# WORLD BETTING GUIDE



**PLUS** EXCLUSIVE ANALYSIS, TIPS & INSIGHT FROM OUR SQUAD OF EXPERTS

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### INTRO

It feels like yesterday that a late Mario Gotze goal saw Germany lift the 2014 World Cup, yet here we are, four years later, with the 2018 World Cup bearing down on us.

In its anticipation and after months of planning and hours upon hours of research, we're delighted to bring followers of ThePuntersPage.com this 100% free and fully comprehensive 44 page World Cup betting guide. This magazine-esque guide features profiles of all 32 teams competing, plus analysis, insight, stats and opinions that will hopefully help you pocket some profit when betting on this year's tournament in Russia.

So, from everyone at ThePuntersPage HQ, here's to an entertaining tournament, but more importantly, a profitable one!

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### RUSSIA

Tournament hosts Russia will look to use the hostile atmosphere's to their advantage as they aim to progress through Group A. They are second favourites to top the group at 15/8 and are as short as 2/5 to qualify.

Hosting such a major tournament may not bring the benefits you'd first imagine. As a result of their automatic qualification, Russia have played little competitive football. That cannot be underestimated.

One competition they did compete in was the 2017 Confederations Cup. Russia hosted that too, but failed to make any advantage tell as they were eliminated in the group, losing 2 of 3 games.

In fact, Russia have been eliminated in the group stages in each of the last 3 World Cup tournaments and the last 2 European Championship's, so last summer's failure was nothing new.

It can be difficult to read into friendlies because of the nature and tempo in which the matches are played. They've failed to keep a clean sheet in 10 of 12 friendlies since the start of 2017, losing 3-0 in the March international break.

In 2017, Russia were competitive against some decent sides, losing just 1-0 to Argentina and drawing 3-3 with both Spain and Belgium. Those results are less impressive than they may first seem when we look slightly deeper however. The following game, Argentina were beaten 4-2 at home to Nigeria. Similarly, in the lead up to Euro 2016, Spain lost to Georgia and drew with Romania, while Belgium conceded 2 goals against a fairly poor Norway side in the lead up to the same tournament. We can see here that it's probably not wise to be looking at bare form in friendlies.

Almost immediately after Euro 2016, manager Leonid Slutsky was replaced by Stanislav Cherchesov who inherited an ageing squad. In the 3 group games at Euro 2016, the average age of Russia's starting XI's were 30, 28 and 28. The experienced centre-back pairing of Vasily Berezusky and Sergei Ignashevich soon retired, with over 200 caps between them and yet at the 2017 Confederations Cup, the average age of the Russia starting XI was 29 in all 3 games.



Historically, Russia have been quite negative and direct in their approach and that'll likely still be the case should 6"5 striker Artem Dyzuba start. Dyzuba struggled for minutes at Zenit this season and did not make the squad in the recent March international break.

At Euro 2016, both Russian goals were headers and just 20% of their passes were bracketed as 'short' according to official UEFA data, which was the joint lowest in the tournament.

Cherchesov was dealt a massive blow earlier this year when forward Aleksandr Kokorin ruptured his cruciate ligaments. Kokorin, who's been linked to the Premier League in the past, has 10 goals in 22 appearances in the Russian Premier League this season and 9 in 13 in the Europa League.

2 players to look out for are Fyodor Smolov and Mario Fernandes. Smolov has 3 goals in 6 friendlies and boasts a decent record of 11 goals in 28 caps. Furthermore, he netted 14 goals in 22 games in the Russian Premier League and is now 6/4 to be Russia's top scorer. Highly-rated right-back Fernandes may also impress.

Alan Dzagoev will be in the frame too but has failed to kick-on since ending Euro 2012 as the tournament's joint top scorer. He failed to start a game at the 2014 World Cup and missed both the 2016 Euro's and 2017 Confederations Cup through injury.

To Finish Bottom	13/1
To Qualify	2/5
To Finish Top	15/8
To Lift The Trophy	40/1



# URUGUAY

Group A favourites Uruguay came through a tricky South American qualification process finishing 2nd.

It's worth noting that Uruguay only won 2 of their 9 away games, although did hold Brazil to a 2-2 draw in Rio, where they were the only visitors to take points.

Manager Oscar Tabarez has been in charge for over 10-years, following a brief spell as boss between 1988 and 1990. Consistency and trust has been at the heart of his time in charge which is reflected in his team selection over a long period and could stand them in good stead this summer.

Tabarez has built a strong core. Goalkeeper Fernardo Muslera boasts 92 caps and will be protected by Atletico Madrid defensive duo Diego Godin and Jose Gimenez. In midfield Tabarez could put his trust in 20year-old Rodrigo Bentancur and 19-year-old Fede Valverde whom have been gaining experience in Serie A and La Liga respectively.

It is in attack where Uruguay's strength lies however. In Luis Suarez and Edinson Cavani, they have the attacking quality to rival most in the tournament. Between them, the pair accounted for 15 of Uruguay's 32 goals in CONMEBOL qualification, which equates to 47%. Cavani was the top scorer in South American qualification with 10 goals.

Under Tabarez, Uruguay have progressed from the Group phase in all 3 World Cup tournaments he has been in charge, which includes a run to the semi-final in 2010. They also won the 2011 edition of the Copa American, so have decent pedigree in tournament football.

Many will be expecting Uruguay in the last 16 and odds of 10/11 for them to win Group A will no doubt prove popular.



### THE ODDS (VIA BET365)

To Finish Bottom	22/2
To Qualify	1/5
To Finish Top	10/11
To Lift The Trophy	33/1

18+ ] BeGambleAware.org ] Odds accuarte at the time of print

# EGYPT

Egypt will no doubt approach this summer's tournament in great spirit. It's the first time they've qualified for a World Cup since 1990.

Egypt won 4 of their 6 games in qualification, losing just once. They also reached the final of the 2017 African Cup of Nations (AFCON). They are a defensively sound unit, indicated by the fact they conceded just 3 goals and kept 4 clean sheets at AFCON. They've conceded more than the single goal in just 1 of their last 16 competitive games.

Manager Hector Cuper has been in charge since 2015 and is wellversed in management, with over 25 years of experience which includes stints at Valencia and Inter Milan.

At the heart of their defence is West Brom duo Ahmed Hegazi and Ali Gabr who will provide solidity, while Ahmed Elmohamady and Mohamed Elneny will both be well-known to English football fans.

The main-man however is no doubt Mo Salah. The Liverpool star top scored for Egypt at the AFCON finals and scored 5 of their 6 goals in qualification. The 25-year-old is also on penalties and has scored a noteworthy 33 goals in 57 games for his country, which is an impressive return for a nation who have failed to qualify for a World Cup in well over 20 years. Salah has scored 10 of Egypt's last 17 competitive goals which equates to 59% and is 1/2 to be Egypt's top scorer..

45-year-old Goalkeeper Essam El-Hadary will also draw attention and will become the oldest player in World Cup history should he feature.



To Finish Bottom	5/1
To Qualify	5/4
To Finish Top	6/1
To Lift The Trophy	150/1



# SAUDI ARABIA

Saudi Arabia will appear at a World Cup for the first time since 2006. They came through the tricky and complex Asian (AFC) qualification period impressively.

As the 11th ranked side of the 46 AFC nations, Saudi Arabia began their journey in the 2nd round. Juan Antonio Pizzi's side came through a group of the UAE, Palestine, Malaysia and Timor-Leste with a strong record of W6-D2-L0. In the 3rd phase of qualification, Saudi Arabia were drawn with Japan, Australia, UAE, Iraq and Thailand and ultimately finished 2nd behind Japan after pipping Australia of automatic qualification on goal difference.

Across both stages of the process, Saudi Arabia's cumulative home record was W8-D1-L0, compared to a less impressive W4-D2-L3 on their travels. Most significantly, away at the 3 highest ranked nations during qualification, Saudi Arabia lost all 3 games, albeit all by a single goal. Whether they can replicate their strong form away from home comforts remains to be seen.

Manager Pizzi spent time in charge of Chile, following a long-period in management domestically in South America. All of Saudi Arabia's squad ply their trade domestically, barring Yahya Al-Shehiri, Salem Al-Dawsari and Faha Al-Muwallad who all play in La Liga.

In friendlies this season, Saudi Arabia lost 3-0 in Portugal, 1-0 in Bulgaria and most recently 4-0 away to Belgium. In contrast, they've played 5 friendlies at home during that period and lost just once – further evidence that they perform best on home soil.

Sides from the AFC and OFC regions have historically struggled at World Cup tournaments. 16 of 21 sides from these regions have been eliminated in the group phase over the last 4 tournaments. Saudi Arabia have finished 4th in the group stages at the last 3 World Cup competitions they've competed in.



### THE ODDS (VIA BET365)

To Finish Bottom	2/5
To Qualify	7/1
To Finish Top	4/1
To Lift The Trophy	1000/1

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# IRAN

As with most participants drawn from the AFC and OFC regions, Iran have had quite the journey to qualify for Russia – the fact that they did so unbeaten is an impressive feat.

Iran came through the first phase with a record of W6-D2-L0, conceding just 3 goals in 6 games. They also managed to top their group in the second phase too, finishing above South Korea, with a record of W6-D4-L0 and conceded just 2 goals in 10 matches, both of which were in the final game against Syria.

Carlos Queiroz is in charge and is best known for being Sir Alex Ferguson's right-hand man, although many may forget the 65-year-old had been in charge of Real Madrid, South Africa, UAE and Portugal (x2) before joining Iran.

Queiroz will have his team well set up which is evident in their solid form. Here in England, we're familiar with winger Ashkan Dejagah, while Football League fans will be hit with nostalgia when former Charlton striker Reza Ghoochannejhad lines up.

#### **DID YOU KNOW?**

Since 1986 (included), every country that has gone on to win the World Cup topped their group.

### THE ODDS (VIA BET365)

To Finish Bottom	19/20
To Qualify	11/2
To Finish Top	33/1
To Lift The Trophy	500/1





Our Verdict

4TH

# MOROCCO

Morocco qualified for this summer's World Cup in robust style from what could have proved a tricky African qualification group having been drawn with Ivory Coast, Gabon and Mali. Instead they were unbeaten through their 6 games, without conceding a single goal.

At the African Cup of Nation's last year, Morocco lost 1-0 to Egypt in the quarter-finals having won 2 of their 3 group games.

Boss Herve Renard brings solid tournament pedigree having won the African Cup of Nations with Zambia in 2012 followed by victory with Ivory Coast in 2015, becoming the first manager to do so with 2 different countries.

Striker Khalid Boutaib scored 4 of Morocco's 11 goals in qualification, but Ayoub El Kaabi could be the one to look out for. The 24-year-old seems to relish joining up with the national team, scoring an impressive 10 goals in 8 caps.

Followers of European football will be well aware of Medhi Benatia, Nabil Dirar, Achraf Hakimi, Younes Belhanda, Hakim Ziyech and Amine Harit from Europe's top competitions. Closer to home, English fans may be familiar with Romain Saiss of Wolves, Nordin Amrabat of Watford, Sofiane Boufal from Southampton and Karim El Ahmadi from a brief stint at Aston Villa.

Morocco have a decent pool of players, so it wouldn't be much of a surprise to see them cause a problem or two.



To Finish Bottom	7/4
To Qualify	4/1
To Finish Top	16/1
To Lift The Trophy	500/1



# PORTUGAL

Following their Euro 2016 triumph, Portugal qualified for Russia boasting a record of W9-D0-L1. 7 of those 9 wins were accompanied by a clean sheet, which indicates their style remains similar two years on. Their sole defeat came in the opening game away to Switzerland, which now seems like it was the result of a hangover from their European Championship success.

Fernando Santos' side competed in the Confederations Cup last summer, where they lost on penalties to Chile in the semi-finals. Portugal kept 4 clean sheets in 5 games over the course of the tournament, again evidence of their organised style.

Santos has used the past two years as an opportunity to integrate younger players, however as we're accustomed too, the onus will be on captain, most-capped player and all-time top scorer, Cristiano Ronaldo, to produce at key moments.

Interestingly, Portugal have been eliminated in the group stages at each of the last 2 World Cup tournaments.

#### **DID YOU KNOW?**

Portugal are aiming to be the fourth team to win the European Championships and the World Cup consecutively, like West Germany, France and Spain.

Our Verdict



#### THE ODDS (VIA BET365)

To Finish Bottom	29/2
To Qualify	2/9
To Finish Top	2/1
To Lift The Trophy	25/1

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# SPAIN

After a brief couple of major tournaments away from the silverware, Julen Lopetegui's Spain side will arrive in Russia with high hopes.

The 2010 World Cup winners qualified from Group G with an eyecatching record of W9-D1-L0, with their only dropped points coming away to Italy.

Remarkably, Spain have not lost a competitive football match since June 2016 at the European Championship's. They've scored in every match since, a run of 18 matches and have found the net at least twice in 15 of those.

It's not just going forward where they've performed with efficiency either. Spain's 3 goals conceded in qualification was the joint fewest amongst the 48 sides in European qualification.

Spain cannot be underestimated. Their squad is blessed with serial winners. Over recent months, Lopetegui has hinted that he knows 10 of his starting eleven. If they line up as expected, then 6 of these players would have previously won a major international tournament (Andreas Iniesta, Sergio Ramos, David Silva, Sergio Busquets, Gerard Pique and Jordi Alba). The likes of Dani Carvajal and Isco aren't void of success either.

Indeed, Real Madrid star Isco could prove to be the country's star man this summer. While he doesn't boast the experience of his teammates, he has been pivotal to their success under Lopetegui.

The midfielder has scored 7 goals in his last 7 games for Spain. His record in an international shirt is 10 goals in 27 caps which becomes even more impressive when you consider that 9 of those goals have come in his last 11 appearances.

Isco was Real Madrid's best player in the first part of the season and given he's likely to operate high-up the pitch, he might just prove a popular selection in the Player of the Tournament and Top Goalscorer market.



With Spain fancied to go far, there's no reason why he can't notch a few goals along the way. The 26-year-old was Spain's joint top scorer in qualification.

Whilst it may not be a ground-breaking stat, Spain won the group in each of their tournament wins between 2008 and 2012, so if they do get off to a flyer, they may be hard to stop.

#### **DID YOU KNOW?**

Spain and England conceded the joint fewest goals during the UEFA Qualifiers (3 goals in 10 matches).

To Finish Bottom	45/1
To Qualify	1/6
To Finish Top	1/2
To Lift The Trophy	6/1

# AUSTRALIA

Australia qualified through a play-off against Honduras after finishing 3rd in the final phase of AFC qualification behind Japan and Saudi Arabia. 68% of their points in this phase came at home, a trend that stuck in the play-off when they drew 0-0 away before winning the return leg 3-1 at home.

In the opening phase of qualification, Australia boasted a record of W7-D0-L1.

Bert van Marwijk's side competed at the Confederations Cup last summer and performed fairly well. Despite not progressing out of the group stages, they drew 1-1 with both Cameroon and Chile and lost 3-2 to Germany.

Interestingly, they have not won outside of Australia since September 2016, a run of 11-matches.

The trio of Mile Jedinak (13), Tim Cahill (11) and Tom Rogic (6) accounted for 62.5% of their goals throughout the entire qualification process. 7 of Jedinak's 13 goals came from the spot.

Just two weeks after securing qualification, Andre Postecoglu resigned as manager and was replaced by Bert van Marwijk. It was later announced that van Marwijk will oversee the World Cup campaign, with Graham Arnold taking charge immediately after.

#### **DID YOU KNOW?**

Every World Cup has been won by a European (11) or South American (9) side. In fact, these are the only two continents represented in a World Cup final.

### THE ODDS (VIA BET365)

To Finish Bottom	11/10
To Qualify	7/2
To Finish Top	20/1
To Lift The Trophy	300/1



TROISI

Our Verdict

4TH

# DENMARK

Age Hareide's Denmark side beat the Republic of Ireland in the playoffs after finishing 2nd in their group behind Poland.

Denmark ended the qualification process with a record of W7-D3-L2 scoring 20 goals and conceding just 7 across 10 games. Their 2 defeats came in their opening 3 games.

Notably, they picked up as many points away from home as they did at home (10), a stat which bodes well for the World Cup.

The influence of talisman Christian Eriksen can't be underestimated either. The 26-year-old scored 10 of Denmark's last 21 competitive goals and will no doubt play a major role in any success.

Denmark have competed in 4 of the last 8 World Cup tournaments and have progressed past the group stages in 3 of those 4. With an impressively deep squad, it wouldn't be too far-fetched to see them cause a surprise or two this summer.

#### **DID YOU KNOW?**

Denmark have qualified from the group stage of a World Cup in 3 of their last 4 World Cup campaigns.



To Finish Bottom	5/1
To Qualify	4/6
To Finish Top	9/2
To Lift The Trophy	100/1





# FRANCE

France approach another major tournament with a real chance and Didier Deschamps will be hoping to go one better than their run to the final at Euro 2016.

They boast phenomenal squad depth and on paper they are contenders – but football isn't played on paper.

They won Group A in qualification with a record of W7-D2-L1.

Interestingly, in 10 of the last 11 World Cup tournaments, France have either been eliminated in the group or reached the semi-finals, so they tend to do either really poor or really well.

Deschamps prefers playing with two strikers and historically Olivier Giroud and Antoine Griezman have been the go to duo, so it will be intriguing to see if they revert that way in June.

Of the top-four contenders in the outright betting market, France look the most vulnerable. This is by no means an easy group.

#### DID YOU KNOW?

France have topped their group in only 2 of the last 9 World Cup tournaments they have competed in (1998 and 2014).



To Finish Bottom	50/1
To Qualify	1/20
To Finish Top	2/7
To Lift The Trophy	13/2





# PERU

Arguably one of the more interesting sides at this summer's tournament is Peru, who overcame New Zealand in a play-off to secure their place in Russia.

The South American outfit finished a respectable 5th during the CONMEBOL qualification process and at one point looked like finishing inside the top four.

They've shown they're more than capable in recent times. At the 2016 Copa America, they beat Brazil, before losing to Colombia on penalties in the quarter-finals.

Only Brazil and Uruguay scored more than Peru in qualification. They will be a tricky outfit and have the ability to outperform their odds.

Manager Ricardo Gareca has been dealt a huge blow after the Court of Arbitration for Sport extended captain and all-time top scorer Paolo Guerrero's cocaine drug ban from 6 months to 14 months and so will not be available for selection.

#### **DID YOU KNOW?**

9 of the last 10 World Cup tournaments hosted by countries in Europe have been won by teams from the same continent.

To Finish Bottom	23/10
To Qualify	2/1
To Finish Top	10/1
To Lift The Trophy	200/1





# ARGENTINA

A 3rd place finish in CONMEBOL qualification somewhat flatters this Argentina side. It went down to the final game, where Lionel Messi produced a match-winning hat-trick meaning his side finished with a record of W6-D5-L3.

Indeed, a reliance on Messi was a theme throughout the qualification process. The now 30-year-old scored 7 of Argentina's 19 goals (37%) – only Bolivia scored fewer goals than Argentina in qualification.

The Argentinian pool of attacking talent is undeniable, but it does not necessarily guarantee success. The squad is not overly balanced and they are lacking in defenders.

Manager Jorge Sampaoli has done well previously when in charge of Chile and Sevilla and is no doubt capable of masterminding further success. Argentina have reached at least the quarter-final stages in 6 of 8 World Cup finals but may find life tougher here.

#### **DID YOU KNOW?**

Only Bolivia (18) scored less goals than Argentina (19) during the CONMEBOL qualifying.



To Finish Bottom	33/1
To Qualify	1/7
To Finish Top	8/13
To Lift The Trophy	9/1





# CROATIA

Croatia changed manager at the later end of the qualification process and appointed Zlatko Dalic to take the reigns. It ultimately paid dividends as Dalic oversaw his side beat Greece 4-1 on aggregate in the play-offs.

Croatia have interestingly been drawn with Iceland, whom they finished behind in qualification. 10 of their 12 games during the entire qualification process saw under 2.5 goals and they did not concede more than the single goal in any of those games.

Croatia will be hoping for better performances than have been evident over the last couple of years. With the players at their disposal, they have the minerals to go deep into the competition.

Ivan Rakitic, Luka Modric and Mateo Kovacic make up a solid core, with the likes of Ivan Perisic and Mario Mandzukic more than capable in the final third.

#### **DID YOU KNOW?**

Only 2 of the last 9 World Cup tournaments have been won by the pretournament favourites.

Our Verdict

#### THE ODDS (VIA BET365)

To Finish Bottom	7/1
To Qualify	1/2
To Finish Top	9/4
To Lift The Trophy	33/1

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# ICELAND

Following their Euro 2016 heroics, Iceland appointed Heimir Hallgrimsson to take over from Lars Lagerback, but that did little to stop them building on the impressive togetherness and team ethic.

They are a tight-knit group and boast good experience. The five lineups with the highest average ages in Iceland's history have all been fielded under Hallgrimsson's time in charge.

They continued their solid form in qualification, winning a tricky group that included Croatia, Ukraine, Turkey, Finland and Kosovo and ended with a record of W7-D1-L2.

Heimir Hallgrimsson's side won 4 of their 5 group games 'to nil', with 7 of the 10 group games seeing under 2.5 goals.

Expect them to be competitive in tight, low scoring matches.

#### DID YOU KNOW?

The record for most goals at a World Cup stands at 171 (in 1998 and 2014) while the record with the least goals is 145 (in 2010).

Our Verdict

To Finish Bottom	13/10
To Qualify	11/4
To Finish Top	12/1
To Lift The Trophy	200/1



# NIGERIA

Nigeria were the top scorers in African qualification, finishing ahead of Zambia, Cameroon and Algeria to win their respective group. They boasted a record of W4-D2-L0 during that period, although were awarded a 3-0 loss against Algeria after fielding an ineligible player.

Ola Aina, John Obi Mikel, Wilfred Ndidi, Victor Moses, Alex Iwobi and Kelechi Iheanacho are apart of a contingent we should all be familiar with here in the UK.

Gernot Rohr's team tend to share goals amongst the team. The way they qualified through a potential tricky group to get here could stand them in good stead.

It's difficult to make comparisons between sides from different regions, but if friendlies are your thing, they've won away at Argentina and Poland since November.

#### **DID YOU KNOW?**

Every World Cup has been won by a coach who was the same nationality as his team.

Our Verdict

To Finish Bottom	8/5
To Qualify To Finish Top	9/4 10/1

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### BRAZIL

Amongst the market leaders, Brazil boast strong claims. With a wealth of talent plying their trade at the elite level, they have depth all over the park.

While the fitness of Neymar is a worry, the likes of Willian, Douglas Costa, Gabriel Jesus, Roberto Firmino and Phillipe Coutinho are more than adept at pulling their weight.

In midfield, they possess a fine balance. In slightly deeper roles, Casemiro and Fernandinho are more than capable of doing the 'dirty work', while Paulinho offers a different dimension with his ability to get beyond the striker, which compliments their ball-players who want to come deep.

The full-back area is not an issue either, despite the injury to Dani Alves. Serial winner Marcelo is as good as you'll get while Danilo is capable of filling in on the other side in the absence of Alves.

Manager Tite steadied the ship when he took over in 2016. Since then they've lost just once and have kept an impressive 7 clean sheets in their last 9.

Their only loss in qualification came in the opener against Chile back in late 2015. They boasted a W12-D5-L1 record, topping the Eliminatoria group. Brazil were the group's highest scorers, yielding a +30 goal difference.

Goals were spread across the team during Brazil's qualification phase, with Jesus, Neymar, Paulinho, Coutinho and Willian all netting at least 4 times.

#### **DID YOU KNOW?**

No team has been able to retain the World Cup since Brazil won successive tournaments in 1958 and 1962.



To Finish Bottom	40/1
To Qualify	1/16
To Finish Top	2/7
To Lift The Trophy	4/1







# **COSTA RICA**

Famous for their run to the quarter-finals back in 2014, Costa Rica finished second to Mexico in CONCACAF qualification to secure a fifth World Cup appearance.

Costa Rica ended the qualification process with a record of W7-D5-L2. The Central American outfit scored 22 goals and conceded 10. Only twice did they concede more than 2 goals in a single game.

Recent form is possibly worry for Oscar Ramirez, however, whose side has won just 1 of their last 7 matches.

Costa Rica's 14 goals in qualification came via 8 different scorers which represents the collective nature of their play. Any success will likely come as a result of a valiant, team effort across the park, rather than isolated moments of individual brilliance.

They have experience throughout, with former Fulham-man Bryan Ruiz having been capped 109 times.

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#### **DID YOU KNOW?**

11/1 are the longest pretournament odds of any World Cup winner (Italy in 1982).

# Our Verdict

To Finish Bottom	5/6
To Qualify	17/2
To Finish Top	18/1
To Lift The Trophy	500/1



# SERBIA

Serbia impressively won their qualification group, seeing off the likes of the Republic of Ireland, Wales and Austria. They lost just once in doing so and scored in every match.

4 of their 6 wins came 'to nil'. They are a robust outfit and have the tools to make life tough for opposition.

With Aleksandr Mitrovic in inspired form following his loan move to Fulham, he could prove a handful. Mitrovic found the net 6 times during qualification, with Dusan Tadic doing so on 4 occasions. Nemanja Matic and Luka Milivojevic will sit at the base of midfield in a Serbia side who have a steel about them.

Head Coach Mladen Krstajic took over last October after spending time within the backroom staff. The former Serbian footballer, who was known for his composure and leadership qualities during his time playing, is yet to manage a competitive game.

#### **DID YOU KNOW?**

2018 will be the 21st edition of the FIFA World Cup, 88 years after the initial tournament was held in in Uruguay (1930) and for the first time in Russia.

### THE ODDS (VIA BET365)

To Finish Bottom	7/2
To Qualify To Finish Top	6/5
	8/1
To Lift The Trophy	200/1



Our Verdict

2ND

# SWITZERLAND

Group B of the UEFA qualification stage was arguably the most interesting of the lot.

Along with Portugal, Switzerland dominated their opponents, producing 27 points from their 10 games, a tally only bettered by Germany, Spain and Belgium.

Switzerland were actually group leaders going into the final game against Portugal, which they lost 2-0. Unfortunately for Switzerland, Portugal's superior goal difference secured them the automatic spot, forcing Switzerland into a play-off.

Fortunately for the Swiss, they went on to overcome Northern Ireland 1-0 on aggregate in a tense encounter. This will be Switzerland's fourth consecutive appearance at the World Cup.

They are an awkward outfit, but quality in the final third could be a worry at the elite level. At Euro 2016, they scraped through their group scoring just 2 goals in 3 matches.

Manager Vladimir Petkovic has been in charge since Ottmar Hitzfeld's departure after the 2014 World Cup. Petkovic previously managed Lazio where he won the Coppa Italia.

#### **DID YOU KNOW?**

Switzerland are the only country to avoid conceding in a World Cup campaign – 0 in 4 games in 2006.

### THE ODDS (VIA BET365)

To Finish Bottom	4/1
To Qualify	1/1
To Finish Top	6/1
To Lift The Trophy	100/1

**Our Verdict** 

**3RD** 

# GERMANY

Holders Germany were able to assert their authority in qualification, winning all 10 of their games. Their +39 goal difference was the best of all 54 European sides.

They won last summer's Confederations Cup (beating Chile 1-0 in the final) with virtually a second-string squad and possess outrageous squad depth.

With Miroslav Klose and Mario Gomez no longer available, Germany's front-man will come from Thomas Muller, Sandro Wagner or Tino Werner, whom scored 13 goals between them during qualification.

Manager Joachim Low has been boosted by the news that first-choice goalkeeper Manuel Neuer should be back to full fitness in time for when the competition starts in June after recovering from a footy injury that has sidelined him since September.

Low has been in charge since 2006 and has taken Germany to at least the semi-finals in all 5 major tournaments during that time. The 58year-old, who recently signed a contract extension that will keep him in charge until 2022, has the experience and the know-how to take his team far and another solid showing is expected.

Our Verdict

#### **DID YOU KNOW?**

Under Joachim Low, Germany have reached the semi-finals of all 5 major tournaments they have competed in.

### THE ODDS (VIA BET365)

To Finish Bottom	50/1
To Qualify	1/12
To Finish Top	1/3
To Lift The Trophy	9/2

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# MEXICO

This Mexico side came through CONCACAF qualification losing just 1 of their 16 games and conceding just 8 times in the process.

The North American side have progressed through the group stages in each of the previous 6 occasions they have appeared at the World Cup, quite a remarkable record.

Manager Juan Carlos Osorio has been in charge since 2015 and has overseen Copa America and Confederations Cup campaigns. They scored in all 5 of their matches at last summer's Confederations Cup.

Osorio's team possess a well-balanced, experienced squad who know how to get the job done on the big stage.

Raul Jimenez, Javier Hernandez, Carlos Vela, Oribe Peralta and Hirving Lozano bring good variety in the final third. Captain Anders Guardado has accumulated an incredible 144 caps at the age of 31.

#### **DID YOU KNOW?**

Mexico have been knocked out in the last-16 of the last 6 World Cup tournaments. Our Verdict

To Finish Bottom	9/2
To Qualify	11/10
To Finish Top	5/1
To Lift The Trophy	100/1

# **SOUTH KOREA**

South Korea secured their place in Russia this summer after finishing 2nd behind Iran in AFC qualification. The 2002 semi-finalists weren't overly convincing, having failed to win a single match away from home soil and finished with a record of W6-D3-L3. Nonetheless, they did enough to ensure a ninth consecutive World Cup app<u>earance</u>.

Head Coach Shin Tae-Yong took over in June 2017 from Uli Stielike after 3 years as assistant manager. The 49-year-old's first 2 competitive games both ended goalless. The role should not prove too overwhelming given he took caretaker charge in 2014 and has since managed the South Korean U20 and U23 sides.

Spurs man Son Heung-Min, who scored 12 goals in 2311 minutes of domestic football this season, will spearhead the South Korean frontline. Meanwhile, Swansea midfielder Ki Sung-yueng will captain the side and is set to reach 100 caps in the opener against Sweden.

#### **DID YOU KNOW?**

5 of the last 8 goals scored by South Korea at the World Cup have come from outside the penalty area and 12 of the last 13 have come in the second half.

Our Verdict



To Finish Bottom	9/10
To Qualify	5/2
To Finish Top	16/1
To Lift The Trophy	750/1



# SWEDEN

Sweden must be respected after defying the odds to reach this summer's tournament – their first World Cup appearance since 2006 in fact.

The Scandinavian nation beat Italy 1-0 over two-legs in the play-off, after finishing 2nd in Group A behind France and ahead of Holland. Maybe rather surprisingly, they were the group's highest scorers, with 26 goals in 10 games and so are more than capable of finding the back of the net.

It can be argued that Janne Andersson's side might have benefited from all-time top scorer Zlatan Ibrahimovic's retirement, as there is more of a team feel to the squad. They have successfully rebuilt and after the Swedish FA confirmed the talisman will not be returning to international football, the side can look forward to the future with fresh hope.

Marcus Berg found the net 8 times during qualification, but it's RB Leipzig's man Emil Forsberg who could be key. The pair are 5/2 and 9/2 respectively to finish as the 'Top Team Goalscorer'.

#### **DID YOU KNOW?**

The last 2 reigning champions going into a World Cup were knocked out in the group stages. Our Verdict **3RD** 

### THE ODDS (VIA BET365)

To Finish Bottom	16/5	
To Qualify	5/4	
To Finish Top	13/2	
To Lift The Trophy	150/1	

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MERTENa

# BELGIUM

As has been the case in most recent major tournaments, this talented Belgium side are deemed a threat – at least in the betting market, that is. They have a chance here to overcome their serial-underachievers tag.

Manager Roberto Martinez took over from Marc Wilmots following the side's Euro 2016 exit to Wales and has changed style in order to get the most out of his pool of players. Martinez's preference is a back-three.

Belgium were the joint highest scorers of the 54 sides in European qualification, with 43 goals in 10 games. They went unbeaten throughout that time.

Belgium have scored in 16 consecutive games, finding the net at least twice in 13 of those. Romelu Lukaku scored 11 goals in qualification, while Eden Hazard, Dries Mertens and Thomas Meunier all got on the scoresheet at least 5 times.

The omission of Roma midfielder Raja Nainggolan seems an extremely strange decision, despite being for 'purely tactical' reasons, according to Roberto Martinez. It remains to be seem how big of a miss he will be.

A quarter-final appearance in 2014 was the first-time the Belgian's had moved beyond the round of 16 since 1986.

#### **DID YOU KNOW?**

R LUKAKU

Our Verdict

2ND

Only 3 countries have won all of their games at a World Cup (Uruguay, 4/4 in 1930), Italy (4/4 in 1938) and Brazil (6/6 in 1970 and 7/7 in 2002).

To Finish Bottom	33/1
To Qualify	1/10
To Finish Top	5/6
To Lift The Trophy	11/1

# ENGLAND

England convincingly booked their place in Russia this summer after an unbeaten qualification campaign, conceding just 3 times in 10 games.

The two-year period has seen the next generation of players establish themselves, with the old guard in the form of Wayne Rooney, Gary Cahill and Joe Hart fading. England have not got beyond a World Cup quarter-final since 1990.

Circumstances saw Sam Allardyce's reign become just a short-stint. Under Gareth Southgate, England's best work has come in friendlies against higher-level opposition in the likes of Brazil, Germany, France, Spain, Holland and Italy.

Recent friendlies show the Three Lions may thrive when able to sitdeep, soak up pressure and hit opposition on the counter. The same games indicate Southgate is likely to opt for a back-three.

Harry Kane will lead the attack, despite slight concern over his fitness. The 24-year-old spent just three weeks on the sidelines after suffering ankle ligament damage back in March, despite initial claims that he would be out for six weeks.

Kane is 5/4 to be England's top goalscorer this summer and 4/5 to score 'Over 2.5 Goals'.

#### **DID YOU KNOW?**

11/62 (17%) of games England have played in World Cups have ended 0-0, more than any other team.

To Finish Bottom	25/1
To Qualify	1/8
To Finish Top	6/5
To Lift The Trophy	18/1





con su glos

# PANAMA

Panama's solid showing in CONCACAF qualification has returned them their first ever World Cup appearance. Talismanic skipper Roman Torres headed home late-on against Costa Rice to secure their spot in Russia.

The Central American side ended qualification with a record of W5-D5-L4. They remained unbeaten in their 7 home games (W4-D3-L0) – a stark contrast to their way form (W1-D2-L4). Rather more worryingly however, they managed just 2 goals on the road.

It must be said, Hernan Dario Gomez's side are well-drilled. They conceded just 15 times in 16 qualification matches, scoring on 16 occasions, indicating the nature in which they competitively battle and aim to keep things tight.

Six players within the current squad have been capped over 100 times. Understandably, Panama are the favourites to finish bottom of their group and are the longest-priced side to win the tournament. It'll be interesting to see how they fare.

#### **DID YOU KNOW?**

Other than South Africa in 2010, all hosts have reached the knockout stages.

**Our Verdict** 

**3RD** 

To Finish Bottom	17/25	
To Qualify	9/1	
To Finish Top	40/1	
To Lift The Trophy	1000/1	

# TUNISIA

Nabil Maaloul, who was reappointed as Tunisia Head Coach back in April 2017 after replacing Henryk Kasperczak midway through Central African Qualification, is just the second Tunisian-born coach to lead the team to the World Cup.

They were solid enough in qualification, coming through unbeaten from a group with DR Congo, Guinea and Libya. Nabil Maaloul's side ended their qualifying campaign with a record of W4-D2-L0.

Interestingly, experienced defender Aymen Abdennour was overlooked in the March international break due to lack of game time at Marseille. Yohan Benalouane will likely be the only English-based player in the final Tunisia squad, while dead-ball specialist Wahbi Khazri, formerly of Sunderland, will too be familiar.

The Carthage Eagles will be dreaming of a spot in the last 16, having failed to progress from the group stages of the World Cup on 4 previous occasions and having been drawn with underachievers England and Belgium, who knows what may happen.

#### **DID YOU KNOW?**

Tunisia have failed to progress past the group stages in all 4 of their previous World Cup finals appearances.

# Our Verdict **4TH**

uhisport

To Finish Bottom	7/4
To Qualify	4/1
To Finish Top	14/1
To Lift The Trophy	750/1



# COLOMBIA

Colombia earned their place at this summer's tournament after finishing 4th in Eliminatoria qualification. Former Argentinian boss Jose Pekerman led Colombia to the quarter-finals in 2014, in what was Colombia's first World Cup appearance in 16 years.

All time top-scorer Radamel Falcao's timely resurgence over the last two seasons is a definite plus. Injuries meant he missed chunks of the qualification campaign, although he scored 3 goals in 6 games for his country in 2017 and has enjoyed consecutive fruitful campaigns for Monaco.

James Rodriguez has also shown glimpses of his best at Bayern. Many will remember the 26-year-old as one of the standout players at the 2014 World Cup. His 6 goals helped secure him the Golden Boot and he is 66/1 to repeat that feat this summer. If both Rodriguez and Falcao are producing, then Colombia can be a real threat in Russia.

Meanwhile, talented defensive duo, Davinson Sanchez and Yerry Mina, may lack in experience, although their potential is undoubted.



#### DID YOU KNOW?

At the 2014 World Cup, the 2 teams bookies had as favourites to progress did so in just 3 of 8 groups. Our Verdict

### THE ODDS (VIA BET365)

To Finish Bottom	38/5
To Qualify	4/11
To Finish Top	11/8
To Lift The Trophy	40/1

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# JAPAN

Japan won their qualification group ahead of Saudi Arabia and Australia to book their place in Russia this summer and ended their campaign with a record of W8-D2-L2

Although they are currently a shadow of former Japanese sides, one can question the decision to sack manager Vahid Halilhodzic so close to a major tournament. Under intense media pressure, Halilhodzic lost his job in April 2018 following the 2017 East Asia Cup disappointment. Former technical director of Japanese football, Akira Nishino, will take charge.

Former AC Milan midfielder Keisuke Honda played very advanced at times during qualification, so it will be interesting to see if Nishino uses him in a similar way. Southampton's Maya Yoshida, Borussia Dortmund's Shinji Kagawa and Leicester City's Shinji Okazaki will be familiar to most fans in England.

Japan have won just 2 of their last 13 matches at World Cup finals and that record doesn't look like it will improve at this year's tournament.

#### **DID YOU KNOW?**

Aside from 2002 during which they had home advantage, Japan have won just 2 of their 13 World Cup finals matches.

### THE ODDS (VIA BET365)

To Finish Bottom	8/5
To Qualify	2/1
To Finish Top	15/2
To Lift The Trophy	300/1

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**Our Verdict** 

4TH

LEWAN

# POLAND

Poland's consistency paid dividends as they progressed through an awkward qualification group. Each of Denmark, Montenegro, Romania, Armenia and Kazakhstan are tricky opponents in their own right, so we cannot underestimate the level of performance shown to achieve 25 points from 10 games, which included 8 wins and a draw.

To put thing further into perspective, England only achieved a single point more, with Belgium yielding just three greater, in what were possibly 'easier' groups.

Captain and record goalscorer, Robert Lewandowski, will spearhead the charge while the likes of Arkadiusz Milik, Piotr Zielinski, Kamil Grosicki and Jakub Blaszcykowski have proved their worth in behind.

Poland conceded double the amount of goals than that of any other European qualification group winner, indicating that their strengths lie mainly in the forward third.

Adam Nawałka's side showed promise when reaching the quarterfinals at the 2016 Euro's and the same structure remains in place twoyears on. The 60-year-old has been in charge since 2013. This is a side capable of posing problems in their first World Cup appearance since 2006.

9

#### **DID YOU KNOW?**

Poland have failed to progress from the group stages in 4 of the last 5 major tournaments they have participated in.

Our Verdict

To Finish Bottom	11/2
To Qualify	4/7
To Finish Top	7/4
To Lift The Trophy	50/1

# SENEGAL

Senegal shone in CAF qualification, finishing with a record of W4-D2-L0 and conceding just 3 times.

Former Birmingham and Portsmouth man, Aliou Cisse, is at the helm, after working his way through the ranks as Assistant and then Manager of the Senegalese U23 side.

In Sadio Mane and Keite Balde, Senegal have explosiveness in the final third. The pair are 9/4 and 11/2 respectively to finish as their country's top goalscorer.

Creativeness in midfield could be an element in which Senegal are lacking however. The likes of Idrissa Gueye (Everton), skipper and Cheikhou Kouyate (West Ham), Henri Saviet, Cheik N'Doye (Birmingham City), Aldred N'Diaye (Wolves) and Badou Ndiaye (Stoke) all offer workman like approaches that may not be conducive to breaking down supremely organised backlines.

Napoli's Kalidou Koulibaly will offer calmness at the heart of defence and will no doubt earn plaudits should he perform.

#### **DID YOU KNOW?**

Senegal have lost just once in 27 games in all competitions under Aliou Cissé since he took charge in March 2015.

### THE ODDS (VIA BET365)

macron

To Finish Bottom	11/5
To Qualify	5/4
To Finish Top	9/2
To Lift The Trophy	200/1





# **TO LIFT THE TROPHY**

It won't be any surprise to see that Brazil (4/1) and Germany (9/2) lead the outright market who you'd expect to be there or there about. However, given the fine margins that are often in play in knockout football, they are best left alone given the prices available.

Elsewhere, question marks can be posed at each of France (13/2), Argentina (9/1) and Belgium (11/1) who should therefore also be avoided.

Argentina were heavily reliant on Lionel Messi in qualification and if it wasn't for moments of magic, they wouldn't be involved in this summer's tournament. While there is a plethora of attacking quality at Jorge Sampaoli's disposal, defensively they look vulnerable.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, Roberto Martinez has a deep squad with top-class talent all over the field, but they've failed to produce the goods as a unit on the big stage.

France do of course have claims, but they are priced shorter than Spain (6/1), who possess an experienced squad with a wealth of top-level success between them. From World Cup's, to European Championship's and Champions League titles, Julen Lopetegui's side is full of serial winners. Above all, they are argualy the most talented squad of players and should they progress to the later stages, you'd fancy them against anyone.

At 16/1 and 25/1 respectively, we have England and Portugal, but perhaps it's Uruguay who are worth taking a chance on as one of the outsiders. Top their group and that could stand them in good stead going into the knockout rounds, in terms of both the draw and momentum. Luis Suarez and Edinson Cavani have the ability to win any game and at 33/1 Oscar Tabarez's team should give you a good run for your money.

### THE VERDICT

Spain (each-way)	6/1	



# **TOP GOALSCORER TIP**

In 9 of the last 10 World Cup tournaments, either 5 or 6 goals has been enough to win the golden boot. Including ties, 13 of the 14 top scorers in those last 10 tournaments have played at least 5 games. Although these trends aren't predictive, they are worth keeping in mind when addressing the top scorer market ahead of this summer.

Edison Cavani was the top goalscorer in CONMEBOL qualification with 10 goals. Uruguay tend to operate with two up-top with Luis Suarez playing a slightly deeper role. At 25/1 you can make a case for the PSG man who netted 40 times in 47 matches in all competitions this season.

On the other hand, the likely approach of Group A counterparts Egypt, Russia and Saudi Arabia could be a worry. All 3 outfits will look to keep games tight and that could result in low-scoring affairs.

When looking to get a run for your money in this market, eyeing regular starters from sides who should progress to the latter stages of the tournament is a wise move.

Germany have reached at least the semi-final stages in 5 consecutive competitions since Joachim Low took charge. Thomas Muller started 9 of the country's 10 qualification games, scoring 5 goals in total. Domestically, Muller got on the scoresheet 15 times for Bayern Munich this season, in what was an underwhelming campaign by his standards. Muller is no stranger to the big stage and was the top scorer at the 2010 tournament and finished as the second top goalscorer in 2014.

### THE VERDICT

Perhaps the best value of all can be found in the three-figure price about Paulinho. The Brazilian scored 6 times in 11 appearances during qualification, a single goal behind Brazil's leading scorer Gabriel Jesus.

All 6 of Paulinho's goals came from outside of Brazil whilst 4 of those were to open the scoring, so he was producing at important moments. He netted 9 times in La Liga whilst playing a bit-part role for Barcelona this season.

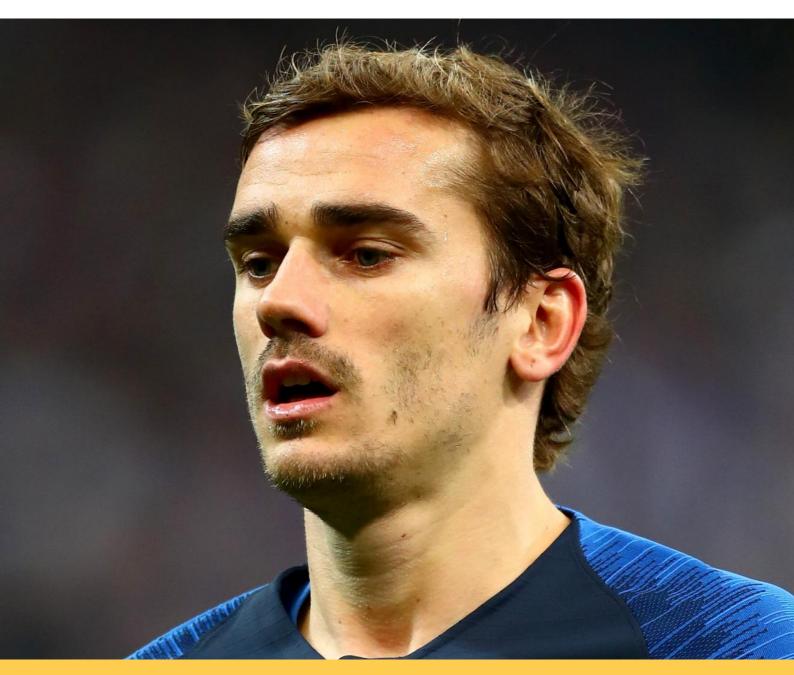
The 29-year-old loves venturing into the six-yard box and has a knack on getting on the end of things. Odds of 100/1 mean we're getting around 25/1 for the place part of our bet which seems generous.

#### Paulinho (each-way)

125/1

Tip: When placing your top goalscorer bets, remember that most bookmakers are paying out 4 places at ¼ of the odds.





### PETE O'ROURKE (@SPORTSPETEO)

The wait is almost over as the World Cup is on the horizon as the domestic football season draws to a close across Europe. All eyes will be on Russia come June 14th as one of the biggest sporting events kicks-off. The best 32 teams from all continents will compete for the honour of being called the best team in the world. There are some big teams who missed out on qualification but there is sure to be no shortage of drama and excitement as the world's best players pits their wits against each other. Let the feast of football begin.

To Lift The Trophy: Spain	7/1
Top Goalscorer: Antoine Griezmann	16/1
Bet Of The Tournament: Top African team at the tournament - Nigeria	5/2

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### **DAVE TINDALL (@DAVETINDALLGOLF)**

While the Euros can throw up surprise winners (Denmark 1992, Greece 2004, even Portugal 2016), the World Cup is a closed shop. Whether it's the extended format, weight of history or officials swayed towards favouring the traditional powerhouses, the 12 finals since England's 1966 home-soil win have been contested by just seven nations. Germany (six appearances) lead the way in that period, ahead of Brazil (four), Italy (four), Argentina (four), Netherlands (3), France (2) and Spain (1). I see absolutely no reason to think it'll change this time and, if both win their groups, I think this time it's the turn of Brazil and Spain to battle it out.

To Lift The Trophy: Brazil	9/2
Top Goalscorer: Edison Cavani	33/1
Bet Of The Tournament: Brazil/Spain final	20/1





### **BEN DINNERY** (@BENDINNERY)

France look the team to beat to me this summer. With a little more luck (or perhaps slighter bigger balls) they could've seen off Ronaldo and the moths in Euro 2016 and will be battle-hardened by the experience. They have ability in abundance all over the pitch and strength in depth that few can match. Plus, a group of knock-overs will allow them to warm up gently before stepping in with the big-hitters. Be prepared for plenty of celebrations from Antoine Griezmann at the sharp end too.

My bet of the tournament is reserved for England though. A Quarterfinal showing will be seen as a partial success after the disaster of 2014 (Group Stage) and the 2010 non-event (Round of 16). And the Germans are likely opponents. Enough said.

To Lift The Trophy: France	6/1
Top Goalscorer: Antoine Griezmann	16/1
Bet Of The Tournament: England to go out at the quarter-final stage	5/2





### **<u>GRAEME BAILEY</u>** (@GRAEMEBAILEY)

I really see European domination in this World Cup. Brazil aside, I don't see the threat, indeed I think Argentina will go out in group stages. I like the look of Spain and Germany, with their tournament pedigree, it is hard not to, but for me it is between France and Belgium - they are my two stand outs. If Griezmann and Pogba turn up then France could very well win, but I am going for Hazard and De Bruyne to deliver for the Golden Generation although they are hampered by having a Roberto Martinez, who is not a world class coach.

To Lift The Trophy: Belgium	
Top Goalscorer: Romelu Lukaku	25/1
Bet Of The Tournament: Argentina to go out in the group stages	



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ThePunt



### JOE CRILLY (@FOOTY\_JOE)

I am staggered by the fact that there are people tipping anyone but Germany to win this summer's World Cup. Joachim Low's side have been there, done it and bagged the t-shirt (and the trophy) and what's more, the 'C' team that they sent to last year's Confederation Cup would have no difficulty in reaching the latter stages of the World Cup so squad depth is not an issue.

Brazil are joint favourites but, in my opinion, lack the mental fortitude to keep it together over the course of a month long tournament and god forbid anything should happen to Neymar (who will also be coming off the back of a lengthy lay-off). I imagine that Brazilian tears will once again be an enduring image of the competition.

France are third favourites to win but when you have the dearth of talent available to you that Deschamps has and still can't get a tune out of your team, there must be something fundamentally wrong with either the manager or the players or maybe even both.

As for England? It's always the hope that gets you.

To Lift The Trophy: Germany	9/2
Tan Caalaaayay Bahart Lawandawaki	77/4

Top Goalscorer: Robert Lewandowski 33/1

Bet Of The Tournament: Egypt to qualify from **11/8** Group A





YOUR SELECTION YOUR NAME		. &
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EGYPT	는 URUGUAY	37
<b>PORTUGAL</b>	SPAIN	
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FRANCE	AUSTRALIA	
PERU	DENMARK	
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GERMANY	MEXICO	A.V.
SWEDEN	SOUTH KOREA	
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COLOMBIA	<b>JAPAN</b>	