, for which Senegalese are famed. (*ed: I'm not sure I'd trust hospitality from a lion*).



The high spot of Senegalese World Cup football was 2002 when they reached the quarter finals and, in the process, beat the reigning champions France 1-0 in the opening match of the tournament. This will be their fourth World Cup appearance, and the third in a row.

Senegal were another team that remained unbeaten whilst winning their World Cup qualification group. And they may or may not be the African Champions, after first winning against Morocco - albeit with bad grace – then having the title stripped from them following the world's longest VAR review. They are currently awaiting the outcome of an appeal of that decision to the Court of Arbitration of Sport (aka "the footballing gods").

Another feather in their cap (*ed: do lions wear caps?*) came in June 2025 when Senegal beat England 3-1, becoming the first African team to beat England at football (*ed: though they won't be the last.....*). Their manager is Pape Thiaw, who was a player in the 2002 team.

*World Cup record: Played 12 W5 D3 L4*

*Current FIFA World Ranking: 19th*

*Star Player: Nicolas Jackson (Chelsea/Bayern München)*

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**Seeler, Uwe** – We mentioned Uwe Seeler in the last sweepstake and German sweepstakers of a certain age enjoyed it, so we are repeating our piece on him.

Uwe was captain of the West Germany team that played in the 1966 World Cup Final and, sportingly, was about the only German in the entire country (other than Walter Ulbricht) not to dispute England's third goal.

He got revenge of sorts at the 1970 World Cup, when Germany beat England 3-2 and Seeler scored the equaliser with a back header which he said "came not off my head, but my hair".

Only 1.68m tall and stocky, he played his entire career for SV Hamburg, scoring 404 goals in 476 appearances for them, plus 43 in 72 appearances for the national team. He was such a cult icon that the fans called him "uns Uwe" (our Uwe) and he even had a pop song - "give it to Uwe" - written about him.



**Sharks** – Now here is an interesting fact. Footballers are, statistically, more likely to be bitten by Luis Suarez than a shark. And he's still lurking in the waters around Inter Miami.....

**Shinner** – the technical term for when a player misjudges a shot and instead of kicking it with his foot, it hits his shin. At its worst a 'shinner' is horribly embarrassing, but many a crucial goal has also been scored this way.

**Shin pads** – FIFA requires that all football players, at every level of the game, wear shin pads – pieces of hard plastic worn beneath socks – in order to prevent the transmission of AIDS! The FIFA logic is that unprotected shins are susceptible to cuts, and open wounds exacerbate the risk of contaminated blood being transmitted.

Of course this pre-supposes that a) the cut player is HIV positive, and b) that he somehow transmits the blood from his open wound to an open wound of another player.

The design of shin pads – in particular their lack of development – continues to amaze. Many professional players wear very cheap shin pads that are held in place by means of lavish use of duct tape, applied either inside or on top of the player's socks. So you have a player worth €50 million+, paid €100k+ a week and his most valuable asset – his legs – are protected by €5-worth of plastic and a roll of brown tape. Jack Grealish (retail price €100 million) even wears children's sized shin pads as he likes to show off his calves!



I think we need a major EU funded research project to come up with something better....

**Shirt Biting** – here's another thing that you never saw the great players of the past (Gerd Müller / Johan Cruyff / Bobby Charlton / Vinny Jones) doing: biting their shirts. For some inexplicable reason many modern players feel the need to chew on their shirt, usually when they have missed a goal chance.



Why??? Are they getting some vitamins from sucking on that mix of polyester and nylon? Is it a tribute to Luis Suarez, football's most famous biter? Are they simply showing off the new teeth they got in Turkey? We need an explanation..... Keep your eyes peeled to see which player in the World Cup is the first to bite his own shirt.

**Shirts** – See our separate article on the topic of replica shirts:

[Get your kits out for the lads](#)

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**Shirt Backs** – If you wonder why teams with striped shirts now have plain non-striped backs this is because of an obscure ruling from “the Footballing Authorities” (*ed: the Shirt Police*) who have said that the back of shirts must be plain, to facilitate the legibility of the writing there.



Of course, this destroys the symmetry of striped shirts.....

**Shirt pulling** – along with spitting and telling tales when standing in a defensive wall, shirt pulling is the sign of a blackguard and cad and has no place in the repertoire of any gentleman playing football. Consequently, shirt pulling is particular popular by defenders from Spain, Italy, Greece and the entire continent of South and Central America. Sadly, Johnny Foreigner has brought this disgusting habit into English football.



Players often wish to swap shirts with Messi, but rarely during the match!!

A strict sharia interpretation of this football law is required – every time you tug on a shirt then you have a finger chopped off.....

**Shoes** – Yet another reason to dislike Gianni Infantino is his bizarre decision to wear white shoes with business suit+tie. Of course, we feel sure that there is no truth in the rumour that Adidas are paying him a large sum of money to wear their Adidas Stan Smiths. After all, how large can the shoe market be for incel men who wish to model themselves on Gianni?



**Shootouts** – if a game is tied after 90 minutes then, for this World Cup, there will be a shootout at the nearest high school.

**Showboater** – a term to describe a ‘Fancy Dan’ footballer that indulges in pointless acts of showing off, like step overs. It is not a complement to be considered to be a ‘showboater’.

**Sleeves** – yes, the busybodies at FIFA can even make the sleeves of shirts a controversial topic. Football kits are not allowed to have differently colored sleeves. Article 6.3 of FIFA Equipment Regulations states that "*The Sleeves must be the same color(s) as each other*".



wanted. It's shirt policing gone mad!

**Sliding tackle** – If you enjoy watching defensive play then there is nothing more beautiful than a perfectly timed sliding tackle. Former Italian player Daniele de Rossi even has a tattoo of a sliding tackle on his leg!!

Sadly, the sliding tackle seems to be disappearing from the game: midfielders seem incapable of performing sliding tackles without showing their studs – a red card offence, whilst defenders are now too busy learning how to attack that they seem not to practice any form of tackling.



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**Sloping pitches** – the bane of amateur football is the sloping pitch. There is nothing worse than playing uphill on a muddy, windswept pitch!

Yet, these exist as there is no rule saying that a football field must be completely flat. Indeed, one reason why the game has two halves is in order to even out any advantages – from slope, wind, sunshine etc – that a team may get when playing in one direction.



**Smoking** – once it was acceptable for footballers to do it (sometimes even at half-time!). Now, not even football fans are allowed to do it! How times change! However, there are some who still hanker after older times – when Carlo Ancelotti was sacked as Bayern boss it was largely due to him having a very lax fitness regime amongst the players, which included having a fitness coach who smoked!!

**Socks** – a trend of recent years has been for footballers to wear their socks above the knee. One of the first to do this was 'hard man' John Terry.



No! Unless you are playing on a concrete school playground and are trying to prevent your kneecaps from being scarred this is simply wrong! Once socks go above the knee then they are no longer socks, but tights. And only cissies wear tights to play outside.

If it is obligatory for players to tuck shirts into shorts (*ed: no joke – this is a rule*) and obligatory for socks not be rolled down to the ankles then it should also be obligatory for socks to be folded just below the knee.



**Son, Heung-Min** – Captain of the Korea national team is Son Heung-Min (or is it Heung-Min Son: one never knows). He is now aged 33 and, after a career scoring lots of goals for Tottenham, Hamburg and Leverkusen is currently playing for Los Angeles FC.

During the suspension of football for COVID in 2020 Son used the opportunity to complete his mandatory military service in Korea.

Son has dated the K-pop singers Bang Min-ah and Yoo So-young, though it is unclear whether he dated them both at the same time. The fact that he is currently single suggests that he may have tried.....

**Solbakken, Ståle** – Steely Ståle is the coach of the Norwegian team: the Viking chieftain. He had a moderate playing career, 6 games for Wimbledon being the highpoint, but also winning the league in Denmark with two separate clubs.

Solbakken is one of those lucky few players to have had a heart attack – in his case during training – and survived. He now has a pacemaker (and, understandably, retired from playing). However, this all the stress has left him looking disturbingly like an offspring of Gianni Infantino.



As manager he was successful with his former club FC Copenhagen where – in two spells – he was in charge for over 600 games and was awarded the title as the 'Biggest Manager in Superliga History'. However, he got no awards as manager of FC Köln and Wolverhampton Wanderers (*ed: those are two names you don't want on your managerial cv!*).

He took up the Norway job in 2020. A spell at Everton or West Ham surely beckons after the World Cup.....

*Record as coach of Norway : W31 D10 L11*

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**South Africa** – this will be the fourth appearance that “bafana bafana” (so good they nicknamed them twice) will have made at the World Cup, though the first since they hosted it in 2010.

Indeed, despite the game being very popular in South Africa, the national team are not a major footballing force, having won the Africa Cup of Nations only once (back in 1996) and never getting beyond the group stage of the World Cup. Perhaps things are changing under current coach, the Belgian Hugo Broos....

*World Cup record:* Played 9 W2 D4 L3

*Current FIFA World Ranking:* 61<sup>st</sup>

*Star Player:* Siyabonga Ngezana (FCSB, Romania)

**Southgate, Gareth** – Oh how we miss Gareth, the legendary manager of the England football team. His record of, er, one Euro final, was second only to his dress sense.

Since stepping down as England manager he has made his living as, er, a motivational speaker (since no football team seems interested in having him), though it is rumoured that you can sometimes see him working at a car wash in Watford.....



**Spate** - the official collective noun for a lot of injuries at a football club is a “spate” eg “*Tottenham have had a spate of injuries and are struggling to pick a team*”.

**Spitting** – the lowest act that one can do on a football pitch is to spit at an opponent.

The most infamous incident of spitting at the World Cup came in 1990 when Holland’s Frank Rijkaard was filmed spitting not once but twice into the face of Germany’s Rudi Völler. To add insult to injury for Völler he was actually booked for protesting about the first gift of Dutch spittle that he received, thus contributing to him getting later red carded for a foul (which then provoked a second, bigger gob from Rijkaard that the referee this time actually saw – and red carded him too).

### [when the spit hits the German](#)

So disgusting was Rijkaard’s behaviour that it forced all neutral fans to cheer for Germany in the game: a previously unheard of act.

**Spain** – Nicknamed ‘*la Roja*’ or ‘the red one’ (*ed: surely you can get a cream for that?*) Spain has been the most consistently good team in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and deservedly merit their no 1 ranking by FIFA. This will be their 17<sup>th</sup> World Cup and they have been an “ever present” since 1978.

One possible factor in the ascendancy of the Spanish national team is, paradoxically, the decline in the number of top Spanish players at Real Madrid: as a consequence of Real signing ever more overseas players the once-toxic atmosphere between Real and Barca players in the national squad has disappeared. The team is so good that they can even select Alvaro Morata as captain and win.

Their coach is Luis de la Fuente who took charge after Qatar and he has already taken them to victory at EURO2024. Anything less than a last four finish by Spain will be considered to be failure.

*World Cup record:* Played 67 W31 D17 L19

*Current FIFA World Ranking:* 1<sup>st</sup>

*Star Player:* Lamine Yamal (Barcelona)

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**Sporrans** – If you’ve ever been to a football match recently then you’ll be aware that (thanks to nutters setting off bombs) it is now normal to be searched on entry to a ground. In the USA it is even stricter (thanks to their liberal gun laws) and usually only transparent bags are permitted.



So what has this got to do with sporrans? Indeed, what is a sporran, you may be asking? A sporran is a Scotsman’s handbag and it’s the big, hairy thing that hangs on the front of his kilt. (*ed: no dirty jokes, please*). Clearly (and perhaps thankfully) a sporran is not transparent so, in theory, it should not be allowed to be brought into World Cup stadia. But thanks to lobbying by the Scottish FA FIFA has announced that it will allow kilt-wearing Scotsmen to bring their sporrans into the grounds.

A great victory for Scottish manhood – or is it sex discrimination against all women who are not permitted to bring similar sized handbags into grounds??

**Sportswashing** – a word, derived from “whitewashing”, to describe the concept that persons, organisations or even countries may become financially involved in sport simply to try and get a better image for themselves. Of course, whether or not something is “sportswashing” can depend on whether or not you like the people doing it, or the team/sport benefitting from it. Examples of what some have called ‘sportswashing’ include Russian oligarchs or Arab nations buying football teams in western Europe.

**Spursy** – The English team Tottenham Hotspur have not won the Premier League (or Division 1) since 1961. On the few occasions that they have threatened to be a good team they always seem to lose their nerve. Thus the term “spursy” has been coined to describe their inability to live up to expectation.

An amusing term. But, amazingly, earlier this year the term was used by a politician – and in Sweden!! Mikael Damberg, of the opposition Social Democratic Party, said the government was like Spurs because they have squandered opportunities to make use of their great wealth and resources. “*The government risks making Sweden ‘Spursy’*,” Damberg said. “*That won’t do. Sweden cannot perform like Tottenham.*”

To all our Swedish sweepstakers, we send you our sympathy: your country is really going down the toilet when it is being compared with Spurs. Still, it could have been worse – Sweden could have been compared with West Ham or Sheffield Wednesday..... And we look forward to a UK politician making reference to Hammarby or Djurgardens!

**Squeaky bum time** – coined by legendary Manchester United manager Alex Ferguson, he used it to denote the nerves that one faces towards the end of the season when your team is close to winning something. In particular, will they keep their nerve during a stressful time?

**Sterling, Raheem** – it’s hard to feel too sorry for someone who, until recently, was being paid £325 000 a week NOT to play football (that’s Chelsea for you!) but spare a thought for Raheem Sterling. At age 31 this World Cup should be his swansong. Instead, he’s barely getting a kick as a substitute for Feyenoord in the Dutch Eredivisie. Remember, this is a player who has not declined due to injuries and once came 12<sup>th</sup> in the Ballon d’Or – i.e. he was considered by football critics to be the 12<sup>th</sup> best player in the world!

If only he’d chosen to stay at Manchester City instead of opting for a move to Chelsea things might have been so different.....

**Step over** – a rather pointless manoeuvre practised usually by players of the ilk of Cristiano Ronaldo or Robinho (i.e. Showboaters), primarily to show off and/or frustrate the opposing player. A technique that has become prevalent only in the last decade – if a player had tried this in the 1960s or 70s the insulted defender would have broken their leg. Allegedly called pedalada in Spanish (though that sounds suspiciously like a type of boat). Not to be confused with leg over.

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**Stick** – another word for goalpost. e.g. ‘his shot just went past the left stick’. Dates back to medieval days when the goals were marked by sticks.

**Stielike Uli** – A special mention must be given to German defender Uli Stielike. Stielike, who played his club football for Borussia Mönchengladbach and Real Madrid, was a member of the 1982 World Cup team and in the semi-final v France he became famous for becoming the first (and thusfar only) German to have missed a penalty at the World Cup!!! (Needless to say, Germany still won the penalty shoot out)



**Stonewall** - adjective added by commentators when referring to clear penalties: "it was a stonewall penalty". Origin uncertain -is it a reference to famous US Civil War General "Stonewall" Jackson? Doubtful. Or perhaps the LGBTQ+ organisation "Stonewall"? Highly unlikely.

**Stopper** – a central defender who is willing to use any means to stop his opponent. Anton Rüdiger immediately springs to mind.

**Stuttgart** – As a tribute to the long-suffering VfB Stuttgart fans who are also regular sweepstakers we will take a moment to acknowledge that they somehow managed to finish 4<sup>th</sup> in the Bundesliga with a largely German team (plus a loanee from Leicester City!) and so will be in next season’s Champions League! Well done – and prepare for several heavy defeats!! Potentially, there could be up to six *Schwaben* in the Germany squad for the World Cup (but the only one we’ve ever heard of is Maximilian Mittelstädt).

**String** - the collective noun for a goalkeeper making a lot of saves is a “string” eg “Alisson made a string of saves to keep Liverpool in the game”.

**Suarez, Luis** – We thought we’d seen the last of ‘the racist rodent’ – so-called because of his rat-like need to bite players combined with his willingness to insult black players - but Uruguay striker Luis Suarez has ‘un-retired’ from international football, in the hope of convincing team boss Marcela Bielsa to select him for the World Cup.



Now 39 and playing for Inter Miami in the MLS farmers league Suarez retired from international football in 2024 after ‘artistic differences’ with the former team manager. Apparently, in Uruguay calling your boss ‘usual’ is a term of respect and affection.

It remains to be seen if current team boss Marcelo Bielsa – who’s a bit unstable himself – will have Suarez back. But it is worth noting that he has 69 goals for Uruguay which contrasts with the highest goalscorer currently playing for the Sky Blues, who is Darwin Nunez with a meagre 13 goals.

**Substitute** – the player who has made the most appearances at the World Cup as substitute (and actually played, rather than simply sitting on his arse on the bench) is the Brazilian Denilson. At the 1998 and 2002 World Cups he started only one game but came off the bench 11 times – including playing for 1 minute in the 2002 Final!

This is a record that could be broken by England’s Marcus Rashford who has been a World Cup sub 9 times so far. His breaking the record is, of course, dependent on a) Rashford being selected for the England squad and b) his willingness to get off his arse and show some enthusiasm to come on the pitch when asked to do so – neither of which is guaranteed.

**Substitutions** – for the World Cup teams will be allowed to use five substitutes. An additional substitution is permitted if a player has a concussion injury (*ed: define “concussion injury”!*) and, if a game goes into extra time, an additional sixth substitute is permitted. In theory, the 4<sup>th</sup> official is supposed to add 30 seconds to “additional time” for each substitution made.

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For the World Cup each team is allowed to name a squad of 26 players, and all 15 who are not playing will be permitted to sit on the bench and be available for use as a substitute (or, alternatively, a card game or party if the match is boring).

Particularly amusing is the modern trait whereby the would-be substitute has completed his warm up only to then undertake a ten-minute induction course – either by one of the lesser coaches, or by video clip on an iPad. Are they telling the player what to do on the pitch? Or explaining the rules of football once again (footballers are, after all, very stupid)? Or perhaps they are discussing holiday plans/what to do after the game? Maybe they are watching a sitcom on the iPad? We need to know.....!!!

It is only since 1970 that substitutes have been permitted at the World Cup – prior to that you just “manned up” and played on (or hobbled off the pitch). Initially two substitutes were permitted, but that has steadily increased over time – 3 from 1998 and 5 since 2022. For one World Cup (USA 1994) an extra substitute was permitted specifically if a goalkeeper was injured or red carded.

**Sunburn** – we are considering running a separate sweepstake on predicting the number of Scottish or Norwegian fans who die of 3<sup>rd</sup> degree burns after falling asleep in the midday sun in the USA or Mexico (usually following the consumption of excess alcohol).

**Sweden** - the *Blagult* (or Blue and Yellows) (*ed: isn't Blagult a type of yoghurt?*) will be going to their 13<sup>th</sup> World Cup. However, their record is not much to shout about since 1994 when they finished 3<sup>rd</sup> (also in the USA).

The fact that Sweden are even at the finals reflects as much on the barmy way that the European qualification places were dished out by UEFA. For Sweden finished **BOTTOM** of their qualification group (behind Switzerland, Kosovo and Slovenia) – and didn't even win one of their six games! But they won Group C (i.e. the third tier) of the Mickey Mouse Nations League tournament which UEFA decreed entitled them to a World Cup playoff place, regardless of how crap they were in the qualifying group. In the playoffs they beat Ukraine and Poland to “earn” their World Cup place.

None of Holland, Japan or Tunisia will be losing any sleep at the thought of having to play Sweden in the USA. Coach Graham Potter will have to work miracles to get this team to even rack up a win.

*World Cup record:* Played 51 W19 D13 L19

*Current FIFA World Ranking:* 38th

*Star Player:* Alexander Isak is still clearly unfit so the best Blagult player is Viktor Gyökeres (yes, that's how weak they are!!)

**Swiss model** – 1) A league system where everyone does NOT play each other. This is the format followed in the Champions League and is based on a format first used in a Swiss chess tournament in 1895 (hence the name). It is allegedly a fair way to decide fixtures. However, the reason UEFA opted for it was simply greed as it allows the opening phase of the Champions League to have more teams. More teams means more matches, which means more money.....



2) Alisha Lehmann, who plays for Como and Switzerland

**Switzerland** – nicknamed “the Toblerones” this will be their 13<sup>th</sup> appearance at the World Cup final, yet they have never got beyond the quarter finals (even when they hosted the tournament, way back in 1954). At the 2006 World Cup they became the only team at any final to go through the tournament without conceding a goal in open play (being eliminated in a penalty shootout).

Coached by Murat Yakin (*ed: that must be an anagram!*) the Toblerones were unbeaten in qualification. Indeed, they are another of those countries that always qualify easily but then struggle to impress at the finals – in qualification games for the last four World Cups they have lost just a single game in total. Part of the problem is that they never seem to develop a prolific

## **2026 WORLD CUP ALPHABET**

goalscorer – and 2026 seems to be no exception. You just know they'll grind out results in the group stage, but then will struggle in the knockout stage. Switzerland matches are not for the neutral to watch!

If their FIFA world ranking of 17<sup>th</sup> sounds high, just remember that it is only eight years ago that FIFA ranked them no 3 in the world!! (It's purely coincidental that the FIFA Führerbunker and the FIFA gold reserves are both in Switzerland and that Mr Infantino is, er, Swiss)

*World Cup record:* Played 41 W14 D8 L19

*Current FIFA World Ranking:* 17<sup>th</sup>

*Star Player:* Granit Xhaka (Sunderland)