

DIE FUßBALLWELTMEISTERSCHAFTS-GEIST JAHR ZWEI-TAUSEND-UND-SECHS

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In the last 6 World Cups, only 5 teams have made appearances, and none of them have been from outside of Europe or South America. Recently, though, the "world's sport" has become truly global. European coaches are coaching Asian national teams and African players are playing for Europe's club teams, like Manchester United and Arsenal. As a result, the level of play in South Korea, Japan and the Ivory Coast has risen, turning these teams from nonentities to competitors. In 2002, South Korea became only the second non-European or South American team to make it into the Cup's final four (the first was the US in 1930). In the same tournament, defending champion, France, was ousted by Senegal.

This summer, we could see the next step in soccer's development: no-name teams (like Togo and Ghana) now boast name players—some signing club league contracts for as much as \$45 million. These teams add a dynamism and unpredictability to a World Cup, in which David and Goliath are not so well defined. David's been pumping iron with Goliath, and shit is about to go down.

—KS

GROUP D : Angola, Iran, Mexico, Portugal

The most politically fraught group within the tournament, Group D is brimming with nuclear arms, postcolonial strife and the vanguard of indigenous peoples movements. The powder keg centers on the June 8 match between Portugal and Angola. Rolling in with the most menacing flag in the tourney (a machete and cog mimics the Soviet hammer and sickle on top of an anarcho-syndicalist red and black), Angola will surely bring fire against their former colonizers; unfortunately, such intensity will be difficult to maintain against other opponents. Portugal, with the social debut of pretty boy Cristiano Ronaldo and the swansong year for superstar and Heidi Klum crush Luis Figo, figures to avenge a Euro Cup finals loss in 2004 and go deep.

The Mexicans have never won a World Cup, and the recent rise of uber-rival the United States has increased El Tricolor's general fútbol drive. With a national election looming in July, the country hopes to throw out a tortured soccer history just as it abandons that rat-bastard Fox—behind star Francisco Fonseca (say it twice, baby), Mexico will most likely fulfill those hopes. The Ayatollah once said, "Leaders do not have the right to have any pity whatsoever for the mercenaries of the enemy," and so the Iranians must have no pity if they hold any desire to win. But there is little dynamo here, and barring an international (non) nuclear shocker, Iran will be back home by late June. Hey Mexico and Portugal, do you... celebrate?

—JHB

GROUP E : United States, Czech Republic, Italy, Ghana

Despite the lack of respect that the United States receives in the soccer world (mostly due to the fact that we call it "soccer"), Sam's Army will be arriving in Germany as the fifth ranked team in the world, and after showing everyone what America's A-game looks like in 2002 with impressive games against Portugal, South Korea and Germany, expect great things to come. However, in lieu of their past World Cup record, most pundits will not pick the United States to even survive group play. Another team donning the red, white and blue—the Czech Republic—will be favored out of Group E. The Czechs, currently ranked second in the FIFA polls, field a stellar core of players that are ready to make history for their nation's first trip to the World Cup. The Czechs will be stacked from front (Aston Villa's Milan Baros) to middle (Juventus' Pavel Nedved) to back (Chelsea keeper Petr Cech), with many other youthful and experienced players to fill in between their leaders. Adding to the Americans' woes is the presence of Italy, historically one of the world's best teams. As if it wasn't enough that Italy itself looks like a soccer promo to anyone reading an atlas, their star-studded roster bolsters outstanding talent in all parts of the field. While Italy has been exceptionally great in recent friendlies, including their 4-1 thrashing of Germany (who in turn thrashed the US 4-1 in vicarious vengeance), they are prone to upsets, so they will need to stay focused in order to surpass at least one of the competitive teams in this group.

Sadly, Ghana will get smoked. While, like the Czechs, it's also their first time at the big show, they will lack the talent, organization, and, most importantly, the experience to get through group play. Beating teams like Somalia 7-0 just doesn't adequately prepare you to take on the world's best.

—EQ

GROUP G : France, Switzerland, South Korea, Senegal

After a finals home victory in '98 and a first-round loss in '02, France is desperately looking to reclaim World Cup glory with the help of captain (and '98 team veteran) Zinedine Zidane. While they are ranked eighth in the world, the fear is that the team is too old for Les Bleus to repeat their triumphant '98 showing. Nonetheless, barring disaster, they should make it easily out of Group G.

Switzerland hasn't made it past qualifying rounds since 1994, when the team failed to make it out of group play. Led by Alexander Frei of the French first division outfit Stade Rennes, the team turned heads when they made it out of competitive European group with a record that included two ties against the French team.

Although they struggled to get here (finishing behind Saudi Arabia in their group), South Korea is optimistic—coming off of a remarkable fourth place finish in '02, Manchester United's Park Ji-Sung will help to prove that that showing was due to more than homeland advantage. Along with France, they should make it out of group play with relative ease.

Despite a victory over Senegal to make it this far, Togo has its work cut out. A victory over either France or South Korea would draw the world's attention.

—KS

GROUP C : Argentina, Holland, Serbia and Montenegro, Côte d'Ivoire

Group C brings together past champions (Argentina), the how-have-these-guys-never-been-champions? (Holland), the solid, but unspectacular (Serbia and Montenegro) and the big surprise (Côte d'Ivoire).

Argentina has yet to emerge from the shadow of Diego Maradona, who led the team to World Cup Victory in Mexico City in 1986. A few years after a loss in the finals of 1990's Cup, Maradona failed a drug test for ephedrine doping, heralding the end of an era. Their last effort, in the Korea/Japan Cup in 2002, was marked by a first-round loss. The road to the 2006 World Cup became even rockier when head coach Marcelo Bielsa resigned in September 2004. Shortly after, however, Jose Pekerman took the reins and Argentina sealed qualification by defeating Brazil in front of a home crowd (keeping intact their 12-year unbeaten run at home). With arguably the strongest midfield in the country, it will be tough for any other Group C team—except for Holland on a good day—to stop Argentina.

Holland is often considered the best European team to never win a World Cup, which could change in 2006 with Manchester United's Ruud Van Nistelrooy leading the charge. With a runner-up finish (in '74) and a final four appearance (in '98), Dutch fans know what it's like to see things slip away in important games. But former striker and current coach Marco van Basten has rejuvenated the young team, which closed their ten-win qualification run with a 2-0 win over the Czech Republic in October.

Under the banner of Yugoslavia, Serbia and Montenegro reached the top 16 in France in '98, but that provided little guarantee that they would find their way out of the qualifying rounds this year. They did, though, thanks largely to the best defensive line in Europe, which conceded only one goal (in a group with both Spain and Belgium). Serbia's weak midfield will certainly be challenged by back-to-back games against Holland and Argentina.

Just like Nigeria in '98 and Senegal in '02, the Ivory Coast surprised many by finishing at the top of most difficult qualifying group in Africa. In their first trip to the World Cup finals, they're led by several European club players. Kolo Toure, of Arsenal's backline, and Chelsea's Didier Drogba lead the charge. If they can get out of this tough group, they could make a big splash in Germany.

—KS

GROUP B : England, Paraguay, Trinidad and Tobago, Sweden

By and large, there are two competing predictions about England's fate in Germany this summer: first, that this is finally England's year, and that its mix of ripening veterans (David Beckham, plus a host of others from Rio Ferdinand to Michael Owen) and explosive young talent (mostly, the prodigious Wayne Rooney) ensure the team a realistic shot at its first World Cup triumph in 40 years. And second, that England will always lose in the quarterfinals.

What both of these commonplace predictions assume—correctly—is that England will win Group B. The real question is who will be qualifying along with them: either Sweden, who finished second in England's group in 2002, or Paraguay, another smallish nation with a decent collection of talented, if aging, players. I'll give Sweden the nod, mostly because its star forward, Zlatan Ibrahimovic, has been in better form than his (admittedly, much better-looking) Paraguayan counterpart, Roque Santa Cruz. One of my colleagues claims that Santa Cruz is going to "blow up" this year, but he doesn't know anything about soccer.

Trinidad and Tobago's June 15 match against England has the potential for a postcolonial upset, a la France vs. Senegal in 2002, but it's unlikely. Whereas Senegal had a dynamic, highly underrated squad of French Ligue One stars, Trinidad has the 33-year-old ex-Man United forward Dwight Yorke and some mediocre white Englishman whose mother was born in Port of Spain.

—CH

GROUP H : Spain, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Ukraine

Group H is a no-brainer, though FIFA would tell you something different—that issue will be addressed momentarily. The eventual group winner: Spain, ranked suspiciously high at sixth in the FIFA polls, is a team that has always been respected, though they've never been to a World Cup final. The last few World Cup eras have disappointed the Spaniards with many early exits. Now, with many players fielded from the recently very impressive "La Liga," including the powerful scoring duo of Raul (Real Madrid) and Fernando Torres (Atletico Madrid), expect Spain to prove why they deserve their top ranking.

Now, the next ranked team in the group is Tunisia (24th), and then Saudi Arabia (34th), but here is where FIFA screwed up. Ukraine, ranked a lowly 42nd, will make easy work of their non-European counterparts. Why? Two words: Andriy Shevchenko. AC Milan's superstar is one of the world's consistently best strikers, and with seasoned attackers to support him, the unheralded Tunisian and Saudi Arabian sides will have a tough time countering the potent Ukrainian offense.

—EQ

GROUP A : Costa Rica, Ecuador, Germany, Poland

When official World Cup selector Heidi Klum pulled the draw for Group A, Germany's collective cold organ grew a little warmer. The host team competing in a tournament heavily favoring homers, Team Mannschaft is not without worries, including aging stars (Michael Ballack and super goalie Oliver Kahn), but will roll easily. The Costa Ricans will be better off gorging on the free catering orgy of Reislung and Bratwurst than showing up to confront a stadium full of drunken chanting Bavarians in their opener against Germany. Though they have a bit of speed up front, especially in Hermon Medford, the Ticos, placated by years of juicy eco-tourist peace, are just too nice to really cut it in international sporting competition.

Though the Poles will be nearly as at home as the Germans, the specter of the Polish Plumber was more frightening than this pudgy side. Any benefits of playing near home will be eliminated by inexperience and a dearth of playmakers (and who wants to hear weeks of Polish jokes anyway?). On the other hand, Ecuador, like any country bound to the even-keeled solar schedule of the equator, is quirky, wily and overwhelmingly puzzling. This team's young lions, Christian Lara and Luis Valencia, will get the job done. And so to Germany and Ecuador, I say, "Hasta La Victoria Siempre."

—JHB

GROUP F : Brazil, Croatia, Australia, Japan

When Marcus Pontes, Brazil's first astronaut, went into space last month, he brought his national team's jersey along with him in the hopes that it would bring his country luck in Germany. Of course, as even the casual fan knows, Brazil doesn't exactly need the help. As usual, the Brazilian squad has a devastating array of attacking talent at its disposal; two-time World Player of the Year Ronaldinho is only the tip of the iceberg. Only Germany, or a very lucky England or Argentina, will prevent Brazil from claiming its sixth World Cup trophy this summer.

Though its recent race riots highlighted tensions between Anglo-Irish whites and Middle Easterners, Australia is also home to large numbers of Croatian immigrants—many of whom, as J.M. Coetzee's novel *Slow Man* reminds us, are anything but assimilated into bourgeois Australian society. It's no US vs. Mexico, but Australia's June 22 match against Croatia should be a good one, not least because the two teams will also be vying for second place in the group. Croatia, who were the surprise third place winners in 1998, are still a formidable force, while Australia's squad boasts a number of European-based stars—strangely, the English league's toughest hard men (Lucas Neill, Kevin Muscat), as well as its laziest malingers (Harry Kewell, Mark Viduka), are Australian—and managed to overcome Uruguay en route to World Cup qualification. Japan, World Cup co-host along with South Korea in 2002, is unlikely to fare well in the group.

—CH