

## THE 2026 WORLD CUP ALPHABET

### H is for

**Haaland, Erling** – Resembling a God from Nordic legend Erling Haaland is the centre-forward for Norway and Manchester City. He scored a staggering 16 goals in qualifying games (including three against Italy!), almost single-handedly ensuring that Norway qualified for their first World Cup since 1998.

His game is almost exclusively built around goalscoring. Often peripheral in the build-up, Haaland lurks ominously in the background, waiting for a sniff of a chance. Once that chance comes his way, he's deadly. His searing pace and hulking physicality make him almost impossible to stop, on the ground or in the air.



And he seems a nice person, too. If only he would get a haircut.....

**Haiti** – this will be the Voodoo Boys second time at the World Cup. Their previous appearance was way back in 1974 (in West Germany) when they lost all of their games. 52 years later both West Germany and Haiti are very different countries. In the case of Haiti it has been flattened by hurricane and torn apart by gang violence, so much so that the national team was unable to play any of their 'home' WC qualifying games in Haiti. Needless to say, none of the players play for Haitian teams, with around half in Europe and half in the USA.

Haiti are the 2<sup>nd</sup> lowest ranked team to have made it to this World Cup – that is assuming that they are allowed into the USA (we can be pretty certain that no Haitian supporters will be getting US visas). However, the mere fact that they have qualified for the finals is a heroic feat. Here's hoping that Haitians can stop killing each other at least when their national team is playing their games.....

*World Cup record:* Played 3 Wo Do L3

*Current FIFA World Ranking:* 84th

*Star Player:* none

**Hairstyles** – Normally in the alphabet we use this opportunity to mock the awful hairstyles of footballers. However, this year the only hair one can talk about at WC26 is that of Donald J Trump. To use his own words, he really does have “beautiful hair, the best hair. In fact, I have better hair than men half my age”.

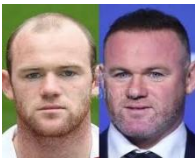


And, indeed, he does have better hair than Gianni Infantino.....



*(Ed: I insist that any article on hair must include a picture of Chelsea and Spain's Marc Cucurella. If his “my little pony” hairstyle was not ridiculous enough he adds to the comical nature of his appearance by wearing an ‘Alice band’ to keep the mop out of his eyes).*

**Hair transplants** – It would be remiss of us to mention hair without mentioning hair transplants in the footballing world. Following his successful hair work Wayne Rooney went from being Mr Potato Head to being Liverpool's answer to George Clooney. Meanwhile fellow Liverpoolian Jürgen Klopp (*ed: surely some mistake?*) has had a hair transplant and so much more - on his teeth, eyes, bum and breasts (*ed: are you sure?*). In fact he has had so much cosmetic work done that he is now eligible for Turkish citizenship.



**Hakimi, Ashraf** – the PSG defender is captain for Morocco and probably their star player. However, he showed disgraceful behaviour at the AFCON Final (including stealing the towel of the Senegal goalkeeper) for which he received a 2 game ban.

#### [Hakimi the towel thief](#)

And now he's also been charged by the Paris police with rape, not that that seems to bother the PSG ultras.....



Just the sort of person you'd want as a role model for your young son.

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**Half-space** – a term that has entered the footballing lexicon only recently is half-space. Like gegenpressing it originates in Germany (*halbraum*) and supposedly refers to the space in between one vertical line denoting a pitch's wide area, and another denoting its central area (*ed: I don't even understand that!!*). Consequently, the commentator may say: "He tends to operate in the left half-space, where he can cut onto his right foot and get shots off."

This is another example of a term that no normal football fan would ever use. And, whilst the term 'half space' is used, you never hear of 'full space' or 'quarter space'.

**Half time** - The footballing equivalent of a tea/coffee break. Indeed, in the good old days (in the UK at least) players actually would have a cup of tea (or a nip of whisky or a smoke of a "Park Drive" cigarette) at half time. (Presumably Diego Maradona's half-times were spent ingesting a few grams of 'Columbian marching powder'). Today, footballers are more likely to have an energy gel and a massage at half time.

However, some traditions still live on – it is a fact that at half time of major televised matches in Britain the sudden demand for additional electricity caused by millions of football fans putting on the kettle for a half-time cup of tea requires the switching on of extra power stations just to cope with the power surge!

Surprisingly, neither UEFA nor FIFA have any plans to change half-time (eg into 4 "quarter times") or to rename it into something like "mid-match break". It can only be a matter of time.....

**Halilhodzic, Vahid** – in the history of the World Cup has there been a more controversial-yet-successful coach than Vahid Halilhodzic? The Bosnian got four teams to consecutive World Cups – Ivory Coast in 2010, Algeria in 2014, Japan in 2018 and Morocco in 2022 – but was sacked by three of them shortly before the finals, usually for "differences and divergent visions"!!



Only in 2014 with Algeria did he actually get to go to the World Cup, where he led the Fennec Foxes into the 2<sup>nd</sup> round.

A Bosnian by birth he was wounded in the Yugoslavian Civil War and was forced to flee his hometown of Mostar following threats from Croats. This may explain his very abrasive personality. Equally, after such a background getting sacked as a football manager is small beans.

Taking four different teams to World Cup finals is already an impressive performance but being so outspoken that you only get to go once to the finals is a unique feat! Undoubtedly a potential candidate for the next FIFA Peace Prize.

**Hamstring** – the hamstring, or posterior thigh muscle, is the second-largest muscle in the human body (the largest being the *glutius maximus*, or arse – which anybody who has seen Kim Kardashian can confirm). Located at the back of the leg the curse of the speedy player is to injure the hamstring – not least because it can take a considerable time for the injury to heal properly.

**Handball** - When a player (other than the goalie) controls the ball with his hand then this shall be deemed to be 'handball' and a foul awarded against him. Conversely, if the ball hits the player's hand and the contact was involuntary then it shall not be handball. Simple.

Except that FIFA decided to complicate things. The handball law now is 252 words and even commences with the words "Not every touch of a player's hand/arm with the ball is an offence". Consequently, nobody today actually understands the handball rule and so expect much heated debate during matches.

There have been three notable cases of World Cup handball. One took place in a World Cup playoff game in 2010 when Thierry Henry used his hand to score vs Ireland ensuring that France qualified and Ireland were knocked out.



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Then there is the “hand of God” when Diego Maradona punched the ball into the net for Argentina v England in 1986.

### [the hand of God goal](#)

Sneaky and very Argie – but a brilliant piece of quick thinking! (Note how the BBC commentator himself did not spot the hand ball!)

But perhaps the most egregious case of handball occurred in the Quarter Finals of the 2010 World Cup when Ghana met Uruguay. With the scores level and the game into its last minutes Uruguay’s racist rodent Luis Suarez saved a goalbound Ghanaian shot with his hand. He was red-carded but Ghana missed the penalty – and subsequently lost to the South Americans in a penalty shoot out. Tragic.

### [The hand of a racist rodent](#)

The cheat even feigns surprise when the ref shows him the red card!!

**Harry, Prince** – We didn’t mention Kevin de Bruyne, under the letters D or B (or even under “G” for ginger). This is because KdB is, actually, only a pseudonym. For it is really Prince Harry of England who wears the No 11 shirt for Napoli.



Don’t believe me? Have you ever seen Harry and KDB in the same room? Harry likes a bling lifestyle like a footballer. He has a footballer-like ‘trophy wife’ And playing for Napoli keeps him well away from his brother.

Not be confused with his uncle – the Andrew formerly known as Prince.

**Hanley, Grant** – At this World Cup Scotland and Hibernian defender Grant Hanley will set several records. He will be the slowest player at the tournament, the player who will collect the most yellow cards, player most likely to score an own goal and will be the ugliest player at the World Cup (*primus inter pares* in the Scotland team)



**Happiness providers** - a term never previously heard in the English language, this was created by FIFA Supremo (*ed: shouldn’t that be supervillain*) Gianni Infantino when, at the 2026 World Cup draw, he declared that FIFA were “*the official happiness providers for humanity for over 100 years*”.

You couldn’t make this stuff up!!

**Hassan, Hossam** – HH (*ed: isn’t that prohibited for being anti-Semitic?*) is the coach of Egypt. A footballing legend in Egypt he played for the country’s two biggest clubs (and Cairo rivals) Zamalek and Al-Ahly, and made a whopping 177 appearances for Egypt (he is the 12<sup>th</sup> most capped player in the world) scoring 69 times, a national record (that Mo Salah is close to beating).



As a manager he has led club side Al Masry no less than five times (!) and was put in charge of the Pharaohs in 2024.

*Current record as coach of Egypt: W13 D5 L2*

**Hat-trick** – term to denote when a player scores three goals in a game. The origins of this term – as with so many things in the English language - is the sport of cricket. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century when stylish headwear for gentlemen was in vogue cricketers would buy a new hat for any bowler that achieved the difficult feat of taking three wickets with consecutive balls. Quite how the term crossed over to the working-class game of football – whose players would have been more likely to wear cloth caps - is not clear.



Bizarrely, in Germany and Austria the feat is only considered a “hat trick” if all three goals are scored in the same half! (otherwise it is simply a “dreier” or “three-er”). (*ed: once again, Germans show a complete lack of understanding of cricket.....*)

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The “perfect hat trick” in football is when the player’s three goals comprise of a right-foot shot, a left-foot shot and a header. (*ed: I suppose the Germans have added some other condition to this, too??*).

There have been no fewer than 54 hat tricks scored at the World Cup – The 2006 tournament in Germany was the only one not to have seen a hat trick.

The most recent World Cup hat trick was, of course, Kylian Mbappe’s dreier in the Final, thus joining Geoff Hurst as the only to achieve this notable feat. Meanwhile Gabriel Batistuta of Argentina is currently the only player to have scored two hat tricks at the World Cup – a record that CR7, Harry Kane, Gonçalo Ramos and Mbappe will be hoping to equal (or even pass).

**Head Tennis** – head tennis, or ‘keep-uppys’ is a game invented in training where the players have to keep the ball off the ground as long as possible. Serves absolutely no purpose to improving the skills of a professional footballer. And the extra blows on the head can't help either, given that most players are starting with a few brain cells less than most of us. In fact, it is surprising that head tennis hasn't been banned on the grounds of ‘health and safety’.



**Herzogenaurach** – the mysterious town in Bavaria that is home to both Puma and Adidas. Such was the rivalry between the two Dassler brothers that founded Adidas and Puma that, for many years, Adidas and Puma workers would not associate with each other. And when Adolf and Rudi died, they were buried in opposite ends of the town's cemetery.

I wonder what happens to anybody entering the town wearing Nike products??!

**High block** – High block is the trendy way of describing when a team does not simply sit back when defending, but actually tries to win the ball back in midfield. The homonym (*ed: are we allowed to use words like that?*) is low block, which used to be called ‘parking the bus’ i.e. putting everyone into defence whenever the ball is with the opposing team.

If, however, you hear the wife talking about a high block then it probably means that the kitchen sink is blocked again.....

**High press** – Another term used only by sport journalists relating to players running around like headless chickens, in this instance by asking attacking players to ‘press’ opposition defenders when they are passing the ball from defence. Cristiano Ronaldo has taken it upon himself to have high pressing abolished.

Alternatively, a high press is something you find in a hotel room for pressing the trousers of tall men, or an act of sexual molestation by a basketball player.

**Holding midfielder** – Holding midfielder is a term that is now very fashionable – you never heard it 10 years ago. It is somebody playing in the middle of the field who is too slow (e.g. Casemiro) or too lazy (e.g. Casemiro) to run and thus spends most of the game standing just in front of the defence trying to get in the way of the opposition attacks. The footballing equivalent of the irritating person in the supermarket whose trolley blocks your smooth, swift passage to your goal.....



The boss failed to explain properly his job as holding midfielder

**Holidays** – Most sweepstakers are either employed by the EU Institutions (note how we avoided saying that you WORK for an EU Institution) or are retired EU officials. Either way, you do not have any worries about arriving late to work (or simply staying in bed) if you’ve been watching a World Cup game until 4am.



Those living in the real world are not so lucky. And there is nowhere more real than Scotland. Scotland’s opening World Cup game vs Haiti kicks off at 2am on a Sunday (Scottish time). Given that it is probably the only match that Scotland may win the Scottish government has already acted to make the Monday a public holiday since they know that half the country will be intoxicated and sleep deprived on that Monday morning !

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**Holland** – Holland (or the Netherlands as some will insist on calling them) has the unwanted record of having played in the World Cup final the greatest number of times without actually winning the trophy (being finalists in 1974, 1978 and 2010). And whilst many of us consider Holland as having a permanent place at the World Cup this will be only their 12<sup>th</sup> appearance.

Nicknamed “the cheeseaters” (by everyone except the Dutch) they were unbeaten in qualifying which has resulted in FIFA giving them a very generous ranking of 7<sup>th</sup> in the World Cup. Their coach once again is Ronald Koeman.

Looking at their current squad it is unlikely that they will get to their fourth World Cup final. But their fans will feel at home in a country where it is fashionable to have an orange look.

*World Cup record:* Played 55 W30 D14 L11

*Current FIFA World Ranking:* 7<sup>th</sup>

*Star Player:* Sadly for NL it is Memphis Depay (Corinthians, Brazil)

**Houston** – Another sprawling cultural wasteland hosting World Cup games is Houston, the USA’s 4<sup>th</sup> largest city. A total of seven matches will be played inside the roofed NRG Stadium, so the players won’t have to suffer the ferocious Texas summer heat –not even the German fans will be putting towels down at hotel pools here.



Seating 72 000 the NRG Stadium is home to the Houston Texans NFL team. When completed in 2002 it was the first NFL stadium to have a retractable roof. Previously the team had played at the Houston Astrodome which, when it opened in 1965, was the world’s first covered sports stadium. The inability of natural grass to grow in the Astrodome led to US chemical company Monsanto inventing artificial grass which was immediately christened “AstroTurf” because of its use in the Astrodome!

**Huddles** – the latest fashion by football teams is for them to have a team huddle shortly before kickoff. Perhaps, being footballers, they have already forgotten what the manager just spent the last 30 minutes telling them what to do. Perhaps they just like hugging each other. Perhaps they are planning where to go as a group after the game.

Normally this unnecessary act of ‘bonding’ takes place midway up the pitch. However, this season Chelsea decided to ‘up the ante’ (ie see if they could annoy opponents) by performing the huddle on the centre spot (thus theoretically impinging onto the ‘territory’ of their opponents). All very childish.



But just to add to the stupidity at one game referee Paul Tierney decided that he would stand with the ball on the centre-spot. So Chelsea did their team huddle around him!!! And the-then Chelsea manager Liam Rosenior then had the nerve to complain, saying that all his players were doing were “respecting the ball”!! (*ed: no jokes about Paul Tierney’s balls please*).

**Hydration breaks** – It gets hot in the USA and Canada in June and July. And it will be even hotter in Mexico! Consequently, games will stop midway through each half for three minutes. This will happen even if the match is played in an indoor, air-conditioned stadium.

The official reason for hydration breaks is for “player welfare” and absolutely nothing to do with allowing tv companies an additional six minutes of advertising or allowing US spectators time to get more food to eat. Of course, a rational person might say that if there is a genuine health risk that requires a drinks break then perhaps they shouldn’t be playing football there.

Not to be confused with the Ramadan-themed hydration break that occurred in the Leeds Utd v Manchester City game earlier in the year that caused much indignation amongst all the Christian, God-fearing football fans.