

JUNE ISSUE

FIRST TOUCH

WOMENS WORLD CUP 2019

**THE US MAY BE
THE FAVORITES,**
BUT WHO COULD PREVENT
THEM FROM WINNING
BACK TO BACK

**CAN HOST NATION
FRANCE FOLLOW**
IN THE MEN'S TEAM'S
FOOTSTEPS?

**COULD ANY OF THE
AFRICAN TEAMS SHOCK
THE WORLD?**





Breakout Star - Thembi Kgatlana

CAF 2019 Women's Player of the Year

Not many had a better 2018 than South Africa's Thembi Kgatlana. Still young at 23 years of age, the forward had a breakout year as she won Player of the Tournament at The Women's African Cup of Nations In November last year. Her five goals were enough to lead Banyana Banyana to qualification for their very first Fifa Women's World Cup.

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Stade des Alpes – Grenoble

The capital of the Alps is famously known for hosting winter sports. It nears the Italian border with one of its major offerings being the ancient Bastille Fortress. The opportunities to hike the mountainous Alps or bike through the city are certainly great breakaway opportunities from just the football. Stade des Alpes itself, which is home to FC Grenoble is a state of the art facility opened in 2008, with a capacity of 20, 068 and endowed with a unique transparent roof structure.

Page 8

pg.4

6 WOMEN WE CAN'T WAIT TO SEE
AT THE 2019 FIFA WOMEN'S WORLD
CUP

pg.7

COULD ANY OF THE AFRICAN
TEAMS SHOCK THE WORLD?

pg.9

FT 2019 WOMEN'S WORLD CUP
STADIUM GUIDE

pg.11

THE US MAY BE THE FAVORITES,
BUT WHO COULD PREVENT THEM
FROM REPEATING?

pg.12

WOMEN'S FIFA WORLD CUP:
GROUP A, "THE GROUP OF DEATH"

pg.15

CAN HOST NATION FRANCE FOLLOW
IN THE MEN'S TEAM'S FOOTSTEPS?



Born and raised in Utrecht, Netherlands, Shanice Van De Sanden's professional career started out at her hometown club. She has come a long way since then, now a superhero plying her trade with the Avengers at Olympique Lyon. Capable of turning a match on it's head at any moment, be on the lookout for VDS.

6 WOMEN WE CAN'T WAIT TO SEE AT THE 2019 FIFA WOMEN'S WORLD CUP

Written by: Tinotenda Magiya



Less than a year after the French celebrated lifting the 2018 FIFA World Cup trophy in Russia, we are bracing ourselves for another global tournament. This time, the Women's World Cup is hosted by France and is promising to be another one to remember. A total of 24 teams from 6 federations will participate in FIFA Women's World Cup France 2019. Out of those, Africa is represented by Nigeria, Cameroon and South Africa. Of course, we are going to witness the likes of Asisat Oshoala and Thembi Kgatlang showcasing their talents against the world's best players on the 6th of June. The only downside though would be the absence of the current best player in women's football, Ada Hegerberg. Nonetheless, I am not discouraged as there are 6 other top players that I look forward to watching in action in this upcoming tournament. Here's my list in no particular order.

1. Wendie Renard - Olympique Lyon - France

If you have been following women's football, you would know that there is one team that has been dominating the European scene which is Lyon. Olympique Lyonnais Féminin, as they are officially called, appeared in their 8th UEFA Women's Champions League final since 2010 when they matched up against Barça Women on the 18th of May 2019. The Barcelona Women sought to end Lyon's dominance only to receive a 4-1 thrashing at the hands of their French counterparts. The headlines shouted Ada Hegerberg, an expected blockbuster name, but little attention was paid to the people behind her. Specifically, the Lyon captain Wendie Renard.

Wendie Thérèse Renard is a central defender who was born in Schœlcher, Martinique. Ever heard of it? Me neither. Howbeit, she represents the French national team and also happens to be the skipper. These leadership qualities remind me of French legend Lilian Thuram who played for Barcelona.

Wendie Renard's contribution to her squads' success has been immense. Her never-give-up attitude brings memories of a certain Chelsea legend, John Terry, who was famous for putting his life in the line for his team. Wendie Renard is not scared to dive into a challenge or throw her body to block a ball from going into the back of the net. It is these qualities that have become rare to find in modern football where players are becoming more technically gifted and a little less rough about the defensive work. But not Wendie though. Wendie is a beast.

That 4-1 win against Barcelona, a competent European team proficient in banging goals, shows her resilience as the leader of the backline. Her command built an impenetrable wall at the back and was unlucky to concede a consolation on the 89th minute at the hands of the Nigerian international, Asisat Oshoala. Imagine this passion and desire for the game being shared with a star-studded French team. Could Wendie Renard prove to be the key? That question would have to be answered later after assessing the next player.

2. Asisat Oshoala - FC Barcelona - Nigeria

That's right. We jump ship next to the very person that could only manage to score against Wendie Renard in the UEFA Women's Champions League final between Barcelona Women and Olympique Lyonnais Féminin. Asisat Oshoala has been a global phenomenon. She has represented some of the best clubs in the world starting at Liverpool Ladies, a brief stint at Arsenal Ladies before her current club, Barca Women. However, she also played for Dalian Quanjian FC in between her time at the London club and before the switch to Spain.



Name: Vivianne Miedema
Club: Arsenal Ladies
Nation: Netherlands



Name: Lucy Bronze
Club: Olympique Lyon
Nation: England



Name: Thembi Kgatlana
Club: Beijing BG Phoenix F.C
Nation: South Africa



Name: Marta
Club: Orlando Pride
Nation: Brazil

Her qualities are apparent hence she's always in demand. But who is she? And what is she capable of? Our very own Simiso Shabangu wrote about her individual honors and how she has managed to win the Women's African Player of the Year, BBC's Women's Player of the Year and was also the Most Valuable Player and highest goalscorer at the 2014 FIFA U-20 Women's World Cup in Canada. It seems like it's her thing to scoop such awards at prestigious tournaments. Could we witness her fighting her way to the top again in a couple of days when the FIFA Women's World Cup commences on the 6th of June, 2019?

About her on-field style, Asisat Oshoala is a ruthless forward capable of scoring from anywhere. Her debut goal for FC Barcelona Femení, where she played on the shoulders of the Rayo defense and calmly controlled the ball in top-speed before sliding it under the onrushing goalkeeper, resembles the play of Thierry Henry who was brought in to score goals at the Blaugrana. If Nigeria are to challenge for the title, they will surely need goals from Asisat Oshoala. The 24-year-old will be leading the line with experience. I think she will definitely have a hand in all the juju on the pitch.

3. Vivianne Miedema - Arsenal - Netherlands

It is no easy feat to finish the season as the top goalscorer especially in the FA Women's Super League table where there are clubs like Liverpool Ladies, Arsenal Ladies and Chelsea Women who are always on the lookout for the best players in the world to represent them and challenge for titles. This year, the trophy was lifted by Arsenal ladies many thanks to the top goalscorer Vivianne Miedema who scored 29 league goals in 25 matches. Across all competitions, she scored a total of 37 goals mirroring Robin Van Persie's best season in an Arsenal shirt back in 2011/12 season. And to think, Vivianne Miedema is just 22 years old. There's more to come from the youngster.

Hailing from the land of the Dutch, Vivianne is more than just another soccer player. Her dedication to promoting football among young girls is something worth recognition. Vivianne Miedema is a published author, having written a series of children's books to inspire young girls to play football. She cites her family, many of whom played professionally, as her own inspiration. As such, Vivianne is a role model in her own way and sets a precedent for other women to promote women's football. Despite her young age, Vivianne proves to be a leader.

When the Netherlands Ladies face New Zealand, Cameroon, and Canada in the group stage, they will need goals from the young center-forward. Vivianne has established herself as one of the best strikers in world football. Her track record speaks for itself, having debuted for Heerenveen in the Dutch top flight aged just 15, and going on to score 39 goals that season. That unbelievable season earned her a move to Bayern Munich where she helped them win the Bundesliga without losing a single match. Wherever she goes, success seems to follow her and she will be looking forward to maintaining the record in the world cup.

Personally, there is nothing more fascinating than finding out the stories about footballers and the kind of lives they were living before the beautiful game transformed them. I cannot stop imagining how their lives would have turned out to be if they never left that low-paying job or if they had given up and just decided to never set foot on a pitch again. With Lucy Bronze, I got to know a few things about her background. She worked at Dominos at some point in her life where she enjoyed the benefits of free pizza. However, she previously stated that maths is her true calling in life, admitting that if she wasn't a professional footballer, she would probably be an accountant. But today, she stands as one of the best full-backs in the world. Plying her trade at Olympique Lyonnais Féminin, obviously, she has enjoyed club success.

As mentioned above, their club battered Barcelona Women in the UEFA Champions League final and she was holding the right-back position. She has earned praise from England boss, Phil Neville who said, "Lucy Bronze is the best player in the world. Write that down, print that, because she is." It is expected that such statements are made by your own coach right before a major tournament to boost the confidence of their players. Lucy Bronze will be participating in the upcoming competition for her nation England although she is half-Portuguese. But how does she play?

5. Thembi Kgatlana - Beijing Phoenix FC - South Africa

Another one of the headliners playing at the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup finals in France is Thembi Kgatlana from South Africa. Like Asisat Oshoala, Thembi Kgatlana is an African jewel. No wonder the battle for the CAF Women's Player of the Year 2018 was a close tie between the two. In the end, the South African walked away with it and deservedly so.

Margaret Mandeya describes Thembi Kgatlana as a dynamic and fast forward. I could not agree more. Her goal against Nigeria in the 2018 African Cup of Nations group stage match reminded me of a certain player that played for Barcelona under Frank Rijkaard and Pep Guardiola. Her technique in possession of the ball and the ability to bolt past defenders is a reflection of Samuel Eto'o at his best. Thembi Kgatlana's parents must be proud to see their daughter making headlines after being reluctant at some point to allow their dear child to play a sport that wasn't popular especially down south.

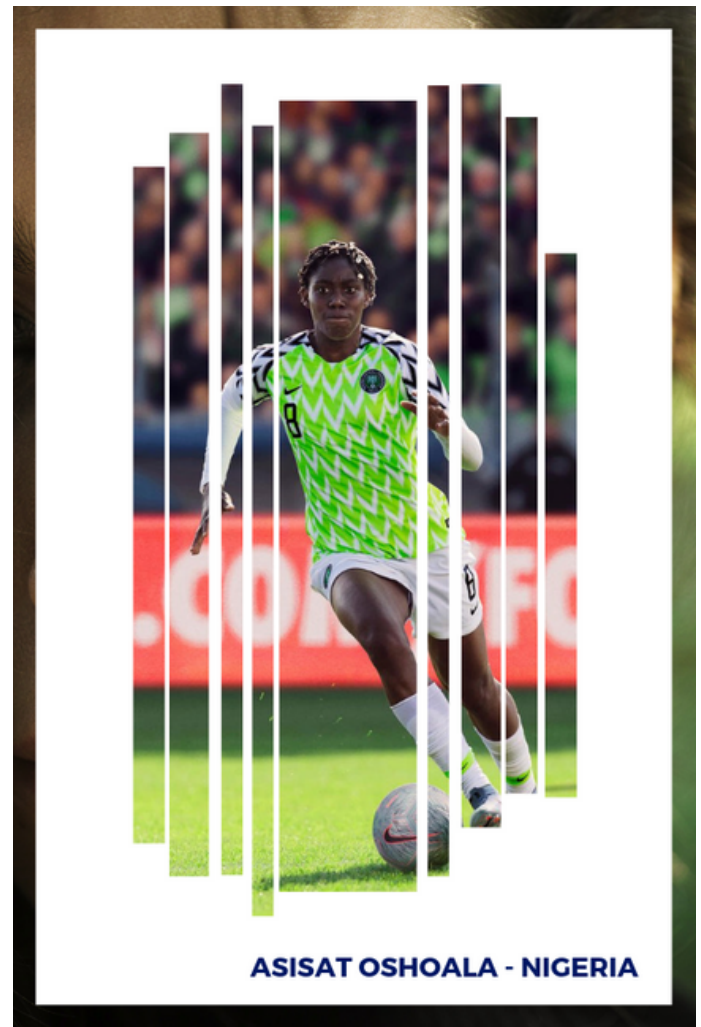
Now, Thembi is a role model for many African women who desire to play football as she has challenged the perception of soccer as a sport reserved for men. Banyana Banyana qualified for the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup finals. This means that all eyes are going to be on Thembi to not only replicate her performances at the previous AFCON tournament but also to eventually win a trophy after they narrowly missed out in the 2018 Total Women's African Cup of Nations.

A tough ask, this is going to be as they face Spain, China, and Germany in their pathway before the knockout round. Surely, the 23-year old will have to bring her A-game and fire Banyana Banyana to the next round. This presents an opportunity for the young forward to test herself against the world's best. If she sustains the pressure at this stage, Thembi Kgatlana will surely have a shoutout at the next Ballon d'Or ceremony. Too ambitious? Watch the tourney and tell me if I am wrong.

6. Marta - Orlando Pride - Brazil

Arguably the greatest female player of all time, Marta Vieira da Silva is 33 years old going into the Women's World Cup. She is a 6-time FIFA Player of the Year winner. The merits have not come by coincidence because Marta is an intelligent forward that resembles the Brazilian samba flair seen in the likes of Neymar who plays for PSG and the likes of Ronaldinho and Pele who played in the past. She tops it off with a killer instinct when through on goal.

I cannot forget an iconic goal she scored at the 2007 FIFA Women's World Cup against the USA. Words cannot fully capture the scenes in the stadium when Marta flicked the ball with her back heel, subtracting one defender in the turn before chopping the last defender with a snakebite trick. The rest, you have to find out for yourself on YouTube.



COULD ANY OF THE AFRICAN TEAMS SHOCK THE WORLD?

Written by: Simiso Shabangu



The Total Africa Women's Cup of Nations (AWCON) comes with great anticipation and the celebration of the continent's women who have thrived in soccer. After we have given the medals and sang the national anthems on the day of the final match. We might all know that one of the objectives of the Total Africa Women's Cup of Nations is not just to determine the champion, but to select the three teams that will represent the continent in the Women's World Cup. In this 2019 edition of the FIFA Women's World Cup; Nigeria, South Africa and Cameroon will be there to show the world what Africa has to offer.

In our previous article, we gave an analysis of how each of these teams have been preparing for this grand challenge. The questions that are still lingering in most of our minds is; with all these preparations that are taking place, could the world just be pleasantly shocked by what Africa can bring to the table? Could this be the year that brings a fresh perspective on how the world views Africa? Before we get into what the teams might eventually come up with, it would be prudent to begin by analysing the starting place of each team which is how they performed at the 2018 AWCON, the current odds and what they might just shock with. Even beyond that, we want to explore the bigger conversation about the necessity and relevance of predicting how teams will perform at a tournament way before the matches begin.

Nigeria

Since 1991, the Super Falcons have never missed any World Cup. They will be appearing in the Women's World Cup for the 8th time. As expected, this has come after the team has won the AWCON Cup, a staggering 11 times out of 12. Even in 2018, the Super Falcons did not disappoint as they still snatched the title from South Africa by a 4-3 scoreline. Even though the fortunate and timely winning only came by a "lottery" penalty shoot-out, it still allowed the celebration to fall on the West African side. Some critics claim that Nigeria's performance in the AWCON was not up to standard with some moments where it could even be doubted that they would win this year. Regardless of that view, others still believed that some Nigerian players still did well during the tournament with Asisat Ashoala scoring the second highest number of goals in the tournament and Tochukwu Oluehi getting the best goalkeeper award. These are the players that will still be in the World Cup squad in France. The different opinions then inform the predictions of how these ladies may perform on the upcoming tournaments.

Despite the multiple World Cup appearances, it looks like the Super Falcons' dominance is only constricted within the African continent. The most devastating results came in China 1991 and 2013 in the United States where none of the team's efforts resulted in a goal. They could not get even a single goal throughout the tournament. The Super Falcons did finish in the top 8 in the 1999 World Cup which still remains their highlight today. With such an unimpressive track record, what are the odds that this year might be the year that the team wipes the tears of all Nigerians who have wept since 1991? That is a difficult question to respond to because it is really hard to pin down the challenges behind the Super Falcons' disappointing performance at an international level. It might be the pressure that comes with knowing what is at stake, the strength of the other teams or just the inevitable losses that come with any sport.

Some analysts attribute these losses to the fact that some of these players are not fit enough and the team has not worked on their playing system. Those arguments were valid before the current coach Thomas Dennerby joined the team and moved a couple of things around.

Recent predictions of who is most likely going to win the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup; USA, France and Germany were at the top of that list. After scrolling down and down the list, the Nigerian team finally appeared as the 20th most likely team to win the World Cup. This is, by the way, the most likely team amongst the three African teams that will be present. The probability score that was assigned to them was 250/1. In short, very few people, if any at all believe that the Super Falcons are likely going to win the World Cup. But that is exactly what will make it a shock, right? If a team with such a low prediction does not only rise to the top but carries the title home, the world could be pleasantly surprised. Asisat Oshoala who is a star player of the Nigerian team and plays for Barcelona was quoted saying, "In football anything is possible. We are a team in progress and we will surely spring surprises during the World Cup."



South Africa

After standing just one goal away from taking the AWCON cup home, Banyana Banyana will be attending the Women's World Cup for the first time. As it can be assumed of a debut appearance, it has been predicted that South Africa is least likely going to win. Actually, out of the 24 teams that will be there, South Africa is considered as the 22nd most likely team, just above Jamaica and Thailand. What we cannot overlook though, is that after the AWCON, South Africa is armed with the Best Player in Africa and top goal scorer of that tournament, Thembi Kgatlana. Beyond that award, and of course, the silver medals, a couple of other South African players also got awards for scoring goals at the tournament. After carrying the team to the finals, we cannot dismiss the possibility of her doing the same at the World Cup this June.

I moved around asking for people's opinions and one respondent said, "South Africa might not have the experience and many key players, but what they have is a united front. Just like Croatia, they might just shock the world." In the 2018 FIFA World Cup, there were other renowned and presumably more deserving teams like Germany and Portugal, but Croatia silenced all skeptics and made it to the finals. History and fate might just collaborate to bring the same for South Africa.

Even though South Africa have not often participated at the international level, they have proactively sought opportunities to get this kind of exposure before the tournament commences. In April, they had a match with Jamaica who will also be at the World Cup. Banyana have played other teams like the Netherlands, Sweden and the United States in an attempt to get experience. They will face Norway on the 2nd of June 2019 to get a final sense of their readiness. But really, to what extent does experience matter? Would South Africa's lack of international experience work against them?

Cameroon

After beating Mali 4-2 in the third-place play-off match last year, the Indomitable Lionesses of Cameroon secured their place in this year Women's World Cup. Just like all the other African teams, the team is also anticipated to perform poorly at the upcoming tournament and has been given a probability score of 500/1 which is the same as South Africa. They appear as the 21st most likely to lift the trophy. Given that the Cameroonians will be appearing for the second time in the tournament, they have had some lessons to incorporate from the 2015 edition where they went as far the round 16.



Unlike Banyana Banyana, this team has not had enough opportunities to explore a lot of international opportunities during the preparation stage for the tournament. They have prepared mainly through domestic means which is a method that has been criticised for its inability to represent the reality of tournaments as big as the World Cup. Even though that might be true, we cannot escape that some countries do not have enough resources to prepare their teams to the desired levels.

Cameroon has, however, participated in the Chinese Four-nation tournament where they came second to China. That is something impressive on its own. It might not be all the necessary exposure, but it did give the team an idea of what to expect. They expect to seal their preparations with a friendly match against Spain later this May. Their forward Njoya Ajara who has been making waves recently, says she is optimistic that they will do better this year. In spite of how optimistic teams can be, they still face a lot of negativity from the outside world. This then raises a question, that if all teams have qualified for a certain tournament, is it necessary to then predict how they will perform? In whose best interest are these predictions?

FT 2019 WOMEN'S WORLD CUP STADIUM GUIDE

Written by: Dennis Takendesa



Overview

As for the month of June starting from the 7th all through to the 7th of July, football is poised to be the biggest tourist attraction in the European nation of France. Not just any football but the 8th edition of the FIFA Women's World Cup. A total of 24 nations from the continents of the globe will get a chance to tour and play across nine of the most scenic and historically rich venues and cities in the French nation. Those not privileged enough to take a trip to France will have all the 52 matches brought to them live, in the comfort of their homes by several service providers depending on where they are. It's perhaps the biggest football spectacle of the year, expected to attract peoples of all colors, creeds, religions and ages, just as the men's tournament did in June 2018 where France emerged as the overall winner.

Furthermore, women's sports and events have been growing exponentially over the years, breaking barriers and claiming their rightful place as equally able entertainers and heroines. The 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup will not be any different. Here is a number for you, the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup was watched by an estimated 764 million viewers. The final match between Japan and the US is said to have been watched by a whooping 23 million viewers in America alone, making it the most watched soccer match in the history of the United States of America.

In many nations, where the men's football teams have consistently failed to perform at the highest level, the women are staking a serious claim at the biggest prizes and putting their countries on the map. It's not only the USWNT but includes the likes of South Africa, Jamaica, Thailand, China PR, New Zealand and Norway, all of whom will participate in this year's finals. In fact, the current best women's player in the world is Ada Hegerberg from the small and less heralded Nordic nation of Norway.

Even though Hegerberg will not be present in France 2019 for personal reasons, there is still so much more to look forward to.

All the finalists and tournament format

Below is the list of all the complete groups of the 24 finalists as drawn in December 2018. The group winners, their runner ups as well as four third placed teams with the most points will make it to the first knock-out stage of 16 teams.

Group A: France, South Korea, Norway, Nigeria
Group B: Germany, China PR, Spain, South Africa
Group C: Australia, Italy, Brazil, Jamaica
Group D: England, Scotland, Argentina, Japan
Group E: Canada, Cameroon, New Zealand, Netherlands
Group F: United States, Thailand, Chile, Sweden

The schedule of all the matches is also detailed below:

Group Stage (matches 1-36): June 7 – 20
Round of 16 (matches 37-44): June 22-25
Quarter-Finals (matches 45-48): June 27-29
Semi-Finals (matches 49-50): July 2-3
Third Place and World Cup Final (matches 51-52): July 6-7

Stadiums and the host cities

The nine French cities hosting the tournament have a unique blend of some of the country's newest and oldest stadiums which us here at FirstTouch have decided to group into three categories. Their unique value offerings are obviously non-exclusive but could fall into feature, scenic and historically rich stadiums. Let's check them out.



1. Featured stadiums

Parc Olympique Lyonnais – Lyon

The main feature stadium of the 2019 tournament is Lyon's home stadium with a capacity that is just over 59 000. It's the biggest amongst the chosen nine, the most expensive stadium in France which costed a total of €400 million upon completion in 2016. Only the two semi-finals and the final will be hosted by the Parc Olympique Lyonnais. Other than the sparkling nature of the stadium itself, Lyon as city is highly acclaimed to be the gastronomic capital of the highly gastronomic France. Foodies will be hugely satisfied in Lyon as well as by the charming neighbourhoods, historic buildings and rich culture that come along with all the gastronomy. The choice to name Parc Olympique Lyonnais as the main feature stadium of the tournament was largely in appreciation of the Lyon's Women football team and the fans who have supported a thriving side that has dominated the whole of Europe in the last 10 years.

Parc des Princes – Paris

Many will know this as PSG's home. The 47, 929 capacity stadium will host a total of seven world cup fixtures; five group stage matches, one round of 16 and one quarter-final. The opening match between France and South Korea will be played there and all else that is found in the French capital needs no introduction. The Eiffel Tower, the romance, history, food and culture will be available to all willing takers. It will most definitely be one of the most in-demand destinations.

2. Scenic stadiums

Stade des Alpes – Grenoble

The capital of the Alps is famously known for hosting winter sports. It nears the Italian border with one of its major offerings being the ancient Bastille Fortress. The opportunities to hike the mountainous Alps or bike through the city are certainly great breakaway opportunities from just the football. Stade des Alpes itself, which is home to FC Grenoble is a state of the art facility opened in 2008, with a capacity of 20, 068 and endowed with a unique transparent roof structure.

Stade Oceane – Le Havre

Well, this one is my favorite. Stade Oceane is widely regarded as the best eco stadium amongst the nine venues. It is a state of the art 25, 278 all-seat arena endowed with a solar panelled roof that powers the entire stadium and all the water is impressively recycled.

In addition, the Stade Oceane which was opened in 2012 also offers a beautifully lit up blue exterior because of the surrounding ocean as well as green spaces during the day plus gorgeous beaches.

Stade de Nice – Nice

French Ligue 1 side, OGC Nice's home stadium is no stranger to hosting big tournaments. It was opened back in 2013, just in time for the Men's UEFA Euro 2016 to host four matches. The Allianz Riviera can boast of being located on the sunny Cote d'Azur, one of France's most popular destinations. The city is known to "have something for everyone," not least the world-class casinos, scenic views of the mountains, beaches and the sea. The stadium itself will be one of the largest at the tournament, with a total capacity of something over 35 000 and it will host six matches.

Stade de Hainaut – Valenciennes

This one nears the Belgian border and is conveniently located placed within a few hours of Brussels, Amsterdam, London, Paris and Luxembourg. Just like Lyon, it has an impeccable reputation for gastronomy and popularly known as the Athens of the North because of its artistic structures and vibe. Valenciennes FC play at the at least 25 000 capacity stadium which will host six of the 52 world cup matches.



3. Historically rich stadiums

Roazhon Park – Rennes

Voted as one of the most livable cities in the whole of France, Rennes is a lively university town with a stadium that was first constructed as early as 1912. Despite being over a 100 years old, refurbishments in 2004 and 2015 has given the close to 30, 000 capacity stadium a modern touch. Hosting a total of seven 2019 FIFA World Cup matches, fans can also expect some glorious architectures, a historic city centre as well as to relax in the city's lovely parks, most especially the celebrated Parc du Thabor.

Stade Auguste-Delaune – Reims

This one has been around enough to host even the 1938 World Cup. Reims is a relatively small city with plenty of Cathedrals and a few more historical buildings to explore. More famously, champagne originated nearby and the beverage is still a major cash cow to the city's economy. A bubbly beverage atmosphere, envelopes the city which is home to the legendary Robert Pires, a member of Arsenal's infamous invincible squad. The grass pitch will play host to a total of six world cup matches.

THE US MAY BE THE FAVORITES, BUT WHO COULD PREVENT THEM FROM REPEATING?



Written by: Margaret Mandeya



France 2019 — the stage is set for FIFA Women's World Cup; 24 teams gear up to lead their nations to world cup glory. The US come into the tournament as the team to beat. USA National Women's Soccer team have become synonymous with world-class football, winning the World Cup a record three times since its inception in 1991. The US are deadly opponents, they play with rigor, determination, and with the intention of dominating the game, which has set them apart as the best team in the world over time. This World Cup is set to deliver high-level performances not only from the US but from the other teams on the roster. The major competition for the US comes from England, France, Germany and Japan who have all recorded standout performances in the leading up to the 2019 FIFA World Cup, putting them among the favorites to win the title and dethrone the US women from their long-held position as the best team in the world.

Home field advantage—France

Host nation France has a legitimate chance to claim the title and replicate what the French men's team did in Russia which was nothing short of magnificent. The stage is set for French women's team to make history and follow the men's team to keep the title in France come June. France's squad is made up of talented and experienced players. Les Bleues will be banking on the expertise of Lyon forward and captain Eugénie Le Sommer who has scored 250 goals for her club and 74 for the French national team, to lead the team to their first World Cup title. France have a moral advantage in that as the host nation, they will have the support of large crowds at their games which will give the team the momentum and confidence that will have an impact of their performance on the field. Home ground advantage is powerful, Russia made the most of it last year; when most wouldn't have predicted such an outstanding performance from the Russians, they put one of the most memorable performances of the tournament, even eliminating the acclaimed Spaniards.

Coming from a major victory—England

England is the birthplace of football, yet both the women's and men's teams have not been successful in translating that legacy into the modern game by claiming the title of world champions.

This could be the year that the title of world champions finds its way to England. They do not possess the same decorated world cup history as the US but the Lionesses made a case for their title chances when they won the SheBelieves tournament in March 2019, beating Japan 3-0 in the cup final. Having been grouped together with Argentina, Japan and Scotland, England has a tough challenge ahead, however, they remain favorites to progress to the knockout stage along with Japan. Still riding on the momentum from the win, the Lionesses come into this World Cup with newfound confidence and verve that if combined with the right tactical strategy from coach Phil Neville, they could have an edge in the group stages and in the knockout rounds.

The tactical advantage — Germany

Germany are eight-time European champions and two-time world cup winners. In the qualifying campaign for France 2019, Germany scored 35 goals and conceded only 3 times. Die Nationalelf are ranked second behind the US coming into the tournament and are the second most obvious contender for the world cup despite not having won the title since 2007. The Germans should progress with ease from the group stages where they face much lower ranked teams - China, Spain and newcomers South Africa.

Germany is a holistic team— they are both defensively tight and masters at creating and converting chances into goals. In 2015 they finished as the top goal-scoring team with 20 goals followed by the US who managed 14 goals. The US and Germany are always the top two teams on the FIFA rankings, alternating for the number 1 spot.

Two-time finalists — Japan

After appearing in two consecutive World Cup finals in 2011 and 2015, winning in 2011, Japan cannot be left out of this list. They are very familiar with the world cup stage and always leave it all on the field even as they demonstrated in the 2011 and 2015 finals. In 2018 they secured a second AFC Women's Asian Cup against Australia. Japan has a solid record in the World Cup which they will be looking to extend by becoming the first team to be in three consecutive finals.

Japan has a young and talented squad led by Lyon defender Saki Kumagai whose performance this past season earned her a nomination for BBC's Player of the Year alongside teammate Ada Hegerberg. In March, Japan beat out Brazil and USA to make to the SheBelieves Cup final, despite missing key players like Sakaguchi Mizuho and Miyake Shiori who had to sit out due to injuries. Japan will face England in the group stages as well as Scotland and Argentina, a tough challenge but may not be a roadblock for Nadeshiko.

The US football team embodies what it means to dominate a sport through and through, they have the trophies to prove it. England, France, Japan and Germany have the World Cup experience and track records that make them all worthy title contenders. Will the US add a fourth world cup title and extend their reign as the most decorated football team in world cup history? — All will be decided in France.

WOMEN'S FIFA WORLD CUP: GROUP A, "THE GROUP OF DEATH"

Written by: Siphosethu Thwala



We're nearing the start of the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup, which gets underway in France on June 7 and features 24 teams vying for the title. Hosts France get the competition under way with their opening group match against South Korea in Paris. The hosts are No. 4 in on world the rankings and will have the home crowd behind them, as they try to duplicate their fellow men's side, Les Bleus' title triumph in Russia last year and live up to high expectations in the pool that pundits, arguably, called as "Group of Death", comprising of the hosts France, Norway, Korea Republic and Nigeria. Below we zoom into Group A of the women's world cup and analyze each team's chances of progressing to the next stage of the tournament.

France

As the hosts of the tournament, Les Bleues will be expected to pick up on the momentum left behind by the men's French team, with the host nation eyeing the highest honor in football by winning the tournament on home turf. The women's team's best finish on the world stage was fourth place in the 2011 edition and they will be looking to up that in next month's event. The French team is one of the most talented teams in the world. The team boasts of a number of players that can rival the much fancied sides and bring the trophy home provided they (France) play their best football. Amongst these players are Wendie Renard and Dephine Cascarino. The former is considered to be one of the best defenders in the game (her rating as the top center back in FIFA 19 says a lot). Wendie is what Virgil Van Dijk is to Liverpool: reliable. She's quick on her feet and unbeatable in the air, which has led to her prolific scoring rate (for a defender) at both the national team and club level.

Having won every trophy on offer with her club Olympique Lyon including the Champions League, the one trophy missing in Renard's trophy cabinet is the World Cup gold, and that should be enough motivation for her to deliver her best showing for the French team. If Renard hits top gear, she could be vital in France's quest to become the first nation to hold both the men's and women's World Cup trophies at the same time. Another key player that is likely to make a big impact for France is upcoming attacking player Dephine Cascarino. The 22-year-old Lyon midfielder has impressed at club level for the past two seasons, bagging seven goals apiece for two successive seasons. While Cascarino is relatively inexperienced at a full national team level, with just 11 caps, she has 12 goals at youth World Cups, and looks to get a good chunk of playing time this summer.

Apart from these enterprising players, the experience of long-serving servant Eugenie Le Sommer cannot go unnoticed. The French forward has scored 74 goals in 159 national team appearances, including 11 World Cup goals. In front of their home crowd, coupled with the right mixture of established stars and promising young players, one could argue that this would be the right time for France to finally win a major tournament.

Norway

Norway has the most World Cup appearances in Group A, having qualified for all eight previous editions of the event. It is also the only team in the group that has won the cup, back in 1995. Perhaps the key talking point of this Norwegian side is the absence of their star player Ada Hegerberg.



Regarded as the world's best female footballer, the 23-year old who is also the current Balon d'Or winner and three-time Champions League winner, quit the national team back in 2017, as protest for what she says is a lack of respect for female players in Norway. She has scored 38 goals in 66 caps for the national team. Norway coach Martin Sjogren said in February that the federation had "tried to solve" things between them and Hegerberg but "she decided not to play". Sjogren further added: "As a coach, you need to focus on the players who want to be a part of the team and Ada doesn't. We respect that and we have been working hard with the other players and they have been doing a great job."

With this in mind, Norway will be pinning their hopes on the current crop of players and in particular their captain Maren Majelde. The 29-year old has featured for the side for more than a decade. She's the soul and mastermind of the team. Capable of playing in central defence, as a defensive midfielder or even as a playmaker, Marelde's sheer vision, dead-ball skills and charisma are key assets for Norway leading up to the World Cup. Apart from Marelde, players like defender Maria Thorisdottir and forward Caroline Graham Hansen are also expected to play a pivotal role in Norway's quest for glory.

South Korea

South Korea qualified for their second straight Women's World Cup after finishing fifth at the 2018 AFC Women's Asian cup. This will be South Korea's third appearance in the world cup. They were eliminated in the group stages in 2003 and only made it as far as the round of 16 in 2015. The Koreans kick off their world cup campaign against hosts France on June 7, knowing very well that a win will boost their chances of coming out of the group stages. On paper at least, the odds are on the women from Seoul to get knocked out in the group stages.

The 14th ranked South Korea is the proverbial dark horse in Group A after a lackluster performance in tournaments leading to the World Cup, most recently the Asian Cup. Nonetheless, South Korea's powerful weapon in France would be its defense, as it did not concede a single goal in all its matches in the 2018 Women's Asian Cup. One game that may provide the team with a lifeline of qualifying to the next stages could be their second game where they face off against Nigeria. The Africans are ranked 38th in the world, 24 places below the Koreans.

Being a tactical team, South Korea's ability to keep the ball and wear down their opposition with a possession-based style of football, could be key to South Korea's any realistic chances of progressing further to the knockout stages.

While the Korean team face an uphill task to qualify to the knockout stages, they can still have a couple of key players they can rely on. These include Chelsea's playmaker Ji So-Yun, who is the biggest star in the team. Credited with 54 goals in 115 appearances, she's easily the most prolific Korean player. The 29-year-old was named the PFA Women's Players' Player of the Year for the 2014-15 season, her debut season in England. Apart from Ji So-Yun, South Korea will also be banking their hopes on talented youngster, Son Hwa-Yeon to help the team.

Overall, the odds are definitely stacked against the Koreans and they are easily deemed as the underdogs of this group. Nonetheless, all that will count for nothing as football has taught in the past that anything is possible and by virtue of that, one can count this South Korean side out at their own peril.



Nigeria

Nigeria booked the ticket to France by winning the CAF Women's Africa Cup of Nations for the ninth time. The Falcons will open their campaign against 1995 winners Norway on 8 June. The nine-time African champions will then play South Korea in Grenoble on 12 June before facing hosts France on 17 June in Rennes. The West Africans hold the record of being the only African nation to have qualified for every Women's World Cup since it began in 1991. However, they have failed to translate their continental dominance on the world stage, with their best showing coming only during the USA world cup in 1999 where Nigeria reached the quarter-finals. Since then, they have failed to go beyond the group stages in the last four editions in 2003, 2007, 2011 and 2015. Coach Thomas Dennerby will therefore be hoping that the team break its duck and advance further in the competition.

As expected in any team, Nigeria boasts of a number of players that will be crucial if the team's hopes of winning the tournament are anything to go by. One of these players is FC Barcelona striker and three-time African footballer of the year, Asisat Oshoala. She exploded to the scene back in 2014, winning both the Adidas Golden Ball and Golden Boot awards as Nigeria reached the finals of the FIFA under-20 Women's World cup. Voted the best African player in 2014, 2016 and 2017, the powerful and aggressive striker is pivotal to the Super Falcons' attacking potent/arsenal.

Apart from Oshoala, the leadership experience of team captain Onome Ebi will prove crucial to Nigeria's push for the coveted trophy. Nigeria's 2018 player of the year, Ebi, was an important figure as Nigeria recorded a title-winning success at the 2018 African Women's Cup of Nations in Ghana. All in all, the Super Falcons' ninth title win in the Women's Africa Cup of Nations is enough proof that Nigeria is a threat to the hosts.

Both Norway and Nigeria are among the select band of teams never to have missed a single FIFA Women's World Cup. The Norwegians have played a total of 35 matches in the competition, and the Nigerians 22. In contrast, France have only 14 matches to their name and Korea Republic a mere 7. Whether the experience (or lack thereof) will be a difference maker remains to be seen. But one thing is for sure, Group A certainly has all the sparks and recipes to be an electrifying group!

The group winners and runners up are guaranteed round of 16 berth, whereas the third placed team will only progress if it happens to be one of the four best third placed teams in the tournament.



CAN HOST NATION FRANCE FOLLOW IN THE MEN'S TEAM'S FOOTSTEPS?

Written by: Dennis Takendesa



The 2018 Blues

It was a night of dances, cheers, laughs, cries and even so much more. Perhaps the culmination of all human emotions, those we love and some not so much. One game, one football and one tournament bred all of them. Why not? It's the biggest football showpiece in the realm of human kind, the FIFA World Cup. All of the high and mighty had descended upon Russia in June of 2018 with the simple aim of taking home the world cup gold. All the different skin colors, languages, creeds or religions of the final 32 nations present to contest for the ultimate prize was reduced to one. Goals. Those to outscore their opponents being the most fluent in the new language.

On that particular night, the climax of all fights, contests and contentions – France reigned supreme and perhaps changed the men's football language to French, at least until Qatar 2022. Barcelona's Samuel Umtiti drew first blood by ruthlessly heading the ball past Croatia's Subasic from a resulting corner that led to a Mandzukic own goal. Of course the highlight therein was his sassy and missy like dance which he was so kind enough to repeat on several other occasions. Then Griezmann converted from the penalty spot after their European counterparts had pulled one back through Inter Milan's Ivan Perisic. He too, turning the pitch into a dancefloor with a fortnite move, not the first by the departing Atletico Madrid forward. Mbappe danced like Mbappe as the French hit song suggested whereas Pogba didn't actually dance when he found the back of the net on the night. After carefully placing a rebounded long range shot in the bulgy net and wrapping up the 4-2 win for Les Bleues, the Manchester United midfielder instead decided to lend an ear to his critics and silenced them with joy as he celebrated the all but certain France's second ever world cup triumph.

That was fun, at least for the Frenchmen who were dancing their way into the history books with an emphatic 4-2 win in the final. Also crushing 32 dreams in the process, most apparent being the Croats who had impressively fought with sweat, blood and tears, against all odds, to reach their first ever FIFA World Cup final. But that's part of the game we all love, when some rejoice, it's almost certain that others will languish in despair of what could have been and wait for the chance to go again.

As good as all the above may sound, it's certainly water under the bridge now. However, a new hunt is on the horizon and blank history books are going to be opened for keen writers to leave their mark. Same FIFA World Cup tournament but this time, it's the women who get to have their say.

The 2019 Hunt

As luck would have it, it's not only the winning spirit of 2018 that could boost Les Bleues towards an unprecedented world cup triumph, they also have the home advantage. All of the 24 finalists for this year's FIFA Women's World Cup will fly to France and play across nine different venues and cities for the single most important silverware in the community of women's footballing nations. From the 7th of June to 7th of July 2019, the fight will be in France. Amongst those present, the three time and record winners in US Women's National Team, Germany, Japan, England and the Netherlands are expected to mount a strong world cup title challenge. And of course, the host nation, whose prospects we shall exhaustively explore in the following paragraphs. If winning is merely a spirit passed by osmosis or any other means, the world cup one is most certainly circling in their home country. Putting aside fantasy, fairy-tale and butterflies in the stomach talk for a minute. Can the French Women's team follow the footsteps of the men and really go all the way? What do the facts say?

Their four winds of a possible success

1. Ici Ce France

As the famous Paris St Germain's mantra goes, Ici Ce Paris (Here is Paris), the French team can certainly boast of the home advantage. To start with, the French Women's national team has lost only once on home soil since January of 2016, a 1-0 defeat at the hands of Germany in February 2019, that was a record of over 24 matches without a loss before the Germans. They have not only been winning against the less heralded and learning to be experienced nations but whoever has dared to breach their fortress.

Most recently, in January of this year as the finalists played friendlies in preparation for the upcoming June tournament, Les Bleues defeated the defending champions, USWNT, 3-1 in Lyon. Some commentators will probably argue that the Stars and the Stripes were short of two or three star players but the reality is that's an integral part of football. And the French just don't joke at home. Having won the past 9/10 matches at home, you certainly cannot put it past them to win seven more. Only seven wins separate them from the world cup gold.



2. An impressively progressive history

Les Bleues have been on the up since the turn of the millennium. Just like any other newly formed team, France had to patiently wait in its grind to become one of the most consistent and dangerous opponents in Europe. They failed to qualify for the first three organized FIFA Women's World Cup beginning in 1991 as well as six UEFA European Championships. Les Bleues have since become a consistent performer and a loathed opponent on the grand stage who have reached two of the three quarter-finals of the UEFA competition since 2000. In that same period, they also qualified for their first FIFA Women's World Cup tournament in 2003, though failing to reach the same finals in 2007, they returned with a bang and recorded their best ever finish in the 2011 tourney.

After defeating England on penalties in the quarter-finals, they came up short against USWNT in the semi-final who dismissed them 3-1 to book a final against eventual winners, Japan. One year later, they proved that their world cup exploits were no fluke as they reached the semi-finals of the 2012 London Summer Olympics again losing 2-1 to one of the big girls, Japan, in the semis. In the most recent world cup 2015 held in Canada, they were deluded of a semi-final berth after agonizingly losing 4-5 on penalties to the 2011 hosts, Germany in the quarters.

This brief journey into the history of women's French football does tell us that they don't choke on the big stage and a team that has been on the up since inception. They are yet to reach a world cup final, and there is no better place to do that or better yet win the tournament other than in their own backyard. Their current 4th placement on the FIFA Women's Global Football teams ranking is no given and they will be eager to prove once more, that they bring the big game!

3. Momentum stemming from the pre-tourney friendlies


More often than not, success on grand stages hinges on momentum, passion and experience. We are guaranteed that France will not be short of any passion given their hunger for more substantial success and silverware while being backed by a home crowd who believe they can, having seen their male counterparts wing it in the 2018 Men's FIFA World Cup in Russia. As for the experience, we will learn more of that a little later on. The winds of momentum are also blowing full strength into their sails. Of the nine friendly matches played since September 2018 in preparation for the world up, France have won eight, losing only once to Germany. In that time, they scored a total of 31 goals and conceded only 4. Surely, you can understand their prospects much better now. They are no minnows, perhaps the favorite of favorites.



Even more, among those defeated, are some of the successful and recent winners of the women's world cup, USWNT and Japan with a 3-1 score-line against both. The heaviest wins were against Cameroon and Uruguay, scoring 6 goals in each match with no reply. Les Bleus are expected to blow away Thailand and China PR on the 25th and 31st of May as they close off a more than thorough and impressive world cup warm-up campaign.

4. The golden generation

It's a thing in football, maybe in every other team sport. Time and time again, talented individuals are combined to form a competitive unit. However, of all the units assembled, there is that one which many onlookers refer to as the "golden generation." That one has not just talented but exceptionally talented individuals. It became apparent at the 2013 UEFA Women's Euro in Sweden where Les Bleus breezed past Spain, England and Russia to gain a first class entry into the quarter-finals. In the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup hosted by Canada, they were considered favorites and defeated England, 1-0 in their opening match. All of USWNT, Japan and England means they have gotten one over most of highly ranked teams in the tournament in recent years.



Even defeating the first two, earlier this year as alluded in the preceding paragraphs. They are known to play an attractive brand of football punctuated by dominating possession and yes, scoring loads of goals. Just as their men who emphatically lifted the world cup gold in 2018, the women too have benefited from France's immigration laws that have overtime allowed them to assemble teams of individuals whose descent may not necessarily be French. The winning men's team is a golden generation with the likes of Golden Boy Winner, Kylian Mbappe and a host of massively talented footballers playing in Europe's best teams. In the same vein, there is also an equal chance that the women's golden generation could be crowned champions in Lyon, come July 2019.

Endowed with the spirit of Lyon

This one, is more than just a factor of four as to why the Women's World Cup gold may be heading to France. It is an entire spirit, a stand-alone pillar for Les Bleus' world cup title bid. Here's a bit of trivia. The best group of players assembled anywhere in any sport at this juncture is inarguably Olympique Lyonnais Feminin. After winning their fourth successive UEFA Champions League title a few weeks ago, a sixth crown in 10 years, if they don't personify dominance, nothing will. Real Madrid won three Champions League titles in a row but sucked domestically, the Golden State Warriors could win their third straight NBA Championships and the New England Patriots won the Super Bowl thrice in five years – but they all don't come close to Lyon's Women football team. Other than their European dominance, they have ridiculously won the French national title, 13 times in a row. They are just way too good and the best there is. Now, guess what the feature city and stadium of the 2019 World Cup is? Stade de Lyon in Lyon. Possibly the mother city of women's football around the globe. Check out the fixtures to be hosted by the stadium outlined in our FT Women's World Cup Stadium Guide. The fans in Lyon definitely know how to get behind a women's football team and will bring that to the table in pushing Les Bleus to victory.

Furthermore, Lyon has supplied a total of seven talented and experienced players who know how to win, to the French side. That means coach Corinne Diacre can have 2/3 of her team be a replica of Lyon's dominate side if she chooses. These seven include goalkeeper Sarah Bouhaddi, defenders Amel Majri, Mbock Bathy Nka and the towering Wendie Renard, the vastly experienced midfielder and captain in Amandine Henry as well as forwards Delphine Cascarino and one of the best players in the world, Eugénie Le Sommer. France is endowed with the winning spirit of Lyon from the goalkeeper right up to the attackers, not forgetting the other exceptional women playing in top leagues around Europe.

Final note

It's definitely game on and lights off for many who will come up against Les Bleus. But whether they will stand tall on the podium after all is said and done especially in the presence of the unrelenting USWNT, Japan, Germany and England – it remains somewhat a mystery.

France will kick-off their world cup campaign with a group game against the 11th ranked South Korea on the 7th of June before squaring off with the Ada Hegerberg-less Norway five days later. They will close off the group stage with Africa Women Cup of Nations champions and record-winners, Nigeria on the 12th of June in Rennes.

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