

2018 World Cup Finals Draw

The round-robin clashes for the June 14-July 15 global showpiece are set. The Sunday Times looks at the teams who will surprise and the potential breakout stars.

- With in-form forward Mohamed Salah inspiring **Egypt**, they will fancy their chances of progressing from, or even winning, the group.
- Aleksandr Golovin**, 21. The attack-minded Russian and CSKA Moscow midfielder will trouble opponents with his pace and direct running. He is reportedly on Barcelona's radar and a major move could be on the cards with good performances on home soil.
- Egypt goalkeeper **Essam El-Hadary**, 45 next month, could become the oldest player in World Cup history.

GROUP A	
	RUSSIA
	SAUDI ARABIA
	EGYPT
	URUGUAY

- World No. 32 **Iran**, the top-ranked Asian side who have lost just one of their last 29 games, could be the wild card.
- Isco**, 25. The visionary Real Madrid midfielder can go from good to great in his first World Cup.
- Both **Portugal** and **Spain** suffered four-goal defeats by Germany and the Netherlands respectively in their opening 2014 World Cup fixtures and failed to make the knockout stage.

GROUP B	
	PORTUGAL
	SPAIN
	MOROCCO
	IRAN

- It has been more than a year since **Peru** last tasted defeat when they lost 0-2 to Brazil in a World Cup qualifier. Since then, they have won six and drawn four to qualify for the global showpiece for the first time since 1982.
- Kylian Mbappe**, 18. The forward has been learning the ropes from Neymar and Edinson Cavani at Paris Saint-Germain and is ready to be one of France's main men.
- After **Ange Postecoglou's** shock resignation last month, Australia are one of just two World Cup teams, along with Serbia, who are currently without a coach.

GROUP C	
	FRANCE
	AUSTRALIA
	PERU
	DENMARK

- Nigeria** have made it to the knockout stage three times (1994, 1998 and 2014) in five previous World Cup appearances. They have produced delightful forwards like Kelechi Iheanacho and Alex Iwobi and will aim for a deeper run.
- Paulo Dybala**, 24. His ability to score and create has led to comparisons with team-mate and five-time World Player of the Year Lionel Messi. Nicknamed "La Joya" or "The Jewel", he could help Argentina deliver the crown for a third time.
- With a population of 330,000, **Iceland** is the smallest country to qualify for the World Cup.





GROUP D	
	ARGENTINA
	ICELAND
	CROATIA
	NIGERIA

- WHO COULD SURPRISE
- WHO COULD SHINE
- WHO KNEW



GROUP E	
	BRAZIL
	SWITZERLAND
	COSTA RICA
	SERBIA

- World No. 37 **Serbia** were the highest-ranked team in the fourth pot. Few would have wanted them in their section as the Serbs, with Nemanja Matic bossing the midfield, proved their worth by topping their European qualifying group.
- Caseiro**, 25. He has blossomed into one of the world's best defensive midfielders at Real Madrid and could be the steel in the Selecao's samba.
- While **Switzerland** have never won any major honours at senior level, they did win the 2009 Under-17 World Cup.

GROUP F	
	GERMANY
	MEXICO
	SWEDEN
	SOUTH KOREA

- Sweden** have already stunned the football world by eliminating four-time champions Italy in the play-offs and Zlatan Ibrahimovic may make a U-turn from international retirement to boost their attack.
- Leroy Sane**, 21. The Germans had a chart-topping 21 different scorers in qualifying, but the Manchester City midfielder was not among the goals. He has impressed in the English Premier League and could open his international account in Russia.
- Group F** has never delivered a World Cup winner in nine tournaments.

GROUP G	
	BELGIUM
	PANAMA
	TUNISIA
	ENGLAND

- England** have lost only once to Belgium in 21 meetings, a 3-2 reverse in 1932. But, with the Three Lions' penchant for messing up at major tournaments, expect a Belgium win when the two sides meet.
- Jordan Pickford**, 23. The Everton goalkeeper may have just one cap for England but, with Joe Hart in a slump, he could grab the opportunity to make himself a hero.
- Hernan Dario Gomez** is one of two coaches, alongside Henri Michel, to have helped three countries qualify for the World Cup. He achieved the feat with his native Colombia, Ecuador, and now Panama.

GROUP H	
	POLAND
	SENEGAL
	COLOMBIA
	JAPAN

- Senegal**, with a good spine of Kalidou Koulibaly, Cheikhou Kouyate and Sadio Mane, are the dark horses.
- Gaku Shibasaki**, 25. The Japan midfielder has the distinction of scoring against both El Clasico rivals within a year. He notched a brace for Kashima Antlers in the 4-2 Club World Cup final defeat by Real Madrid last December, before netting a stunner for Getafe in a 1-2 loss to Barcelona in September.
- On average, **Robert Lewandowski** scored once every 56 minutes for Poland during the World Cup qualifiers. His 16 goals made him the top scorer in European qualifying.