

FIRST TOUCH

NOVEMBER 17 - DECEMBER 01

2018 AFRICA WOMEN CUP OF NATIONS OVERVIEW

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GHANA



NARRATIVE

Other than the Super Falcons of Nigeria, you can hardly think of any other team with the football swag that the Black Queens have. They have never ranked lower than 53rd on the FIFA Women's rankings and represented the continent at the 1999, 2003 and 2007 world cups in the United States twice and then China respectively. They boast of a remarkable 11 appearances at the Women's Africa Cup of Nations but have never won it. The Black Queens will make a 12th appearance at home later this month. They suffered their heaviest defeat against Germany at the world cup in 2016, a humiliating 11-0 loss. That was two years after the Black Queens recorded their biggest win, a 13 - 0 demolition of West African counterparts, Guinea. They played their first official match in 1991 against Nigeria and have never looked back.

Unlike other teams, the expectation from fans and neutrals for the Black Queens is simple, that is winning the tournament. They have the advantage of being hosts and more experience than most at that level. Will they deliver, after being so near yet so far many times.

COACH: Bashir Hayford

The former coach for domestic football clubs in Ghana, namely Ashanti Gold and Ebusua Dwarfs FC has been entrusted to lead the Queens to glory. He is overseeing three friendly matches with Zambia, South African and Kenya before the kickoff of the tournament on the 17th of November.

STAR PLAYER: Grace Asentwaa

She is only 17 but the midfielder was crowned player of the match in Ghana's game against New Zealand in the final group game at the FIFA U-20 Women's World Cup. If this young lady does grace us at the tournament, keep your eyes on her. It is inspiring and quite powerful to have someone at her age who has developed her passion to the level that Grace has. She is a gem for now and the future of global football. Captain Elizabeth Addo who plays for Seattle Reign FC in the United States of America is also one to watch out for.



PREDICTED GROUP STAGE PERFORMANCE

With or without being hosts, Ghana will see anything but Semi-Final qualification as a failure for their nation. Expect them to be on the forefront of the action from the start of each of their matches, as they embrace their homecourt advantage.

WHY ROOT FOR THEM?

A tournament is fun when the hosts are playing in it, to the final stages.

WHY ROOT AGAINST THEM?

Could be fun backing a team that p**ps the party for the hosts.

COUNTRY PROFILE

Best AFCON finish: First runners-up position in 2004, 2014 and 2016.

Historic Milestones: All time high of 42 on the FIFA rankings in June 2008, currently 47th, the second-best ranked African team after Nigeria.

Qualification Journey : Qualified as hosts.

Style Of Play: Going directly at opponents in a quick attacking style

Persona: The Black Queens are like that bright child in school who always gets second place no matter how hard she tries.



ALGERIA



NARRATIVE

Algeria's story is that of a group of women backed to break new ground by becoming the first Arab and Muslim nation to participate in the Women's FIFA World Cup. Not too far ago, we heard of the inspiring story of Iranian women who traveled to Russia to watch their first football match in a stadium since 1980 at the 2018 FIFA World Cup. As you could have imagined, it didn't take long for many to rally behind the audacious Iranian women eventually leading to a historic encounter where for over 40 years, both men and women watched the Spain vs Iran group B fixture in Tehran's Azadi Stadium.

Now, the Fennecs of Algeria are similarly Muslim and Arabic women who have undoubtedly faced some stigma but were given the opportunity by the Algerian Football Federation to take it a notch higher and actually started playing the game in 1998. Their first match was against France where they lost 14-0 which happens to be their heaviest defeat to date but have since handed the same scoreline to Lebanon in 2006. They have qualified for four Africa Cup of Nations tournaments and will make a fifth appearance in Ghana 2018. The Fennecs have never won the AFCON trophy and will be eyeing at least their first knock-out stage appearance later this month. Even more, inviting is the prospect of reaching the last three and qualifying for the 2019 Women's FIFA World Cup, a priceless gift to the Arab World.

COACH: Azzedine Chih

A loyal soldier that built the foundation of Algeria's women football team for over 19 years. He has the experience and his players believe in him to take them to a new height.

STAR PLAYER: Fatima Sekouane

Algeria's captain, Fatima, was their top goal scorer in the qualifiers with three goals to her name. Being a defender and topping the scoring charts for her team tells you a lot about the kind of woman she is.



PREDICTED GROUP STAGE PERFORMANCE

The Ghana match will be tough, but they are probably one of the teams to beat in group A other than the hosts. They are favorites against Mali and getting a result against Cameroon may almost certainly get them through to the semi-finals.

WHY ROOT FOR THEM?

To stick it in the faces of those who ever thought Arab women cannot play football

WHY ROOT AGAINST THEM?

Perhaps causes that transcend the football pitch really don't cut it for you

COUNTRY PROFILE

Best AFCON finish: Group stage finish. Have won only two matches in the tournament finals

Historic Milestones:

1. 64th ranking on the FIFA Women's Rankings in June 2009 and currently occupy the 80th position, the sixth best ranked African nation.
2. They won the Arab Women's Championship in Egypt 2006
3. First Runners-Up of the UNAF Women's Tournament in Tunisia 2009

Qualification Journey: Algeria narrowly beat Senegal, 3-2 on aggregate in the first round before sweeping away Ethiopia with an aggregate scoreline of 6-3 in the second round.

Style Of Play: Hold the opponent at bay and hit them quickly on the counter.

Persona: I would liken them to a formerly 'despised' hairstyle that has recently become trendy because of what it represents.



MALI



NARRATIVE

The Female Eagles of Mali are one of the most experienced sides heading into the 2018 Women's Africa Cup of Nations hosted by Ghana from the 17th of November to the 1st of December. They have appeared in six AFCON tournaments since their debut in 2002 and Ghana 2019 will be number seven. Their heaviest defeat was at the hands of a familiar predator, Nigeria, an 8-0 humiliation in Abuja 2015. However, they can also pride themselves in having dealt West African counterparts, Guinea, a similar 8-0 thrashing in 2002. The Female Eagles have never appeared at the Women's FIFA World Cup nor the Olympic games and will be eyeing at least 3rd spot in the Ghana 2019 tourney to be guaranteed a 2019 World Cup qualification.

Their main confidence booster will probably be the upset they caused when they eliminated the highly-rated Ivory Coast to secure a spot among the final eight set to battle it out in Ghana.

COACH: Aly Elkebich

Mali will know all about the Female Eagles gaffer. Aly is hardly documented but the feat to reach the 2018 Ghana finals should well enough speak for this coach.

STAR PLAYER: Yacouba Sylla

It just has to be their captain. With a bag of experience, Yacouba will be expected to lead her nation to an unlikely glory. Hawa Tangara and Bassira Toure who play for AS Real De Bamako in Mali will also be expected to help provide the goals as they did in the qualifiers.



PREDICTED GROUP STAGE PERFORMANCE

All the teams in group A namely hosts, Ghana, Cameroon, and Algeria are ranked above Mali on the current FIFA rankings. However no match is out of reach for the Female Eagles, they will have to punch way above their weight.

WHY ROOT FOR THEM?

Probably because not many people will vouch for them.

WHY ROOT AGAINST THEM?

The odds really don't favor the Female Eagles winning the tournament.

COUNTRY PROFILE

Best AFCON finish: A fifth-place finish in both the 2006 AFCON and in Cameroon 2016

Historic Milestones:

1. Tournoi de Cinq Nations (Five Nations Tournament) won in Burkina Faso 2007.
2. A historic 62nd ranking on the FIFA Women's rankings in 2003. They are currently on 89th position, the eighth best ranked African team.

Qualification Journey:

Mali got a free pass against Sierra Leone and beat Ivory Coast on away goals after drawing 2-2

Style Of Play: Mali are a side who like to get as much of the ball as possible.

Persona: They are like that ever-improving student who hardly gets noticed but committed to being better through hard work and perseverance.



CAMEROON



NARRATIVE

The Indomitable Lionesses of Cameroon are coming into the tournament as the 3rd best team in the continent. Undoubtedly, they will be one of the favourites to take glory in 11th edition of the Women Africa Cup of Nations. After narrowly missing out on the title at the last installment, Cameroon will be looking to improve their fortunes to finally lift the trophy as the champions of the continent. The biggest rival to Cameroon will be Nigeria to whom they were runners up in 2014 and 2016. The Indomitable Lionesses made history at the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup when they became the second African nation to advance from the group stages of the tournament. Football fanatics can expect nothing short of a stellar performance from Cameroon's star studded lineup with gems like Gabrielle Onguéné and Gael who are two of the continent's best players.

COACH: Enow Ngachu

Carl Enow Ngachu has been the head of Cameroon's women's side since 2004. He has led the side to historic performances at FIFA 2015 and AFCON 2016. He is credited with growing women's football in the Central African Nation by leaps and bounds. "I want to make an appeal to not only our federation, but to all of Africa, that women's football has arrived." Cameroonians will be expecting him to pull his best campaign yet and coach Cameroon to victory in these games.

STAR PLAYER: Gabrielle Onguéné

The CSKA Moscow striker is one of the most prolific players on Cameroon's talented roster. In 2016 she took home the title of the player of the tournament at the 2016 AFCON finals. She is the driving force of Cameroon's attacking play with speed and precision that make her a goal scoring machine and every defender's worst nightmare. She was also nominated for the CAF player of the year in 2017. Like father like daughter: Gabrielle Onguéné is the daughter of former Cameroonian striker and coach Jean Manga Onguéné who was CAF's top player in 1980.



PREDICTED GROUP STAGE PERFORMANCE

Cameroon were drawn into group A with Algeria, Mali and hosts Ghana. Cameroon will have to fight of the mighty Black Queens of Ghana who are ranked 2nd on the continent behind Nigeria. While Algeria and Mali are ranked 8th and 10th respectively, quite fierce challengers to this Cameroonian side. Still Cameroon will likely sail to semi finals with ease.

WHY ROOT FOR THEM

If you like a good comeback story, Cameroon is entering this tournament with successive upsets in their last two AFCON campaigns.

WHY ROOT AGAINST THEM

Maybe you prefer the Super Eagles, which is fine with us.

COUNTRY PROFILE

Best AFCON finish - Three time runner ups; 2004, 2014 and 2016

Historic Milestones - 2015 FIFA World Cup when they beat Switzerland to become the second African country after Nigeria to reach the knockout stages of tournament.

Qualification Journey - They beat Congo Brazzaville with an aggregate scoreline of 10-0 in the second round after getting a free pass in the first

Style Of Play - Quick pace, direct and physical

Persona - Fearless lionesses on the hunt for big game



NIGERIA



NARRATIVE

The Nigerian national team is nicknamed the Super Falcons and their name can easily be associated with victory. They have won the Total Africa Cup of Nations eight times which is a milestone that no other African team has met. In as much as the tournament is for all Africans teams, it can be termed as one where Africans watch the Super Falcons soar very high.

COACH: Thomas Dennerby

After coaching the Swedish Women's national team from 2005 -2012, Thomas Dennerby was announced as the Super Falcons manager earlier this year. While with the Swedish team, he led them to snatching the bronze cup at the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup which was held in Canada. During his officiation ceremony, the manager was quoted saying that, "I will be placing a serious demand on the players to give their best in training, physical fitness and in every competition. My philosophy is to develop the players and to work with the backroom staff." His commitment was evident as one of his players Rasheedat Ajibade was awarded one of the top goal scorer in the 2018 WAFU Women Cup of Nations which was held in Ivory Coast earlier this year. Dennerby is not here to get quick wins and leave, but he will be with the Super Falcons until 2020 to thrust them to their full potential.

COACH: Asisat Oshoala

In our previous article, we gave you a deep dive of who the Nigerian star player, Asisat Oshoala is. To name a few of what she has been crowned with, she has won the 2017 African Women's Player of the Year award. In 2015, she was also named BBC's Women Footballer of the Year. She was declared the most valuable player at the U20 World Cup in Canada 2014.



PREDICTED GROUP STAGE PERFORMANCE

Given their track record, it's inconceivable to see Nigeria being denied at least a semi-final spot. They will probably beat all the other opponents with ease.

WHY ROOT FOR THEM?

Only if you are Nigerian and enjoy complete dominance of other nations without reply.

WHY ROOT AGAINST THEM?

It really becomes boring when one team wins the tournament all the time. It would be nice seem them lose, just for once

COUNTRY PROFILE

Best AFCON finish: In the 2004 Women's AFCON final which was held in South Africa, the Super Falcons gave Cameroon a 5-0 blow.

Qualification Journey: To start from the top, they slapped Gambia with a 6-0 win to gain entry to this tournament. On average, they got a score of 7-0 for their matches.

Style of Play: Expect total football. Not many teams know how to pass the ball around the pitch like the Super Falcons.

Persona: They are like that star child that makes every other child look unserious. You see that child that every other parent tells their child to aspire to be like, that is what Super Falcons are.



SOUTH AFRICA



NARRATIVE:

Banyana Banyana are coming into this tournament as possible contenders for the title. Coming from a recent COSAFA campaign where they emerged victorious when they beat Cameroon who were guests in the Southern African Tournament 2-1 in the September final. The Southern African powerhouse has a solid AFCON record with three second-place finishes with the last being in 2012. Banyana Banyana will be counting on the experience of team captain Janine van Wyk who recently earned her 150th cap for the national team during the 2018 COSAFA championship. Banyana coach Desiree Ellis will also be counting on the talented Linda Motlhalo and Thembi Kgatlana who play their football in the Houston Dash along with van Wyk. After narrowly missing out on qualifying for the world cup in 2014 when they lost to Ivory Coast in the third place playoffs, Banyana will be hoping to finish in the top three in Ghana to secure a spot at the World Cup in France next year, for the first time.

COACH : Desiree Ellis

Desiree Ellis is a former forward and captain for the South African National Women's team. The 55-year-old manager was announced as the permanent coach of Banyana Banyana in February after holding the position on an interim basis since 2016. Banyana have displayed a solid performance under her leadership that earned them the 2017 CAF African Women's Team of the Year award.

START PLAYER: Thembi Kgatlana

The 22-year-old attacking forward is nicknamed "the Roadrunner" because of her lightning pace. Kgatlana made her move to the National Women's Soccer League in February which was heralded as a step forward for women's football in South Africa. The skillful striker will play a critical role in the Banyana Banyana attacking force as they aim for at least a third-place finish in Ghana.



PREDICTED GROUP STAGE PERFORMANCE

South Africa has been drawn in Group B with Nigeria, Zambia, and Kenya. As the second highest ranked team in the group, the South Africans will most likely make light work of qualifying to the semi-finals. Banyana's first match will be their toughest, as they will go head to head with the Super Falcons of Nigeria.

WHY ROOT FOR THEM?

Things are going well for them... and they need this.

WHY ROOT AGAINST THEM?

Petty but... former South African president Jacob Zuma once insulted poor Malawi for no reason when he belittled their country's roads in comparison to South Africa's.

COUNTRY PROFILE

Best AFCON finish: Three-time runner-ups; 2000, 2008, 2012

Historic Milestones: London 2012 Olympics when the South African National Women's team made its maiden debut at the Olympic games.

Qualification Journey: Beat Lesotho 7-0 on aggregate in the second round after getting a bye pass in the first.

Style Of Play: Organised and tactical

Persona: Perhaps that decent looking expensive handbag frequently won but not the best of a bunch



ZAMBIA



NARRATIVE

The Zambian women's national football team is nicknamed She-polopolo, like their male counterparts, meaning copper bullets. It's mainly because the Southern African nation is richly endowed with copper reserves. Yes, the mineral. This will be She-polopolo's 3rd AFCON appearance since their debut in 1995, not counting the 1991 pseudo appearance from which they eventually withdrew. Zambia's biggest victory was a 8-0 thrashing of neighbors Malawi while their heaviest defeat to date was at the hands of 10-time champions, Nigeria. It was a 6-0 loss in 2014.

They have never won the tournament but will be confident entering the Ghana 2018 tourney as they eliminated the in form Zimbabwe Mighty Warriors who were one of the two teams to represent the continent in the 2016 Summer Olympics.

COACH: Bruce Mwape

Local coach, Mwape was appointed manager for She-polopolo just before the 2018 second round qualifier against Zimbabwe. He has over 20 years in football management famously known for winning the 1998 league title with local Nchanga Rangers as an assistant coach. He also led Nchanga back to top flight football in 2009 after the club faced the chop in 2008 and previously served as the assistant for Zambia's U-23 and U-17 teams.

STAR PLAYER: Barbara Banda

At just 18 years of age, Barbra has become one of the most important players for the national side. She currently plays Escuelas de Fútbol de Logroño in the Spanish top flight women's league, Primera Division. She scored 3 of Zambia's 5 goals in the 2018 Women's Africa Cup of Nations Qualifiers, most famously a solo goal against Tanzania where she dribbled opponents from the center, running down the wing and eventually cutting inside to score the equalizer in Tanzania.



PREDICTED GROUP STAGE PERFORMANCE

She-polopolo will be up against Nigeria, South Africa and Kenya in group B. They will probably secure a victory against Kenya, find Nigeria hard not to lose to, but fight it out with South Africa for a spot in the semi-finals. They will particularly be eager to revenge the 2017 COSAFA Championships final loss to South Africa on penalty shootouts, after they blew a 3-0 lead.

WHY ROOT FOR THEM?

Because Barbara is bae, just too good at the age of 18.

WHY ROOT AGAINST THEM?

Because they beat my beloved Zimbabwe to qualify for the tournament

COUNTRY PROFILE

Best AFCON finish: A 1995 quarter-final appearance.

Historic Milestones: Won the Homeless World Cup in 2008, played in Melbourne Australia, a tournament played by the homeless citizens geared to end homelessness in the world.

Qualification Journey: They overcame Tanzania in the first round by the "away goals" rule after an aggregate 4-4 scoreline, also advancing based on the same rule after drawing 2-2 with Zimbabwe in the final qualifying round.

Style Of Play: She-polopolo like using either wings to swing in crosses for the strikers to finish.

Persona: They are like that wardrobe shoe hardly worn but when it does, can surprisingly cause a frenzy. Some call such teams, darkhorses of a tournament, capable of pulling off the most amazing unexpected results.



KENYA

NARRATIVE

Just like any women's football team, the Harambee Starlets of Kenya survived the harmful patriarchal tendencies to come into existence in the year of 1985. Their competitive record does not in any way do justice to battles they have fought and won off the pitch. They qualified for the Ghana 2018 finals as a result of Equatorial Guinea's disqualification from the tournament for fielding an ineligible player in the qualifier against Kenya.

They are the lowest ranked team in the competition as per the FIFA rankings and their heaviest defeat to date came against the pair of Ethiopia and Cameroon. They were all 5-0 defeats in 2012 and 2006 respectively. The Harambee Starlets' biggest win came as a 11-0 thrashing of Zanzibar, actually quite recent in 2016. After debuting at the Africa Women Cup of Nations in Cameroon 2016, losing all the three group matches to Nigeria, Ghana and Mali - Kenya are not being restrictive in their approach. The president of the Football Kenya Federation, Nick Mwendwa, has made it clear that their main goal heading into the tournament will be securing a historic 2019 FIFA World Cup qualification.

COACH: Ann Aluoch

The former Harambee Starlets skipper, who got appointed as the U-20 coach quite recently in 2017 is tasked with responsibility of setting up the senior team for the biggest of tournaments in their history. She is a renowned tactician who can't be ashirked by the task at hand

STAR PLAYER: Faith Kwamboka

Besides the experience of the most capped player in Kenya's history, captain Wendy Achieng, the Harambee Starlets have the 21-year-old Kwamboka who plays for Park Pirates in the United States of America. Israel based, Esse Akida will be expected to provide the needed goals up front.



PREDICTED GROUP STAGE PERFORMANCE

I don't see them getting results against Nigeria or South Africa. Their best bet is probably Zambia, but who knows history gets re-written over and over again. With their hearts and souls heavily invested in the tournament as they are, the Starlets may shape their own destiny.

WHY ROOT FOR THEM?

They are quite bold to aim for 2019 world cup qualification given they are the lowest ranked team in the tournament.

WHY ROOT AGAINST THEM?

Realistically, they are the least likely team to win the 2018 AWCON. If you're going to watch one game, send some positive juju their way.

COUNTRY PROFILE

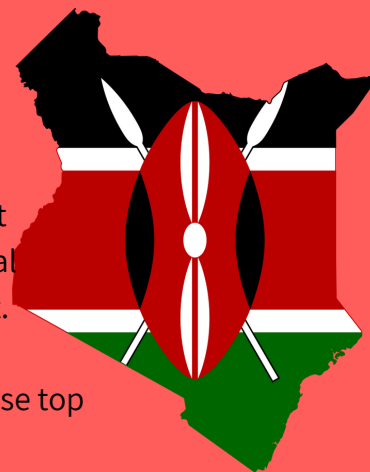
Best AFCON finish: Group stage finish in their first and only appearance in Cameroon 2016.

Historic Milestones: An all time high of 92nd on the FIFA rankings in December 2009. They currently sit on 129th position.

Qualification Journey: They beat neighbors Uganda, 1-0 on aggregate in the first round before losing 3-2 on aggregate to the 2008 and 2012 champions, Equatorial Guinea who got disqualified. Kenya was eventually called up as the replacement.

Style Of Play: Logic says Kenya will have to defend with their lives against all these top and more experienced sides.

Persona: I can liken them to a rat who dares to run and grab a piece of meat from the vultures' catch. Kenya is quite ambitious to dream of a world cup qualification. The kind of ambition that gets you killed or leads you to achieve the unprecedented.



FIRSTTOUCH TOTAL AFRICA WOMEN CUP OF NATIONS 2018.



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