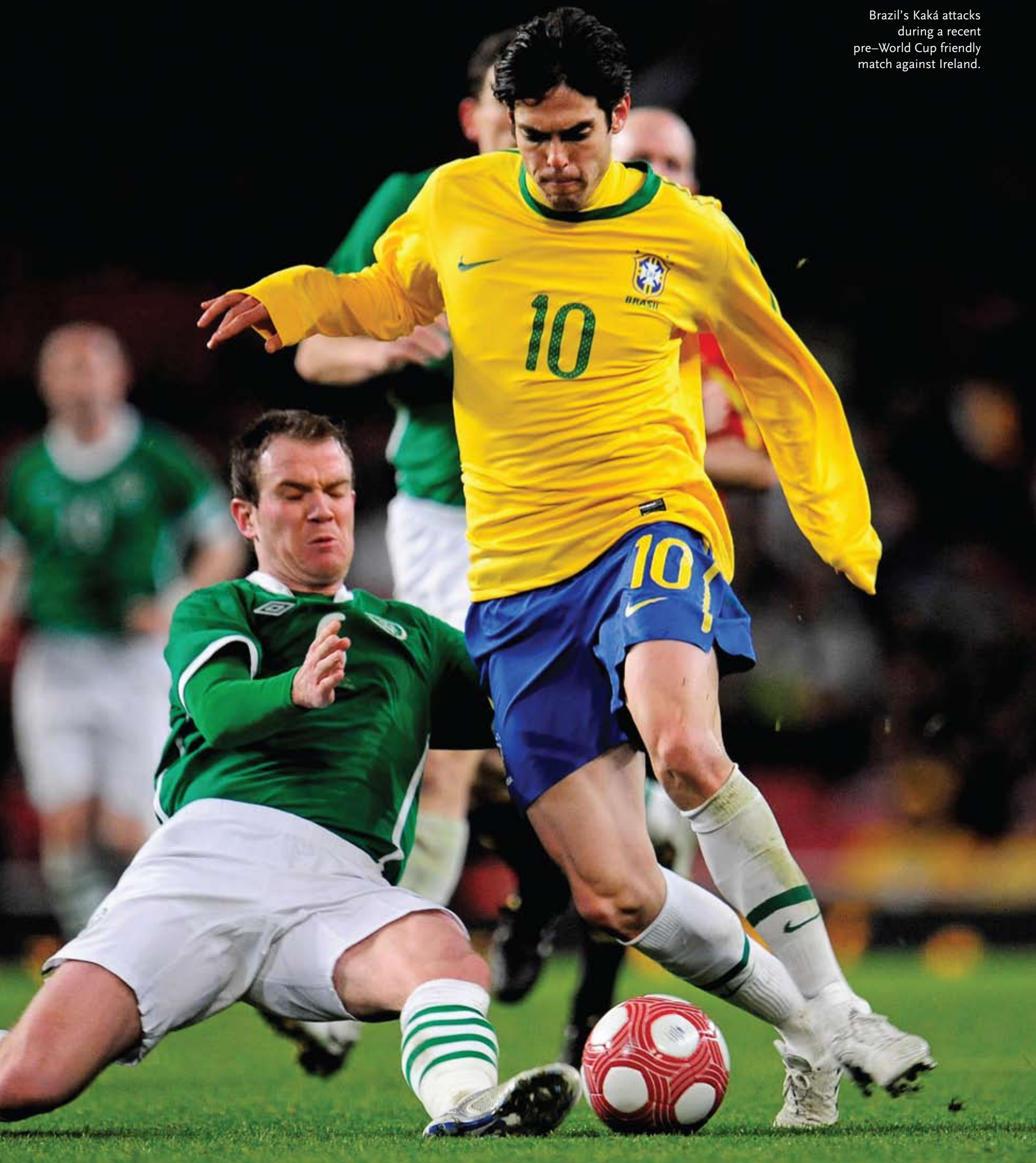


# THE WORLD'S BIGGEST SPORTING EVENT

**After four years and hundreds of games, 32 soccer teams will battle for the championship of the 2010 World Cup in South Africa** **BY NOAH DAVIS**

**O**n July 11, one billion people worldwide will turn to their television sets and sit at rapt attention as two teams fight to be crowned champion of the globe's biggest sporting event, the FIFA World Cup. Will Brazil's Kaká face off against Argentina's diminutive Lionel Messi? Or maybe England's bulldog Wayne Rooney will find himself trying to outscore Spain's talented Fernando Torres. Perhaps the plucky American side, led by Landon Donovan and Clint Dempsey, can shock the world, or another upstart such as Portugal—featuring all-world talent Cristiano Ronaldo—will march to the finals. • The two sides facing each other in Johannesburg's beautiful new

Brazil's Kaká attacks during a recent pre-World Cup friendly match against Ireland.





Soccer City Stadium will take the pitch for the seventh time in five weeks. Over the course of the tournament, the hopes of millions will rise and fall with each touch of the ball, the drama playing out across televisions and computer screens, in living rooms and bars worldwide. On July 11, the global heartbeat won't stop, but it might skip a few beats. For all but two nations, whittled over the course of two years from 204 teams to 32, and ultimately just a pair, there will be a heart-break, a crushing of national pride that in some nations has led to suicides, murders and riots after a loss—and one team will emerge victorious.

It all takes place in South Africa.

Two decades ago, Nelson Mandela walked through the gates of the country's Victor Verster Prison to freedom. Jailed for 27 years, "Madiba," as he would come to be called, was soon elected president and helped unite white and black South Africa. Sport played a role in easing the wounds inflicted by apartheid. The 1995 Rugby World Cup, chronicled in the movie *Invictus*, brought together the two populations as they rallied to support the country's national team. The Springboks won the tournament, allowing South Africa to unify around a shared athletic triumph.

Even Mandela, however, could not have predicted that just 20 years after his release, his country would host the FIFA World Cup. Between June 11 and July 11, hundreds of thousands of international spectators will descend upon the African nation and billions more will watch from distant points around the globe as 32 teams compete for the sporting world's biggest prize. It is a massive undertaking and the first time the African continent has hosted the World Cup. South Africans believe this is their moment to demonstrate how far their country and continent have come. A vision Mandela could have only dreamed about is nearly a reality.

**Top:** Nelson Mandela with the World Cup trophy as South Africa is announced as host. Green Point Stadium in Cape Town. Fans with vuvuzelas. **Bottom:** Johannesburg's Soccer City Stadium, site of the final.

South Africa is prepared. The government spent billions to build or refurbish beautiful stadiums with stunning vistas. Green Point Stadium in Cape Town overlooks the ocean while the exterior of Johannesburg's Soccer City Stadium resembles a calabash (a dried gourd often used as a bottle). Safety is a concern, so the government hired and trained an additional 45,000 security officers. Their presence—in cars, atop motorcycles and on horseback—will be obvious.

Country officials believe that success hosting previous large-scale events such as the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development and last summer's Confederations Cup, which featured eight of the world's best soccer teams, will translate to a readiness for the World Cup. It's a larger task, but one which South Africa can handle adeptly.

The World Cup also represents a chance for the entire continent to demonstrate the progress it's made. "We think that it's an opportunity to showcase not only South Africa as a country, but the continent of Africa in general," Jeanette Ndhlovu, Consul General for the country's Los Angeles office, says. "There are a lot of people who only associate Africa with underdevelopment, with wars, with diseases, and they see very little of the development that has taken place on the continent in recent years. Because some of the people will be staying in neighboring countries, they will see that it's not only South Africa; other countries have made tremendous strides in terms of development."

And then, of course, there's the soccer. The tournament in South Africa is actually the last phase of a global event involving almost 850 matches. Ultimately, 31 teams battled through the grueling qualification process to reach the final stage. (South Africa automatically qualifies as the host nation.) Squads will represent all corners of the world with six

# TOP 10 PLAYERS



**Didier Drogba** (Chelsea, English Premier League) Drogba, Africa's best and most visible talent, will shoulder heavy expectations to help carry a loaded Ivory Coast squad deep into the tournament. Their progress will be a major storyline during the World Cup.

**Steven Gerrard** (Liverpool, English Premier League) The Englishman's midfield partner, Frank Lampard, can stake a claim to appearing on this list, but Liverpool's Gerrard is more consistent and versatile.

**Andrés Iniesta** (Barcelona, La Liga) The Iberian side is just that good. Iniesta provides the creative yin to Xavi's methodical yang.

**Kaká** (Real Madrid, La Liga) Brazil's '10 squad doesn't feature the overwhelming star power of previous sides, but they will still contend in South Africa thanks to the wonderfully skilled player Real Madrid purchased for \$95 million last summer.

**Lionel Messi** (Barcelona, La Liga) The diminutive Argentine striker is the latest in the long line of proclaimed successors to Diego Maradona, yet only Messi's living up to the hype. The 22-year-old wunderkind is a virtuoso with the ball at his feet.

**Franck Ribéry** (Bayern Munich, Bundesliga) Flashy and understated at the same time, the Frenchman lives on the wings, waiting for the perfect time to strike. When he does, watch out.

**Cristiano Ronaldo** (Real Madrid, La Liga) Portugal's driving force would be a star in any sport. Ronaldo possesses a physical prowess matched only by the flair and wizardry he displays when running at a defender.

**Wayne Rooney** (Manchester United, English Premier League) Half man, half pit bull, England's wrecking ball of a forward played the best football of his career leading up to the World Cup. The Three Lions need this run of form to continue in South Africa.

**Fernando Torres** (Liverpool, English Premier League) The midfield makes Spain run, but Torres wields the dagger. He and striker partner David Villa combine to create the world's best duo in front of the net.

**Xavi** (Barcelona, La Liga) As one of the Spain's center midfielders, the 30-year-old is charged with keeping his side organized and moving forward. He succeeds at this task brilliantly.

hailing from Africa, four from Asia, 13 from Europe, one from Oceania, three from North and Central America, and five from South America.

The format combines a round-robin with March Madness. The first stage consists of eight, four-team groups. Each squad plays the other three once. A win earns a side three points, while each is awarded one point for a tie. The top two from each group advance to the knockout stage. From there, it's win and move on, lose and go home. Simple math, really: 32 teams, 64 matches, one winner.

Italy travels to South Africa as the reigning world champions. At the 2006 World Cup in Germany, the *Azzurri* rode a stout defensive line led by captain Fabio Cannavaro and Gianluca Zambrotta that only allowed two goals in seven matches. In the final, manager Marcello Lippi's side defeated France 5-3 on penalty kicks after Les Bleus, midfield talisman and Golden Ball winner Zinedine Zidane was sent off for headbutting Marco Materazzi. Italy hoisted the trophy for the fourth time and will look to repeat in '10, a feat the nation accomplished in 1934 and 1938.

In South Africa, Lippi's aging team—which only reached the quarter-finals of the 2008 European Championship—won't be the favorite. Spain and Brazil, who battled for FIFA's No. 1 ranking throughout 2009 and into the first half of '10, share that honor. The European squad reversed a long history of underachievement with their '08 Euro victory and didn't lose a game between November '06 and June '09, a record-tying string of 35 matches. (The United States ended the run with a 2-0 victory in the semifinal of the Confed Cup.)

*La Furia Roja* (The Red Fury) feature the attacking duo of Fernando "El Niño" Torres and Valencia's David Villa, combined with the playmaking brilliance of Xavi along with Andrés Iniesta.

Brazil is the only team to feature in every World Cup and the sole nation to win the tournament five times. A *Seleção* (The Selection) favor a free-flowing, attacking style that epitomizes the beautiful game. (Soccer historians consider Pele's 1970 World Cup-winning squad to be the best ever.) Midfield engine Kaká and forward Luis Fabiano continue the grand tradition, but the '10 iteration can also rely on its defense. Goalkeeper Júlio César is one of the world's best and the back four allowed only 11 goals in 18 qualification matches. "I love watching guys like [team captain] Lúcio in the back because Brazil gets so much attention attack-wise that some of the defensive work they do goes unnoticed," former U.S. Men's National Team player and current ESPN analyst Alexi Lalas says.

Spain and Brazil play the role of favorites, but half a dozen other teams could win the Cup. The Netherlands, ranked third in the world for most of the last 18 months, breezed through their qualifying process. Liverpool teammates Dirk Kuyt and Ryan Babel must display their attacking prowess for the squad to best their disappointing Round of 16



Landon Donovan, the key to the U.S. men's team success, has become a top world talent.



finish in '06. Portugal battled to defeat Bosnia-Herzegovina in a play-off to qualify for South Africa, without their star, the electric Cristiano Ronaldo, who can dominate entire matches with his unique combination of pace and physicality. (He's also deadly on free kicks from inside 35 yards.) Argentina, coached by country hero Diego Maradona, also struggled to reach the tournament. However, '09 FIFA World Player of the Year, Lionel Messi, can take over games although he's been better for his Barcelona club side than he has when playing for Argentina. England, France, and Germany can also claim a realistic chance of finishing as the world's top team.

An African nation won't win the tournament although one of the continent's six participants could go further than ever before. Cameroon and Senegal—who reached the quarterfinals in 1990 and 2002, respectively—both hold the distinction, but the Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast) and Nigeria teams are strong enough to match or exceed this feat. The teams include talents who ply their trades for some of

Fernando Torres of Spain fires a shot during a group A match against South Africa in the 2009 Confederations Cup.

Europe's biggest clubs such as the Chelsea trio of Didier Drogba (Côte d'Ivoire), Mikel John Obi (Nigeria), and Michael Essien (Ghana). African teams increasingly complement their athletic ability with organizational and tactical awareness. Furthermore, the entire country will support its continent's representatives. "South Africans will be there in large numbers to cheer the other teams when we are not playing," Ndhlovu says.

South Africans will proclaim their enthusiasm not only in number but also in volume. Anyone who watched the Confederations Cup undoubtedly noticed an infernal buzzing in the background of every broadcast. The noise came courtesy of a musical instrument called the vuvuzela. The traditional horn is a fixture at soccer matches in the country and will be ever-present during the World Cup. FIFA discussed the possibility of banning it, but decided against taking action. In the words of organization president Sepp Blatter, they weren't trying to "Europeanize an African World Cup."

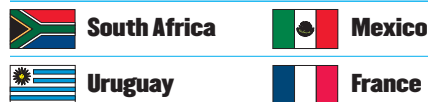
The buzzing may make television viewers reach for their earplugs, but the players don't have that option. "The thing it does the most is make it hard for you to hear on the field, but ultimately it hurts both teams," U.S. defender Jonathan Bornstein says. "It's just one of those things that South Africans have adapted as a way of cheering for those teams and it's not one of those things you can eliminate, so you have to deal with it."

Despite enjoying rabid fan support, South Africa will struggle. The Bafana Bafana, who haven't been ranked higher than 69th in the world since mid-2007, will challenge the 1994 American team for the distinction of being the least-talented host nation in the tournament's 80-year history. Chances are good that the side paired with France, Mexico and Uruguay in Group A will become the first home country that fails to reach the knockout stage.

**T**he host nation isn't the only participant in an unusual position. The U.S. team should advance from Group C. The key to the American's success will be their ability to evolve from their usual position as the underdog. "That's not an easy transition for any soccer team, or any team in general to make," Lalas, a veteran of the '94 and '98 Stars and Stripes squads, says. "The U.S. seems to do very well when they are in the underdog role, which we've used to our advantage for many, many years, but for the first time in this World Cup, they are expected to advance. They are expected to beat certain teams. I don't think they are unrealistic expectations but it's certainly higher than anything else that's happened in the past."

# TOURNAMENT PREVIEW

## GROUP A



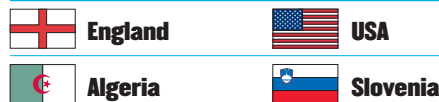
This is one of the most equally matched groups, and any of the four teams could advance to the Round of 16. France, winners of the '98 World Cup, will ride winger Franck Ribéry as *Les Bleus* go through. New manager Javier Aguirre helped Mexico find their form in the late stages of qualifying so expect them to move on as well.

## GROUP B



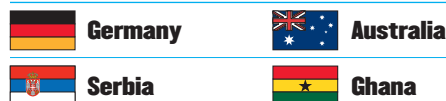
Legend Diego Maradona helms Argentina and although few believe he can be an effective coach, the South American side possesses too much talent to fall in the first round. Second place is up for grabs, but the Super Eagles of Nigeria will slip past Greece's defensive wall and '02 semifinalist, Korea Republic.

## GROUP C



The world expects England and the U.S. to advance with ease. Both will, but the task is more difficult than those unfamiliar with Algeria and Slovenia (read: virtually everyone) anticipate. The latter two squads don't boast the household names of the Americans or the Three Lions, but they battled through tremendously difficult circumstances to qualify and have earned their spot in the final 32.

## GROUP D



Only the strong will survive the so-called "Muscle Group." The foursome features some of the tournament's most physically imposing teams. The brutally efficient Germans should finish first, while the winner of the June 13 Serbia-Ghana match will place second. Take Serbia, but don't bet the house.

## GROUP E



Can the Dutch finally break through and win on the world's biggest stage? The 1974 and 1978 runners up will advance for the seventh straight time. Cameroon will battle Denmark for the final spot with Arsenal's Nicklas Bendtner and Wolfsburg's Thomas Kahlenberg leading their European side into the Round of 16.

## GROUP F



Traditionally, Italy starts poorly but wins their group (and often challenges for the trophy). The Vladimir Weiss father-son (coach-player) combo might have enough to help Slovakia to the promised land, but Paraguay's the pick if star Salvador Cabañas can return after being shot in the head outside a Mexico City bar in January. New Zealand will be happy to score a goal.

## GROUP G



Korea DPR has no chance, but the other three teams could challenge late into the tournament. But first, they have to advance. Brazil is the favorite, while Côte d'Ivoire will make up for a disappointing showing in the African Cup of Nations and ride a friendly crowd to the second round.

## GROUP H



*La Furia Roja* will contend for the title and shouldn't struggle getting out of Group H. The Swiss are always strong defensively, but Chile and dark horse Honduras feature enough attacking prowess to penetrate their backline. Most will pick the South Americans to proceed into the knockout stage, but their neighbor to the north, Honduras, will slip through.

## OUR PREDICTED WINNER



SPAIN WAITED 44 YEARS between winning the European Nations Cup in 1964 and their second major trophy, the '08 European Championship. The country's next success will arrive much sooner. Just two years after hoisting the European crown, *La Furia Roja* will leave South Africa with their first World Cup.

From top to bottom, Vicente del Bosque's squad is loaded. Despite checking in at less than six feet tall, Real Madrid's Iker Casillas can lay claim to being the world's best shot-stopper in net. Of course, opponents struggle even to reach the goalie since Carles Puyol and his defensive mates shut down most attacking forays. The team conceded exactly half a goal a game during their 10 qualifying matches.

The midfield is even more impressive. To whit, Cesc Fàbregas—the playmaking general at Arsenal, one of the best clubs in the world—sits on the bench. Think John Stockton replacing Magic Johnson on the 1992 Dream Team. (Spain's reserves could beat some sides at the World Cup.) Xavi and Andrés Iniesta dominate the middle of the pitch and control the game like a pair of puppet masters, feeding the striking partners David Villa and Fernando Torres. Spain can score in bunches, netting nearly three goals per game in European qualifying matches.

The team also has the advantage of being familiar with South Africa. They participated in the '09 Confederations Cup and although the American's snapped their record 35-match winning streak, they won't be surprised by the unique conditions. Vuvuzelas? Been there, done that. The World Cup will be the second one played during the winter (Argentina 1978) and temperatures will dip into the 30s. In other words: cold. But the Spanish know the drill and their talent will shine through.

Spain isn't a bold pick, but it's the correct one. ❖

Goalkeeper Iker Casillas may hold the key to Spain's World Cup hopes.



The Americans face England in their first game, a rematch of the Stars and Stripes shocking 1-0 victory at the 1950 World Cup held in Uruguay. (English papers were so sure the result was mistake when the score came over the wire that they printed that the Three Lions had won by a score of 10-0.) Tickets for the June 12th match are already selling at more than five times their face value.

The U.S. isn't favored to win, but they've showed they can compete with the world's best sides. "We'll have to play the same style of play we used against Spain, we need to stay compact defensively and hit them on the counter," midfielder Clint Dempsey said after the draw announcing the groups. "Hopefully we can be confident and take the game to them a little bit." Algeria and Slovenia round out the group, a much easier foursome than 2006's "Group of Death," from which the team failed to advance.

The increased expectations stem from two factors: a growing level of talent and the team's success on the international stage. The U.S. formation is filled with players finding time at some of the biggest clubs in the world including goalie Tim Howard (Everton), centerback Oguchi Onyewu (A.C. Milan) and Dempsey (Fulham).

Landon Donovan, the American's all-time leading scorer and arguably the best field player to wear red, white, and blue, demonstrated his talents to the world in a successful stint with English Premier League side Everton. Although defender Carlos Bocanegra wears the captain's armband,



Argentina's Lionel Messi, shown with his Barcelona team, can dominate a game with his goal-scoring and ball-handling skills.

Donovan provides the face of the U.S. squad. The 28-year-old announced his presence on the world stage during the American's quarterfinal run during 2002 World Cup, and he's improved steadily.

"He's grown as a player, just like most good players do," says Brian McBride, the striker whose scoring record Donovan broke. "For him, he's also grown as a person. I think those things have transitioned to him understanding what he wants better. It's made him a better player. That definitely is a great thing for U.S. Soccer in general and I think it's great for a team going to the World Cup."

But the squad has injury problems. Dempsey and Onyewu suffered knee injuries but should return in time for the World Cup. Charlie Davies nearly died in an October car accident and doctors wondered if he would walk again, much less play. The emerging star striker has staged a miraculous recovery from a broken leg, multiple facial fractures and a lacerated bladder, but at press time his participation in June remained undetermined.

Under manager Bob Bradley, who's posted winning records in each of his three seasons in charge, the squad enjoyed their most successful year ever in '09. The Americans finished first in their qualifying group—providing more fuel to the argument that they are the top dog in North and Central America — and reached the final of the Confed Cup, the first time they've played in the championship match of a FIFA tournament. The U.S. led Brazil by two goals before succumbing to the talented Samba Boys 3-2, but gained

**3rd** Best finish by a U.S. team at the World Cup (1930)

**6 wins, 3 ties, 16 losses**  
The U.S.'s all-time record at the World Cup

**1 / 8 / 2** Goals scored by the U.S. during the 1998, 2002 and 2006 tournaments, respectively

**-24** The U.S.'s all-time goal differential

**18th** FIFA rank of the U.S. as of March 2010

**5th** FIFA rank of the U.S. entering the 2006 World Cup (June '06)

**23rd** FIFA rank of the U.S. as of August 2006

## FACTS & FIGURES

**110–120 yards by 70–80 yards**

Dimensions of a soccer field

**6+ miles** Distance run by a midfielder during a 90-minute match

**147** Goals scored during the 2006 World Cup (2.3 per match)

**13** Goals scored by France's Just Fontaine in 1958 event, most by a single player in a single tournament. (Ronaldo holds the record with 15 goals scored in his World Cup career.)

**5** World Cup victories by Brazil, the only five-time winner. (Italy has won four times.)

**6** Countries that have qualified for all of the last six World Cups (Brazil, Germany, Italy, South Korea, Spain, U.S.)

**576** Doping tests conducted before and during the 2010 event

**4 million** Number of youth soccer players registered by U.S. Soccer and other soccer groups

**3,587,088** Attendance at the 1994 World Cup in the U.S., the highest ever

**450,000** Original estimate of international visitors to South Africa during the World Cup (revised down to 350,000 in early 2010)

**91,141** Capacity of Soccer City, the largest stadium in South Africa

**150,000** Capacity of Korea DPR's Rungrado May Day Stadium, the largest soccer facility in the world

**73,072** Hours of television coverage during the 2006 World Cup, a 76.4 percent increase over 2002

**715.1 million** People who watched the Italy–France final of the 2006 World Cup.

**\$50 billion** Amount bet worldwide on soccer every year

**\$2 billion** Amount bet through British bookkeepers during the 2006 tournament



respect with the strong showing and the impressive defeat of Spain. The Stars and Stripes will be overlooked no more.

**T**he growth of soccer in the United States isn't just about the players. It's also about the fans. Thousands traveled to Germany in support of the team during the last World Cup, and FIFA reports that Americans have purchased more tickets to the '10 edition than any country other than South Africa. "It's almost as if we had these sleeper cells and they've been dormant for many years and the word has come down over the past couple years to awaken and rise," Lalas says of the U.S. fanbase. "They are coming out of the woodwork. It's a fun time to be a soccer fan."

Tens of thousands will flock from the States, but millions more will watch on television. In 2002, 70 million different individuals watched at least one minute of coverage and that figure jumped to 98 million four years later. Executives at ESPN and ABC expect 2010's broadcast numbers to significantly outstrip those of '06, as they commit unprecedented resources towards televising the games.

All 64 fixtures will be available on the family of networks, with 30-minute pregame shows and postgame wrap-ups accompanying each match. The network plans to air a two-hour "World Cup Primetime" nightly and show 25 games on a new ESPN 3D channel. Broadcasters and commentators include Alexi Lalas, Martin Tyler (considered to be the best soccer play-by-play man on the planet), former U.S. captain John Harkes, former Netherlands star and Los Angeles Galaxy manager Ruud Gullit, World Cup winner Mario Kempes and others.

The viewing audience will notice a distinctly South African feel to the coverage. "We're trying to be as authentic as we can with our broadcasts of the games and we feel we need full, half-hour pregame shows before every kick to get to all the pomp and circumstance in all of the games and give the American audience the true feel of what being at a game is like," says Bill Graff, senior coordinating producer at ESPN who oversaw the

Wayne Rooney, left, England's biggest star today, is one of the world's strongest strikers; Cristiano Ronaldo of Portugal has dazzled the world with his foot and goal-scoring skills, right.

coverage in 1998, 2002, and will do so in 2010. "Our goal for the broadcasts is to bring both the culture of South Africa and the meaning and the activities behind the games in South Africa back home to the American fans."

Every game will be broadcast in high definition, a massive quality increase. Soccer benefits from HD treatment because viewers can clearly observe the mind-bending skill of the players on the pitch. It's akin to the difference between watching an NHL game in regular and HD. Additionally, thanks to contracts with Major League Soccer, Spain's La Liga, and the English Premier League, ESPN now has a wealth of experience showing soccer to the American audience.

"[ESPN has] a real focused approach to broadcasting the game as it is broadcast around the world as opposed to Americanizing it and dumbing it down for the general sports consumer," says Don Garber, MLS commissioner and cigar connoisseur. "ESPN is going after the soccer fan and there are more than enough soccer fans to get excited about MLS, to get excited about the World Cup, and the production quality and values are going to reflect that."

The 2010 tournament won't be the tipping point for soccer in the States—how many times have sports pundits claimed that "football" was on the verge of breaking into the mainstream?—but it will be bigger than any previous World Cup. In 20 years, Americans will look back and point to the upcoming tournament as a major step in the sport's evolution in this country. The monthlong event will undoubtedly raise soccer's profile on our shores. It will also show visitors and spectators across the globe how far South Africa has come in two decades. The world is watching and the country is ready.

"When you arrive at OR Tambo International Airport in Johannesburg, you will see that South Africa is opening its arms and saying, 'Welcome,'" says Consul General Ndhlovu.

You can almost picture Nelson Mandela standing there, smiling. ❖

Noah Davis covers the United States Men's National Team for Goal.com.