

THE 2026 WORLD CUP ALPHABET

B is for

Baby food – In recognition of Norway being at the World Cup we have the phrase “baby food”, which in Norwegian means things are easy. Thus, Erling Haaland scoring a hat trick is only baby food for him.

Backpass rule – It is forbidden for a goalkeeper to pick up the ball if it has been kicked or thrown back to him by one of his own teammates (headed passes are permissible). This rule was introduced in 1992 as a reaction to teams killing games (and entertainment) by spending a lot of time passing the ball between the goalkeeper and defenders. Just look at this clip of what Denmark did in the final of Euro 92, which gives a flavour of what watching football used to look like:

[Denmark backpass their way to Euro '92 glory](#)

However, the zenith was the 1990 World Cup, which was officially described by FIFA as “exceedingly dull, rife with back-passing and goalkeepers holding up the ball” At that WC the Ireland v Egypt game was less a sporting spectacle and more a war crime. In that match Ireland goalkeeper Packie Bonner spent a total of 6 minutes of game time dribbling the ball around his area and picking up backpasses. Not surprisingly, the game ended 0-0.

Whilst we are ready to criticise FIFA for being useless, we must admit that this rule change was one of the few occasions when FIFA did something to improve the game.

Badge kisser - There are some players who try to convince fans of their loyalty to a team by kissing the team badge whenever they score. In reality this is usually a reliable sign of someone who is untrustworthy – the more a player kisses his team badge the greater his likelihood to ask for a transfer soon. This axiom is confirmed by the general lack of badge kissing in international games.



Bagheri, Karim – The name of Karim Bagheri appears in the alphabet as he is the proud holder of the record of scoring the most goals in a single World Cup qualification campaign, getting 19 goals for Iran when they qualified for the 1998 World Cup finals. He “bagged” a lot of goals....

Barbarez, Sergej – Mr B is the coach of Bosnia – the Barbarez of Sarajevo, so to speak.

As a player he spent his career in the German Bundesliga playing for several teams, most notably Hamburg SV. He also picked up 47 caps for Bosnia. When he retired as a player in 2009 he wanted to become the Bosnia team manager, but his appointment was blocked by the Serbian FA (How??) and he instead became a professional gambler (!). Jump forward 15 years and in 2024 he finally got his dream job.



Record as boss of Bosnia: P20 W8 D4 L8

Baumann, Oliver - Oliver who? you may ask. Well, Mr B is the first choice goalkeeper for Germany. Baumann plays for the village-team Hoffenheim, who have been this season’s surprise package in the Bundesliga. Known as Bertie to his mates, Baumann was selected for the national team squad back in 2020 but it was only with the retirement from international football of Manuel Neuer, plus the bad injury record of Marc-Andre Ter Stegen that he first got his chance to play for the national team. However, he seized the chance with both (gloved) hands and is now Julian Nagelsmann first choice for the n°1 shirt.

However, replacing Neuer – who was the first choice goalie for *Die Towel Boys* since 2010 - is a big task and if Germany does not perform well at the World Cup expect ‘Bild’ to have a ‘Blame Bertie’ press campaign...

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Bayern München – Bayern are the “Marmite” of German football¹: either you love them or you hate them – and have just become Meister (champions) for the 35th time. They will have around 15 players at the World Cup but, even more interestingly, they can claim to have no fewer than three former managers in charge of teams at this World Cup! - Carlo Ancelotti, Thomas Tuchel and Julian Nagelsmann.

You’d think this would be a record but there is another club that can boast four ex-managerial staff at USA2026. The answer will be revealed in a future letter of the alphabet.

Bazeley, Darren – Darren is the coach of the New Zealand team. An Englishman, he played for Watford, Wolves and Walsall (*ed: since he likes teams beginning with the letter W he should be in charge of Wales!*) before migrating Down Under. Darren is the breed of coach who started at U-17 level and was promoted upwards until in 2022 he was given the top job in NZ football.



He is the first ever ‘Darren’ to appear at a World Cup (Darren Anderton never played for England at a World Cup – living up to his nickname of “Sick Note”)

Record as coach of New Zealand: W12 D6 L9

Bald players – The combination of developments in hair transplant technology with footballers being overpaid (and thus well able to afford hair transplants), together with the fashion for ultra-short haircuts means that the blatantly bald footballer has disappeared from the game. No longer is do we see the floodlights glistening off the shiny dome of a player like we used to with Bobby Charlton, Alan Gilzean, Ralph Coates, Grzegorz Lato or Yordan Lechkov. However, shaved bonces are the “new bald”. *See also Charlton, Bobby.*



Balls – regular sweepstakers will know that we love to talk balls in the ramblings. And we have so much to say that we have made a separate article just about football’s most important piece of equipment – that will be your weekend read!

Barnstorming – a word that is used in describing football is barnstorming. It has absolutely nothing to do with barns or storms (or, for that matter, brainstorming). It is used to emphasis when a player has made a great attacking run eg “Cristiano Ronaldo made a barnstorming run”.

Barnstorming denotes less the speed, more the length of the run - a darting run is faster, and a marauding run is slower, but a barnstorming run is more devastating.

Barnstorming is rarely used outside of football. You would not say “I’ve just been to a barnstorming meeting” (*ed: especially in the European Commission*)

Beccacece, Sebastian – Mr B is the coach of Ecuador. An Argentinian, he is a protégé of legendary Argentinian coach (and madman) Jorge Sampaoli.



Apart from a season at Elche in Spain, he spent his entire club management career in Argentina before getting the Ecuador job in 2024.

Anyone who can get a win on a cold Tuesday night in Bolivia has some management prowess.

Record as coach of Ecuador: W5 D9 L1

¹ Marmite is a delicious/disgusting yeast spread that is loved/hated by British people

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Beckham, Sir David – Walking advertising hoarding and former Manchester United footballer who in 2025 received a knighthood for ‘services to self-promotion and money making’. His estimated worth is \$500 million – it would be more but for his wife blowing millions on her loss-making designer fashion business.



Beckham is part owner of MLS football team Inter Miami and so has a vested interest in the success of soccerball in the USA. At the World Cup “Becks” is guaranteed to be found in the FIFA VIP box close to Mr Infantino and probably will share a prawn sandwich and a vacuous chat with President Trump, a man of similar intellect.

Though heterosexual Beckham is happy to be known as a gay icon – as that brings in lots of money – but his concern for LGBT rights did not prevent him being a “Sporting Ambassador” for Qatar at the last World Cup. He has over 80 million Instagram followers (*ed: whatever that may be*) making him the fifth most followed footballer and the second most for a UK person after Dua Lipa (!) (*ed: isn't Dua Lipa a form of cosmetic surgery?*).

Belgium – the Red Duvels will be playing at their 15th World Cup. For the fourth consecutive time they won their qualifying group without losing a game – the last time they lost a qualifying match was back in 2009 (against Estonia!). However, this is not the same team that was ranked as world n°1 as recently as February 2022.



Coach Rudi Garcia took over after the team’s disappointing performance at Euro2024 and much will depend on how he handles the “big beasts” of Lukaku, de Bruyne and Courtois – great players all, but also big egos and very injury prone.

World Cup record: Played 51 W21 D10 L20

Current FIFA World Ranking: 8th

Star Player: Jeremy Doku (Manchester City)

Bellingham, Jude – Jude Bellingham is the marmite of English football (*see footnote 1*).



For some inexplicable reason the British football media absolutely adores him (usually being called ‘Jude’, rather than ‘Bellingham’), yet ordinary football fans are more critical.

Perhaps it is because he has a languid style of playing that makes it look as if he is not really trying very hard, or perhaps it is because fans do not really know what position he plays – he may wear 4 on his shirt at Real Madrid but he is not a defender, but is he a holding midfielder? An attacking midfielder? A number 10? Does he know himself?

That, together with his seeming arrogance, makes him “Mr Marmite” with fans.

Bench – The technical term for the seating area used by the coach, his entourage and the substitutes. Given how many people sit there today it is many years since an actual bench was used.



Indeed, for this World Cup FIFA has decreed that “no more than” 26 people - up to 15 substitutes and 11 team officials, of which one must be the team doctor - will be allowed to sit on the bench. 26 ?!!! That would be one hell of a big bench!!

Between the lines – an expression that is now commonly-used in football (but did not exist 20 years ago) is between the lines. It refers to the space separating an opposing team’s back line from its midfield one and reflects how today’s teams (particularly the less gifted ones) play in disciplined lines, like model soldiers being moved on a wargames battlefield.

Between the lines can also describe what happens between sessions of coke at the parties of [*insert the name of an overpaid player that you dislike*].

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Bibs – In the good old days bibs were only ever seen on the training ground – or in the homes of parents with very small children. Now, thanks to another bloody daft FIFA ruling, it is obligatory for all substitutes to wear bibs (in dayglo colours) when warming up. Presumably the dayglo colours are for ‘health and safety’ reasons, to ensure that the subs are not hit by a car.....



Bielsa, Marcelo – Mr B is the coach of Uruguay. His nickname is ‘el loco’ (the madman) and, given that he is Argentinian, it is a high threshold he must cross to be christened that!



Bielsa had an undistinguished playing career in his native Argentina before turning to coaching. He has coached in both South America and Europe – he was a cult figure (*ed: you did mean cult?!*) at Leeds United – and Uruguay will be his third coaching job at the World Cup, having previously led Argentina and Chile.

He is widely regarded as one of the most influential coaches of all time, with Pep Guardiola describing him as the best in the world. However, he is also loco and invariably resigns from his jobs – at Lazio he quit after 2 days!! And he recently gave a 110 minute press conference at which he said “*I’m a generator of tension. When I arrive, the environment becomes tense. That’s why I appear infrequently*”.

“*I’m toxic,*” he continued. “*To associate yourself with me makes you worse off. Do you understand me? There are toxic types who only see the errors that they are correcting, who are demanding, who are never satisfied with anything. He talks only about the work he is doing. When he goes out to eat, he reads the newspaper because he doesn’t want to integrate with those around him, so that he doesn’t have to talk about things that distract him from all that. Don’t think I enjoy it. For me, it’s karma.*”

His preferred tactical formation is 3-3-3-1: three defenders, three midfielders (one central midfielder with two wide players / wing backs), three attacking midfielders (one No.10 and two wingers) and one centre-forward.

Has the habit of sitting on a cooler box (or, at Leeds, on an upturned dustbin!) during games. You can guarantee that there will be a camera focussed on him permanently during matches!

Record as coach of Uruguay: W15 D12 L6

Black Lives Matter – three words that you better not say when you are trying to enter the USA for this World Cup.

Blatter, Sepp – It is said that Roman emperors would always nominate as their successor someone who was worse than them: the logic being that, in future years, the Roman public would look back nostalgically and say that the previous Emperor was better.

By this logic we can today look back to the previous Kaiser of FIFAland and say “compared to the crooked despot currently in charge Sepp Blatter wasn’t so bad after all”. After all, even Septic Bladder never thought of creating a FIFA World Peace Prize.....



Bosnia – Bosnia, or the Bosnia & Herzegovina national team if one wishes to be pedantic, will be making their second World Cup appearance, having previously got there in 2014. They got to the finals via the playoffs, having finished runners up to Austria in the group stage (but losing only one game). In the playoffs they won both of their games – vs Wales and Italy – on penalties.

Bosnia are the lowest ranked European team at the finals, but they are also in a weak group (Switzerland, Qatar and Canada) so perhaps they can cause an upset or two.....

Their nickname is the Dragons (or Zmajevi in Bosnian) and their coach is Sergej Barbarez.

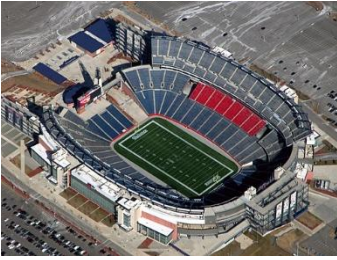
World Cup record: Played 3 W1 D0 L2

Current FIFA World Ranking: 65th

Star Player: I’m sure they will have a star 23-year-old who we’ve not heard of, but for star billing you have to turn to Edin Dzeko, the 40 year old team captain.

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Boston – the 65 000 capacity Gillette Stadium is normally the home of the New England Patriots NFL team. However, for the World Cup, it will host six football matches including one of England's games (*ed: more like Old England Patriots!*), plus two Scotland matches.



Given that every Bostonian claims to be of Irish heritage I'm sure the city will give a very warm welcome to the English fans.

Boston in summer can get up to 28°C so one can expect a lot of very red Scots fans in the very exposed stadium.....

Bouncebackability – in the German language it is legitimate to create new words by sticking together a couple of existing words. In the English language it is not – except if you are a football manager. When the then manager of Crystal Palace Iain Dowie wanted to describe how his team had won a match after previously playing rubbish he activated his seven brain cells and created the word “bouncebackability”. The word lasted – unlike Dowie's managerial career – and is still used by football pundits.

Boots – If Henry Ford once said that ‘you can have any colour of Ford as long as it is black’ then when it comes to football boots the slogan of Adidas/Nike/Puma today as ‘you can have any colour as long as it is NOT black’.



The reason is, of course, marketing. Specifically, hoping that kids will wish to buy the same style of boots as is worn by their favourite players – an easier ‘sell’ if players are wearing distinctive individual colours. These can cost over €200!

Our tip to parents of football-mad kids is that you adjust your tv sets so that you only watch the games in black and white. It will save you money!!

Brazil – The *Seleção* are the only team to have appeared at all twenty-three World Cups. In the process the boys in canary yellow have given football fans much pleasure – which also generates lots of pressure on the team in the years when their team is not so great.

Brazil has won the World Cup a record five times, but the last of these was 2002. That, combined with the success of Argentina, is a heavy cross for them to bear. For this World Cup Brazil do not have a decent no 9 – a fact highlighted in the qualification phase for this World Cup where Brazil came only fifth, losing six times (including home and away to bitter rivals Argentina).

On the plus side their current coach is that canny old fox Carlo Ancelotti. And you have to go back to 1966 for the last time Brazil failed to get beyond the group stage.

World Cup record: Played 114 W76 D19 L19

Current FIFA World Ranking: 5th

Star Player: Vinicius Jr (Real Madrid) – though Neymar probably believes he is still the star.

Breakthrough players – at every World Cup there are players who are unknown to the majority of football fans yet will use football's biggest stage to show off their talents and get signed by a “big club”. Remember how James Rodrigues went from being just another player at Monaco to being a big summer signing for Real Madrid after his performances for Colombia at the 2014 World Cup?! Likewise El Hadji Diouf was snapped up by Liverpool after playing so well for Senegal during the 2002 World Cup, and Chelsea paid a ridiculous amount of money for Argentina's Enzo Fernandez after discovering him during the 2022 World Cup.

So, watch out for a player, probably for an African team or a smaller South American country, being plucked from relative obscurity by a “big” club after performing well at this World Cup. My tip of a player to watch is Ivory Coast's Yan Diomande.....

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Broos, Hugo – Broos is the manager of South Africa. Aged 73, he played 24 times for Belgium in a long playing career at Anderlecht and Brugge. His first manager's job was back in 1988 and after several clubs in Belgium he spread his net wider. In 2016 he managed Cameroon who he led to Africa Cup of Nations success, and in 2021 he got the South Africa job. Under him they qualified easily for the World Cup



Hugo caused controversy at AFCON at the start of the year when he made the following comment about one of his own players: *"I can assure you he is a Black guy, but he will come out of my room as a white guy."* I still haven't figured out what he meant by that but I can understand why it offended many people!

Record as coach of South Africa: W32 D24 L9

Brundage, Avery - American Avery Brundage was head of the US Olympic Committee in the 1930s and subsequently became head of the International Olympic Committee 1952-1972.

So why mention him here? Because he is probably the only sporting administrator who was even more bent than FIFA's Gianni Infantino. Not only did Brundage award the 1936 Olympics - both summer and winter - to Nazi Germany but, when he was compelled by US public opinion to visit Germany in advance of the Olympics to see if state-sponsored anti-semitism was taking place he somehow managed to conclude that it wasn't.

He even managed to double down on his awfulness during the 1972 Munich Olympics. When 11 Israeli competitors were murdered by Palestine terrorists Brundage decreed that the games should not be cancelled.

Bubista – Bubista or, to use his proper name, Pedro Leitão Brito, is the coach of the mighty Cape Verde team.

There's not really much to say about him, other than he has been in charge of the 'Blue Sharks' since 2020 and has done a fantastic job of turning a team of no-hopers into World Cup participants.

Record as coach of Cape Verde: W29 D15 L16

