

World Cup

TIM VYNER
WORLD CUP
DRAW
No 6 ST PETERSBURG

What a weekend this is turning out to be. The tournament has exploded into life in a riot of colour and goals. In 24 hours it has become the celebration of the beautiful game we all knew it could be.

St Petersburg is buzzing, quite literally as vuvuzelas have taken over, with fans from all nationalities mingling alongside onlooking Russians who are providing a warm welcome to everyone.

When the fixtures came out for this World Cup the first one I wrote down on a wish list was Morocco v Islamic Republic of Iran in St Petersburg. It is the day after the holy month of Ramadan and the fans are out in numbers.

From the car full of Moroccans who have driven from North Africa, to the newly-wed Iranians in their traditional dress, from the Scottish-Iranian who lives in Newcastle wearing a kilt, to the Moroccan who is wearing a Putin mask. And, of course, where there is a World Cup there are plenty of Mexican fans.

Spain and Portugal produced the goals and the glamour but when will I ever get the chance to see Morocco v Iran in Russia's imperial capital of culture again?

This is what the World Cup is all about. From fan zones to the stadiums in all the host cities, this weekend has begun the process of transformation that always happens.

It has taken me four days to get here, crossing borders and navigating traffic jams and customs controls. But just like the opening weekend of London 2012, the collective mood appears to have been lifted. And this World Cup has begun to write its own story.



Previews

Costa Rica v Serbia

Venue Samara Arena
Kick-off 1pm BST
Referee Malang Diedhiou (Senegal)
Odds Costa Rica 7/2, Serbia 5/4, Draw 10/11

Head-to-head record This is the first meeting between the two sides.

Form guide Costa Rica: LWLL, Serbia: DLWLW

Commentator's kit Costa Rica conceded just one goal in their 2014 World Cup run, fewer than any other side in the competition.

Omens Serbia have never managed to beat a team from Central America, losing twice and drawing once.

Teams (probable) Costa Rica: Navas; Waston, Gonzalez, Calvo, Gamboa, Borges, Guzman, Oviedo, Campbell, Benegas, Urena. Serbia: Stojkovic; Karamovic, Milenkovic, Tosic, Kolarov, Matic, Milinkovic-Savic, Tadic, Ljajic, Kostic, Mitrovic.

Germany v Mexico

Venue Luzhniki stadium
Kick-off 4pm BST
Referee Alireza Faghaei (Iran)
Odds Germany 1/2, Mexico 6/1, Draw 10/3

Head-to-head record This is the 12th meeting in all competitions, with Germany winning six and losing one.

Form guide Germany: DLLWW, Mexico: WLDWL

Commentator's kit Thomas Muller has scored five goals in each of his two World Cups.

Omens Germany have won all three of their previous World Cup matches against Mexico.

Key Clash Thomas Muller v Jesus Gallardo. Mexico have been poor defensively in the run-up to the World Cup, and whether they make it out of this game unbeaten or better may depend on the performance of 24-year-old Gallardo, who has the unenviable task of marking the Germany forward. If he fails, things could get ugly.

Teams (probable) Germany: Neuer; Kimmich, Boateng, Hummels, Hector, Dreier, Kroos, Muller, Reus, Draxler, Werner. Mexico: Ochoa; Salcedo, Reyes, Moreno, Layun, G Santos, Herrera, Guardado, Vela, Hernandez, Lozano.

Brazil v Switzerland

Venue Rostov Arena
Kick-off 7pm BST
Referee Cesar Ramos (Mexico)
Odds Brazil 2/5, Switzerland 8/1, Draw 7/2

Head-to-head record Brazil have won three of their eight games in all competitions, losing two.

Form guide Brazil: DWWWW, Switzerland: DWWDW

Commentator's kit At just 26 years old, Neymar is third on the list of Brazil's all-time top goalscorers.

Omens Their previous World Cup encounter came in 1950, when Brazil went on to lose in the final.

Key Clash Neymar v Stephan Lichtsteiner. The new Arsenal man is Switzerland's best defender and he will have to show it to stop the PSG superstar from crushing the European side. Lichtsteiner was part of the Switzerland side who beat Spain in 2010 and so he is certainly capable of holding off the world's best.

Teams (probable) Brazil: Alisson; Danilo, Silva, Miranda, Marcelo, Casemiro, Paulinho, Coutinho, Willian, Neymar, Jesus. Switzerland: Sommer; Schär, Akanni, Lichtsteiner, Rodriguez, Behrami, Khaka, Shaqiri, Dzemali, Zuber, Embolo.

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Russia 2018 fixtures guide

A	B	C	D
<p>Russia 5 Saudi Arabia 0 Luzhniki Stadium</p> <p>Egypt 0 Uruguay 1 Ekaterinburg Arena</p> <p>Russia v Egypt Tuesday, Saint Petersburg Stadium</p> <p>Uruguay v Saudi Arabia Wednesday, Rostov Arena</p> <p>Uruguay v Russia June 25, Samara Arena</p> <p>Saudi Arabia v Egypt June 25, Volgograd Arena</p>	<p>Morocco 0 Iran 1 Luzhniki Stadium</p> <p>Portugal 3 Spain 3 Fisht Stadium</p> <p>Portugal v Morocco Wednesday, Luzhniki Stadium</p> <p>Iran v Spain Wednesday, Kazan Arena</p> <p>Iran v Portugal June 25, Mordovia Arena</p> <p>Spain v Morocco June 25, Volgograd Stadium</p>	<p>France 2 Australia 1 Luzhniki Stadium</p> <p>Peru 0 Denmark 1 Fisht Stadium</p> <p>France v Peru Thursday, Ekaterinburg Arena</p> <p>Denmark v France June 25, Luzhniki Stadium</p> <p>Australia v Peru June 25, Fisht Stadium</p>	<p>Argentina 1 Iceland 1 Spartak Stadium</p> <p>Croatia 2 Nigeria 0 Kaliningrad Stadium</p> <p>Argentina v Croatia Thursday, Nizhny Novgorod Stadium</p> <p>Nigeria v Iceland Friday, Volgograd Arena</p> <p>Nigeria v Argentina June 26, Saint Petersburg Stadium</p> <p>Iceland v Croatia June 26, Rostov Arena</p>
E	F	G	H
<p>Costa Rica v Serbia Today, Samara Arena</p> <p>Brazil v Switzerland Today, Rostov Arena</p> <p>Brazil v Costa Rica Friday, Saint Petersburg Stadium</p> <p>Serbia v Switzerland Friday, Kaliningrad Stadium</p> <p>Serbia v Brazil June 27, Spartak Stadium</p> <p>Switzerland v Costa Rica June 27, Nizhny Novgorod Stadium</p>	<p>Germany v Mexico Today, Luzhniki Stadium</p> <p>Sweden v South Korea Tomorrow, Nizhny Novgorod Stadium</p> <p>South Korea v Mexico Saturday, Rostov Arena</p> <p>Germany v Sweden Saturday, Fisht Stadium</p> <p>South Korea v Germany June 27, Kazan Arena</p> <p>Mexico v Sweden June 27, Spartak Stadium</p>	<p>Belgium v Panama Tomorrow, Fisht Stadium</p> <p>Tunisia v England Tomorrow, Volgograd Arena</p> <p>Belgium v Tunisia Saturday, Spartak Stadium</p> <p>England v Colombia Saturday, Nizhny Novgorod Stadium</p> <p>England v Belgium June 28, Kaliningrad Stadium</p> <p>Panama v Tunisia June 28, Mordovia Arena</p>	<p>Colombia v Japan Tuesday, Mordovia Arena</p> <p>Poland v Senegal Tuesday, Spartak Stadium</p> <p>Japan v Senegal June 24, Ekaterinburg Arena</p> <p>Poland v Colombia June 24, Kazan Arena</p> <p>Japan v Poland June 24, Volgograd Arena</p> <p>Senegal v Colombia June 28, Samara Arena</p>
I	J	K	L
<p>Russia 1 Uruguay 0 Luzhniki Stadium</p> <p>Egypt 1 Saudi Arabia 0 Luzhniki Stadium</p> <p>Russia 1 Uruguay 0 Luzhniki Stadium</p> <p>Egypt 1 Saudi Arabia 0 Luzhniki Stadium</p>	<p>Morocco 1 Iran 0 Luzhniki Stadium</p> <p>Portugal 1 Spain 0 Luzhniki Stadium</p> <p>Morocco 1 Iran 0 Luzhniki Stadium</p> <p>Portugal 1 Spain 0 Luzhniki Stadium</p>	<p>France 1 Australia 0 Luzhniki Stadium</p> <p>Peru 0 Denmark 1 Fisht Stadium</p> <p>France 1 Australia 0 Luzhniki Stadium</p> <p>Peru 0 Denmark 1 Fisht Stadium</p>	<p>Argentina 1 Iceland 1 Spartak Stadium</p> <p>Croatia 2 Nigeria 0 Kaliningrad Stadium</p> <p>Argentina 1 Iceland 1 Spartak Stadium</p> <p>Croatia 2 Nigeria 0 Kaliningrad Stadium</p>

THE FINAL

Luzhniki Stadium, Moscow

Third place play-off

14 July, Krestovsky Stadium, Saint Petersburg 3pm

‘It still hurts.
You will never
forget losing
in the final’

Pablo Zabaleta remembers everything about the 2014 decider, he tells *Sam Dean*, particularly pain of defeat

Pablo Zabaleta remembers lying awake, talking with Javier Mascherano on the night before the 2014 World Cup final. He remembers the fireworks that were set off outside the Argentina hotel, the singing of the Brazilians that seeped through the walls.

He remembers travelling to the stadium, watching through the windows as blue-and-white shirts packed the streets of Rio de Janeiro. He remembers lining up on the pitch at the Maracana, Lionel Messi to his right, as the national anthems played.

He remembers the chances they had, the opportunities they wasted. He remembers how well Argentina had defended, how close they came to making it the greatest night of their lives. He remembers the excitement and the nerves. He remembers the pain.

“It still hurts,” he says. “I was watching TV the other day and they were showing some clips of that game. When you see that, it hurts.”

“It is something that you will never forget in your life. It took 24 years for Argentina to be involved in a World Cup final again. You never know as a player if you will ever again have the chance to play in a game of that importance.”

“It is something you dream of. The build-up, the days before, being on the way to the stadium and seeing the excitement of the fans, your country knowing that everyone is watching. It is probably the biggest game. From an emotional point of view, it is massive.”

As Mario Gotze ran off in celebration of his extra-time winner for Germany, Zabaleta’s hands dropped to his knees, his shoulders hunched over as if the air had been purged from his lungs. Earlier, Gonzalo Higuain, Rodrigo Palacio and Messi had all spurned clear chances to give Argentina the lead.

“Everyone thought that Germany would score seven goals again after beating Brazil, but it was a really good game from us,” Zabaleta says. “We couldn’t take our chances, that was the only thing. We were a really strong team defensively, but we conceded that goal just five minutes before the end of extra-time.”

“It was a shame, because I thought we had three really good chances to

score a goal. It would have been a different story. But this is the World Cup, this is how difficult it is. You have to take your chances.”

Since then, Argentina have lost two Copa America finals, both on penalties to Chile. Three times in three years they reached the climax of an international tournament and three times they fell short.

Zabaleta, now 33, last played for his country in October 2016, at the start of a turbulent qualification journey to Russia. This summer, the West Ham United defender will be at the tournament in a new capacity, as a pundit for the BBC.

It is his first foray into television. It is not necessarily a path he expects to pursue after retirement, but it still feels like a natural progression for a player who has always been seen, especially during his nine years at Manchester City, as one of the Premier League’s more thoughtful imports.

“I have always tried to analyse how we can improve, to talk to the manager and say what I think about the team and the training sessions,” he says.

‘Sometimes we are a bit crazy but we have to be proud, to enjoy Maradona and Messi’

“I always analyse everything. At the moment it is not something I have got in my mind to do after my career, but we will see how it goes. Hopefully I can enjoy it.”

Four years on from playing for the biggest title in football, he will now be studying his old team-mates, deconstructing the passing patterns of his friends and critiquing a defence in which he used to operate. He hopes there will be more to praise than pillory, of course, but yesterday’s 1-1 draw with Iceland was hardly the ideal start to the tournament.

“This group of players have been playing together for the last seven or eight years and they lost three consecutive finals,” he says. “They are top players.”

The greatest of them all is Messi, even if his missed penalty against Iceland cost Argentina two points in their first game. The Barcelona forward turns 31 this month, so this may be his last chance to win a World Cup that would, in many people’s eyes, end the debate about whether he deserves to be considered the best of them all.

“He is unique,” says Zabaleta. “We will not see a player like him again, not for a long time. When he gets the ball,



Revenge Losers to winners

Only twice in 20 occasions has the losing finalist gone on to win the next tournament. The two times after Argentina were runners-up, they were knocked out in the last 16.

♦ **Winners - 2.** West Germany 1990 champions after being 1986 runners-up, Brazil 2002.
♦ **Losing finalists - 2.** Holland '78, W Germany '86.
♦ **Semi-finals** - 2. W Germany '70, Germany '06.
♦ **Quarter-finals** - 3. Czech '38, Brazil '54, Italy '98.
♦ **Last 16 - 2.** Argentina '34 and '94.
♦ **Group stage** - 3. Hungary '50, Sweden '62, Czech '66, Holland '82).

everyone senses that something will happen. The way he drives the ball forward, he's so quick to play one-two and in front of goal he is a finisher.”

It is perhaps less appreciated that Messi, quiet and introverted, doubles up as the leader of this Argentina side. “When you see him, he probably seems like a quiet guy who does not talk too much. But you see he is a winner. He wants to win, he wants to play. He

has that ambition. He can make things happen.”

Argentina fans, we have to enjoy playing in history. To have Maradona and Messi is something that we need to be

pride of. Maradona was like a god. He brought glory to the people and to the country.

“But sometimes football is too much for Argentine people, and we create all of that. Sometimes we are a bit crazy, a bit mad about football. We have to be proud, to enjoy them.”

“For me, Messi is the best player in the world, without a doubt. It will not change if he wins the World Cup [but] I wish, from the deepest of my heart, that he will get the chance to win it. You see the greatest players with a World Cup trophy in their hands, and that picture will be forever.”

“The inference is clear: World Cup memories do not fade away. The glory lasts forever and, as Zabaleta knows all too well, so does the pain.

The BBC is providing 24/7 coverage of the World Cup across television, radio and online.

Does Diego not like that...



A legend's lament: Diego 'Two Watches' Maradona looks on in horror as his heir as Argentina's talisman, Lionel Messi, makes a hash of his spot-kick and lets Iceland off the hook in their Group D clash.

Umтитi proves you can laugh at even the worst mistakes

Life is much easier if you can learn to laugh at yourself, but it also helps if your team-mates have bailed you out first. With three points - eventually - in the bag, France's Samuel Umтитi was free to see the funny side of his inescapable handball against Australia, sharing on his Instagram feed a picture of the incident and a basketball hoop.

Just try that in the knockout stages, mate.



Viral video could fall foul of VAR

A viral video of some Montevideo schoolchildren wildly celebrating Uruguay's 89th-minute winner against Egypt was further proof of the far-reaching magic of the World Cup. But, as you watched them screaming around their playground in a state of sheer unadulterated euphoria, one could not help but wonder just how unenviable the teacher's job would have been if VAR had then disallowed the goal.

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