

TEEA



2022 WORLD CUP

FIND OUT EVERYTHING THERE
IS TO KNOW ABOUT EACH TEAM
AT THE TOURNAMENT

PLUS: 32 PLAYERS TO WATCH DATA-VIZZES



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NOVEMBER 2022



GROUP A PLAYERS TO WATCH

VENKATANARAYANAN VENKATESAN // @VenkyRedDevil

The first-ever winter world cup is almost here. It's time to look at which teams are the strongest and which players are the ones to watch out for specifically. In order to list down the players to look out for, we have specifically looked at the U23 category and players who play quite often for their respective clubs this season. It is to be noted that, these players might not start all the matches for their teams in the World Cup and could potentially miss out on getting called up altogether, but if and when they do represent their country in Qatar, they definitely have the potential to be game changers.

Group A consists of host nation Qatar with Ecuador, Senegal and the Netherlands. The following visualisation shows the U23 players to watch out for from Group A. All data from the current season.

Ahmed Al Ganehi | Al Gharafa | Qatar | 22 years old

Qatar play the first match of the tournament against Ecuador. Ahmed Al Ganehi, the 22-year-old who can play as a winger or a centre-forward, plays for Al Gharafa. Ahmed has just one goal to his name so far but when we look at his radar in the visual above, seems to be on par or just below par for several metrics.

Moisés Caicedo | Brighton & Hove Albion | Ecuador | 20 years old

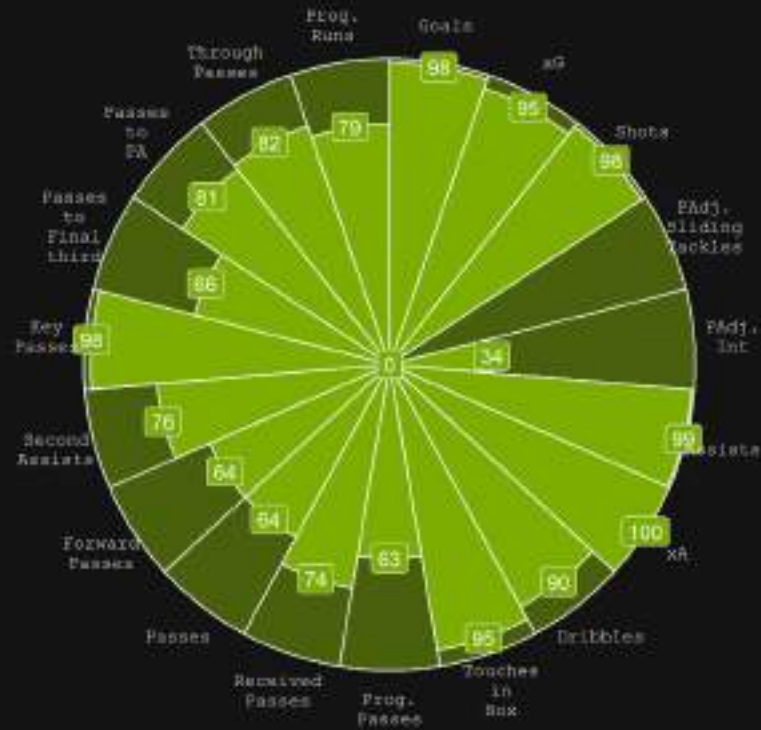
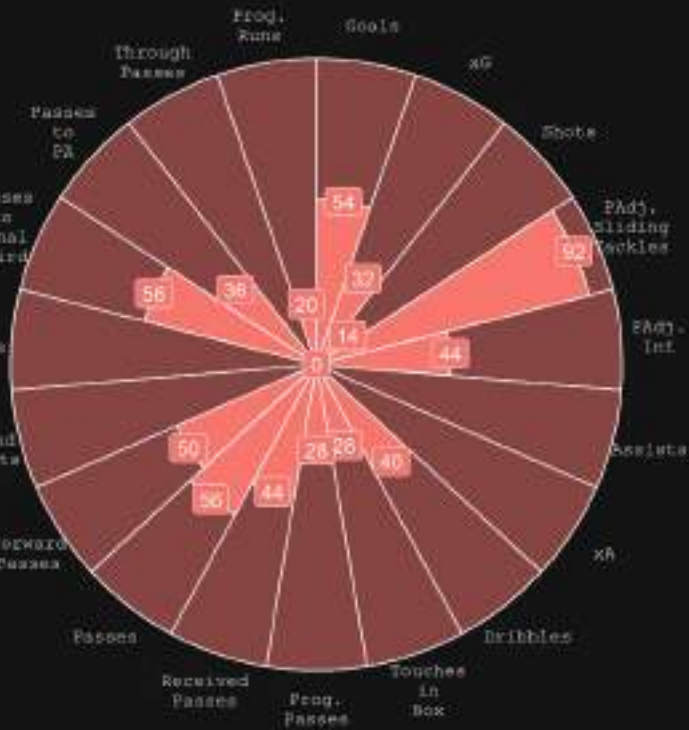
There were many top clubs, including Manchester United, chasing the signature of Moisés Caicedo. Brighton & Hove Albion beat everyone else to sign the 20-year-old Ecuadorian from Independiente. Caicedo was sent out on loan initially but was recalled by Brighton in January 2022 and since then, it would not be wrong to say that Caicedo has been one of the best young midfielders in the league. Caicedo plays as the deepest midfielder for Brighton and brings a lot of qualities that cannot be found in players playing for a number of top European clubs. Having only recently signed for Brighton, Caicedo is still linked with some clubs regularly. His physicality and his defensive attributes are his strengths. Caicedo, having made 25 appearances for Brighton already, will look to make a name for himself on the world stage at Qatar.

World Cup 2022 | Group A

Percentile ranks among players from respective positions in respective leagues | Min. 200 minutes played

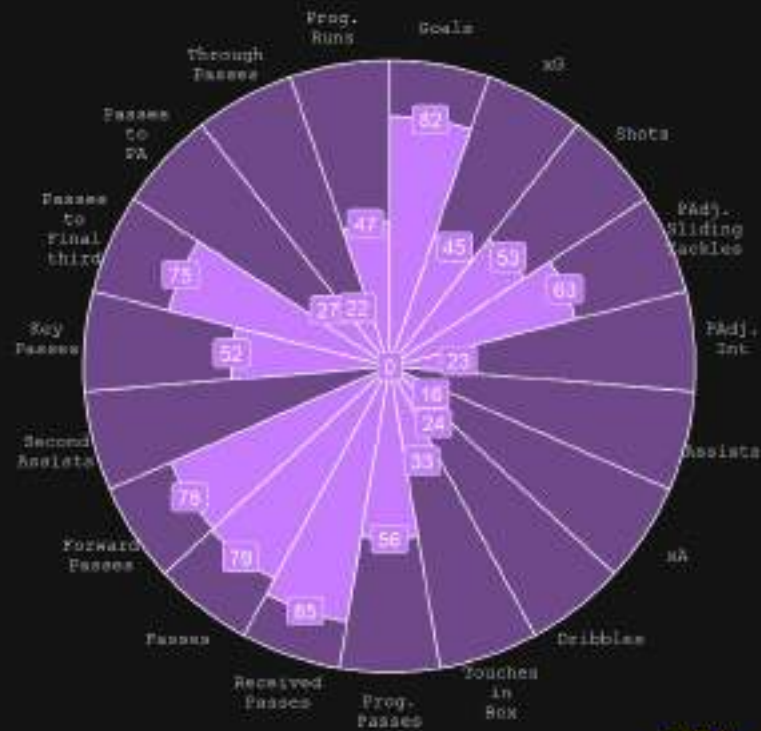
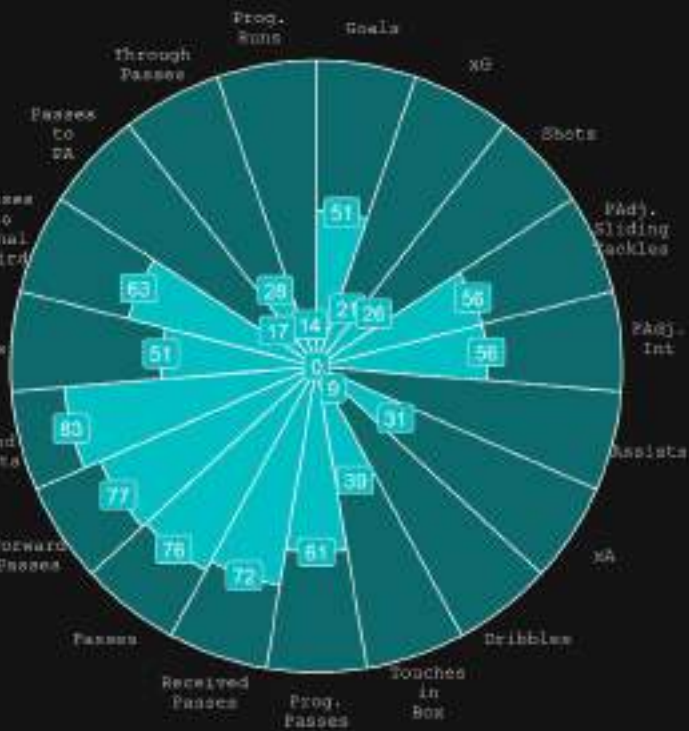
Ahmed Al Ganehi | Al Gharafa Qatar

C. Gakpo | PSV Netherlands



M. Caicedo | Brighton Ecuador

P. Gueye | Olympique Marseille Senegal



Pape Gueye | Marseille | Senegal | 23 years old

Pape Gueye is known for a controversial move to Watford in 2020. The midfielder, after signing for Watford from Le Havre, almost immediately agreed on a deal to join Marseille. Since the incident, the 23-year-old has been a regular member of the Ligue 1 side and his national team, Senegal, as well. Pape Gueye has predominantly played as a left-sided midfielder in a 3-4-3 and is involved in the build-up quite often. With decent passing abilities and average to above-average defensive attributes, Gueye will look to help Senegal as much as possible to help them go further in Qatar.

Cody Gakpo | PSV | Netherlands | 23 years old

Cody Gakpo was linked with several clubs from all around Europe in the recently concluded summer transfer window. It's obvious why from his performances of late, as Gakpo has been one of the best players in all of Europe this season so far. The attacking midfielder can play pretty much anywhere in the front four and this versatility has led to him being top of the Goals and Assists charts 10 games into the season. Gakpo's creativity is unmatched as seen in the radar above and rightly ranks top tier for several attacking metrics. Gakpo made his senior debut for the Netherlands in Euro 2020 and has been a regular since then. He is definitely expected to light up the World Cup this year.

ECUADOR



GROUP A

— BRYANT MARQUES // @bryantmt_ —

Ecuador are back in the World Cup after 2018's setback where the South Americans failed to qualify as they finished eighth in the qualifiers. Their Argentinian Coach, Gustavo Alfaro, has guided the nation to a fourth-place finish, and to a quarter-final place in the Copa America, rebuilding a reputation as one of the toughest and most promising teams in the continent.

The road to qualifying for the 2022 Qatar World Cup was a very brave one, where they won seven matches, drew five and lost six, scoring the third-highest amount of goals (27), and the third to concede less with 19 goals. They only suffered one defeat, which came at home against Perú (1-2), and they have enjoyed some amazing results like 4-2 and 6-1 thrashings of Uruguay and Colombia, respectively.

Ecuador really shocked all of South America thanks to their recent development in each position and in their quick possession-based game, developing new stars with the likes of Moisés Caicedo, William Pacho, Piero Hincapié, Angelo Preciado, Pervis Estupiñán and more to come.

Thanks to the great work the football team's been doing to keep growing their playing style, adapting to modern ideas, focusing more on the individual and technical development of young players from the academy systems, Ecuador has turned into a really interesting footballing nation on the up — mostly for the young players who are emerging from Independiente del Valle's youth academy.

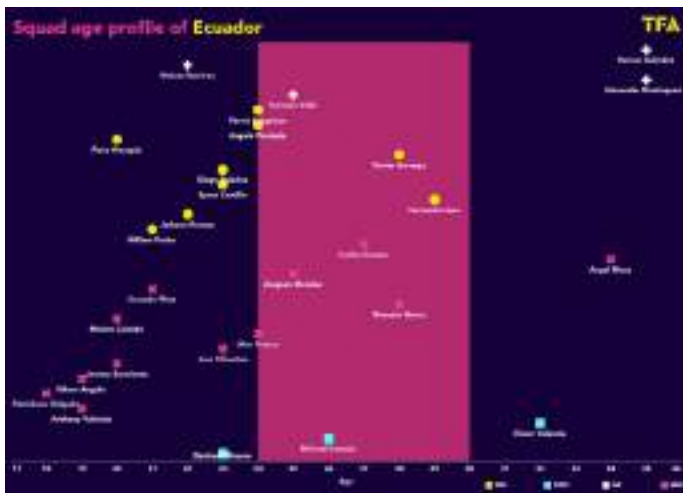
Some of the examples have already been told before like Caicedo, Pacho, Preciado and Hincapié, but they have provided some regular names on the shortlists too like Alan Franco, Gonzalo Plata, Jackson Porozo, Moisés Ramírez and the highly-rated Ajax player, Patrickson Delgado.

PREDICTED STARTING XI

Ecuador have been a very rigid team with their use of formations, changing their structure slightly to a 4-2-3-1, with Brighton's Jeremy Sarmiento playing at the 10 lately. However, the Ecuadorian team should be very similar to what we're showing in the picture below.

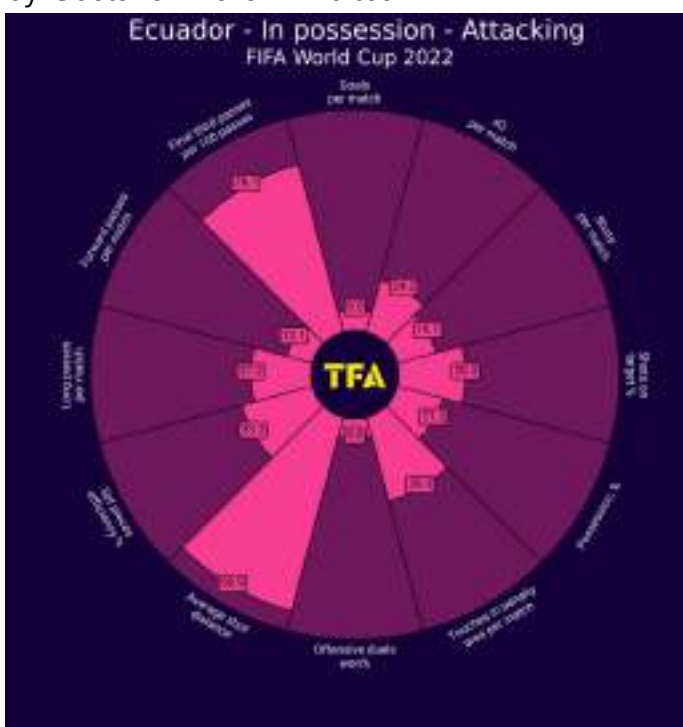


Alexander Domínguez has enjoyed confidence in goal, same for Piero Hincapié as the left-centre-back and Félix Torres to a lesser extent on the right. Meanwhile, Pervis Estupiñán and Byron Castillo should be the names in the full-back positions. As told before, Sarmiento could play in the '10' role for Franco and one of the other usual changes is in the striker spot, where we have seen Enner Valencia, Jordy Caicedo, Djorkaeff Reasco or Michael Estrada. However, the playing style of these options is largely similar.



ATTACKING PHASE

Ecuador have been one of the most attack-minded teams in South America over the past qualifying campaign. The likes of Gonzalo Plata, Moises Caicedo, Pervis Estupiñán and more possess incredible talent to go forward and break lines, which has been seriously exploited by Gustavo Alfaro in his team.



With fast, direct and aggressive full-backs such as Estupiñán on the left and Byron Castillo on the right, Ecuador's attacking threat usually comes from the wings, while build-up also starts from these zones to then connect with players in the central areas. Let's take a deep look at how Ecuador sets up on the ball to beat teams from the back.

Alfaro's boys like to set up with Piero Hincapié and Félix Torres very high on the pitch in possession with both full-backs close to them, but after one of them beats the press, the other stays behind to give balance to the rest defence, forming a back-three. Occasionally, both are released and the attack could come from either wing, turning from side to side, though this is not commonly seen.

Here, we can see this simple automatism from Ecuador to find the full-back: Gruezo traditionally gets deep in the '6' role, while the central midfielders and wingers stay or go inside the channels to overload them and free the wings. After receiving, the full-back has the chance and freedom to carry the ball and then go from out to in with the inverted winger or the '10' if used.



Another way to escape the pressure or accelerate possession by Ecuador is what the centre-backs can do with the ball at their feet. Félix Torres has shown in almost every game why he can be the starter on the right, thanks to his aggressiveness to find players between the lines. Centre-backs usually look to link with the wingers in the half-spaces, executing diagonal long balls to a wide player, which mainly is Estupiñán or flat fast balls between the full-back and centre-back to find the striker making the run.

As we can see in the following figure, Ecuador have, once again, overloaded central areas, and 'the bullet' Estupiñán has recognised the space to attack.



The picture above us explains perfectly what we have been talking about with Plata and Castillo. After Ecuador has stepped on the middle third, the Real Valladolid winger goes inside and Castillo gets total freedom to run.

Ecuador then likes to be very creative and depend on the improvisation of their players in the final third, especially in Plata's talent or Caicedo's intelligent attacks to the box. Even so, several automatism are also seen in these.

Pervis Estupiñán is one of the most dangerous players of all, thanks to his powerful runs and dribbling technique to get inside the penalty box and execute cut-back crosses. However, overlapping runs and short combinations at the edge of the box are other ways of harming rivals that Gustavo Alfaro's team likes to apply.

The Brighton full-back received the ball in the middle, carried the ball very forward and dribbled past players. Alan Franco is the midfielder making the run in this case — not Caicedo — to try and score from a cut-back.



DEFENSIVE PHASE

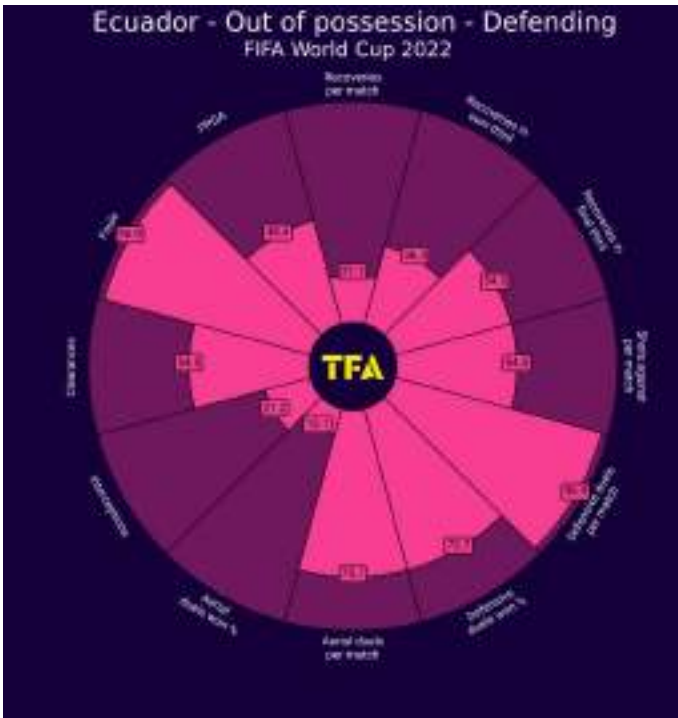
Ecuador's attacking style has been an enjoyable one throughout the qualifying season, but they have worked very hard to solidify their defence too, with Moisés Caicedo being, once again, the part that makes the gear work. Why's this? Let's analyse their defensive behaviours under Alfaro.

In the middle third, Moisés Caicedo becomes the most vital part of the team. Depending on which full-back they put emphasis on in the match, they look to create overloads on that wing, with Caicedo being the third man to support there. His input in these situations is very good because of his mobility, intensity, runs and the way he can turn his body and change to the weak side of the ball. If the '10' is playing, these overloads could exchange massively between them during games.

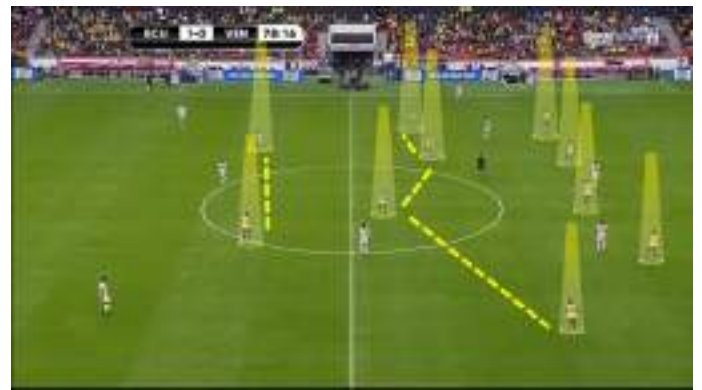
Another name that also gets very important in the middle third is Gonzalo Plata. The right-winger is the one that understands the job of the wide players in Ecuador's system better than anybody.

The 21-year-old is a very undetectable and unpredictable element that predominantly plays in the half-spaces, behind the midfield line, but also for the way he changes channels with his right-back; he's a constant threat and creates plenty of trouble for the opposition. He likes to help the team very deep when they cannot beat mid-blocks and his change of pace is a big thing to be careful of.





Obviously, this situation doesn't work all the time, so if they're forced to fall back to the middle or their own third, they form a rigid 4-4-2 where the full-backs are proactive to jump off their lines and the midfielders try to block every possible pass in the central areas. The picture below shows the perfect example of the 4-4-2 they deploy when forced to get back, and adds another known conduct: The jumps from Caicedo to defend higher.



La Tricolor swap from a high-block and mid-block constantly during the game. Ecuador sets up a great pressing trap that relies upon the prominent timing and reading of the game of Moisés Caicedo. Firstly, you can see them defending high in a 4-3-3 or a 4-2-1-3 if they use a '10'. In this first stage of the press, they don't defend that tightly but also don't position themselves that far from the ball carrier.

If the pass breaks the line through the middle, that's the trigger: Caicedo covers — a lot — of ground and he does it with ease, he's a fantastic ball-winner and his recovering ability is utilised well here.

He gives space for the next receiver, but if this gets the ball, he's going at full speed and power. As we see in the picture, Ecuador has allowed the Venezuelan centre-back to play through the lines with a progressive carry. However, they blocked all the passing options and Caicedo is ready to intercept his next action.

TRANSITIONS

In the attacking transitions, Ecuador have many players to play the ball long to and start a counter-attack. Wingers change their starting positions between the half-spaces and hug the line to receive passes with big spaces to attack. Normally, the centre-backs or midfielders perform these deliveries — namely, Carlos Gruezo, who has good long distribution, has a big role to play here.

In the defensive transitions, Alfaro's team rely on the speed and sprints of their full-backs, as they're very fast, powerful and disciplined players to get

back, but also on the presence of Félix Torres and Carlos Gruezo, which is massively important in this phase because both players have been solid at tracking the rivals' runs. The 11 players must be very committed to making the run and tracking back.

DEFENDERS

At the back, Ecuador has good options. Starting in goal, the regular starter has been Alexander Domínguez. At 35 years of age, he was the trusted man for Gustavo Alfaro. However, Moisés Ramírez from Independiente del Valle, aged 22, is very good and exciting player vying to take his spot.

At the centre-back spot, several players have rotated during many competitions they have played in, only Piero Hincapié at the left side of the defence is the one you can call a regular starter. The Bayer Leverkusen defender has enjoyed a lot of minutes in Europe, being a key player for their system. The other centre-back has been constantly changing, but one of the most regular names there was Félix Torres. Other options include Jackson Porozo, who has recently signed for Troyes in Ligue 1.

The full-backs are a well-covered position for Ecuador. The country's football teams have been developing many names in this spot, from the left to the right, most commonly the right, where Alfaro has one of those good 'problems' of selection. Byron Castillo has been one of the regulars in the lineup, but names like Angelo Preciado or José Hurtado keep catching the eye. The left side is very clear: Brighton's Pervis Estupiñán is one of the most important elements of this Ecuadorian team, mostly in the attacking phase.

MIDFIELDERS

The '6' spot has a name written on the team sheet: Carlos Gruezo. The 27-year-old midfielder from Augsburg has a great understanding of this position, and he tactically knows to perfection how Ecuador likes to play. Patrickson Delgado could be an interesting name to see providing depth in the centre of the pitch.

If Gruezo has his name written on the pitch, we have to talk about Moisés Caicedo. At 20 years of age, he's performing brightly for Brighton and is the main man for his National Team. He has a great opportunity to display his abilities in the most privileged tournament in the world of football. Alan Franco, José Cifuentes and Jeremy Sarmiento are the other names that could play in this position or that will play if Ecuador decides to play with three midfielders.

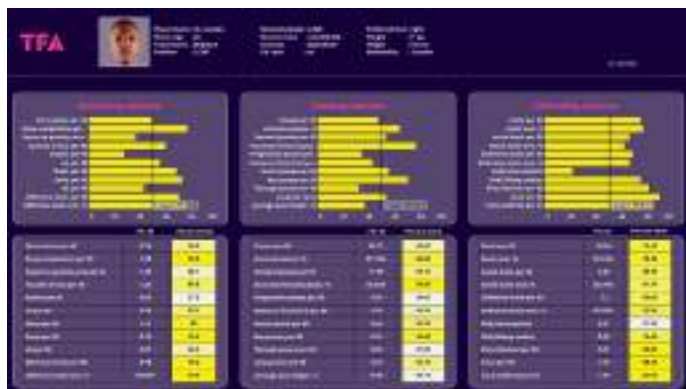
ATTACKERS

The attacking threat is going to be provided by fast, mobile and intense players that like to contribute in every phase of the game. Michael Estrada has been the starter for this team, working as a target man that gets involved in the final third with few touches, as well as Felipe Caicedo. Normally, Enner Valencia enters from the bench to play as a striker or on the left wing too.

Wingers provide speed and also ball-control as they usually play inverted thanks to the threat that full-backs provide to the team. Gonzalo Plata on the right and Rommel Ibarra on the left could be the regular names, but Jeremy Sarmiento could also play on the wing, as well as the experienced Ángel Mena.

KEY PLAYER

Thinking of Gustavo Alfaro's squad, line per line and position per position, at the end it was an easy choice having Moisés Caicedo as the key player.



Not only because he is playing at the highest level in terms of which competition, but also for the way he contributes to the Ecuadorian National Team. His intense defensive profile helps the team to be as aggressive as they want, because he can provide the solidity behind the first line of pressure, as well his positioning and tactical intelligence when closing down the lines in a more pragmatic way to defend.

In the attacking phase, Moisés remains another vital player for his national team, thanks to his great carries after winning the ball, or his aggressiveness to get to the penalty box or score from a long shot. In terms of progression and controlling possession, he's outstanding, constantly shielding the ball in tight spaces thanks to his technical ability and connecting with players on the weak side of the ball.

TOURNAMENT PREDICTION

Ecuador have the squad, youthful fearlessness and talented profiles to qualify at least as the second in their group, and possibly be one of the revelations of the 2022 Qatar World Cup.

The automatised system, mastered by a combination of balanced experience and youthful intensity, as well as a great philosophy from head coach, Gustavo Alfaro, makes La Tricolor one of the teams to follow closely in the competition.

NETHERLANDS



GROUP A

BRYANT MARQUES // @bryantmt_

Commonly known as 'The Clockwork Orange', the Netherlands have become one of the most significant teams in World Cup history — and it's not easy work to be considered that having never won the tournament, but their marvellous playing style and plethoric squads full of talent and technical qualities have made history throughout the years.

After the 2018 setback where they didn't qualify, they're now back in the world's greatest football tournament, and this time with one of the biggest and most legendary managers of all time in their dugout: Louis van Gaal. The former Manchester United coach returned from retirement to get the 'Oranje' back to where they belong.

With a big squad full of exciting and interesting young names, mixing with experience and great technical qualities, the Netherlands have one of the best squads in the World Cup. So let's take a look at how Van Gaal has brought joy back to his land.

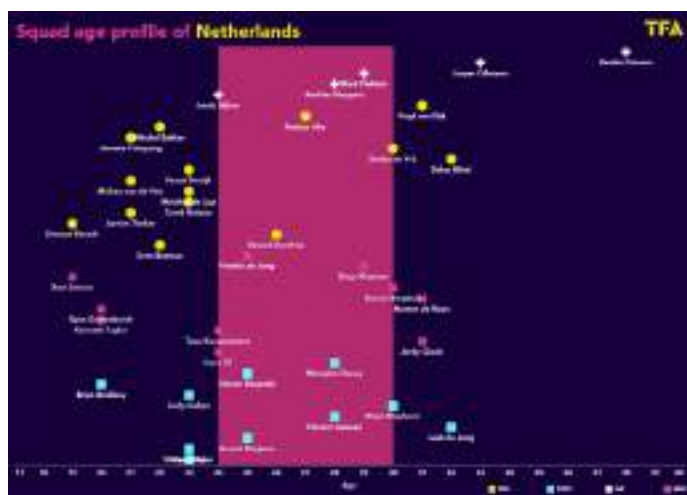
PREDICTED STARTING XI

The Netherlands have implemented a rotative, adaptable and mobile 3-4-1-2 with surprising names like Remko Pasveer who, with his excellent form and qualities on the ball, we think will be the starter in goal. Cody Gakpo and his magnificent start to the campaign has earned him a regular spot playing as a '10' where he has developed even more his game.

Normally, the midfield could join the experienced Daley Blind and technical magician Frenkie de Jong, with some names trying to push their spots like Teun Koopmeiners or Marten de Roon; both are very versatile and dynamic.



Louis Van Gaal has in his hands one of the most perfectly balanced squads of all the 2022 Qatar World Cup. Years pass and the Netherlands keep on producing interesting, versatile, technical and exciting talents that earn spots in the National Team squads as they're also mentally capable of everything they want. Players at their peak combines very well with the ones in their last years, with surprising new names like Pasveer, or the elastic and stimulating Steven Berghuis that at his 30 he keeps living between the lines with sensitive and fine touches, to take an example.



ATTACKING PHASE

The 'Oranje' have displayed some very good-looking play in possession of late, as most of you would expect: The land of the original 'Total Football' should obviously play like this, and mostly under a possession-based lover such as Louis van Gaal.

Playing with a high block and a back-three, when the Netherlands get the ball at their feet, rotations, mobility and dynamism power the engine.

The first automatism we get to see is one of the most known in their history: The rotations from a centre-back. In this case, Jurrien Timber is the one selected by Van Gaal to execute these complicated but vital off-the-ball movements.

Playing in a very similar system at Ajax, Timber knows exactly what kind of zones he has to step into: Frequently he sets up a back-four playing as a right-back to free Denzel Dumfries as a right-winger. But he's also utilised as a midfielder, playing very inverted and with his back to goal, this to get another option behind the first line of pressure, to avoid dragging Gakpo or advanced players to deeper zones.

Here we can see a sequence that shows perfectly both things that we are explaining about Timber's role in the build-ups: He firstly positioned himself as a right-back, went inside to form a double-pivot with de Roon, and then he makes a simple move going to the wide area to create a passing option for Virgil van Dijk and continue progressing.



This creates confusion for the markers, as they do not know if they can go and press the ball carrier, or if they need to keep shadowing Timber but allow the Dutch centre-backs to carry the ball forward. That is another key in the Dutch game, if a centre-back sees a pocket of space, where they can drive forward and push the rival lines back to their own third, they'll do it. Normally, it's Nathan Aké who executes these situations, and he even joins as an overlapping centre-back in the final third.



Louis van Gaal also likes to use his goalkeeper to create numerical overloads when teams press them very high up the pitch: Pasveer has been very good in these stages of the game, and he probably has earned a starting place at the World Cup because of this and his excellent reflexes.

The rotations are basically seen in every part of the pitch, Van Gaal likes versatile players that can solve situations in the wings, in the half-spaces, under pressure or in the central areas.

An example of what we are talking about is provided by Steven Berghuis and Cody Gakpo, who usually take the zones of their teammates

to free them in other positions that rivals aren't expecting. The latter likes to place himself hugging the line, to then drive to the middle and connect with players at the other side of the pitch.

Here we can see Gakpo taking Frenkie de Jong's spot, as the Barcelona player joins the defensive line to open this space that the '10' needs to get deep to help them beat the press.



In the middle third of the pitch, the 'Oranje' try to be very fast and direct, as they look to dominate the game in the final third, so they have to accelerate possessions to play in the rival area during almost every part of the match. One of the movements the Netherlands apply to move along as a group, is the approach of Steven Bergwijn to the build-up first phase, where he can pick the ball, turn and find Cody Gakpo or Steven Berghuis to play short-combinations and arrive in the last third.

As well as in the first stages with the ball, they are also very mobile in these roles of who gets deep, where Gakpo and Berghuis exchange it frequently. Another set of off-the-ball movements is how Daley Blind likes to play inverted in the middle third if the ball is played in his side. If not, he then stays wide.

Here we see one of the trademark movements of the Netherlands, as Bergwijn drops off the striker's lines to receive; he's marked so he can't turn and carry. As a result, he decides to play it to the man in front — this time, Aké, who then is going to see Vincent Janssen making the run thanks to the space Bergwijn has created behind him.



Van Gaal's team have lacked that last-pass or last-touch inside the box to finish off the dominance they enjoy during matches. However, they've been trying to finish up the attacks with through-balls from outside the box to their mobile strikers who like to play sideways to the rival's goal, to make these kinds of runs. Full-backs are taken into account too in attack, as they look to pin the last line of defenders or appear in wide areas with space, looking immediately for the other full-back on the weak side of the ball.

Two of these intentions are seen in the pictures below us. In the first one, we can see how Nathan Aké has once again joined the attack, practically as a midfielder. Depending on where the ball is, one of the centre-backs gets up like this. The idea is to attract players to jump, allowing one of the strikers to make a run in behind, as we see Janssen preparing to do.



In the figure below, we see Steven Berghuis striking an out-swinging cross to find Daley Blind on the weak side of the ball. Blind is immediately attacking the space behind the marker to try and score a goal from that delivery.

DEFENSIVE PHASE



In the defensive phase of the game, Van Gaal likes to once again, use Jurrien Timber as his wildcard. Playing with Nathan Aké and Virgil Van Dijk at the back, or often Matthijs de Ligt too, Timber has the freedom to go off the line and be well-covered behind.

This is not just simple anticipation, the Ajax defender has a key role defending along the midfielders' line, suffocating the free-man if a team likes to use a '10' between the lines. He has the freedom to do it in different structures: Pressing high or closing down spaces when exchanging to a low-mid-block.



They set up a high-pressing idea with the two centre-forwards marking the centre-backs and the wing-backs going very high to mark rival full-backs. Cody Gakpo plays a pivotal role in shadowing the '6' and jumping to the goalkeeper when this one receives. Behind the midfield line, Timber joins to defend the creative players, supported from behind by powerful defenders with solid anticipation, such as Van Dijk.

One of the biggest problems in the defensive phase where they have been very solid recently is the left-hand side of the team sitting in a low block. Daley Blind tends to make dangerous jumps that are often caught up by faster wingers than him, who then can run into the box. He is joined by Nathan Aké who has this type of issue too in his defending style, but what helps the team is the pace he can offer here, and Van Dijk's cover too.

TRANSITIONS

In attacking transitions, the Netherlands like to give plenty of freedom for the player who just recovered the ball to carry for a while before releasing it close to the rival's goal. These kinds of situations create plenty of chances throughout the game thanks to players like Gakpo who have great balance and composure when running with the ball, but you can also see variations with quick releases for a run in behind.

In defensive transitions, as told before, the 'Clockwork Orange' is a high-pressing team that likes to suffocate the opposition very close to

their own box and make a man-marking press that would block every possible passing option. However, their rest-defence acts comfortably playing with a 3-2 or 2-3 if Timber joins the midfield where the excellent timing of Van Dijk is once again important for his team.

DEFENDERS

Jasper Cillessen is one of the most known players of the team, beside his age and his decline at Barcelona, he has always been a vital part of the National Team, however as mentioned many times before, Remko Pasveer has taken his spot in recent games.

Centre-back is probably the position with the most depth in the Netherlands National Team, considering names like Virgil van Dijk, Matthijs de Ligt, Jurrien Timber, Nathan Aké and Stefan de Vrij; all of them with a great sense of passing and capability of defending in a high block. Full-backs are also decently covered with exciting names like Tyrell Malacia, Denzel Dumfries, Devyne Rensch or the experienced Daley Blind.

MIDFIELDERS

Another position in which the Dutch are well equipped is and has been for their entire history, the midfield. With names like Marten de Roon and Frenkie de Jong usually playing in the '6' role, and more advanced midfielders such as Kenneth Taylor, Davy Klaassen, Steven Berghuis, or Ryan Gravenberch, their options are exciting. These promising and clever players suit Van Gaal's ideas perfectly.

ATTACKERS

The Netherlands' attackers combine physical power with technical and elastic attributes.

They boast different profiles such as Wout Weghorst or Memphis Depay, Vincent Janssen or Steven Bergwijn. Mixing excellent dribbling technique or capacities to play deep and turn to run to the goal, like Depay or Bergwijn, with lethal instinct inside the box or height to play as a target-man and drag defenders off their lines.

air and also a compact defensive line that is rarely being compromised all make him an elite defender.

BEST PLAYER

Besides having a large squad full of attacking talent, the Netherlands' success depends on how Virgil van Dijk is going to perform defensively and adding worth to build-ups when he's on the ball. We all know what van Dijk can do, at his best level he can be the best centre-back in the world. His timing in transitions has to be one of the toughest forwards have faced, and this could be one of the keys for Van Gaal's team, as playing with a high block could be risky.

This could be a massive year for the Netherlands considering the decline of several top European teams. With the arrival of Van Gaal as a coach, the 'Oranje' has immediately turned their status and are clearly a candidate to take the trophy home.



At 31 years of age, the Liverpool defender is about to play his first World Cup, which is his top-tournament debut for the Netherlands, as he was injured in the recent UEFA European Championship in 2021, and his country didn't qualify for 2018 World Cup or 2016 European Championship. Therefore, it's going to be a big step in his career.

Van Dijk and his input in every phase of the game is what makes him the best player in the team. The threat he brings while getting up for headers at set-pieces, his long distribution and also ability to break lines with passes or his amazing defending that brings solidity in the

TOURNAMENT PREDICTION

SENEGAL



GROUP A

— FINTAN O'REILLY // @FintanFootball —

This year's FIFA World Cup will be Senegal's third-ever appearance in the competition, having made their first World Cup appearance in 2002 and then waited until 2018 to return to international football's greatest stage. In 2002, Senegal made it all the way to the quarter-finals, delivering an impressive showing. They failed to make it out of the group stage in 2018 but will be hoping to achieve progression to at least the Round of 16 this year.

Senegal are in Group A at the tournament, alongside hosts Qatar, the Netherlands and Ecuador. Aliou Cissé's side should fear none of the three teams they're faced with in the group, as they have the quality to get a result from all of them; that's not a guarantee, but it is a realistic aim and we should see a Senegal side full of belief in Qatar, especially if they manage to get a result in their opening game versus Louis van Gaal's Dutch side.

The Lions of Teranga boast a promising squad for this tournament, with players who've achieved the highest success in club football like Édouard Mendy and Sadio Mané, along with some talents who perhaps can aim for similar levels of success in the future like Pape Gueye, Bamba Dieng, and Pape Matar Sarr; the level of talent at their disposal is thrilling.

This tactical analysis piece in the form of a team-focused scout report aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of Cissé's side. We'll analyse the Lions of Teranga and their tactics in possession, out of possession and in transitional phases, while also taking an in-depth look at the squad selection options Cissé has to choose from for the tournament in all areas of the pitch. Furthermore, we'll dedicate a section of this piece to analysing Bayern Munich star Mané, who we've identified as Senegal's key man for the tournament before we provide our tournament prediction for the team to cap off our scout report.

PREDICTED STARTING XI

To begin our analysis, let's take a look at our predicted 26-man squad and strongest starting XI for Senegal at the World Cup. At the time of writing, Senegal's official 26-man squad has not been released, nor has their provisional squad been publicly released. However, in figure 1, we can see an age profile of a predicted 26-man squad that we've selected from the available panel of players; we don't imagine that Cissé's final squad will be too far off of this one.



At the time of writing, Senegal's biggest injury issues lay in the backline, with Mané's Bayern Munich teammate Bouna Sarr, who'd typically be Senegal's first-choice right-back, set to miss the tournament due to a knee injury and Pape Abou Cissé currently out of action due to hip problems.

We don't anticipate Cissé's injury to rule him out of contention for a place at Qatar but, unfortunately for Senegal, the same can't be said for Sarr who will not make it to the 2022 World Cup. As a result of that injury, we've left him out of our predicted 26-man squad. Other than Sarr, we've selected what we believe to be the strongest 26-man squad Senegal has to offer for this tournament.

Figure 1 shows that the vast majority (16) of this 26-man squad lies within or just on the border of the peak-age range (indicated by the pink strip on our graph). Seven of the remaining 10 players fall in the 'youth' age range while the remaining three players fall into the post-peak 'experienced' age range; those three experienced players are three current EPL players in Cheikhou Kouyaté, Kalidou Koulibaly and Idrissa Gueye, all of whom could have a significant role to play for their country in this tournament.



Figure 2 shows our predicted starting XI from this 26-man squad. Youssouf Sabaly of La Liga's Real Betis takes Sarr's place at right-back, completing a back-four alongside Chelsea star Koulibaly, RB Leipzig's Abdou Diallo and AS Monaco's Ismail Jakobs in front of Koulibaly's Chelsea teammate Mendy.

Nampalys Mendy is a favourite of Aliou Cissé's and as a result, we imagine that he'll retain his place in the Lions of Teranga's starting XI in Qatar,

though Kouyaté could well displace him. We've put him in the deepest midfield position in our starting XI, just behind Marseille's Pape Gueye and Everton's Idrissa Gueye, which we believe to be a strong midfield trio that can deliver what Cissé wants from his central players.

In attack, we've got Mané and Ismaila Sarr sitting on either side of Salernitana forward Boulaye Dia, who's been in fine form in Serie A this season, scoring four goals and making two assists for his club at the time of writing.

Senegal have some excellent attacking options, and we could see some different variations of this frontline at different stages of games in the tournament. We'll go into greater detail on all of the exciting attacking options at Cissé's disposal later on in this scout report, however.

ATTACKING PHASE

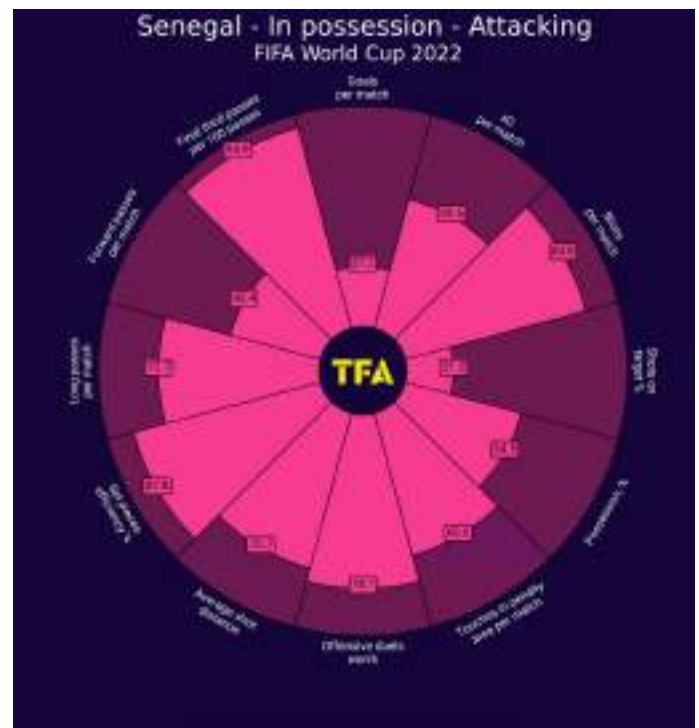


Figure 3 provides an overview of Senegal's attacking game. The data for this radar was taken from their games over the last calendar year, and the percentile ranks shown compare them with the other 31 teams competing in Qatar this year.

Of course, it's important to note remember that the quality of competition Senegal have faced over the last calendar year will differ from the quality they'll mostly come up against in the World Cup, and this shouldn't be used as a preview of what to expect from them in the World Cup or a measure of how exactly they stack up with their competition in this tournament.

However, there's plenty to note about Senegal's playing style with the ball from this radar. In particular, with regard to Senegal, the significant areas to note here are their high number of shots along with their relatively distant average shot distance, their high set-piece efficiency and their high number of long passes per match.

With regard to their set-piece efficiency, a lot of Senegal's most dangerous goalscoring opportunities tend to come via set-pieces, whether their indirect free-kicks or corner kicks. They possess plenty of goalscoring threats, either aerially or otherwise from their set-pieces, and this is an important area that teams should focus on heavily when preparing to come up against the Lions of Teranga.

Senegal's dribblers Mané and Sarr will look to take opposition players on in dangerous areas and get on the ball in congested spaces regularly, entrusting their ability with the ball to cause problems for the opposition and draw fouls from them, thus leading to set-piece opportunities for Senegal from what, for them, is a dangerous position.

Additionally, part of the reason why they are so comfortable with shooting from distance may be that they're happy enough to just hit the target and try to force corner kicks, rather than actually scoring from their long shots, though obviously, scoring is the aim.

Shot selection is an area in which Senegal are generally quite inefficient, in general. They're

often quite wasteful with their shots and tend to shoot on sight a bit too much. It may benefit them to focus a little bit more on patience, working the ball into high-value goalscoring positions for the likes of Dia, Habib Diallo or Bamba Dieng to capitalise on with a greater chance of converting. Their shoot-on-sight tendencies are likely a big cause of their relatively low shot accuracy rate.



When beginning their build-up, it's common to see Senegal as we see them in figure 4, with the centre-backs splitting slightly wide of their goalkeeper from goal-kicks and the full-backs pushing high, generally sitting on either side of their holding midfielder, just behind the other two midfielders in the 4-3-3 shape.

As play progresses upfield, it's common to see the wingers move inside to occupy the half-spaces but at this stage, it's common to see them stay wider and they do often receive the ball early while still positioned wide, allowing them to engage the opposition's full-back in a 1v1 duel in space, which can suit the strengths of both Sarr and Mané.



We see Senegal retain a similar shape as their possession play progresses into a slightly more advanced stage — the progression phase.

However, their full-backs will be positioned far higher by now, with the wingers moving inside to the half-spaces as mentioned. We typically see Senegal utilising a 2-3-5 in-possession shape as seen above as a result of this, but it's also very common to see their ball-far full-back drop back deeper once the ball progresses into the final third, offering some balance and extra defensive stability.



As mentioned earlier, Senegal tend to play plenty of long passes, and this is because Cissé's centre-backs like to perform the deep-lying playmaker role in this side — especially Koulibaly.

We see an example of Koulibaly lining up a long pass over the top for the right-winger to chase down in figure 6. He's comfortable under pressure, and he possesses impeccable vision along with technical passing quality to perform this deep-lying playmaker role behind the midfield trio.



After the pass was played, Senegal's right-winger was set up in a great position to enter the final third and make something exciting happen for his side — all a direct result of Koulibaly's fantastic pass which created the opportunity from a position in which Senegal didn't look at all

threatening. This is the power of a quality deep-lying playmaker at centre-back, which Cissé has at his disposal.



Senegal frequently look to their centre-backs — again, mostly Koulibaly — to dictate the tempo and really control the game. Koulibaly is excellent at pulling the strings from centre-back and can perform this puppet master role masterfully, stroking the ball about and pulling off some really difficult passes in a way that makes it look easy while advancing his team into far more dangerous positions and creating difficult problems for the opposition to solve. He's a great asset for his national team and a major problem for all opposition.

We see a couple of examples of Senegal's tendency to switch the play from the centre-backs out to the opposite wing in figure 8. We mostly see Koulibaly performing this role from right centre-back, switching it out to the left-back who'll be required to perform darting runs forward to aggressively exploit the space Koulibaly targets via these switches of play (the first example seen in the top two quarters of this image and the second example seen in the bottom two quarters).

This link-up between Koulibaly and Jakobs via the long switch is one to look out for at Qatar, especially as Mané will be positioned on the left wing too. So, this long switch out to the left can provide an opportunity for Senegal to quickly create an overload with Mané and the full-back on one wing, as was the case in the bottom example above. This can be extremely

dangerous for Senegal's opponents, so shutting down this tactic should be an important note in the game plan.

Of course, the left-back's first touch is also crucial here, as we've seen examples of the full-back's heavy first touch taking the ball away from him and squandering this opportunity, so that's something Senegal need to watch out for as well; of course, this kind of play has its risks. We often see Mendy going straight to the full-backs from the build-up as well, with the opposition often leaving more space for Senegal to exploit out wide than they do centrally.

Mendy has the vision and technical quality to pull off chipped passes from the get-go out to the wing that can be very valuable for his national team in the same way as Koulibaly's switches.

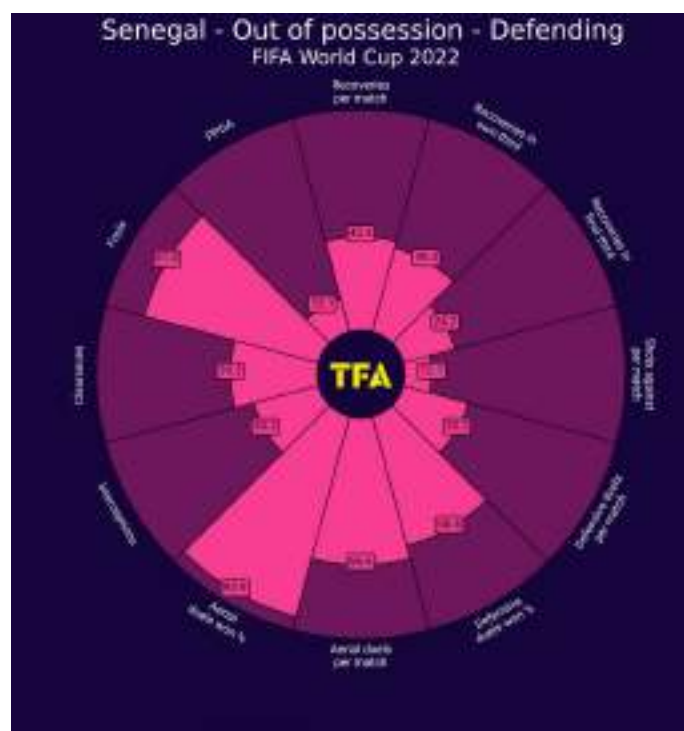


For our final point on Senegal's in-possession play, their deep-lying players — particularly the centre-backs but also sometimes one of the midfielders should they drop deep and find space to turn and play forward, are good at breaking lines via their passing, getting the ball into the feet of their striker or wingers, with an example of this seen in figure 9.

Here, the left centre-back managed to fire the ball into the centre-forward's feet by finding a good passing line through the centre of the pitch, demonstrating impressive vision, composure and bravery on the ball. Note how the forward sets himself well to receive and hold the defender off, allowing his teammates time to get up in support of the move.

This is a great example of how Senegal's deep-lying playmakers, the centre-backs, are crucial to their team's progression into the final third. They can find the wingers in dangerous pockets of space just in or on the edge of the final third via passes like this and that's something important for Senegal's opponents to watch out for in the World Cup.

DEFENSIVE PHASE



Moving on, we'll now take a look at Senegal's performance without the ball. Figure 10 shows us a defence-focused radar looking at some key metrics regarding Senegal's performance over the last calendar year, with the percentile rankings comparing Senegal's performance in these areas with the other 31 teams from this year's World Cup.

For Senegal, the key areas to focus on here are their relatively low ranking in recoveries per match, recoveries in the final third and defensive duels per match. These low rankings are indicative of Senegal's rather passive defensive style. They don't press with tonnes of intensity in the high-block phase, rather preferring to remain organised and compact a bit deeper,

allowing the opposition to have more of the ball in deeper areas without lots of pressure being applied on them.



We see an example of Senegal's high-block shape in figure 11. We can see the Lions of Teranga striker pressing with a bit of intensity but rather just trying to block the pass across the backline and force the opposition to make a move forward where most easy passing options are covered by Senegal shirts, instead forcing the opposition into a risky pass that can lead to a turnover.

While their striker sits higher, the rest of Senegal's forward line and midfield line sit a bit deeper, not following the striker as he presses higher and instead focusing on forming a pentagon shape around the opposition's midfielders, essentially caging those players and making them unattractive passing options. We see these players occupying valuable areas as it pertains to ball progression, so Senegal's decision to focus on controlling this space and these players specifically makes plenty of sense.

This is a typical example of Senegal's approach to defending in the high-block phase. They don't press very aggressively, instead focusing on retaining central compactness around the area just in front of the halfway line to control this part of the pitch and prevent the opposition from using it. The players' tactical intelligence, discipline, awareness and alertness are all key attributes to ensure this tactic works.



We see a similar sight with Senegal pushed into a mid-block, defending in a slightly deeper area of the pitch. Again, the striker sits highest but now forms part of the cage around the midfielders in front of the opposition's backline.

For Senegal, the important thing here is preventing the opposition from building safely and securely through their shape via shorter passes, forcing them into longer, riskier balls by blocking off this middle part of the pitch, as they did in figures 11 and 12.

In the low block, expect to see Senegal performing similarly but with the wingers dropping deeper and wider, on either side of the midfield three, forming a 4-5-1 shape.

In the high-block/mid-block phases, with the wingers remaining quite central to control this area of the pitch, Senegal leave some space exposed on the wings that teams could look to target via long switches of play similar to the balls we see Koulibaly routinely play for Senegal — this is something Senegal's opponents should look to target as they aim to build their attacks against Cissé's well-organised defensive unit.

TRANSITIONS

In terms of transitions to attack, it's common to see Senegal win the ball back in deeper areas with the opposition drawn out and committed to the attack, so traditional counterattacking play starting from a deeper position against a

committed opposition with a high line is on the cards for this team.

When they manage to win the ball back in deeper areas, whether that's from a well-timed interception/tackle (of which there aren't tonnes — they tend to defend more passively) or a result of a successful aerial duel inside the penalty area as an opposition cross is dealt with by the centre-backs, it's common to see Senegal quickly targeting the wings, where the likes of Sarr and Mané can be found positioned intelligently in space where they can run at the weakened defensive shape, using their pace and technical dribbling quality to create problems, either progressing to directly create a goalscoring chance themselves or drawing a foul and creating a set-piece opportunity, which Senegal generally enjoy.

So, expect to see Senegal targeting the wings quickly in transition to attack after regaining possession in deeper areas.



With regard to their transitions to defence, figure 13 provides an example of Senegal's rest defence shape. As mentioned earlier, we often see both full-backs push forward in the build-up and progression phases initially but as play progresses, one full-back (typically the ball-far one) will drop back, leaving Senegal with a 3-3-4 offensive shape rather than a 2-3-5.

The key for their preparation to defend against a turnover and subsequent transition here is the tight, compact central midfield trio, who will generally be found where we see them in

figure 13 in such situations. Their goal will be to cut passing lanes, stifle the opposition's counterattack and give the attackers and full-back(s) time to track back and support the team's defensive efforts.

At times, Senegal's midfielders can fail to apply enough pressure to the opposition in transition, which can make life too easy for them to play past the midfield and expose their weakened backline. We see an example of this in figure 13 and this goes to show how crucial the attackers' positioning is in the defensive phase as when the ball can be easily played into the midfield from deep, it can leave the midfielders — all of whom have great defensive quality — very exposed in this system.

ATTACKERS

As mentioned earlier, Senegal's attacking options are impressive. Along with Mané, who needs no introduction, Sarr, who's enjoying a good season this term and will likely nail down the starting spot opposite many up front, and Dia — again, the Lions of Teranga's most in-form centre-forward, they boast plenty of other exciting options.

Habib Diallo of Ligue 1 Strasbourg is another interesting centre-forward option who's enjoyed a good season at club level so far. He's different from Dia in that he offers far more aerially — this is where you can expect him to thrive. This could make him an attractive option for Cissé in certain games at the World Cup.

Bamba Dieng of Strasbourg's Ligue 1 rivals Marseille can play centrally or on the wings, making him a solid versatile option. He hasn't enjoyed as much of a good time this season under new boss Igor Tudor as he did under Jorge Sampaoli, but his quality is undeniable, and his versatility up front will be useful in the tournament

setting. Dieng could provide fine backup to Mané or Dia in our predicted starting XI.

Monaco's right-winger Krépin Diatta and Sheffield United revelation Iliman Ndiaye make up the rest of our attacking options — Ndiaye is also capable of playing as an attacking midfielder so provides an extra option there as well as the wing or at centre-forward, so the in-form goalscorer's versatility will be valuable again.

MIDFIELDERS

In midfield, backing up our starting trio of Gueye, Gueye and Mendy, we've got Cheikhou Kouyaté, Pape Matar Sarr, Mamadou Loum, Moustapha Name and Pathé Ciss. Kouyaté is a solid holding midfield option who will provide great competition to the starting trio and we'd expect to see feature at some point in Qatar, perhaps even starting ahead of Mendy.

Sarr is an exciting talent who offers something different to our other midfield options. He's a technically proficient player who's probably most comfortable as an advanced '8'. He may not be the ideal profile to start in this midfield but depending on game state, he could be a very useful option to have. Unfortunately for Senegal, he hasn't made a single appearance for Tottenham Hotspur at club level this term, which won't help his match fitness or desire for a starting XI place.

Ciss and Loum provide good defensive midfield backup options. Off the bench, they'll provide a lot of energy and defensive work rate whether that's in order to retain a lead or play a ball-winning midfielder role in an attempt to get Senegal on the ball with a view to getting back into the game.

Lastly, Name is another versatile defensive midfield option who's capable of deputising at right-back. Should right-back prove to be a problem area for Senegal with Sarr out of the tournament due to injury, Cissé may look to Name as he has in the past, so he'll be another good option to have in the squad.

DEFENDERS

In defence, Koulibaly and Diallo are a clear number-one duo in the centre for us, with Moussa Niakhaté and currently-injured Pape Abou Cissé providing good-quality backups should they be required. However, the quality of our starting duo is a step above and this is important given the specific role that these players have to perform within Senegal's in-possession tactics.

Formose Mendy is another centre-back option but can also provide cover at right-back, which is where we may be more likely to see the 21-year-old Amiens player in the World Cup if we see him feature at all. However, we predict Real Betis' Sabaly will start at right-back in place of the injured Sarr.

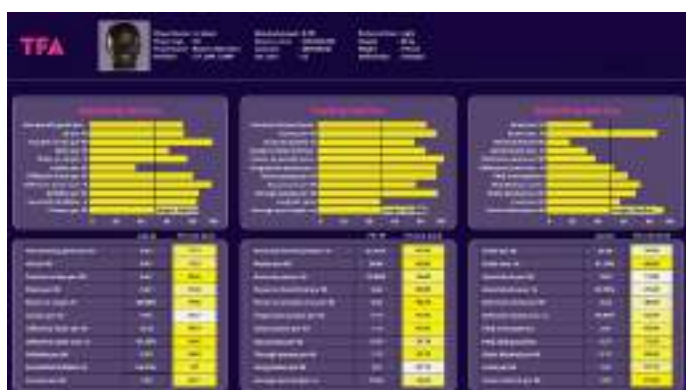
Left-back had been a problem area for Senegal but with Ismail Jakobs recently declaring for the Lions of Teranga, he has the opportunity to make that place in the squad his own, and we feel he'll do that in the World Cup. The Monaco man's main competition is likely to be former Monaco left-back Fodé Ballo-Touré, currently of reigning Serie A champions AC Milan.

Jakobs offers much more in terms of chance creation than Ballo-Touré does and promises to form a formidable attacking partnership with Mané on that left wing in Qatar. The link-up between Koulibaly, Jakobs and Mané from the switch to left-wing overload as discussed in the attacking phase section of our analysis is

mouthwatering, to say the least, and its potential should excite Senegalese supporters.

In goal, Mendy has the starting spot nailed down but has strong backup in the form of Alfred Gomis and Seny Dieng. The goalkeeper department, like the forwards, is a clear area of strength for this side.

KEY PLAYER



Sadio Mané is one of the best attackers in world football at the moment, having finished second in the 2022 Ballon d'Or to Real Madrid striker Karim Benzema, and he'll be Senegal's key man at the World Cup. If Senegal can get Mané on the ball in space in his favourite areas with regularity, that'll make life extremely difficult for their opponents.

S. MANÉ SHOT ASSISTS

All games from Bundesliga 2022/2023, DFB Pokal 2022/2023, Super Cup 2022/2023, UEFA Champions League 2022/2023, Africa Cup of Nations Qualification 2023, Coupe d'Ivoire, Africa Cup of Nations 2021, Cameroon, Premier League 2019/2022, FA Cup 2021/2022, Carabao Cup 2021/2022, UEFA Champions League 2021/2022

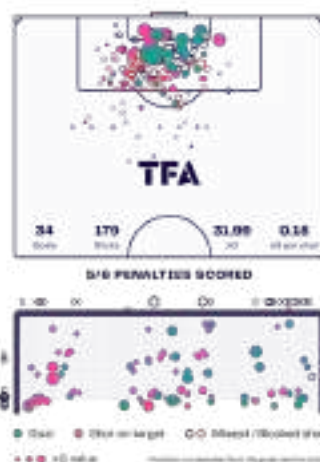


Mané is a top creator, as figure 15 indicates. He loves to create chances after drifting inside to

the left half-space, not necessarily from wider areas. He frequently likes to get into these positions for Senegal and the centre-backs' ability to find him when he moves inside via their line-breaking passes will be crucial to Senegal's chance creation in Qatar.

S. MANÉ XG MAP

All games from Bundesliga 2022/2023, DFB Pokal 2022/2023, Super Cup 2022/2023, UEFA Champions League 2022/2023, Africa Cup of Nations Qualification 2023, Coupe d'Ivoire, Africa Cup of Nations 2021, Cameroon, Premier League 2019/2022, FA Cup 2021/2022, Carabao Cup 2021/2022, UEFA Champions League 2021/2022



Additionally, of course, Mané is a brilliant goalscorer. After picking up the ball out wide or in the half-space, he'll threaten to carry it into the box on the left side and curl a shot around to the opposite side of the net, which is how so many of his goals are scored. If Mané gets into his preferred shooting positions in the World Cup, he'll be very difficult to prevent from hitting the back of the net thanks to his finishing quality.

TOURNAMENT PREDICTION

We think Senegal stand a great chance of getting out of the group stage in the World Cup for just the second time in their history this summer. From there, it's anybody's guess what will happen. They certainly have the quality to make it into the knockout stage and perhaps even to equal their best-ever showing by progressing into the quarter-finals. This may be a realistic and exciting goal for Cissé's side in Qatar, given the strength of their squad.

QATAR



GROUP A

— ALFIE PEARSON // @alfiepear —

The prestigious FIFA World Cup has experienced some iconic hosts and memorable moments since the inaugural tournament in 1930. From the Sipiwe Tshabalala goal and vuvuzelas of South Africa in 2010 to Diana Ross' penalty failure in the 1994 opening ceremony in the USA, the hosts typically provide entertainment one way or another.

However, the 2022 FIFA World Cup has attracted unwanted negative impressions, with the tournament in Qatar at the heart of corruption accusations, human rights violations, and awkward climate conditions.

Can the Qatar national team deliver positive performances at the tournament? Nations generally have success when hosting the FIFA World Cup. Six of the eight champions have won a title when hosting, including Uruguay's win in 1930 and England's victory in 1966. South Korea finished fourth in 2002, albeit with the assistance of questionable refereeing decisions; this is the type of result Qatar will be dreaming of.

Contrastingly, South Africa in 2010 are the only host nation that failed to advance beyond the group stage. In a group with an exciting Ecuador side, the AFCON reigning champions in Senegal, and a Netherlands team unbeaten in 15 games, many will expect a group-stage elimination for Qatar.

As the first Arab nation to host the World Cup and in their first appearance at the World Cup, Qatar face a challenging group. In this tactical analysis, we will discuss whether Félix Sánchez's squad can impress as hosts on the biggest stage.

PREDICTED STARTING XI

If Qatar are to perform at the 2022 FIFA World Cup, their continuity across the last few years will be essential. From the predicted starting XI below, they have registered 1,017 appearances, an astonishing average of 92 caps per starter. Four of the predicted starters have collected 100+ caps, with captain Hassan Al Haydos being Qatar's most-capped player with 165 appearances.

Under manager Félix Sánchez, Qatar have deployed a 5-3-2 in recent years. This consistency has also been aided by their World Cup preparations. Building up to this historic tournament, Qatar have undergone multiple training camps and began their third and final preparatory phase in October ahead of the opening game against Ecuador on the 20th of November. None of the 27 players selected for the final preparatory phase have appeared in the Qatar Stars League so far this season, with full focus on the World Cup.

The final consistent link in the Qatar national team is the Aspire Academy, a hub of sporting excellence in Doha. A considerable contingent of the squad came through the football programme at the Aspire Academy. Félix Sánchez left Barcelona's La Masia to join the Aspire Academy in 2006 and has been in Qatar ever since, working his way up from the youth sides to his senior team appointment in 2017.



Mohammed will provide energy up and down the right wing.

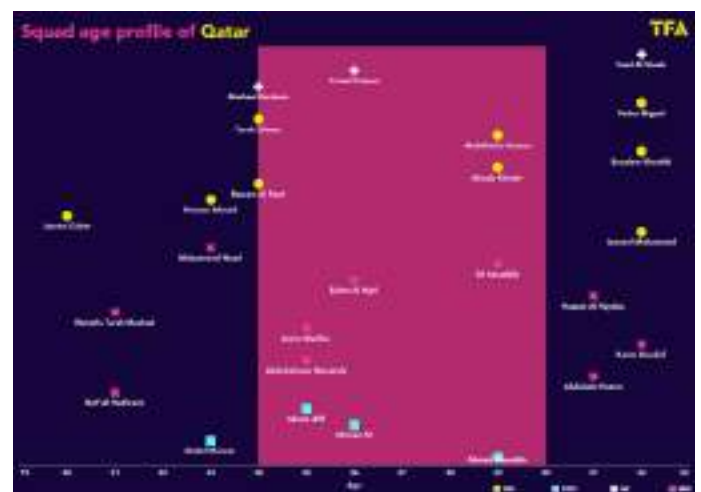
In front of the defence, naturalised pivot player Karim Boudiaf of Al Duhail will balance the midfield and allow the two eights to advance. Al Rayyan’s Abdulaziz Hatem will shuttle between the boxes as an all-action midfielder. Meanwhile, Al Sadd’s Hassan Al Haydos will have a freer role, drifting wide and combining as more of an attacking midfielder.

Qatar’s strike partnership consists of their two best players; Akram Afif and Almoez Ali. During his time at the Aspire Academy, Afif had a spell in Spain, representing Sevilla and Villarreal’s youth teams. He began his senior career with Eupen in Belgium before rejoining Villarreal on a permanent deal.

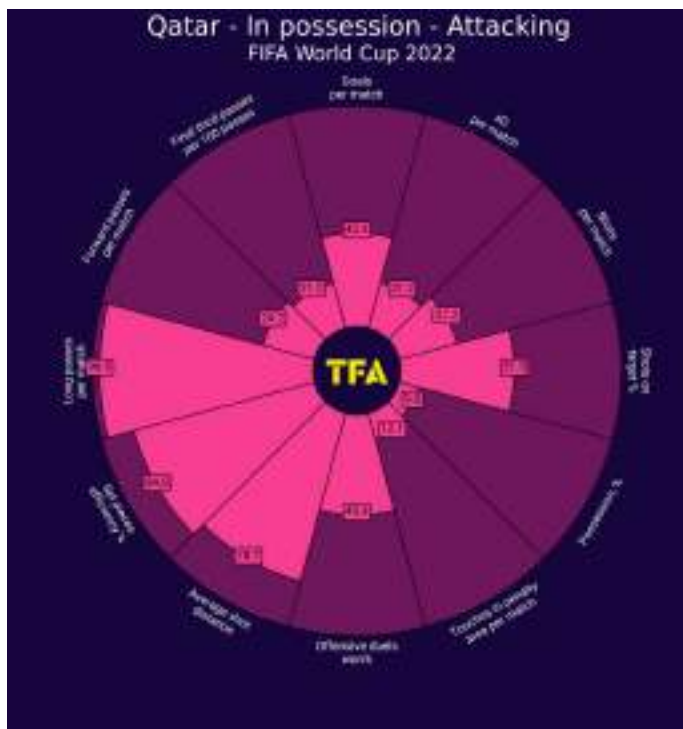
Without a first-team appearance for The Yellow Submarine, Afif returned to Al Sadd after a successful loan. Ali also has European experience, in Austria, Belgium and Spain, but his best work has been with Al Duhail. Whilst Afif has the license to roam and provide overloads across the pitch, Ali will remain centrally as the focal point to occupy centre-backs.

We predict the experienced Saad Al Sheeb, one of 13 Al Sadd players in the squad, to start between the sticks. Sánchez frequently rotates his goalkeepers, so it wouldn’t be a surprise to see Meshaal Barsham or Al Gharafa’s Yousef Hassan making an appearance. In the centre-back trio, Bassam Al-Rawi of Al Duhail will start on the right side. Midfielder-turned-defender Boualem Khoukhi, another one of many naturalised players after moving to Qatar, will start in the centre of the three.

The left side of the defence is less clear. Tarek Salman, a player with youth experience in Spain after time in the Aspire Academy, is a reliable option for Sánchez. Portugal-born Pedro Miguel has played across the backline and was crucial to Xavi’s dominance with Al Sadd. Abdelkarim Hassan, who had a loan spell with Belgium’s Aspire-owned club Eupen, has featured as the left-sided centre-back and left wing-back for Qatar. On the opposite flank, Ismaeel



ATTACKING PHASE



In possession, Qatar are not a ball-dominant side. In the last year, Félix Sánchez's team have averaged 46.63% possession with their approach tending to focus on resisting pressure and fast-paced attacks. From the eight games in which Qatar have had less than 50% possession, they attempted more shots than their opponents in six of them. The Maroon average just 4.64 passes per possession, with nearly 13% of their passes being long passes. Despite having less possession, Qatar regularly attempt more long passes than their opponent.

From goal kicks, though, Sánchez's side mainly play short. When playing under Sánchez, all three goalkeeper options of Meshaal Barsham, Saad Al Sheeb, and Yousef Hassan take the majority of their goal kicks short and generally attempt twice as many short passes per game as long passes. The short goal kicks are often two-yard passes to the central centre-back, Boualem Khoukhi.

The two wide centre-backs hold maximum width on the same horizontal line as Khoukhi, typically

in line with the six-yard box. This peculiarly deep and wide positioning from the centre-backs also has them on the same vertical line as the wing-backs, creating suboptimal receiving angles for the wing-back if the wide centre-backs try to access the wing-backs.

However, the centre-backs' wide positioning stretches the opposition's front line. If opponents overemphasise central compactness, the wide centre-backs will be free to receive. But opponents tend to place their front two evenly between the Khoukhi and the wide centre-backs, thus giving Khoukhi time in possession. With the awkward centre-back positioning stretching the opposition's front line, the passing lanes are expanded for Qatar's central centre-back. As a result, they can find the dismarking midfielders or attackers with longer passes beyond the opposition's first two lines of pressure.

This can, in essence, create Qatar's threatening transitional moments from their own goal kicks by attracting opponents into Qatar's defensive third before playing behind them to face their own goal. Boualem Khoukhi is capable of playing these longer passes, averaging 8.76 progressive passes per 90 with a strong accuracy of 77.27% for Al Sadd in the Qatar Stars League last season.



In the image above against Slovenia, we can see build-up similarities to Qatar's shape from goal kicks. Khoukhi has possession as the central centre-back with the outside centre-backs continuing to take up wide positions. This wider positioning also facilitates the advancing movement of the two wing-backs, with

Abdelkarim Hassan and Ismaeel Mohammed joining the front line at the top and bottom of the image.

Right centre-back Bassam Al Rawi is Qatar's best ball-playing defender, retaining useful passing range to bypass opposition pressure or switch the point of attack from right to left.

With the two wing-backs pushing forward, the midfield three will remain ahead of the defence in the build-up phase rather than joining the forward line. The midfielders will have staggered positioning to provide different options and aid ball progression out of the defence. In the image above, Naif Al Hadhrami has drifted towards the right half-space between the Slovenia midfield and forward line, whereas Mohammed Waad is behind the Slovenia midfield.

These are positions that we can expect starters Hassan Al Haydos and Abdulaziz Hatem to occupy and rotate, with Al Haydos frequently drifting wide to the right. Pivot player Karim Boudiaf offers some technical security and ball retention but mainly leaves the riskier progressive actions for others.

Attacker Akram Afif is often given full freedom to roam and influence Qatar's attacking play wherever. With a tendency to operate in and around the left half-space, Afif regularly drops into the midfield or unoccupied spaces to receive freely from the centre-backs.

As Qatar's key player, Afif is the usual target for the Maroon's attacks. However, his tendency to drop deep or wide to the left can leave striker Almoez Ali isolated. Learning from manager Hernán Crespo at Al Duhail before joining the national team camps, Ali is impressive with his back to goal given his isolated circumstances. He has a comfortable first touch and uses his body to resist pressure, whilst also offering accurate passing to build attacks.

Against the physical and defensive quality that Ecuador, Senegal, and the Netherlands possess, Ali will need more support to link up with at the World Cup.



After a sustained spell of possession, Qatar's attacking shape under Sánchez becomes more of a 3-1-6. With their counterattacking approach against stronger teams, we wouldn't expect Qatar to sustain attacking pressure too often against World Cup quality but their shape naturally becomes a 3-1-6 during attacking transitions too.

With the two wing-backs remaining high and wide whilst Almoez Ali is central, support will push up from deep. Akram Afif will always find his way into the final third, hoping to craft shooting opportunities. The two central midfielders will also advance to make the front six, eventually providing some support for Ali's link-up play.

Behind the front six, the pivot player and three centre-backs will sit back in rest defence. Karim Boudiaf will primarily be a recycling option with the two wide centre-backs looking to offer progression if necessary. Despite being right-footed, Tarek Salman is comfortable anywhere across the back three, but he always looks to open up and play the ball infield.

Abdelkarim Hassan is very forward-thinking, looking to carry into the midfield and break lines. However, his technical deficiencies regarding heavy touches and inconsistent weight of pass can be punished by quality opponents when deployed at centre-back, in particular.

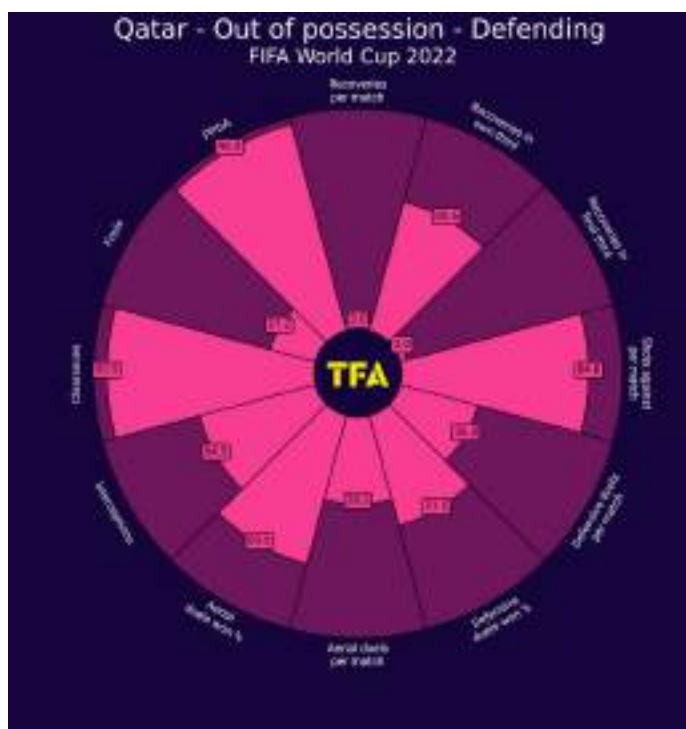
DEFENSIVE PHASE



When inside the defensive third, the wing-backs will stay in the defensive line, practically pinned back by the opponent's wingers. Pairing this with the central midfielders' narrow positioning, Qatar allows lots of space in the wide areas. Attacking players, such as Alexis Sánchez, often drop to receive on the half-turn but the most effective way of punishing this defensive structure is with the use of the defenders.

Qatar's ball-side midfielder will move wide to press the ball carrier when they begin to enter the final third. Striker Almoez Ali is primarily responsible for blocking the opposition pivot player but will drop even further into the vacated space from the pressing midfielder.

Akram Afif lacks defensive work rate, typically just roaming to positions that could threaten in attacking transitions. This allows the opposition's defenders time on the ball with the opportunity to step into midfield. Daley Blind's exceptional passing ability and Nathan Aké's assured progression have the quality to penetrate Qatar's midfield and retain numbers in the front line. Senegal and Ecuador also have defenders that can accelerate attacks and break through Qatar's structure, like Pape Abou Cissé and William Pacho.



Out of possession, Félix Sánchez sets Qatar up to defend in a 5-3-2. The two wing-backs are attached to the defensive line to create a flat five. The wing-backs generally only move into the wide areas when the opposition winger is receiving by the touchline.

Due to the congested space in central areas from the back five and midfield three, their overloads allow the centre-backs to man-mark an opposition attacker that is dropping off. However, once the attacker travels in front of the Qatar midfield, the centre-back will move back into position.

An example of this can be seen in the figure below against Chile. Former Arsenal attacker Alexis Sánchez has dropped away from right centre-back Bassam Al Rawi, who initially followed Sánchez. Receiving off the centre-backs, Sánchez has possession in the left half-space and immediately attracts pressure from Qatar's ball-side midfielder Hassan Al Haydos.



When the opposition have possession in deeper areas, attempting to progress into the final third, Qatar's wing-backs occasionally jump out of the defensive line to press the opponent's full-backs. This strategy requires immense fitness levels from the wing-backs, sprinting after anticipating the pass wide to pressure the first touch. Qatar's wing-back will look to prevent a pass down the line and force play backwards, with the ball-side attacker cutting out access to the pivot. The remaining four defenders will naturally shift across to provide cover and balance.



Qatar's out-of-possession focus is to absorb pressure in their defensive structure, limiting openings and space in and around the defensive line whilst conceding spaces in deeper areas. As a result, Félix Sánchez's side on average allow the opposition to play 23.73 passes per defensive action. This is a stark contrast from the high-pressing approaches of Senegal, Ecuador and the Netherlands. Striker Almoez Ali is always a willing presser of the backline and goalkeeper in the final third and for backwards passes.

If Qatar do engage in a high press against the opposition's build-up, they will press out of their 5-3-2 shape. The front two will focus on pressing

the centre-back in possession whilst keeping the pivot player in their cover shadow. The midfield three will push up to condense the space and pressure ball reception into the midfielders or full-backs. If the winger drops back to create a new passing angle, Qatar's wing-back will follow and remain touch-tight.

TRANSITIONS

With their sit-back and counterattack approach, attacking transitions are crucial to Qatar's success. In the last year, 38.7% of Qatar's counterattacks have ended in shots, averaging at over 1.5 per game, which is a decent efficiency for Félix Sánchez's side.

Ecuador and the Netherlands are generally quite good at limiting opposition counterattacks, with Senegal potentially the opponent Qatar will have the most success in attacking transitions against. Nevertheless, the Maroon will certainly threaten with counterattacks against any opponent, and it would be required to progress beyond the group stage.

Qatar's 5-0 win against the UAE in the FIFA Arab Cup quarter-finals epitomises their game plan. Sánchez's team were 5-0 up at half-time with just 25.8% possession after devastating directness in attacking transitions.

The opening goal was scored six seconds after regaining possession and the third goal was the result of a penalty won five seconds after winning possession. The fourth goal was the aforementioned semi-transition situation, attracting opponents forward from short goal kicks, with a goal scored ten seconds after a quick free-kick on the edge of the Qatar box. The fifth goal hit the back of the net five seconds after regaining possession.



The image is an example of Qatar's counterattacks against Chile. Akram Afif, the player in possession, is the primary receiver of forward passes to trigger counterattacks as a talented ball carrier. Striker Almoez Ali remains centrally up against the opposition's defensive line. The two central midfielders will also push up to support, typically targeting eventual shooting opportunities on the edge of the box.

With Afif's tendency to drift towards the left, sometimes only the right wing-back will join the counterattack on the far side. However, often both wing-backs will bolt up the wing and facilitate Afif's natural dribbling infield off the left. As a result, Qatar's pivot player and three centre-backs stay back to provide balance.



In defensive transitions, Qatar have less of a focus on counter-pressing with their intentions to rush back into a solid defensive shape. One player will pressure the opposition player in possession to delay progression. The defensively aware attacker Almoez Ali may occasionally drop into any gaps in midfield and sustain central compactness until teammates get back into a narrow structure from an expansive attacking shape.

Sánchez may combat the ruthless attacking quality at the World Cup by keeping one wing-back deeper or by limiting central midfielder Abdulaziz Hatem's runs forward.

ATTACKERS

Qatar's starting striker partnership of Almoez Ali and Akram Afif contains their best two players. In possession, it is clear that Félix Sánchez wants them to receive the ball as frequently as possible. Akram Afif has the freedom to drop during the build-up phase to receive in space off the centre-backs, whilst also having the license in rest-attack to drift into areas where he thinks Qatar can best progress and penetrate.

Almoez Ali is much more of a selfless player. Willing to take on Afif's defensive workload whilst remaining compact, his attacking game is also really strong. He can resist pressure with his back to goal and find supporting teammates with accuracy, whilst registering 50 goals and 47 assists in 163 games for Al Duhail.

Off the bench, Al Gharafa's Ahmed Alaaeldin is a nuisance for opposition defences. He doesn't quite have Ali's quality with his back to goal, but the Egypt-born striker can cause chaos off long balls. He can run the channels but his runs in behind defences offer something different for the Maroon. Despite his dreadful goalscoring record for the Qatar national team, scoring just once in 46 caps mostly off the bench, Alaaeldin has displayed some composed finishing for Al Gharafa.

MIDFIELDERS

Qatar's expected starting midfield of pivot player Karim Boudiaf, box-to-box midfielder Abdulaziz Hatem and attacking midfielder Hassan Al Haydos has a wealth of

experience and balanced technical qualities. All three are willing to cover ground defensively, with Boudiaf tending to sit in front and protect the defence with his aerial and ground duelling ability. Al Sadd's Al Haydos provides riskier attacking intent and has incredible chemistry with key player Akram Afif.

Assim Madibo of Al Duhail is the likely replacement for Boudiaf as the defensive midfielder and is another player to have graduated from the Aspire Academy before having spells in Austria, Spain and Belgium. Al Sadd's Mohammed Waad is the swap for left-sided central midfielder Hatem, although weaker going forwards he has better defensive fundamentals.

Ali Assadalla offers a bit more technical security than the other midfielders, at the expense of Al Haydos' creativity and Hatem's duelling, but is a useful option for both roles. Assadalla can also operate as the width holder if needed, a common role of his at Al Sadd.

DEFENDERS

We expect Abdelkarim Hassan, Bassam Al Rawi and Boualem Khoukhi to be guaranteed starters for Qatar at the World Cup, but manager Félix Sánchez has a few options to complete the back five. Left-footed Hassan has been deployed as the left-sided centre-back and left wing-back.

Meanwhile, Al Gharafa's Homam Ahmed is a suitable, consistent player for the left wing-back role as Hassan's back-up or alongside Hassan. Portugal-born Pedro Miguel has also played left centre-back but has spent most of his career playing at right-back. Khoukhi and Al Rawi will start in the centre and right of the three centre-backs respectively, with Tarek Salman another option for the left centre-back spot.

KEY PLAYER



Akram Afif (177cm/5'10", 69kg/152lbs) is a right-footed attacker at the heart of Qatar's attacking play. The 2019 Asian Footballer of the Year often operates as the left winger for Qatari club Al Sadd but Félix Sánchez deploys Afif in a strike partnership with Almoez Ali.

As mentioned earlier, Afif is allowed to drift into different positions to receive possession and influence the game as much as possible. He can take too many touches in deeper phases, which will be punished on the biggest stage and was punished by Chile's Alexis Sánchez in September.

He is essential to Qatar's counterattacks with his quality ball manipulation and ability to skip past challenges making him the target for attacking transitions. His responsibilities also include set pieces, with his eye-catching afro regularly seen over the Maroon's free-kicks and corners.

TOURNAMENT PREDICTION

As the second-lowest ranked nation at the FIFA World Cup, hosts Qatar will be dreaming of causing an upset to progress into the knockout stages in their first-ever finals appearance. Facing Ecuador in the tournament's

opening fixture, manager Félix Sánchez will be fantasising about earning three points against the group's perceived second-weakest side to kick off a memorable tournament for the Maroon.

However, Ecuador are full of emerging talents, with many already making the jump to Europe. Brighton duo Moisés Caicedo and Pervis Estupiñán are well-rounded to support Bayer Leverkusen centre-back Piero Hincapié in defence and electric winger Gonzalo Plata in attack.

In Senegal and the Netherlands, Qatar faces two powerhouses of their continents. Senegal arrive in Qatar as the reigning AFCON champions and qualified for the World Cup by beating Mohamed Salah's Egypt in a dramatic penalty shoot-out. With two established, world-class stars in centre-back Kalidou Koulibaly and Bayern Munich attacker Sadio Mané, Qatar will be challenged more than ever. And things may only get worse for Sánchez's side when they line up against the Netherlands, whose form has them as one of the potential World Cup winners.

With the drama of a tournament opening fixture against Ecuador, the potential counterattacks against Senegal and facing the Netherlands when the Oranje may have already qualified for the next round, maybe Qatar could surprise and progress. That is, however, unlikely, with the quality of these three teams much greater than Qatar's. In reality, one point from the group stage would be better than most people would expect, with three points being a remarkable achievement for the Arab nation. Either way, Qatar will be looking to put on a show as hosts of the world's most viewed sporting event.



GROUP B

PLAYERS TO WATCH

VENKATANARAYANAN VENKATESAN // @VenkyRedDevil

The first-ever winter world cup is almost here. It's time to look at which teams are the strongest and which players are the ones to watch out for specifically. In order to list down the players to look out for, we have specifically looked at the U23 category and players who play quite often for their respective clubs this season. It is to be noted that, these players might not start all the matches for their teams in the World Cup and could potentially miss out on getting called up altogether, but if and when they do represent their country in Qatar, they definitely have the potential to be game changers.

Group B consists of one of the surprise packages from 2018 – England, along with the USA, Wales and Iran

The following visualisation shows the percentile ranks of the U23 players to watch out for from Group B. All data from this season.

Bukayo Saka | Arsenal | England | 21 years old

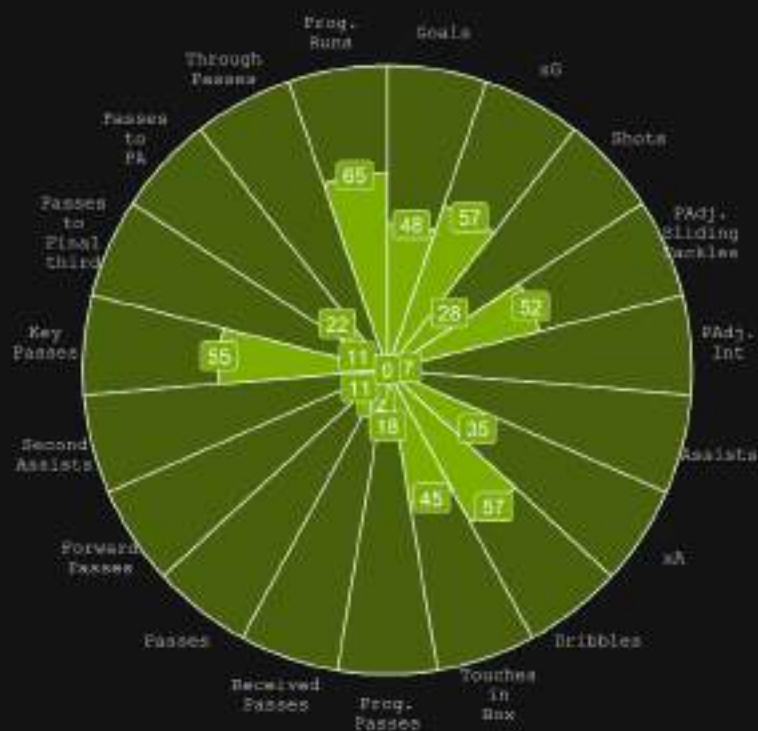
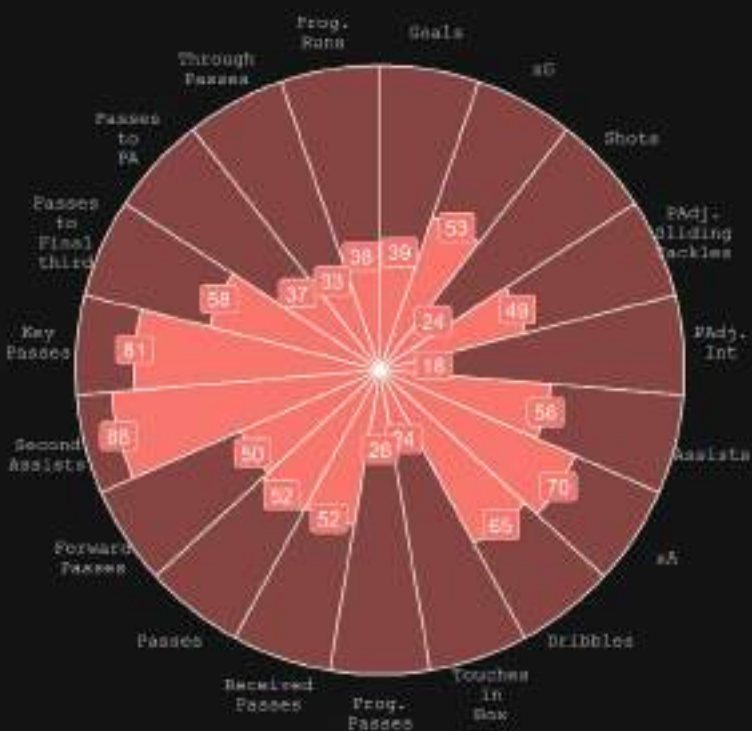
Bukayo Saka endured one of the cruellest endings in the final of Euro 2020. The 21-year-old Arsenal attacker missed the decisive penalty that decided England will finish as runners-up and not as winners of the tournament. However, since then Saka has gone on to become one of the key players both at club and country level. Saka has been used in different positions by Gareth Southgate including at left-wing back. However, Saka is at his best when played on the right side of the front three. Saka, as seen in the visual above, ranks above average for a number of attacking metrics – most specifically for creativity. He is closer to the box and likes to take on the opposition defenders with his impressive dribbling ability. Saka could very well start all the games for England at the World cup given his current form. However, it will be interesting what kind of role the 21-year-old Arsenal player has at the World Cup.

World Cup 2022 | Group B

Percentile ranks among players from res. positions in res. leagues | Min. 200 minutes played

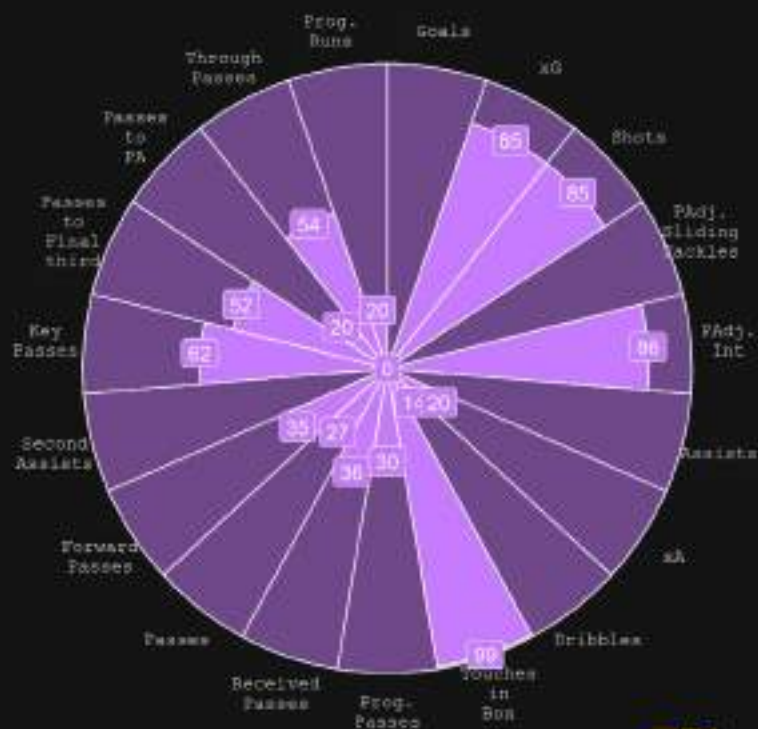
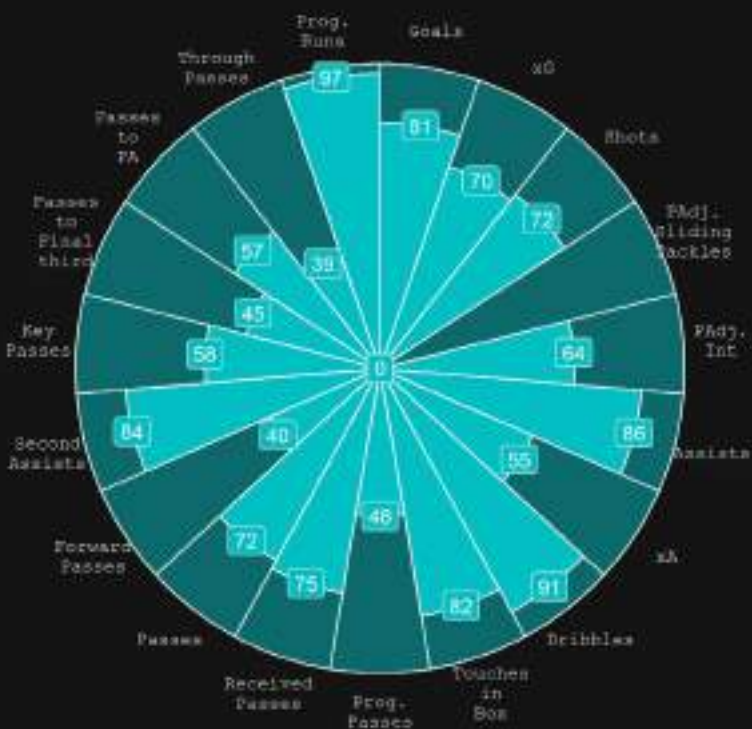
B. Aaronson | Leeds United
USA

B. Johnson | Nottingham Forest
Wales



B. Saka | Arsenal
England

S. Azmoun | Bayer Leverkusen
Iran



Data: Wyscout | Visual by @YankyReddevil | All stats are 'per 90' unless mentioned otherwise
Data as on 19th Oct, 2022

Sardar Azmoun | Bayer Leverkusen | IR Iran | 27 years old

Given the lack of U23 options from Iran, Sardar Azmoun is the player to watch out for from this Iran team. Azmoun, playing for Bundesliga side Bayer Leverkusen after signing a pre-contract in January 2022 and joining the club in the summer. After entering the professional football scene with a lot of expectations on his shoulders, Azmoun was part Iran's 2018 World Cup squad but retired from the international scene temporarily. He returned to international football once again in 2019. Azmoun, so far, has not lived up to the initial hype that surrounded him but will be a player to watch out for from this Iran side given his experience.

Brenden Aaronson | Leeds United | USA | 22 years old

Leeds United secured the signature of USMNT international Brenden Aaronson in the recently concluded summer transfer window. Since his move, Aaronson has started every league game for the club and has also put in some eye-catching performances. The 21-year-old has played the majority of his minutes in the no.10 role. He brings a lot of energy and hard work to the pitch. Ranking, 81st percentile for Key Passes per 90 minutes, Aaronson brings a lot of flair to his game. Aaronson is already an important member of the USMNT. From a tricky group, a lot of burden will lie on young Aaronson's shoulders to carry his team to the next round at Qatar.

Brennan Johnson | Nottingham Forest | Wales | 21 years old

One player in English football who has caught the eye of most fans over the course of the last one and half years is Nottingham Forest's Brennan Johnson. Johnson who impressed for the most part last season and was vital in Forest's promotion from the Championship and has started his life in the Premier League very well, even though his club hasn't. Originally from the Forest academy, Johnson made his senior debut for Wales in 2020 and has since been a regular at first-team level. Johnson can pretty much play anywhere in front but has predominantly been used in a more central role. Johnson's numbers at the start of this season look decent for a 21-year-old. With the attacker already an integral part of Wales' system during the qualifying campaign, he will now be expected to perform well at the highest level to help his team secure a place in the further rounds of the 2022 World Cup.

ENGLAND



GROUP B

LUIS KIRCHER // @luiskircher

After a positive 2018 World Cup campaign in which England reached the semi-final before then going on to lose in the final of Euro 2020, there is an ever-high expectation for the English side to put together an equally impressive run at the World Cup 2022 in Qatar.

They started the new calendar year 2022 with a 2-1 win over Switzerland and a 3-0 win over Ivory Coast in international friendly matches. Since then, England have put together some poor performances. They only achieved three draws against Italy (0-0) and Germany (1-1 and 3-3) besides three defeats against Hungary (1-0 and 0-4) and Italy (1-0) in the UEFA Nations League. Therefore, they ranked in fourth place at the end of the competition; England scored 11 goals but also conceded 9 goals in their last 8 matches.

Nevertheless, there is a feeling amongst many that the current crop of players is nearing the talent pool that performed so underwhelmingly for Sven Goran-Eriksson and Fabio Capello. Whilst England don't currently have a team filled with the likes of David Beckham, Steven Gerrard, Frank Lampard etc., there is a young core to this side, who could well become leading world-class players in the not-too-distant future.

As such, there is a positive atmosphere in England with regard to the national team. At the same time, the tactics and nominations of Gareth Southgate are heavily criticised. So, just as at the last world cup, there are lower levels of expectations — something which only seemed to benefit them in Russia.

This tactical analysis gives an in-depth insight into the players likely to feature in this winter's tournament, as well as giving an analysis of Southgate's overall tactics and how the manager is likely to use said players.

PREDICTED STARTING XI

England's squad is filled to the brim with young talent. You could theoretically have a host of players in the starting XI yet to enter their peak years. We can see these talents in the image below. Declan Rice, Mason Mount, Fikayo Tomori, Phil Foden and Jude Bellingham could all arguably put a case forward for a starting role in Southgate's preferred side.

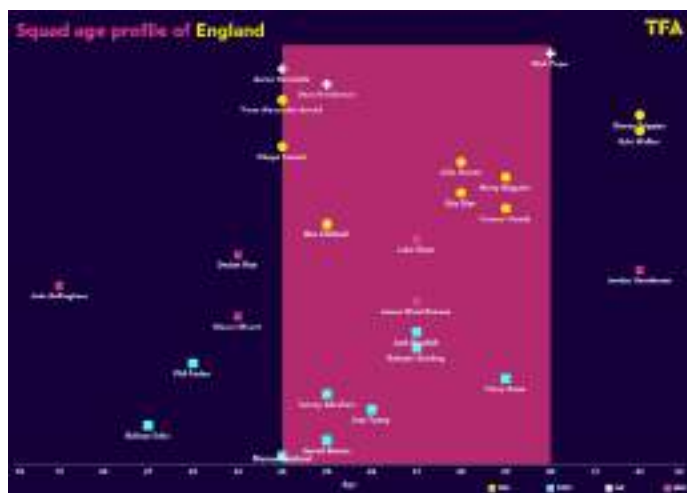
On the other end of the spectrum, Kyle Walker, Kieran Trippier and Jordan Henderson make up the only likely squad options who are perhaps beyond their peak years. Whilst Henderson might struggle for fitness, which would be a devastating blow for England, and Trippier faces steep competition from Trent Alexander-Arnold, Walker is playing still good football under Pep Guardiola at Manchester City.

And then we come to players in the peak years of their careers, as highlighted by the lighter pink section in the following image. There are certainly some key players in this stage of their respective careers. Centre-backs Harry Maguire, John Stones, Eric Dier and Conor Coady fall into this category, as do potential starters Jack Grealish, Raheem Sterling, left-back duo Ben Chilwell and Luke Shaw. Finally, Captain and talisman Harry Kane also falls into this category.

Overall, the squad is certainly one of the younger squads of a leading world footballing nation, and even the players in the peak years of their careers still have plenty of football left in them.

What's most exciting, however, is the young players, who are arguably already leading talents on the world stage. Saka, Foden, Rice, Mount and Bellingham undoubtedly fall into

that category from their performances in the last seasons, whilst Alexander-Arnold has failed to meet the heights of the previous three seasons but is nevertheless an elite talent.



As for formation, there is still some debate as to how Southgate will choose to have his side set up, let alone what players he will choose in that system. It's been widely documented that Southgate likes to play a back three.

Most recently, it appears Southgate is preferring a 3-4-2-1 formation. It seems highly likely that the midfield will involve Rice in the double-pivot with Jude Bellingham or Jordan Henderson. It's likely that Henderson would warrant a start in the midfield given his experience and leadership qualities, on top of his consistently strong performances for England in recent years. However, there's an argument to be made that Bellingham is England's most natural number 8, and with Rice best as a 6, Bellingham would arguably give England their most balanced midfield. Additionally, due to current form, Jude Bellingham should be the option next to Rice.

Ahead of this midfield pivot, England will operate with a front three. The one certainty is Harry Kane starting as the centre-forward. Tammy Abraham deserves credit for excellent performances at AS Roma, and the poacher will undoubtedly offer a threat off of the bench.

On either side of Kane, Foden would appear to have played himself into the starting XI given his

scintillating club form. As for the other position, it's incredibly difficult to predict. Sterling has been a strong performer for England and is experienced at international level, but a dip in club form may cost him a starting place, whilst Saka is widely regarded as one of the Premier League's best players of the current season. Rashford, on the other hand, has been increasingly important for Manchester United this season before suffering an injury in the middle of September.

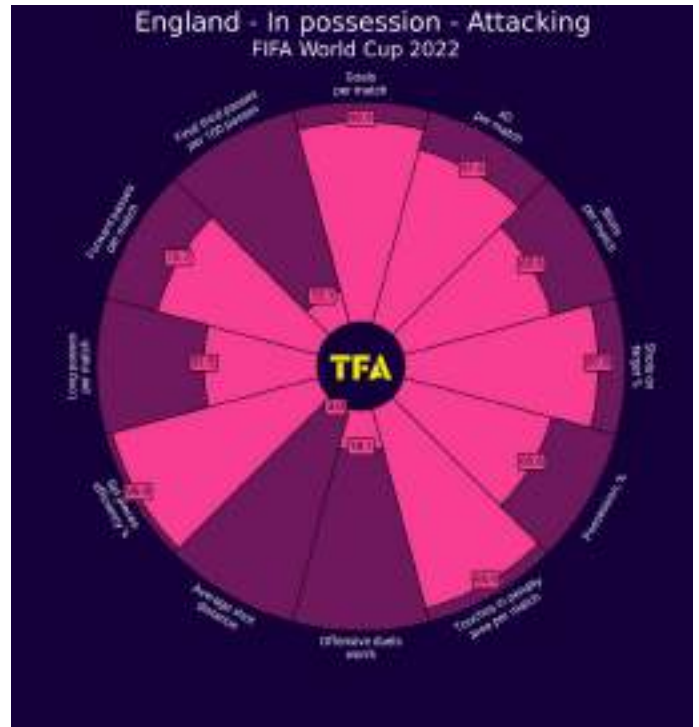
At the back, Maguire, Tomori and Walker seem set to start as a back-three, with Trent Alexander-Arnold at right wing-back, because of the missing competition from injured Reece James. As for the left wing-back position, it's a toss-up between Chilwell and Shaw, but expect the Manchester United man to nick it. The wing-back pairing, and even overall formation, may well change based on the opponent. Against an opponent sitting deep in a low block, we could well see Southgate opt for Alexander-Arnold or Trippier, and Chilwell, giving these wingbacks the license to pepper the box with crosses.

Finally, in goal, Nick Pope had the chance to prove himself in the last matches but couldn't really convince. Aaron Ramsdale might be the number one option for England. His current form will also prove helpful for Southgate's side, and this should see him keep his place at the expense of Nick Pope and Dean Henderson.



ATTACKING PHASE

We can see that England are a patient possession side, playing with little directness, and therefore, unsurprisingly, with few final third passes per 100 passes. On top of this, Southgate's side are far from partial to a long ball. Yet, despite this lack of directness, they are an incredibly efficient attacking side. We can see how highly they rank for goals per match, xG per match and touches in the penalty area per match.



In terms of how they will set up in possession, we have to acknowledge that Southgate has flittered between using a back-three and back-four. However, with Declan Rice growing as a ball player and not just a defensive midfielder who can break up play, the West Ham midfielder provides Southgate with the flexibility to allow England to provide good build-up with both central midfielders.

From this shape, Rice will sit deep during build-up play, allowing the wingbacks to push on and giving England something very similar in possession with a back three to what they look like with a back four.

We can see this pattern in a game situation from the match against Germany, as we see Rice dropping between two centre-backs in order to allow the wing-backs to push forward, whilst also creating lots of central space.



It's well known that Kane likes to drop into midfield at any given time, and leaving two in the midfield during build-up provides more space for him to do this, along with creating plenty of different passing angles from the back three and wingbacks to find the mercurial front man.

Kane's undeniable ability as a goalscoring threat ensures he is always marked closely by the opposition defence, and he is happy to be man-marked to create opportunities on either side of him for his attacking teammates.

In the following image, we can see how he remains central as England build up their game. He drops deep to collect the ball and switches the side of play.



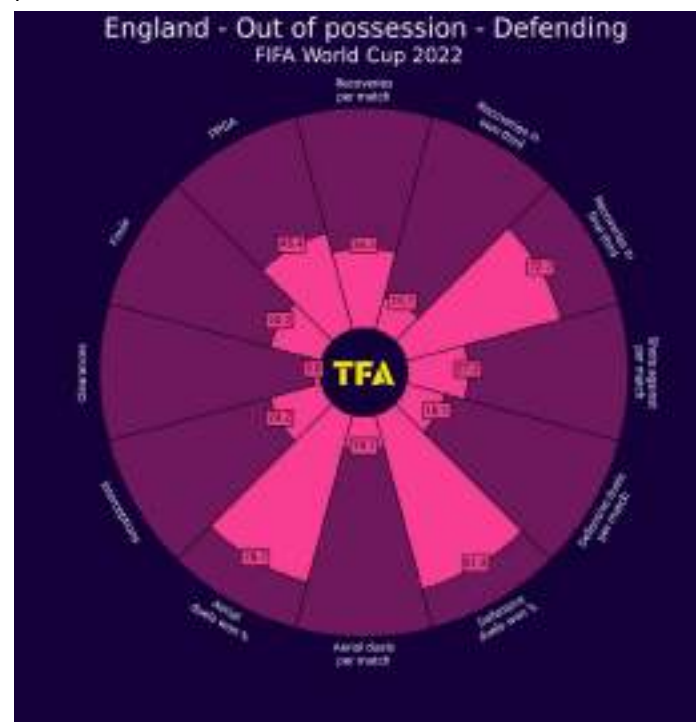
England will also use their attacking talent in wide areas to build play, and even when opponents don't get pulled forward, their attacking wide players have the pace to latch onto through passes even with little space behind. We can see in the following image how Sterling is dropping deep and in a more central area as Shaw receives space on the left flank. Sterling passes the ball to Shaw, before then spinning in behind for the through pass.



DEFENSIVE PHASE

With England being a side that dominates possession so heavily, they naturally spend less time out of possession than other teams will. With this style of play, England will most commonly face sides looking to beat them with quick, direct counter-attacks.

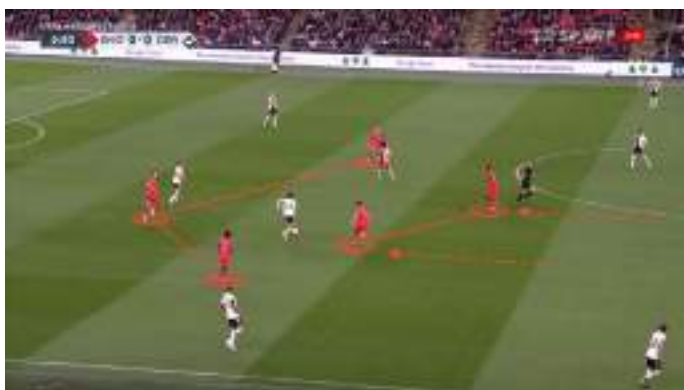
Cutting these attacks out at the source is vital, and we can see that England's ability to make recoveries in the final third is strong, suggesting they press well, and regain possession when the opponent has the ball inside their own third. In terms of just general solidity in defence, it's encouraging for England fans to see their aerial duel win percentage and defensive duel win percentage, rank so highly too.



Look for England's midfield to get particularly compact in an effort to protect the centre of the pitch. With a double pivot, they will remain compact, whilst still providing pressure when the ball is in the half-space. We can also see how one winger tucks inside, with the other winger and centre-forward preventing any easy passage out of pressure for the opposition side.



This compactness remains in the press as well. England will keep their front three narrow, pressing the ball and showing the opponent wide. They are supported by the central midfielders pushing forward to ensure that if the front three are beaten, there won't be any space in the centre of the pitch for them.



Rice's ability to cover ground well and break up play so effectively gives England's midfield and front three more freedom to press aggressively. Should they be beaten, as they are in the next image, Rice steps forward from his deep position to intercept the ball.



TRANSITIONS

When we talk about transition, we naturally look at what teams do as they transition from defence into attack, and then vice versa from attack into defence.

Starting with transition to attack, England will often look to keep possession and begin their patient build-up phase from the back. However, Kane can perform as a target man in transition, and England will also look to hit him in transition. With the pace of England's wide players a constant threat, the likes of Foden, Sterling etc., will look to run past Kane and latch onto the knockdown, before continuing the fast break.



As for transition to defence, England counter-press well, using two basic structures to facilitate this. Firstly, if the ball is lost over a short distance, it will be immediately pressed by the player who gave up possession. This immediate pressure forces the opponent to move the ball quickly, perhaps before their teammates have transitioned into space to receive the ball and play out. As such, this can force a quick turnover, or at least encourage the opponent to merely clear their lines with a long ball forward.

However, England also structure their counter-press during the possession phase. In advanced attacks, Southgate's side will have plenty of passing options in close proximity to the ball. This allows them to combine in tight spaces and advance possession, but it also allows them to quickly swarm the ball upon losing it, and quickly overload the opposition.



ATTACKERS

As a group, England have a set of forwards that are taking a respectable amount of shots per 90, on top of taking a good amount of touches in the box per 90. There isn't particularly any weak player. The wide players generally lean towards more touches in the box per 90 than their centre-forwards, and then adversely, the centre-forwards take more shots than the wide players. That's to be expected.

In terms of wide players, Grealish and Sterling are clear outliers for touches in the box per 90. Kane, unsurprisingly, is high on shots per 90. Interestingly with Kane, he ranks relatively low on touches in the box per 90 despite this, giving an insight into how quickly he gets his shots away, but also showing that he will take plenty of shots from outside of the area too.

Moving on to look at actual goal contributions as well as xG contributions, we can again say that Kane ranks highly, whilst Abraham has outperformed his xG contributions.

Regardless, what we can ascertain from this is that England are blessed with a high-performing group of attacking players, and there will be top-level players not selected. It's a good headache for Southgate to have, at least.

MIDFIELDERS

Then we move onto looking at England's midfielders. Henderson is an outlier when measuring progressive passes and passes into the final third.

Foden ranks well in goal contributions, although is more likely to play out wide and then turning

in into more of a 10 role. Mount and Bellingham are other stand outs.

DEFENDERS

Whilst Southgate is spoilt for choice when choosing his best options in midfield and attack, England's defensive options are slightly shallower. Whilst Chilwell and Shaw are two leading left-backs and the centre-backs are full of seasoned top-class players, there are only a few options for the right side.

KEY PLAYER

Kane is one of the best centre-forwards in the world and will be looking to perform as well as he did in the Euro last year. His game has moved on from just being an elite goalscorer, and Kane has become an outstanding provider, on top of his continued goalscoring exploits. We can see this by seeing how highly he ranks for not only attacking and shooting statistics but also passing and progressions statistics.

Firstly, in attack, he is in the upper echelons of the league for non-penalty goals per 90, xG per 90, headed goals per 90, and shots per 90. His lower ranking for xG per shot comes from his willingness to take on shots from longer distances. Also, his lower ranking for successful dribbles and touches in the box per 90 are likely down to his preference for quickly taking on shots.

He isn't a dribbler by trade, and is far better playing quickly, whether that's taking a shot, or moving the ball on with a pass.

As for his passing statistics, it makes sense to see him rank so highly for smart passes per 90, as well as passes to the final third per 90. Kane is an outstanding passer of the ball, and as he likes

to drop into deeper areas to receive possession, he will often look for that long diagonal switch of play, which he does very effectively. Therefore we see his average pass length rank so highly amongst his peers in the league.

anything more than that would also be seen as an over-achievement. Southgate is honestly still riding the wave of goodwill that the World Cup performance from three years ago and the Euro performance brought. There will be more scrutiny this time around.



It will be interesting to see whether the transfer furore surrounding England's captain will derail his tournament. He will be out to prove those doubters wrong once again, particularly those who haven't taken his last World Cup golden boot seriously down to the penalties that helped him to secure that honour.

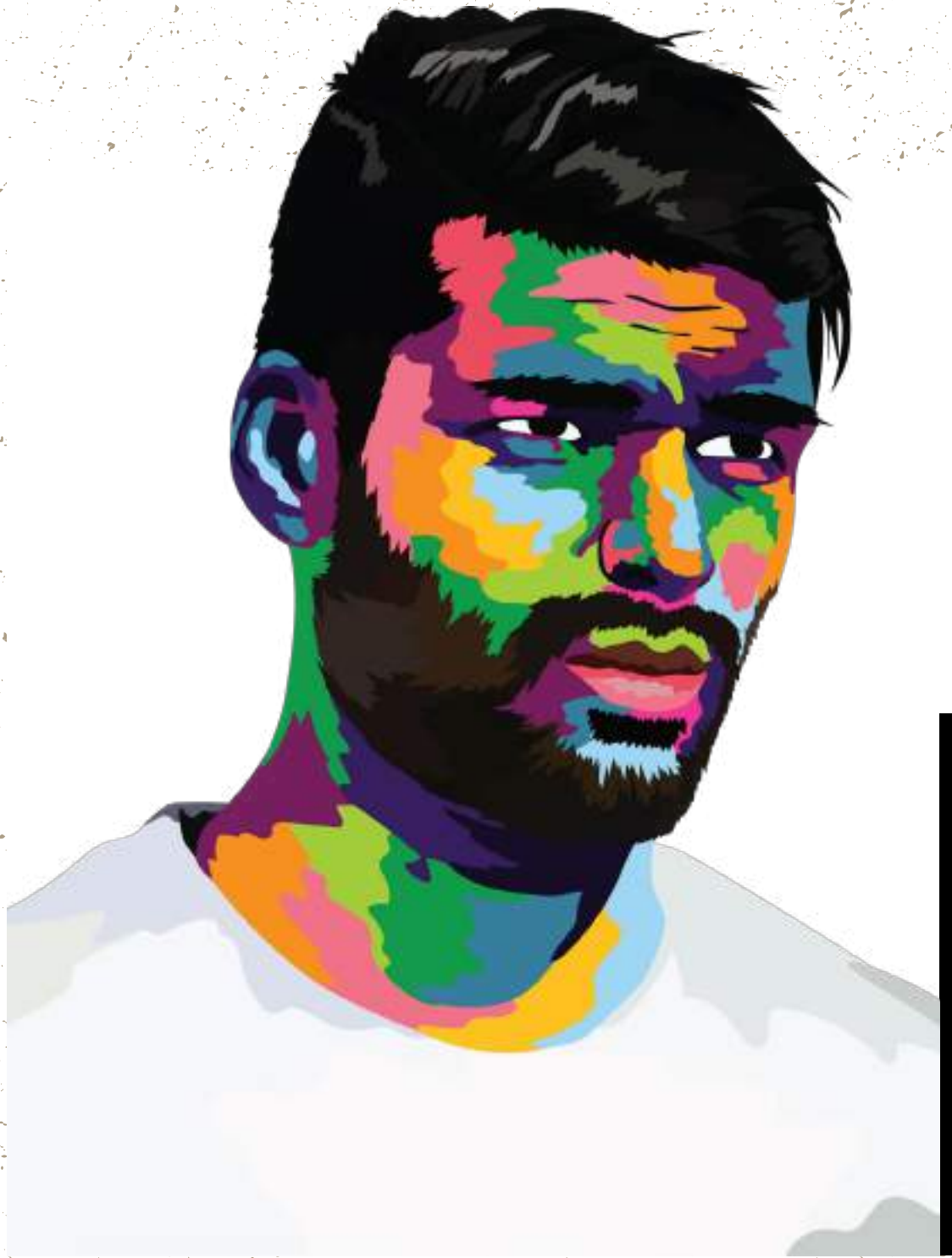
TOURNAMENT PREDICTION

Despite poor performances in their last matches in the UEFA Nations League, England certainly are one of the big favourites to win this year's world cup. Together with France and Brazil, the Euro 2020 finalists will be an interesting team to watch out for.

There is plenty of criticism of Southgate in terms of player nomination and playing style. The defensive philosophy could see them behind other well-rounded nations. But the individual quality of seasoned and talented players is outstanding. So in the knock-out phase, there is always the opportunity to beat opponents that might seem better.

Anything less than a semi-final appearance would be seen as a disappointment, but

IRAN



GROUP B

— **ADAM SCULLY // @ascully24** —

Iran will be hoping to make history in their country in Qatar by becoming the first rendition of the nation to progress past the group phase in the tournament.

Having qualified for five previous World Cup editions, including three of the last four, Iran have never made it into the knockout rounds.

The last two World Cup tournaments that Iran qualified for were in 2014 and 2018, so this winter will be the third on the bounce. In all three, Team Melli were and will be guided by the former Manchester United assistant manager Carlos Queiroz who won two Premier League titles and even the UEFA Champions League alongside the great Sir Alex Ferguson.

However, Queiroz didn't actually lead Iran to qualification this time around. From 18 matches, the Portuguese's predecessor Dragan Skočić won 15 matches to lead the Middle Eastern team to the coveted competition.

In the summer, Skočić was dismissed after losing two of their last three matches before being reinstated by the Iranian FA for two months. Then, the Croatian coach was cruelly relieved of his duties once more, with Queiroz being reinstated as the manager in what was one of the most peculiar pre-tournament sackings since Julen Lopetegui's painstaking departure from Spain in 2018.

Nevertheless, having been drawn into a relatively difficult group alongside England, Wales and the USA, Iran may fancy their chances in at least two of those matches.

This article will be a tactical analysis of Iran in the form of a team scout report. It will be an analysis of the tactics that Carlos Queiroz is likely to deploy in the jarring heat of the Qatari sun.

PREDICTED STARTING XI

Predicting the starting lineup that Queiroz will look to use in the World Cup was extremely difficult given that the 69-year-old has been in charge for very little time — two matches overall, both of which were friendlies.

However, from these games, it became apparent that Queiroz favoured the deployment of the 4-1-4-1 with a number '6' protecting the space between the backline and the more advanced midfielders.

Of course, this is just the shape out of possession as when Iran are on the ball, the wingers push higher, holding the width to create a typical 4-3-3 attacking structure.

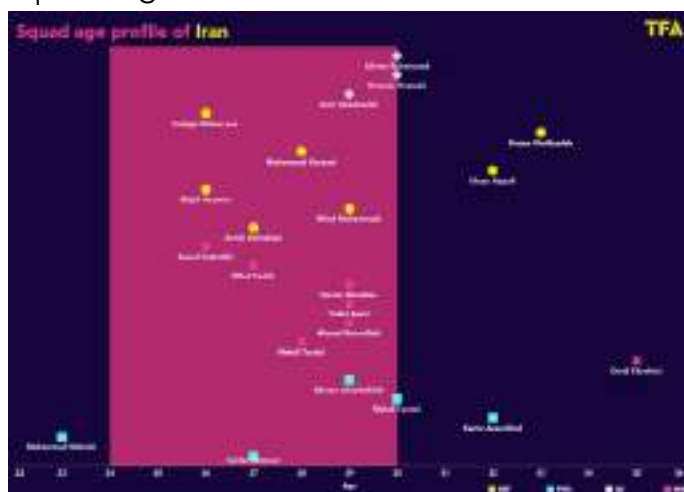
Total Football Analysis predicts that this will be Iran's first-choice starting eleven for the World Cup if all of their best players are available.



Before speaking about the potential lineup and squad that the experienced coach will bring to Qatar with him, it must be said that Bayer Leverkusen striker Sardar Azmoun looks set to miss the tournament which is a massive blow for Team Melli given that the 27-year-old is one of the nation's better players, applying his trade with a UEFA Champions League club.

Overall, the squad is full of experience. Players are either in their prime or are already on the wrong side of 30 which means that the average age of the team is likely to be quite high.

In a recent outing against Senegal during the last international break, the youngest player in Iran's starting side was 26 while the oldest was 32 which seems to be the mean of the overall squad in general.



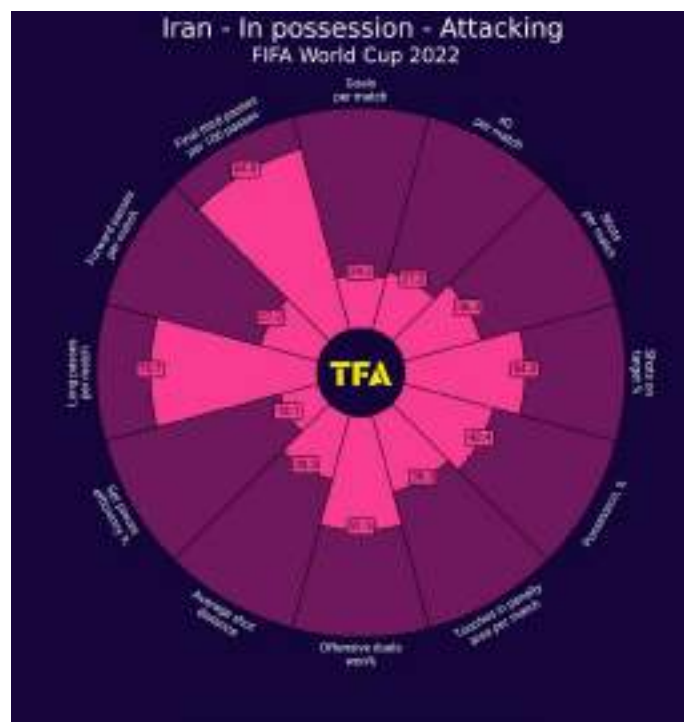
This could come back to bite the Iranians as young players bring a nice blend of bravery and fearlessness that more seasoned veterans lack which the latter makes up for by setting the standards and installing professionalism and calmness to the squad.

Youngsters also bring energy to the team and a willingness to impress, especially if this is their first tournament and so a lot of vibrancy will be absent from Queiroz's side.

Nevertheless, the more experienced players will be able to carry out tactical instructions from the

coach better and so perhaps this is why Queiroz prefers maturity over youth.

ATTACKING PHASE



Iran are not a possession-oriented side, unlike England and the USA in the same group. Their style of play is much closer to that of Wales. Queiroz's side are flexible with their attacking approach, which is potentially the best way to describe it.

This means that not only can Iran hold possession and attempt to build their way through the thirds of the pitch, but Team Melli can also drop deeper into a low block and nullify space between the lines to coerce the opposition up the pitch before hitting them on the break.

The different tactics depend on the opponent on the day. For instance, in Iran's two recent friendlies against both Uruguay and Senegal, the team played polarly opposite in each match.

Versus Senegal, Queiroz's men were holding their compact shape while the African nation dominated the ball. Meanwhile, against the South American outfit, Iran had much more

possession and were allowed to build up from the back due to Uruguay's lack of pressing.

When Iran do play out from the back, the set-up is rather conventional as Queiroz is not looking to reinvent the wheel, but to merely make sure it turns.

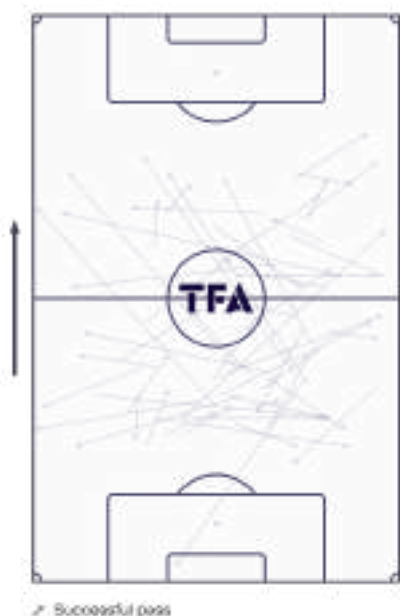


The fullbacks stay relatively low to provide wide support for the centre-backs in case the ball needs to be circulated out wide. Furthermore, the central defenders split wider which allows the single pivot to drop in and out of the backline.

Unfortunately, for a country like Iran, passing out through the pivot is extremely difficult. It requires a high level of technical ability from the midfielders whereas Queiroz prefers his '6' to possess more defensive acumen than attacking proficiency.

S. EZATOLAHİ PASS MAP

From 23 September 2022 to 28 September 2022



Former Reading player Saeed Ezatollahi has been the pivot in each game for Team Melli so far and has resembled a midfielder who is far better out of possession than on the ball.

Tasked with being the link man from defence to attack, the previous image portrays all of Ezatollahi's passes under Queiroz across the two international friendlies he has been in charge of. The Iranian midfielder has primarily played squared passes or more direct passes into the channels, offering little to no central penetration through the lines.

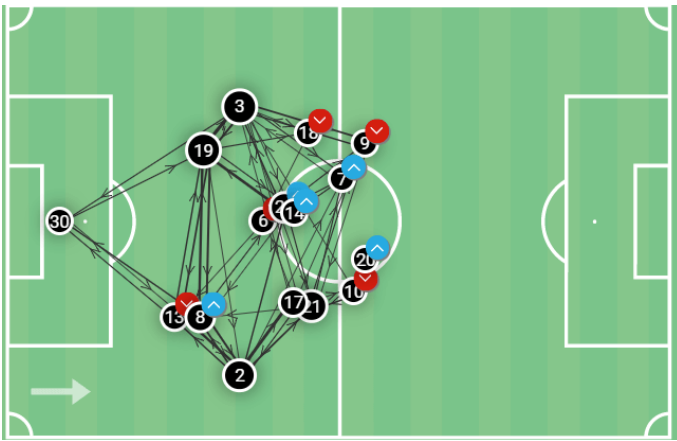
Knowing that they perhaps don't possess the required technical nous to build up through the pivot, Iran tend to combine on the flanks in order to progress the ball from deeper areas of the pitch.



The 4-1-4-1/4-3-3 offers the perfect opportunity for wide overloads and combination play to naturally formulate as shown in this example. With the move having been initiated by the right centre-back, Iran's right-winger, right-back and right central midfielder all combine to break through Uruguay's mid-block into the space behind.

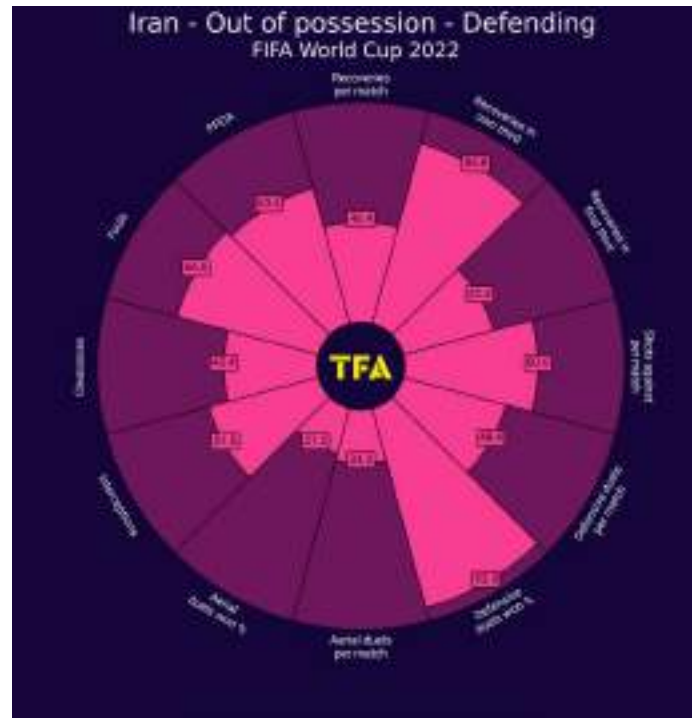
The side's average possession shape also shows this. Look out for how congested the wide areas are and how much stronger the links are on the flanks as opposed to the middle of the pitch:

DEFENSIVE PHASE



Iran are really vertical with their play. Queiroz is not a major fan of having his players hold onto the ball for long periods of time. This increases the possibility of mistakes in dangerous areas. Instead, the experienced coach instructs his men to always look for the first pass forward where they can penetrate the opposition's defence with runners in behind.

This means that the centre-forward must always be occupying the centre-backs and causing havoc by playing off the shoulder, while the players under the ball have to look as far as possible to try find him.



Out of possession, Iran are dogged. Queiroz shows his true Portuguese pragmatism and wants his side to be very disciplined out of possession.



32-year-old Karim Ansarifard has performed this role well so far for Iran and has offered both depth and physicality when challenging in the air for flick-ons and second balls.

However, that doesn't mean that the nation must be wasteful in possession and revert into a deep defensive block when on the back foot. Team Melli do press high up the pitch and look to win the ball back as close to the opponent's goal as possible.



Queiroz instructs his players to apply a mix of a zonal and man-marking pressing structure. This means that from the get-go, Iran, using the centre-forward as an initiator, will force the attacking team into one half of the pitch

where they will then go man-to-man, using the touchline as an extra defender to try and regain possession.

In Queiroz's two games in charge thus far, the side have registered 19 ball recoveries in the opposition's half, showing that they do in fact like to press high.

Lower down the pitch, though, the shape does become far more compact. There is less intention to win the ball as there is to remain narrow between the lines, giving the opposition no space to play within Iran's defensive block.

Since Queiroz has been using a 4-3-3 in possession, the block reverts into a tight 4-1-4-1 with the wingers dropping back and the number '6' operating in a zonal role, picking up any players that drift into the space between the midfield and backline.



The objective in this phase is to keep the opposition players from reaching anyone inside the block, ensuring that play is always circulating either out wide or in front of the defensive unit where it can be contained.

However, this is something that Iran have not quite mastered just yet. In the two friendly games so far during the 69-year-old's tutelage, Senegal and Uruguay were finding it far too easy to reach their best players between the lines and create dangerous chances.



If Iran are to stifle England, Wales and the USA's best attackers who operate in these spaces, they need to be much more compact and cooperative with one another.

TRANSITIONS

During attacking transitions, Iran can be rather dangerous, especially when the team are sitting deeper against a more possession-oriented opponent and are waiting for the right moment to pounce with a counterattack.

When Team Melli break, they want to be as direct as possible with their attacking transitions, looking to play to the feet of the centre-forward who drops short instantly, dragging defenders out of position and allowing runners to move into the space he has vacated.



Nevertheless, it is during defensive transitions that Iran struggle so much. This comes back to the lack of energy in the midfield area, primarily due to the fact that the squad is ageing and has very little youth, particularly in the middle of the park.

During Queiroz's short-reigned second spell, there were several key moments, particularly against the technical dribbling quality and blistering speed of Senegal's attack, where the players were carved open by counterattacks in the midfield.



Here, Iran's midfield and backline stepped up to counterpress after the side lost the ball. The counterpressing was far too lethargic and so, Senegal played through it easily.

From there, the African nation were given most of the pitch to bare down on goal against just the Iranian centre-backs.

Moments like this must be curtailed if Iran are to have any chance at all to survive in the group with England, Wales and the USA.

DEFENDERS

The backline is where Iran may struggle the most in terms of quality.

Guys like Shojae Khalilzadeh and Ehsan Hajsafi could provide much-needed experience at the

back on such a grand stage but would leave the team lacking a lot of pace in the defensive line that England, Wales and the USA could exploit with runners in behind.

Mohammad Kanaani and Sadegh Moharrami will be tasked with providing the pace at the back alongside the two veterans, but the side's poor goals-conceded record may hamper their progression from the group phase and put a lot of the burden of qualifying for the knockouts on the forward line.

MIDFIELDERS

The former Reading midfielder Saeed Ezatollahi is undoubtedly Iran's best defensive player in the middle of the park. The 26-year-old will be integral to breaking up play and protecting the space between the lines for Queiroz in his 4-1-4-1 as the number '6'.

Ezatollahi could also be vital for Iran in the attacking phases at finding runners in behind the backline, something he has been tasked with doing so far under Queiroz in his second spell.

Providing Ezatollahi performs his role well, it could free up both Saman Ghoddos and Milad Sarlak to help the team move the ball forward in more attacking areas. Meanwhile, Iran have experienced heads like Vahid Amiri and Omid Ebrahimi who can come on from off the subs bench to provide some calmness to the side.

ATTACKERS

Mehdi Taremi will be vital for Iran this winter. The FC Porto striker has been in incredible form for his club and the national side will be hoping this translates onto the pitch in Qatar at the World Cup.

However, Iran can also call upon the help of Karim Ansarifard who has been performing very well for Omonia Nicosia in Cyprus. Many will have caught a glimpse of the 32-year-old during Omonia's home and away matches versus Manchester United in the UEFA Europa League where he caused trouble to the Red Devils' backline on numerous occasions and even scored in the home fixture.

Furthermore, Team Melli have players such as Feyenoord's wide-man Alireza Jahanbakhsh, formerly of Brighton and Hove Albion in the Premier League. Capable of playing on the right and left, Jahanbakhsh could be crucial for the Iranians, even if it is off the bench as an impact substitute.

KEY PLAYER



With it being touch-and-go about whether or not Sardar Azmoun will make it to the World Cup this winter, we have decided to select FC Porto star Mehdi Taremi as the star performer for Iran ahead of the coveted competition.

Taremi has been in flying form for the Portuguese champions and is one of the top goalscorers in the Primeira Liga right now. Looking at his metrics, it's easy to see why the 30-year-old will be integral for Team Melli under Queiroz.

Having been used as a winger so far under the Portuguese coach, Taremi can play anywhere along the frontline, although he is strongest up front.

Not only are the striker's attacking metrics exceptional, but also his defensive stats, showing that the experienced number '9' will be useful when his side are out of possession at pressing and intercepting the opposition's passes.

If Iran are to defy the odds and progress from the group phase, they will need Taremi to be on top form.

TOURNAMENT PREDICTION

To progress from a tough group that includes British duo England and Wales, as well as the USA, Iran need to be unbreakable, defensively, in each game.

Team Melli simply cannot go toe-to-toe with these three nations who possess some of the most decorated players in Europe, including multiple Champions League winners as well as serial title collectors.

In order to cause damage, Iran will need to do what they do best; soak up pressure, hit the opposition on the break, and when they are in the attacking phases, play as vertical as possible.

Unfortunately, Total Football Analysis does not believe Iran have the quality required to get out of such a difficult group and so, will likely finish bottom of the quartet.

USA



GROUP B

— DAVID ASTILL // @DavidPAstill21 —

North American football has been growing in strength and popularity every year, with the MLS attracting many star names and the recent success of Canada's qualification campaign showing that the continent is becoming much more competitive in world football. However, whilst John Herdman's Maple Leaves will be appearing at only their second-ever World Cup finals, the United States have been one of the tournament's regulars in living memory, having appeared at every edition of the competition between 1990 and 2014. They missed out on Russia 2018 after going out during the qualification stages, but have recovered and will return to the finals through their third-place finish in the third stage of CONCACAF qualifying.

The USA have been drawn in Group B in Qatar, which will see them face England, Wales and Iran for a place in the knockout stages, and they have a very real chance of making it that far. They also have previous experience of competing in the latter stages of the competition, having finished in the top two of their group in both 2010 and 2014, so know what it will take to be in the last 16.

This tactical analysis will look at their overall game in more detail, with the scout report identifying their key tactics, which players will carry the most importance for them and the statistics that show what their strengths and weaknesses are. The analysis will also pick out one member of their squad who will be central to everything they do during their time in Qatar, and why keeping that player fit will be essential to their chances of getting into the knockout rounds.

PREDICTED STARTING XI



Head coach Gregg Berhalter has tended to favour a 4-3-3 formation since taking charge of the national side in 2018, with it being used on 87% of occasions this year. The fact that their next most-used structure, a 4-2-3-1 setup, has only been seen in 4% of their matches highlights how much faith they have in the balance that comes from a 4-3-3 lineup.

In goal, they have several good options to choose from, with Middlesbrough's on-loan Manchester City stopper Zack Steffen and Nottingham Forest's Ethan Horvath, who is spending the 2022/2023 season at Championship side Luton Town, both good players to have in the squad. However, the player most likely to be given the nod between the posts is Matt Turner, with the

Arsenal and former New England Revolution goalkeeper currently in firm possession of the No. 1 jersey and tending to start when he is fit.

In front of him, the USA look for a balance of defensive and attacking quality, enabling them to be hard to beat but also to play out from the back when they can. The full-backs are especially important to this, and they have tended to mix around in recent games due mostly to injuries but also to test different combinations out ahead of the World Cup.

However, the two that are most likely to start are DeAndre Yedlin and Antonee Robinson, who have both shown throughout their careers that they can support attacks and offer defensive support with equal ability. With those two players likely to get up the pitch, the USA need to have good defensive strength and awareness in the centre-back partnership, and Aaron Long and Walker Zimmerman fit those profiles perfectly.

The midfield trio is made up of one defensive-minded player and two who can both defend and attack, with the USA's tactics centring around their transitional work and ensuring that they have players who are comfortable with the ball at their feet. Juventus' Weston McKennie is not the most effective player to have in the final third, but he can be relied upon to make intelligent passes and provide those on either side of him — in this case, the Leeds United duo of Tyler Adams and Brenden Aaronson — with the ability to get forward and work closely with those ahead of them, which is where they are at their best.

The forward line is made up of two wide attackers and one striker, although in reality all three are expected to contribute goals and make the right movements at the right times. There is likely to be a good deal of competition for those positions, but it is likely to be the star duo of Borussia Dortmund's Giovanni Reyna and

Chelsea's Christian Pulisic who are given the nod in the wide attacking roles, whilst Jesús Ferreira is likely to start between them.

Both Reyna and Pulisic have shown themselves to be capable of changing direction on the spot and of delivering accurate crosses into the middle, while DC United's Ferreira has impressed when used in recent matches, most notably when the USA faced Grenada and he scored four times and constantly broke through their defensive line.



The full USA squad has yet to be announced, but this graphic indicates all of the players in with a chance of being included in Qatar and their age ranges, with them either categorised as youth, in their peak or experienced.

With the USA's preferred style of play requiring good movement and intelligent passing, it is no surprise to see that the majority of those who could feature fall in either the youth or peak sections, and this will also help the USA to grow as a team when the tournament begins, with them getting used to each other's strengths and developing partnerships around the field.

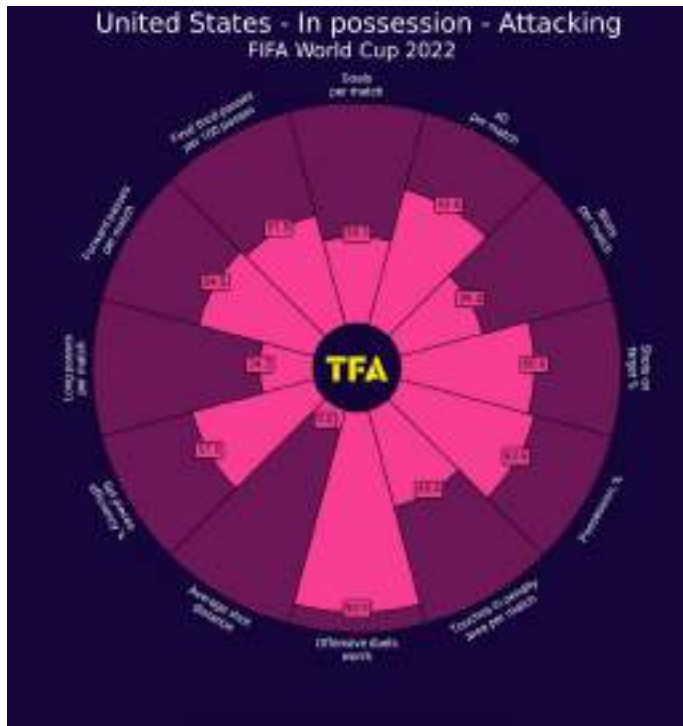
ATTACKING PHASE



That precision and attention to detail are indicated here, with the USA's setup meaning that they have covered all bases and ensured that they have a way of progressing play regardless of what their opponents, in this case, Saudi Arabia, choose to do.

The key players to look at here are the two full-backs, as Yedlin has moved higher up the pitch whilst Barcelona's Sergiño Dest has stayed closer to the two centre-backs. This presents a slightly unbalanced picture, but it gives the USA options on the ball, as they can now play a longer pass towards Yedlin, which would gain them a significant amount of territory, or they can be conservative and play a shorter pass in Dest's direction, with him having more time than Yedlin to control the ball and to see if he can make any progress up the field.

This setup has been a common feature in the USA's matches and is clearly something that head coach Berhalter has worked on with them, and it has had a very positive effect on the development of their pass-and-move tactics simply because of how it gives them different ways to move the ball around the pitch and to never take unnecessary risks.



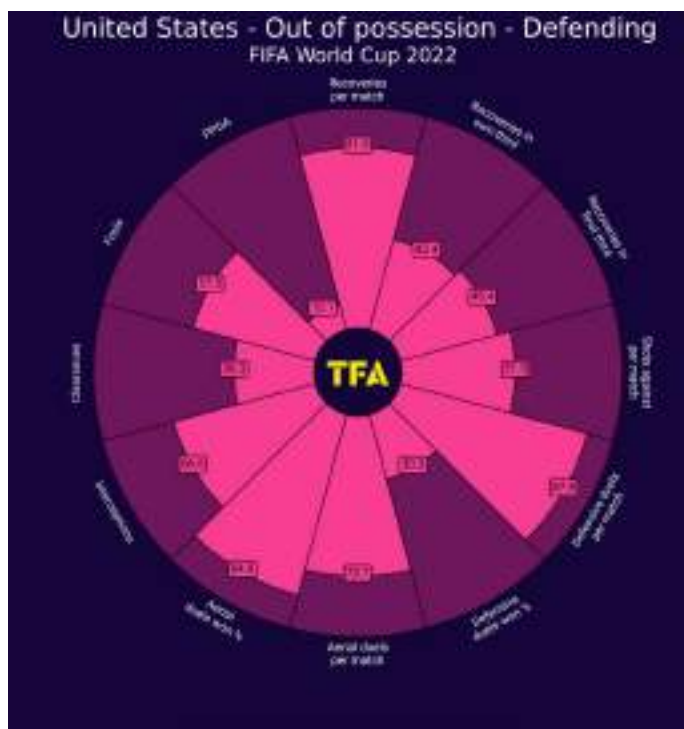
The way to describe the United States' style of play is patient at the back and then fast and decisive passing when they get the chance to move forwards, and the fact that they have a lower percentile rank for average shot distance reflects how they always wait for the right opportunity to open up before moving forwards and don't take shots until they are closer towards the opposing goal, minimising the risk of it failing to find the target. They also prefer to move the ball through the thirds instead of playing long balls during transitions, which is why they have a low percentile ranking for long passes and sit around the middle percentile bands for touches in the penalty area and shots on target.

It is also worth mentioning that they don't give up possession easily, which again comes down to the care that they take when they have the ball. As mentioned, everything they do is precise and shows good attention to detail, and this means that it will not be easy for England, Wales and Iran to win the ball back once they lose it, putting more pressure on them to not make mistakes.

When they do move the ball into advanced areas, the USA immediately increase the tempo of their play as they look for the best way to hurt their opponents. In this case, Grenada have caused their own problems, with their high back line inviting the USA to position players on the shoulder of the defenders and to send passes into the spaces behind, and the fact that they had Ferreira leading the line in this game was key to them making the most of the spaces that Grenada left open, with Ferreira's Dallas teammate Paul Arriola weighting a perfect pass through and a goal coming from this attack.

Therefore, the key thing that the USA's upcoming World Cup opponents will need to be aware of is that they cannot leave spaces open, because the fact that Ferreira scored four times in this match from similar situations demonstrates that any mistakes or gaps left open will be capitalised on.

DEFENSIVE PHASE



When out of possession, the USA look to make themselves as tough to score against as possible, with this graphic indicating how they rank highly in percentile terms for defensive duels, aerial duels and recoveries

made per game. However, there is a clear difference between the number of aerial duels won and the number of defensive duels won, which suggests that the way for their opponents to beat them is to keep the ball on the ground, although the fact that they are in the middle band for shots against per match implies that not many teams do this.



This situation illustrates their setup once they have lost the ball, with the lines indicating their 4-3-3 structure. By setting up this way, they have put a significant amount of ground between the ball and the goal, making it as difficult as possible for Japan in this case to advance up the pitch and create a goalscoring opportunity.

However, the key detail that makes this so effective is that their formation constantly changes, with individual players either moving forwards or dropping back, so this structure could at any time change into a 4-3-1-2 or a 4-4-2, and that makes the USA unpredictable and therefore harder to beat, with the chance of Japan making an error increased as they try to find a way through.



However, the thing about the USA's defensive tactics is that they only work when their players

have time to get back behind the ball, and this situation shows how they can be caught out when they lose possession and can't get numbers back.

In this case, McKennie has made a poor pass in his own third which has invited Junya Ito to advance towards the USA's goal area, and his combination play with Hidemasa Morita enables the ball to travel into the path of Eintracht Frankfurt forward Daichi Kamada, whose run is indicated by the red arrow. Once the ball reaches Kamada, he has time and space to pick his spot and find the bottom of the net, and the fact that he was alongside the two USA centre-backs when he took the shot meant that there was no way for either Zimmerman or Long to get across and close him down.

On this occasion, the USA were saved by the fact that Kamada was ruled offside when he took the shot at goal, but this is not the first time that they have found themselves in this type of situation, with it coming down to how much they push players up the field when committing to an attack. It is very much a "risk and reward" way of playing, with the positives obvious but the negatives indicated here, and it is something that their opponents will recognise and look to exploit once the World Cup gets underway.

TRANSITIONS



As mentioned, the United States on the whole play a measured style of football that sees them keep the ball and then strike when the right

moment arrives, and that is helped in no small part by the movement that individual players make around the field. To explain, if players had one role and stayed in just one area of the pitch, then it would be easy for their opponents to mark them and prevent the ball from moving around. However, because the USA's players keep moving and switching positions, they become less predictable and teams find it harder to close off all available passing options against them.

It is important to remember though that the USA don't take risks when moving the ball around, and that is once again on show here with their players looking after it as their priority, and the fact that Aaronson's first thought when he receives the ball from Adams here is to send it back towards his defensive line indicates that it is a case of "safety first" in everything that they do.

However, Adams is the player to look at here, because his run after sending the ball into Aaronson takes him into an area where he can provide a link between the two ends of the field, which Aaronson recognises as he gets up the pitch to offer a forward passing option. Therefore, Nashville defender Zimmerman can now pass forwards to Adams and know that the USA will be able to transfer the ball through the thirds and into a dangerous area of the pitch, with Aaronson not missing the target by much once the ball reaches him.



Once they lose possession, as mentioned, their focus immediately turns towards getting back and protecting their goal area, and this analysis

has already shown how they set up in a shape that limits what their opponents can do. In the initial stages of that defensive effort, any player in the area at the time is expected to fill in, with Adams getting back here to act as an emergency left-back.

However, the key point to make here is that these four players are now only focused on protecting their goal, which means that none of them think about coming out to slow Morocco's progress down. This on paper looks like a good decision, as it prevents gaps from opening up, but the problem is that it also invites pressure from opposing sides when they are counterattacking, and Morocco used the spaces well on this occasion to get Adel Taarabt into a good position, before he set up Angers' Azzedine Ounahi, in the blue circle, to have a shot at goal.

On this occasion, Adams did come out at the last minute to meet Ounahi and deflect his effort, making it easier for Turner to save the shot, but the feeling among some might be that the USA could have done more earlier to prevent Morocco from getting so far up the pitch here, and this is another potential chink in the United States' armour that their three group stage opponents could use against them.

ATTACKERS

It has already been mentioned that the United States want their wingers to be capable of cutting inside and supporting the striker as much as possible, but that relies on the player in that central role having the right profile. Otherwise, the team will end up with players getting into the same spaces and rendering their attacking chances ineffective.

The two players most likely to play in the central role are Ferreira and Norwich City's Josh Sargent, who has started the current

Championship season in good form and has shown after a difficult Premier League campaign that he can score goals for the Canaries. He would be the ideal player for the USA to start if they were looking to play with those tactics, as he has fewer touches inside the penalty area per game on average (4.17, compared to Ferreira's 5.31), which suggests that he is a more mobile option, and that makes sense when considering how he has worked with the likes of Teemu Pukki and often dropped back to enable the Finland international to get on the end of crosses and passes at Carrow Road this season.

Sargent also averages a higher number of aerial duels won, having been successful on 30.5% of occasions compared to 26.3% for Ferreira, so he would also be the better player to have if the USA wanted to be more direct, but the fact that he moves around more also has its downsides as it means that he might not be the best player to have on the pitch when the USA require a goal. Instead, that is where Ferreira will shine, with him showing in recent internationals that he likes to stay in a more fixed position and to run behind defences to convert opportunities, and that is why he is perhaps more likely to start as the USA try to take early control of their games.

MIDFIELDERS

When it comes to the central third, the main characteristics that Berhalter looks for are the ability to make accurate passes and to get shots on goal, with those who start in those positions expected to push forwards and contribute in the final third.

When it comes to passing the ball around, the player with the best accuracy out of those likely to be in these positions is Luca de la Torre, with 89.1% of his passes finding their intended target. However, the three players named in the predicted starting XI are not far behind him, with

Adams' passing accuracy standing at 88.2%, Aaronson's at 85% and McKennie's at 83%, so all four players can be relied upon to move the ball around the pitch with precision and to help create chances.

However, whilst de la Torre is clearly the best option to have when moving the ball around, he is let down when compared to the other three by the percentage of shots that he gets on target, with only 33.3% of his efforts being accurate, whilst Adams has the highest percentage for this statistic, with 54.5%, whilst Aaronson has 54.2% and McKennie 44.6%. This is why de la Torre was not included in the predicted starting XI, although he is likely to feature at the World Cup and will be a highly effective squad player and someone that can make an impact from the bench when needed.

DEFENDERS

There are two things to consider when analysing the different options in the USA's defensive line, because they need full-backs who are happy to play in advanced areas and who will help to move the ball up the pitch and they need centre-backs who are tough to beat and would be comfortable being left on their own when their side has possession, with that last point being something that they have struggled with, as previously analysed.

Focusing first on the full-backs, the player with the best accuracy when it comes to sending balls into the final third is Dest, with 84% of his passes into advanced areas finding their intended target.

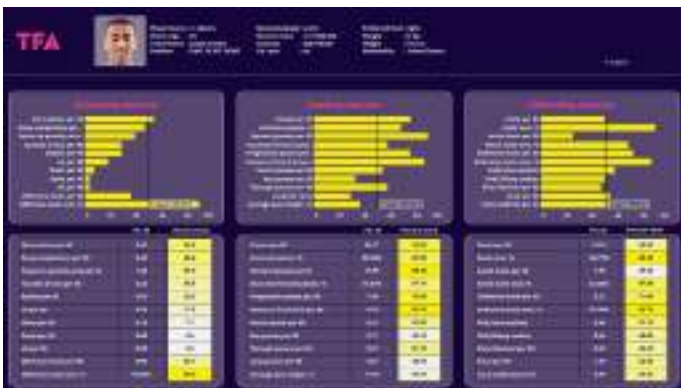
The next best player is Yedlin, who has a 72.7% accuracy, whilst Reggie Cannon, who is likely to be one of the main deputies in the full-back areas, has a 72.2% accuracy and Fulham's Robinson has 68%. However, the reason for this statistic

being lower is likely to be due to him not getting as far forward as the others, meaning that his efforts have longer to travel, and the fact that he stays further back is why he fits into the USA's tactics when considering the unbalanced setup that was identified earlier in the scout report.

As for the centre-backs, they need to be good at winning defensive duels and interceptions, ensuring that opponents have as few chances to shoot at their goal as possible. The player who wins the most defensive duels out of those likely to start in these positions is Long, with his experience also making him an important part of the team. Meanwhile, the other players in with a chance of starting have mixed values, with Celtic's Cameron Carter-Vickers, Nashville's Zimmerman and Club Bruges' Mark McKenzie winning 67%, 73.6% and 76.5% of their 1-v-1 battles respectively, so it is clear that, from this statistic, Long has to be on the field if the USA are to be robust in their own third.

However, the perfect defensive partnership is made of two players who bring different things to the field, and the best way to compliment a player like Long who engages in duels is to have a player who reads the game well and anticipates play. With that in mind, the player from those four who has the highest average interceptions is McKenzie, with him averaging 6.43 per game, whilst Zimmerman makes 4.76, Long 4.28 and Carter-Vickers 3.98. Therefore, having McKenzie or Zimmerman alongside Long would be the best selection for the United States to make, but Zimmerman has more experience and has shown himself to be adept at passing out from the back (another key quality), which is why he was selected ahead of the others in the predicted starting XI.

KEY PLAYER



What has become clear in this analysis when focusing on Adams is that the Leeds midfielder offers everything that the USA need from their players in the central third, including an ability to link up with those behind him, offer passing options and get up the field at speed when his team are in transition. Therefore, there is little doubt that the USA's ability to make their tactics work against England, Wales and Iran will depend on him being in top form in every game.

With him being a mainly box-to-box player, his attacking metrics rank in the lower percentile bands, but this is not a disaster as his role is not to provide the final end product. However, what will encourage fans of the USA is that he does work hard in offensive duels, with him ranking in the second-highest percentile band for this area of the game and therefore giving his team a strong chance of scoring whenever he gets into advanced areas of the field.

His passing metrics are also hugely encouraging, with him ranking above the league median for forward passes, progressive passes and passes to the final third. Therefore, again, his attacking play contains a high degree of accuracy, which is why he will be essential in defence-to-attack transitions and in helping to transfer the ball into the forwards when chances to do so present themselves.

The fact that he ranks below the median for long passes and average pass length might worry some people, but they are nothing to be concerned about as those statistics simply show how the USA approach their games tactically, so are not a reflection of Adams' abilities.

Being a box-to-box midfielder means that players need to be just as good at the back, with them needing to offer defensive protection when it is required, and this scout report has already shown that Adams is happy to play his part when his team need someone to drop back and cut spaces off. His defensive metrics support those findings, with him ranking highly for defensive duels and aerial duels won, so there is no doubt that, given what has been mentioned about him throughout this analysis, he is someone that his team will rely on as they look to keep clean sheets and have the best possible chance of progressing into the knockout rounds.

TOURNAMENT PREDICTION

What has become clear throughout this tactical analysis is that the United States are a team with an abundance of quality and that cannot be underestimated, with England, Wales and Iran needing to be at their best when facing them once the tournament gets underway later in November. If they get every detail of their play right, including personnel, tactics and substitutions, then progression into the knockout rounds is very much within the USA's grasp, and Berhalter will feel that his side has a strong chance of meeting that expectation with the squad options that he will have available to him in Qatar.

However, as has also been shown, there are areas where they can be hurt, with them needing to look after each other and not leave spaces

as open because some of their recent friendlies will encourage their opponents that they can be broken down if possession is won back high up the field and they can isolate the two centre-backs. However, despite this, progression to the knockout rounds does look fairly secure for the USA, although anything could happen once the tournament finally begins.



WALES



GROUP B

— OWEN BULLMAN // @BullmanOwen —

Wales have been drawn into Group B for the 2022 World Cup in Qatar. Making up Group B are Iran, USA and England. All sides rank in the top 20 of the FIFA world rankings, making it, based on rankings, the most difficult group.

Having qualified for their second-ever World Cup, Wales will be determined to leave their mark on the upcoming tournament. Previously, Wales qualified for the 1958 World Cup, where they lost 1-0 in the quarter-finals to eventual winners Brazil.

The Wales squad contains several talented and experienced players such as Aaron Ramsey, Joe Allen, Ben Davies and all-time top scorer, Gareth Bale. These four players, along with goalkeeper Wayne Hennessey, are integral to Wales' success and have been for the last decade. Bale, now playing in the MLS, and Ramsey, now in Ligue 1, both still possess world-class quality. The fitness and availability of these players will be key.

Wales qualified through the playoff route where they successfully beat Ukraine 1-0 after overcoming Austria 2-1 earlier in the year. Their route to the World Cup was no walk in the park, as they showed their grit to secure narrow wins throughout their campaign. Not only this, they were able to earn a draw versus the world number two ranked side Belgium in November 2021.

Head coach Rob Page has recently been given the job permanently after taking over from Ryan Giggs. Page has been a massive success with this squad and although his side suffered two defeats in the final international break before the tournament, there is still great hope and excitement throughout the country.

PREDICTED STARTING XI



Rob Page likes to set his side up in one of two formations. 5-3-2 or 5-2-3, the latter is what I believe will be preferred in Qatar. The impact of attacking wide players such as Dan James and Brennan Johnson makes Wales dangerous going forward. The formation has been well-drilled and each player knows their role. It provides a good balance in all areas of the pitch and can be adapted if it needs to be.

Wayne Hennessey is Wales' number 1; he currently has 106 international caps, three less than current record holder Chris Gunter. Hennessey has been reliable over a long period of time and is settled as the first choice. Other 'keepers such as current Leicester City number 1, Danny Ward, will also be in contention for a place if anything happens to Hennessey.

The likely backline consists of some experience with a new youthful core. Players such as Neco Williams, Ethan Ampadu and Joe Rodon are all relatively young and will provide a good base on which to build for the future. Ampadu is close to 40 international caps at the age of 22 and will no doubt be a mainstay in the Wales side.

Connor Roberts and Ben Davies of Spurs will make up the defence in what is a very settled, tried and tested backline. Wales are difficult to beat and their defensive unit is a massive part of this. Ben Davies provides excellent balance as he is left-footed. 21-year-old Neco Williams plays as a right-footed left wing-back which, at times, has its limitations but mostly works well for this team. Chris Mepham can provide good cover for the central defenders and has hit some good form so far this season.

Moving on to the midfield which is an area of quality for Wales. Aaron Ramsey and Joe Allen have played numerous times together and are the heart of the team. They provide good experience and quality in the central area of the pitch. Allen now plays for Swansea City and enjoyed a positive start to the season. He has made 72 international appearances, just fewer than midfield partner Aaron Ramsey.

Ramsey has moved to Nice and has featured quite regularly for the French outfit. Both now 32 and 31 respectively means that it is likely their last international tournament. The midfield area can also be covered by Ethan Ampadu who has played for his country in midfield. His versatility means he is well able to cover if needed and he helps if Page opts for a 5-3-2.

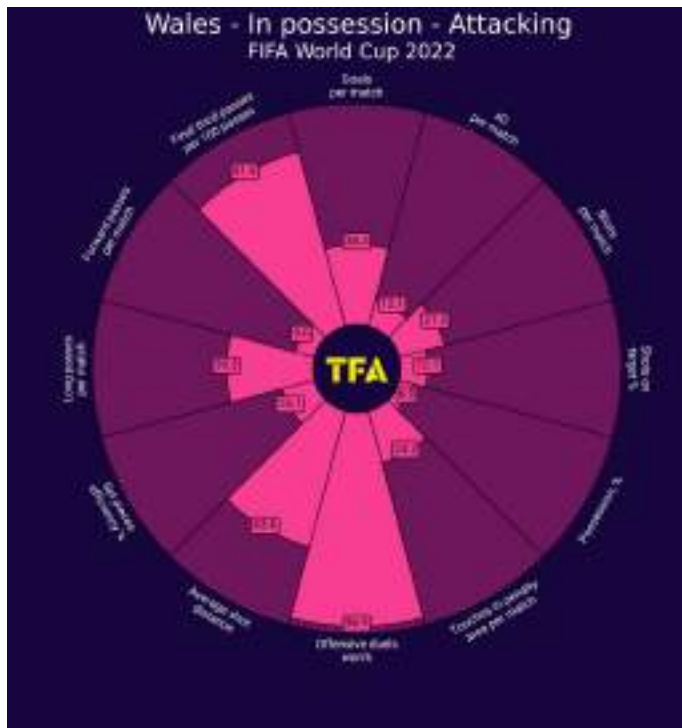
The attacking unit of the team is an area that is really well-balanced and utilised. The likely front three will consist of top goalscorer Gareth Bale on the right, Keiffer Moore through the middle and Brennan Johnson on the left. Dan James can also be included in this conversation as he

and Johnson will likely rotate based on form. The attack is really well balanced with Moore acting as a target man allowing for Johnson and Bale to play off him. Bale is dangerous from the right-hand side and his set pieces are something to look out for.

When looking at the squad age profile it is apparent that Wales have a majority of their squad in the peak-age category, represented by the pink band, though plenty of their key players fall beyond their peak. The group of players in this peak-age section and that to the left of it bodes well for the future of Wales. A good youthful squad will provide for the future with a mix of more experienced players giving good value both on and off the pitch.



ATTACKING PHASE



The data above shows Wales' style of play and reflects how they like to attack. Their incredibly high rank for offensive duels won shows how successful they are in building attacks and maintaining the ball in the final third. They play to their strengths, which will be covered later, the data above paints the story for Wales.

They expect to not have a large amount of possession, hence the low rank for possession, and they also rank low for shots per match and forward passes.

Further in the article, we will discuss and cover how wales attack and how they manage to create chances. Their style is well suited to the players, and they all know their roles and responsibilities perfectly.

Wales's attacking style is interesting. They look to play to their strengths — their wide areas. With brilliant wingers and wing-backs, Wales are very creative and dangerous from the wide channels. Not only this, they play to Keiffer Moore's strength, which is aerial. Moore is a

massive threat from balls in the air. This attribute plays well into Wales's excellent wing play.

When trying to build an attack, Wales are capable of playing short with their defenders. Their centre-backs are all extremely comfortable on the ball; Ampadu and Davies are excellent at progressing play with accurate passes. However, Wales are comfortable in mixing their style of play up. They are great at creating opportunities for Moore to compete in aerial duels. The image below shows how they work a situation so that they can benefit from it.



The above image displays several things. Firstly the wing-backs — highlighted blue — are as wide as they can be. This allows for the attacking players to play more centrally but more importantly, closer to Moore. The front three is relatively narrow and Moore, highlighted yellow, swaps positions with a winger when he is expecting an aerial ball.

By doing this the chances of having a duel against a weaker opponent are increased as, usually, the central defenders are the strongest in the air. Moore likes to play on the full-back where he has a better chance of winning the ball. His teammates are alert to this and position themselves well for a flick into the space behind. Below is another example of how this change happens and how effective it is.



In this example, Moore drops deep to challenge a midfield player for the ball. Bale rotates with him and takes up a central position and is ready to attack the space if Moore wins the header. This clear strategy of playing forward quickly causes teams trouble as the fast movements and position changes as well as physical mismatches are difficult to combat.

As mentioned, Wales excels in their wide areas. Dan James, Brennan Johnson, Gareth Bale and Rabbi Matondo provide excellent depth and ability for Rob Page. They are all confident and direct in 1v1 situations. This helps to create goalscoring opportunities for teammates in the box. Below is an example of how Brennan Johnson creates a goal for Moore with his direct dribbling ability.



Johnson uses his dribbling ability to directly attack the space towards the byline. He is quick at changing direction and accelerating from tight areas. Johnson then sends in a lovely cross to Moore who nods it home. A Wales-style goal that couldn't be created any better — excellent wing play finished by the target man.

Not only do their wide attacking players create excellent chances but their wing-backs provide attacking output. Neco Williams has been great for Nottingham Forest this season, playing as a wing-back. He is a very influential attacking player for Wales.

The wing-backs often find themselves as the furthest players forward and always provide

width. This allows for the attacking players to play centrally and combine more quickly with each other. Furthermore, if a wing-back is crossing the ball, more players can position themselves in the attacking box. Below is an example of how Neco Williams finds himself in an advanced position with the attacking players taking up the central areas.

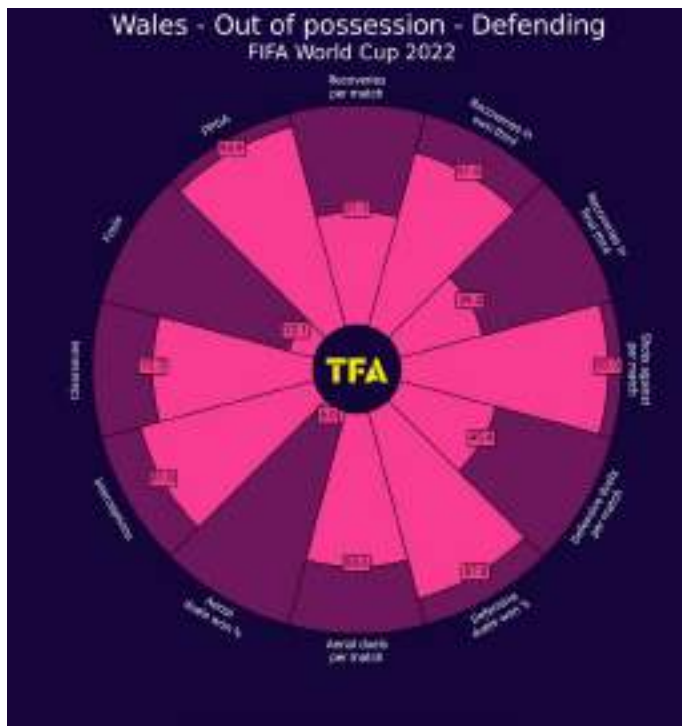


Williams attacks the space before crossing the ball into his teammates — a real attacking system that has been tailored to fit the needs and gain the best from the players involved. Wales create chances in the box and look to cause problems for the opposition.

Another method of attack to keep an eye out for is their long throw — something that Iceland had great success with during the 2016 Euros and, perhaps, can bring Wales some similar fortunes. Connor Roberts is the man who can hurl the ball into the penalty area. His throwing is dangerous and can easily lead to goalscoring opportunities. By targeting Moore, they are likely to win the first ball and the way that they set up enables them to capitalise on any loose balls. This tactic can cause drama and unrest for the opposition defenders — definitely something to watch out for.



DEFENSIVE PHASE



The data above shows how Wales rank in some key defensive metrics. A high rank for defensive duels won shows how physical they are as a team. Furthermore, a high percentile rank for PPDA shows that Wales do not engage aggressively in pressing their opponent high, which will be covered in more detail shortly.

Some slightly worrying data is their high rank for shots against per match, this shows that the opposition can get shots off fairly frequently. This could potentially lead to goals which need to be amended.

Another interesting area is the recoveries in the final third and own third. These two areas contrast each other massively and give a clear insight into the way that Wales look to defend. A high ranking for recoveries in their own third is because Wales are happy to sit back and be hard to break down.

When defending from the front, Wales do not press aggressively and much prefer to direct play to an area or space via their organised and

disciplined shape. Below is an example of how Wales set up when the ball is high up the pitch. The midfield players of Wales, Ramsey and Allen coloured yellow, step high up the pitch and look to engage quickly if the ball is played centrally.



The forward players maintain a solid shape and do not look to engage any higher than they currently are. Doing this makes it hard for the opposition to play in the attacking half of the pitch. The emphasis is on the opposition to play wide. Wales heavily mark the central area and try to stop the ball from being played through the middle of the pitch.

This works well as the ball is often forced wide, and they can deal with it more comfortably in the wide areas with their wing-backs. However, if the central area is penetrated, then a really dangerous attack will take place. This is because the midfield is no longer able to cover the defensive unit and the opposition now have a free run at the defence. This is something that Wales must be wary of as it can cause them defensive issues.

Furthermore, whilst remaining in shape, Wales maintains their 5-2-3 formation which allows them to cover a wide range of the pitch. The wing-backs take the wide channels with the central area crowded by the two midfield players and three centre-backs.



As mentioned above, Wales do not look to press high up the pitch. Their main objective is to stop the ball centrally. There is a large emphasis on the central midfield players to make sure that they get their distances right. They need to be close enough to the defensive unit so they can screen it but also not too close so that there is space in front of them. Their role is difficult and they must remain disciplined in their role.

The defensive unit have to ensure that their line is at the perfect height on the pitch. They must be a good distance away from the goal and high enough to make the pitch smaller for their opponents. The defensive unit is relatively mobile and quite good at recovering.

Along with this, the forward players have to work hard to cut the opposition's passing lanes off. If they do this, then it is increasingly difficult for opponents to play through into the midfield. Not only do they need to make it difficult they must be aware of the current situation in terms of regaining their shape and dropping in deeper.

Leading on from this, the defensive shape that Wales take up when they are defending deeper ensures that they can frustrate opponents. Their style out of possession is well-drilled and they are rarely played through centrally. The below example shows how they defend the penalty area.

The wide attacking players drop deep to create a bank of four alongside the central midfield players. The distances between the left and right of both the midfield and defence is very narrow. This again emphasises the importance that Wales have placed on defending the central areas. The midfield unit must choose when to engage with their opponents. A heavy touch is a perfect trigger to try and regain possession or disrupt play.

TRANSITIONS

Wales look to play forward quickly and be direct in offensive transitions. They don't break forward with a lot of support other than the wide players. Most of the attacking transitions go through Moore; he is usually the recipient of a long ball to his chest or into space he can run into.



Once the ball has been played, Moore looks to hold possession and wait for support from his teammates. This usually comes from the wingers, and they can look to build an attack from there.

Defensively, Wales transition quickly into their defensive roles. They are quite conservative in

the way they move and do not look to over-commit themselves to any challenges that could leave them exposed. As previously mentioned, Wales are not a high-pressing side. Pictured is an example of how Wales monitor the situation by the nearest player engaging.



The defender with the yellow arrow looks to delay the opponent by cautiously engaging him. This, hopefully, slows down the opposition's attack whilst another Welsh player looks to come in and tackle.

ATTACKERS

Wales' attacking options are quite plentiful, especially in wide areas. As mentioned previously they are blessed with the likes of Bale, James, Johnson and Matondo. The majority of these wide players are comfortable playing across the front three as a striker or winger on either side. The use of Gareth Bale as a striker has been done before and is something that Page could look to do, depending on the game.

Speaking of the striker position, Wales are relatively lightweight in terms of numbers. Keiffer Moore is such an influential player for the style of play they implement that if something were to happen, like an injury or suspension, Wales would be likely to play Bale centrally. An area that provides so much success for Wales must be monitored by Rob Page throughout the tournament.

MIDFIELDERS

The middle of the pitch has an abundance of young talent along with a wealth of experience. If fit, Ramsey and Allen are first-choice midfield options for Wales, however, both have been known for picking up injuries and this must be accounted for. Players such as Harry Wilson and Joe Morrell could easily feature in the midfield and are perfect rotation options for Ramsey.

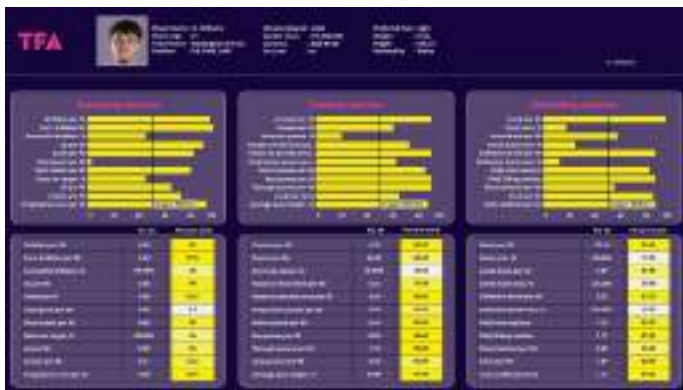
Furthermore, the likes of Ethan Ampadu can play in the midfield which brings good versatility and options for Page. Along with Ampadu midfielders such as Jonny Williams, Dylan Levitt and Rubin Colwill could also feature depending on minutes, fitness and scenarios.

DEFENDERS

The defensive unit almost picks itself. The mainstay players such as Wayne Hennessey, Ben Davies, Ethan Ampadu, Joe Rodon and Connor Roberts will be accompanied by the young and exciting Neco Williams. Chris Mepham and Ben Cabango provide excellent cover for the central defenders with Sobra Thomas, another exciting full-back, giving depth in the wider areas.

KEY PLAYER

Of course, Gareth Bale is the main man in the Wales squad but since moving to the MLS, his minutes have been limited and his form hasn't been great. Neco Williams, on the other hand, has been making an impact in the Premier League for Nottingham Forest of late.



rank Williams in the bottom 20th percentile. An area of weakness that could perhaps be targeted by the opposition. Having said this, playing as a wing-back does tend to reduce defensive responsibility so Williams should be able to manage as a nearby centre-back or midfielder will be able to offer a helping hand.

TOURNAMENT PREDICTION

Wales find themselves in a difficult group competing with England, Iran and the USA. A win in their first game against the US would put down a huge marker for the rest of the group. Their second game is a must-win if they are looking to qualify out of the group stages, while their tasty affair with England in the final Group Stage match could be set up for an all-or-nothing scenario depending on the results — Wales will fancy their chances against anyone.

Their group togetherness accompanied by their national spirit has seen Wales cause upsets before. I wouldn't be surprised to see Wales comfortably qualify out of the group stage with a few 'surprise' results.

The young wing-back joined from Liverpool in the summer and has started brightly in the Premier League. His overall game is vital and provides a good balance to the Wales side. At wing-back, he covers a large area of the pitch whilst having a lasting and continuous impact on the game.

Attacking-wise, his data is really impressive, though he's got relatively little experience in the Premier League. His percentile rank of 97.5 for successful dribbles per 90 shows just how direct he is on the ball. To continue, his progressive runs per 90 percentile rank, 92.5, again tells us how direct and forward he is. On top of all this is a danger in front of goal ranking in the 90th percentile for xG per 90 and 65th percentile for xA per 90.

Moving on to his passing, his passing data again shows his quality and ability on the ball. A high rank for crosses per 90 could come in useful due to Wales' style of play. Furthermore, his creative ability is backed up even more by his high ranking for both smart passes per 90 and key passes per 90. Both areas show how progressive on the ball Williams is, something that can hopefully lead to success in the tournament.

Finally, his defending data, which again possesses some real quality. His PAdj interceptions and sliding tackles both have him higher than the 80th percentile, giving Rob Page confidence in the young defender. However, there are a few areas of concern, such as duels won % and defensive duels won %. Both of these metrics

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GROUP C

PLAYERS TO WATCH

VENKATANARAYANAN VENKATESAN // @VenkyRedDevil

The first-ever winter world cup is almost here. It's time to look at which teams are the strongest and which players are the ones to watch out for specifically. In order to list down the players to look out for, we have specifically looked at the U23 category and players who play quite often for their respective clubs this season. It is to be noted that, these players might not start all the matches for their teams in the World Cup and could potentially miss out on getting called up altogether, but if and when they do represent their country in Qatar, they definitely have the potential to be game changers.

Group C consists of runners-up from 2014 – Argentina, one of the surprise packages from 2018 – Mexico, with Saudi Arabia and Poland.

The following visualization shows the players to watch out for from Group C. All the data is from the current season.

Enzo Fernández | Benfica | Argentina | 21 years old

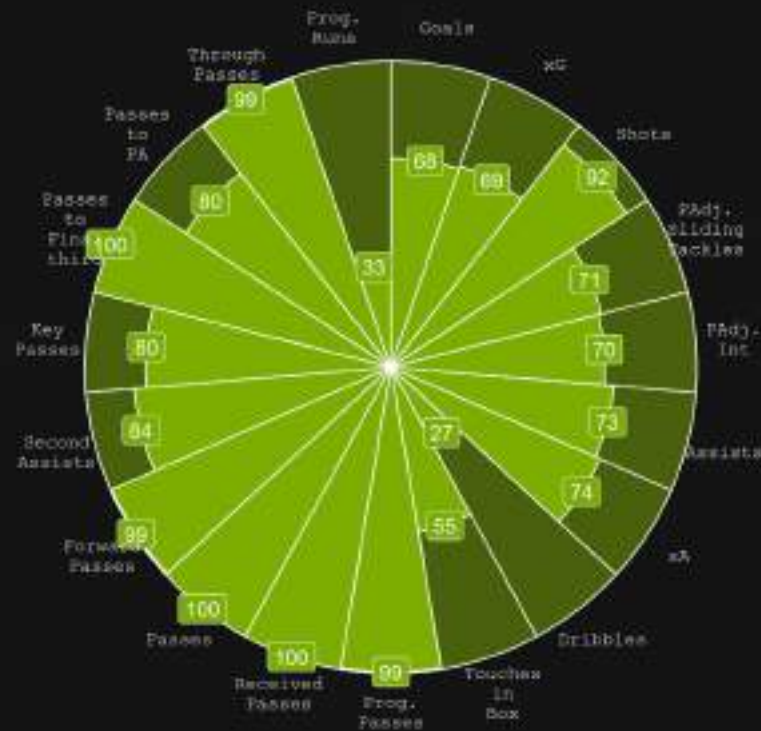
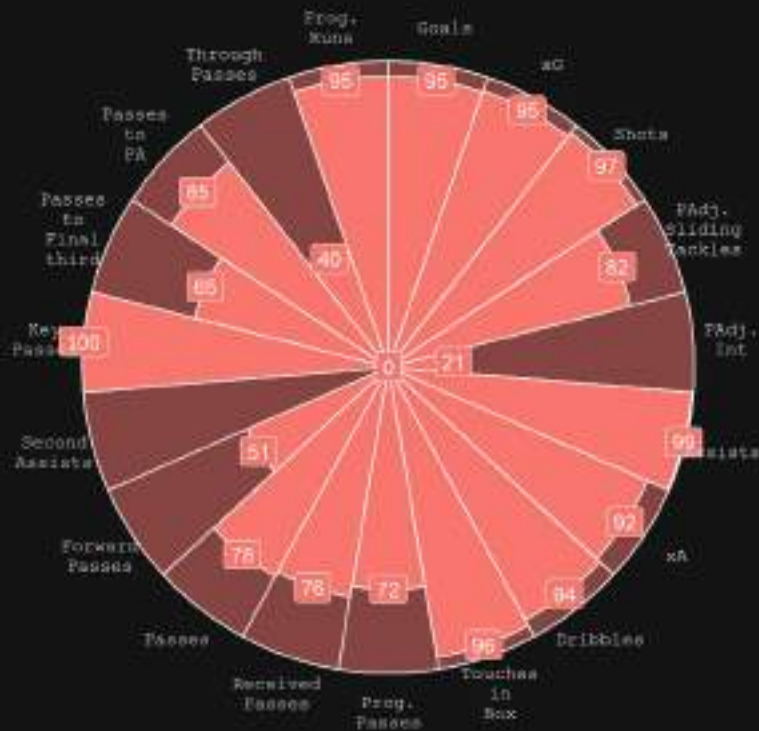
One of the most talked about midfielders right now in European football is Benfica's Enzo Fernández. The 21-year-old Argentinian is the only outfield player to have started every game for Benfica in the league this season. The midfielder usually plays in a midfield two this season in a 4-2-3-1 formation. His radar shows his strengths which include his passing. The midfielder's ability to find his teammates by passing between the lines and create chances for them to score puts him top tier for a number of passing metrics. One couldn't ask for a better all-round midfielder than Enzo Fernández and after his senior international debut only last month, World Cup 2022 could very well be the tournament that helps Enzo Fernández secure his move to a club in Europe's top five leagues next summer.

World Cup 2022 | Group C

Percentile ranks among players from res. positions in res. leagues | Min. 100 minutes played

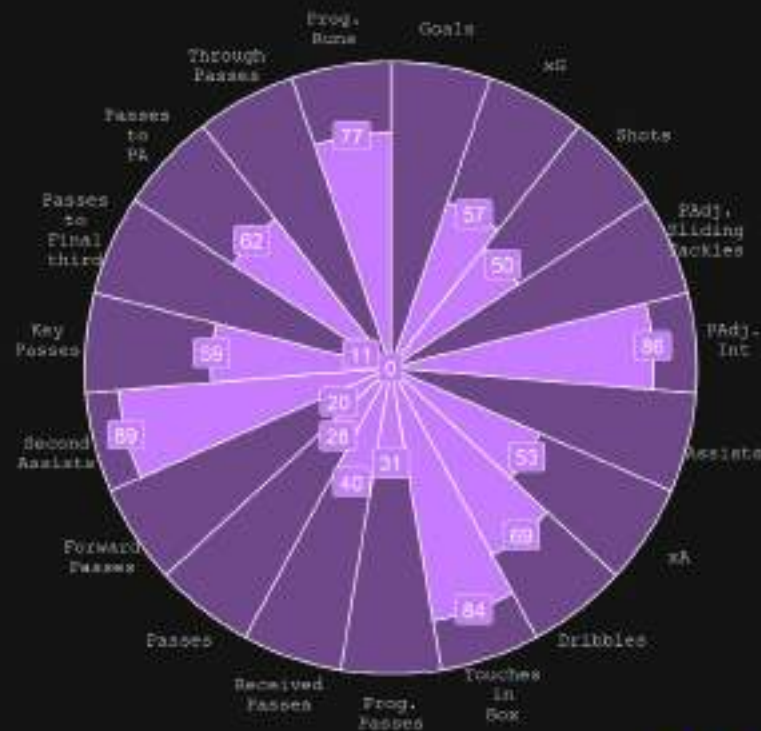
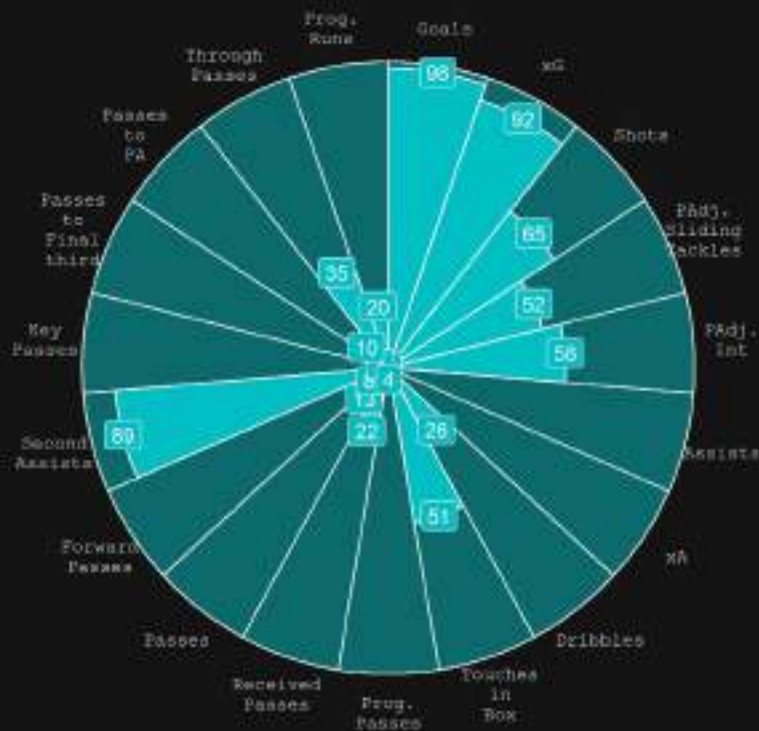
D. Lainez | Sporting Braga
Mexico

E. Fernández | Benfica
Argentina



Firas Al Buraikan | Al Fateh
Saudi Arabia

J. Kamiński | Wolfsburg
Poland



Firas Al-Buraikan | Al Fateh | Saudi Arabia | 22 years old

Al Fateh's 22-year-old forward Firas Al-Buraikan is the top scorer for his club this season with four goals and one assist to his name. Having made his senior debut in 2019, Firas has been an important part of the national team setup and played an important part in helping his team secure qualification for the tournament in Qatar. It will be interesting to see if the forward can continue his form at the biggest tournament.

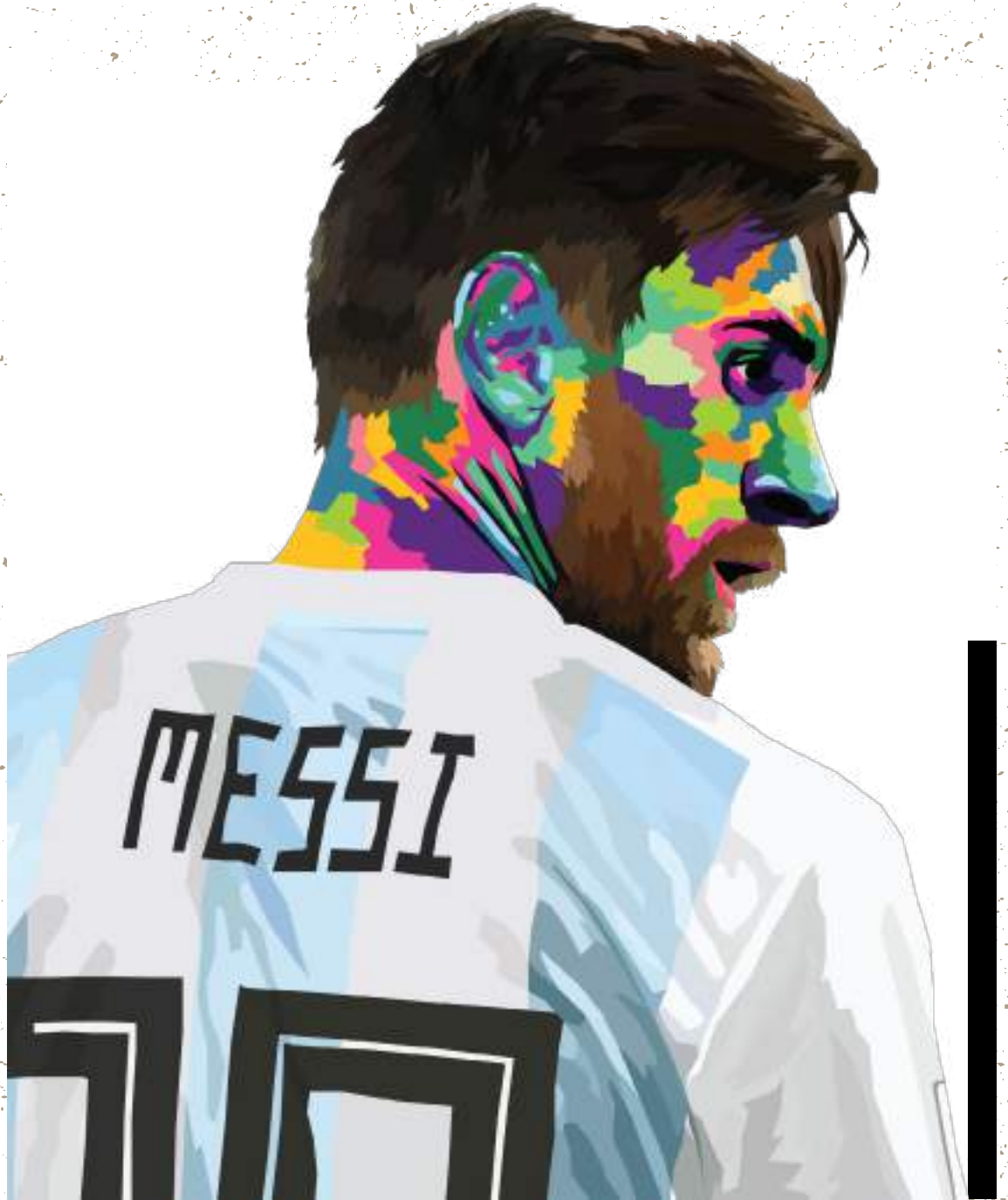
Diego Lainez | Braga | Mexico | 22 years old

We have another midfielder to watch out for from the Portuguese League in Group C. Mexico's 22-year-old Diego Lainez has started just only one league game for Braga this season. However, Lainez has shown what he is capable of during his time on the pitch. The versatile midfielder can pretty much play in any of the attacking midfield positions. As seen in the visual above, Lainez brings a bit of pretty much everything to the table whenever he is on the pitch. Having made his senior international debut in 2018, Lainez has been a regular since then, however, he has not started regular games. He will definitely be one of the players to watch out for from Mexico this year if they are to repeat their heroics from 2018.

Jakub Kamiński | Wolfsburg | Poland | 20 years old

Jakub Kamiński, from Wolfsburg, has played in a number of different positions for his club this year, showing his versatility. Kamiński, having made his senior international in a World Cup qualifier as a 19-year-old, is an attacking midfielder who likes to stay in and around the box and create chances for his teammates. His awareness of the game is one of his biggest defensive strengths. Poland have lacked a lot of consistency in recent times and as a result of that, a number of new players are getting their chances. Jakub Kamiński is one of those, the player impressed in the Nations League games in June and is expected to fly to Qatar 2022.

ARGENTINA



GROUP C

— CAIO MIGUEL // @osegundovolante —

Having turned 35 earlier this year, the 2022 FIFA World Cup will most likely be Lionel Messi's last attempt at getting his hands on the biggest trophy in football. The PSG star is widely considered one of the best players of all time, if not the best. However, for most of his career, Messi has had nothing to show internationally. Although he led Argentina to the World Cup final in 2014, with Messi, the Albiceleste never looked like a real force on the global stage. That is, however, until the arrival of Lionel Scaloni.

The 44-year-old manager took over the national team on an interim basis after a rather disappointing 2018 World Cup performance under Jorge Sampaoli. Not much was expected from the former Lazio player, especially as he arrived with zero managerial experience. At any rate, after a promising start, the Argentine Football Association decided to give Scaloni a chance at the 2019 Copa América. Despite losing to Brazil in the semi-final, AFA felt as if Scaloni was building something special and allowed him to continue his job for the remainder of the World Cup cycle.

Since that defeat to Brazil on the 3rd of July 2019, Argentina have not lost a single match. With a balance between experienced players and the new extremely promising Argentinian generation, Scaloni has restored a sense of identity and pride to the Albiceleste. After leading Argentina to their first major trophy in 28 years, Lionel Scaloni and Lionel Messi have their sights on a historic world title.

This tactical analysis will provide a detailed insight into Argentina's tactics under Lionel Scaloni. More specifically, this analysis aims to identify why and how Argentina come into this World Cup as one of the favourites to win it all.

PREDICTED STARTING XI



Although on paper Argentina line up in a 4-3-3, there is a defining lack of structure in Argentina's tactics. Without adhering to a rigid shape, Scaloni's men play a free-flowing and fluid style of football. Before examining these varying shapes and structures in the next section, it is important to understand some of the factors behind this style. The main one can be simply attributed to the players at Scaloni's disposal.

Aside from Juventus' Ángel Di María and Ajax's Lucas Ocampos, there is a significant lack of true wingers in the national pool. Contrastingly, there is an overwhelming number of diverse and dynamic midfielders. As a consequence, similar to Spain's route to glory in 2010, Scaloni's

possession-based tactics look to take full advantage of this depth in the midfield.

Looking at Argentina's predicted starting XI, we are able to see how such a side might function. The backline is fairly straightforward, with the fullbacks having more attacking roles. In the midfield, Leandro Paredes, Rodrigo De Paul, and Giovanni Lo Celso offer a balanced and dynamic trio. Additionally, ahead of them, Papu Gómez and Lionel Messi are almost false wingers, constantly drifting inside to create superiority. Lautaro Martínez is the marksman up front, but he is also capable of providing support in possession.



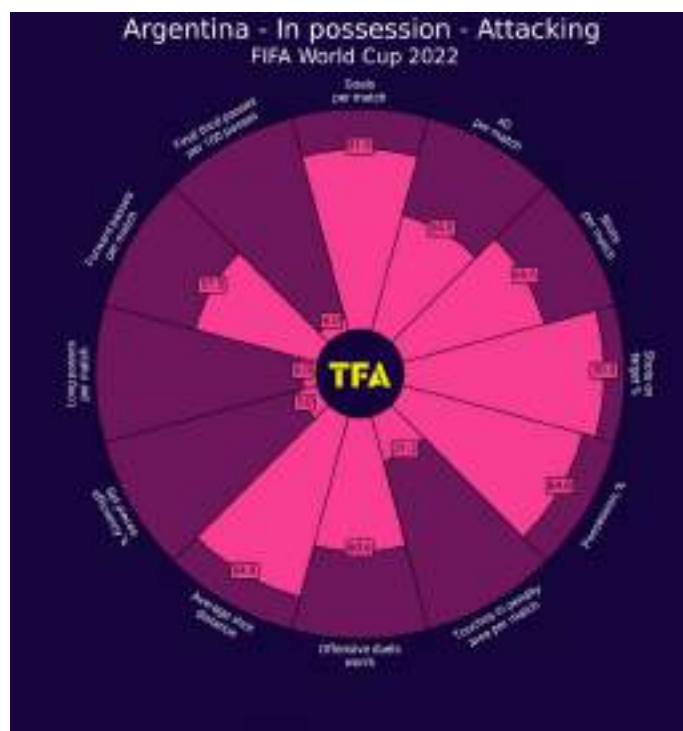
Argentina's age profile further indicates why this World Cup might be their best shot at the title in recent decades. Quality aside, the players at Scaloni's disposal offer an extremely desirable dynamic. La Albiceleste have tried and tested players at their disposal such as Nicolás Otamendi, Ángel Di María, and Lionel Messi.

On the other hand, they also have young and emerging stars such as Enzo Fernandez, Julián Álvarez, and Alexis Mac Allister. However, the core of Scaloni's men are in their prime years, with the majority of players being between 24 and 30 years old.

On paper, considering age, depth, and quality, Argentina have an extremely promising squad for this year's World Cup. What sets them apart, however, is their style. With fascinating tactics

guided by a unique and historic philosophy, Lionel Scaloni has gold on his hands.

ATTACKING PHASE



Argentina's tactics in possession can be broken down into two sections, behavioural and structural. While these can be examined individually, they can never be thought of as separate. They work hand in hand to create a dominant and possession-based style of play, which can be further illustrated in the pie chart above. Among every team in the World Cup, Argentina rank in the 84.8th percentile for possession percentage.

This dominance is also translated into results. They are in the 81.8th percentile for goals per match, highlighting their ability to put the ball in the back of the net. Additionally, they are constantly able to create very good looks, being in the 84.8th percentile for average shot distance and 90.9th for the percentage of shots on target. Finally, another key metric that can be used to illustrate their possession style is their extremely low tendency to play it long, only ranking in the 6th percentile for long passes per match.

In possession, Scaloni's men adopt a patient and dominant style, where they look to control the match by having most of the ball. With incisive verticality, they effectively progress through the pitch to create clear and dangerous chances. While there are many ways to go about this, structurally, Argentina do so in a very unique manner.

As mentioned, there is an abundance of central players in Albiceleste's starting XI, let alone in the squad. Scaloni looks to take advantage of this by implementing a fluid system reliant on constant approximation and numerical superiority. Consequently, there is no set structure or shape they look to maintain. The backline is perhaps the most constant unit, but ahead of them, the players are as fluid and mobile as possible. Their structure in the build-up, as seen below, begins with a line of four behind an overloaded midfield.



Scaloni's men are constantly looking to create numerical superiority around the ball. In order to do so, the players are constantly supporting possession and creating passing lanes around the ball carrier. This can be further illustrated in the example below, against Italy. Argentina's midfield collectively drops deep to support possession alongside the other centre-back and the right-back. By doing so, they create a unit of six players against Italy's four.



The same principle is followed in the final third. As they try to breakdown Estonia's low block, Scaloni's men create a 5v4 superiority on the left side. With such superiority, they are able to use their mobility, individual talent, and collective play to progress further and create dangerous chances.

Additionally, this system significantly enhances Messi's potential. The 35-year-old thrives in tight spaces where he is able to interact with teammates to combine and progress further. While it may seem like his performances for Argentina have significantly improved lately, it is simply a result of the collective performance evolving.



Argentina are extremely dynamic in possession, with individual talent and intuition guiding a lot of their actions. At any rate, there are certain principles, such as superiority, patience, and approximation, that dictate their collective behaviour, positioning, and mentality.

DEFENSIVE PHASE



Defensively, Argentina rank incredibly low in nearly every key metric. As most defensive metrics go, volume does not indicate success. In 2022, according to Wyscout, Argentina averaged 59.21% of possession per 90. Being with the ball nearly twice as much as the opposition, it is only logical their defensive numbers would rank quite low in volume. Nonetheless, in metrics that measure effectiveness, such as the percentage of aerial duels won and the percentage of defensive duels won, they do rank quite well.

Overall, as they tend to dominate the majority of their matches, Argentina are not defending much. At any rate, they still enjoy significant defensive success. In 2022, they only conceded 0.25 goals per 90, that is only one goal every four matches. Their defensive work begins with an intense high press, as seen by their ranking in the 36.3rd percentile for PPDA.

Similar to their tactics in possession, there is no rigid structure without the ball, especially as they function in an extremely man-oriented defensive system. At any rate, the general and

loose formation out of possession is a 4-4-2, with Messi joining Lautaro up top. When they press high, they do so in a very aggressive manner, often looking to match the opposition's numbers. In the example below, against Brazil, they are able to man-mark every Brazilian player as they focus their build-up on the right side.



They are also extremely compact when going about their pressing. After forcing and limiting the opposition to one side, they look to squeeze them in and overwhelm them into giving the ball away. In the example below, Peru are nowhere near as structured and organised as Brazil were in the last image. Nonetheless, Argentina advance their high block and create significant numerical superiority around the ball.



In lower blocks, Scaloni's men revert into a more compact 4-4-2 block, with Lionel Messi being an outlet without many defensive duties. Despite generally attempting to maintain two compact lines of four, they still adhere to a man-oriented marking system. Against Italy, although a loose 4-4-2 can be identified, it is dictated by man references.



TRANSITIONS

In transition phases, Scaloni's tactics adhere to common and modern strategies. With such talented players, when the ball is recovered, they look to immediately launch vertical counterattacks aiming to exploit the chaos that are transitions. Albiceleste's work in the offensive transition can be broken down into two principles. The first is numbers. When launching counterattacks, Argentina look to commit a significant number of players forward in order to maximise the possible damage. In the example below, Argentina launch six players against Chile's four.



The other principle relates to coordinated movements and combinations. The beauty of transitions is how chaotic and disorganised they are. In order to take the most advantage out of this defensive disorganisation, Argentina look to perform coordinated movements and runs to manipulate the opposition and create space. Against Chile, they perform a quick combination to reach their centre-forward. Meanwhile, three other players are sprinting forward to support the counterattack.



Unsurprisingly, their defensive transition begins with a counter-press. Immediately after losing possession, Scaloni's men are instructed to instantly pressure the ball and keep the opposition

from getting out. If unsuccessful, they aim to delay the play as they reorganise themselves defensively. As their possession structure involves a high number of players around the ball, when they lose it, they already have a lot of players near the ball to initiate the counter-press.



ATTACKERS

The forwards are Argentina's most star-studded unit. Lionel Messi leads the line, averaging an incredible 0.78 goals per 90 and 0.52 assists per 90 this season. Beside him, Lautaro Martínez, Ángel Di María, Paulo Dybala, Ángel Correa, and Julián Álvarez are all options. Di María has been struggling with injury this season but should be expected to return in time for Qatar. Dybala also suffered an injury scare recently, and the Roma star is currently racing against time to participate in the World Cup.

Lionel Messi aside, Lautaro Martínez is perhaps the biggest name on this list, and should Argentina win the World Cup, he will certainly play a big role in it. The Inter marksman averaged 0.67 goals per 90 last season and comes into this World Cup at the peak of his career. At any rate, Argentina have undeniable depth and quality in the final third, with stars who lead some of the world's biggest clubs.

MIDFIELDERS

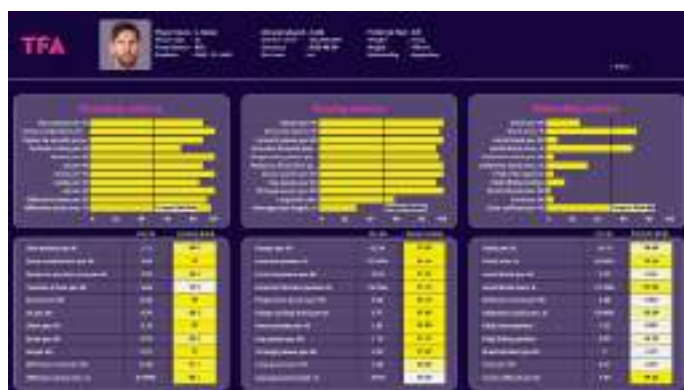
Scaloni's midfield is the heart of this new-look national team. There are no star players in this

section of the pitch, but on the other hand, there are numerous unsung heroes who are capable of doing the dirty work and working together to supply their dangerous forward line. Lo Celso, De Paul, and Paredes lead the midfield, with the three being perhaps the most popular players in this section of the pitch. Nonetheless, across the whole midfield section, there is a great balance in style and characteristics. Additionally, the majority of these players are between 23 and 28 years old.

DEFENDERS

Albiceleste's defence has a balance between more experienced players such as Nicolás Otamendi and Nicolás Tagliafico and young stars such as Cristian Romero and Lisandro Martínez. With Otamendi being perhaps the leader on the pitch, the former Man City defender brings seven World Cup appearances of experience. Additionally, Romero and Martínez are leading Tottenham and Man United's backlines, respectively. With great depth and quality, Argentina have a very secure defence to hold down the fort when needed.

KEY PLAYER



There is not much to say when referring to Argentina's best performer. Lionel Messi is one of the best players of all time and after an illustrious career, he looks to cap it off with a World Cup title. After an underwhelming first season at PSG,

the 35-year-old has bounced back this season averaging incredible numbers. In both attacking and passing metrics, Messi ranks incredibly high in all statistics. In the attacking department, his 97th percentile for both assists per 90 and xG per 90 is especially notable. Passing-wise, Messi is one of the most dangerous and effective forwards football has ever seen, ranking above the 95th percentile in nearly all metrics.

Messi's quality is undisputed, and for the first time in his career, the Barcelona legend finally has a team performing up to his standard. With a squad willing to go the extra inch for him, he has everything he needs to secure the most important trophy in football.

TOURNAMENT PREDICTION

Despite not having won the competition since 1986, Argentina enter the 2022 Qatar World Cup as one of the favourites to take the trophy home. Under Lionel Scaloni, Albiceleste have not lost a single match since 2019. With the 45-year-old manager seeming to have found the perfect recipe, we will see if Lionel Messi can finish off his career with a fairytale ending.

MEXICO



GROUP C

There are four things you can count on in life...death, taxes, Guillermo Ochoa putting on Gold Glove performances at the World Cup, and Mexico exiting in the Round of 16 (we'll leave England's penalty kicks out, for now).

Mexico is one of the 10 most populous countries in the world. Of the nine countries ahead of them, only Nigeria and Brazil are football-first nations. Given their obsessive following of the sport and the fact that all their top athletic talents take the football route, Mexico's limited success at the World Cup is a bit baffling.

The last time Mexico reached the quarterfinals was in 1986. They were banned from the 1990 World Cup and have finished with Round of 16 exits in seven consecutive tournaments. Even in 2022, they've drawn Argentina in their group and find France as the likeliest opponent should the Mexicans finish second in their group. So, in the group stage, they'll face the third favourite with the hope of playing a knockout round game against the second favourite. It's a difficult draw for the nation, one that looks likely to prolong the quarterfinal drought.

But that won't stop the Mexicans from putting on a show in Qatar. Regardless of the opponent, Mexico will play with pride and the expectation of going toe-to-toe with their opponent, be it Argentina or France. This tactical analysis will give a preview of Mexico's expected tactics and personnel, as well as some of the red flags that have come to the forefront in the qualifying rounds and recent friendlies.

PREDICTED STARTING XI



Mexico is one of CONCACAF's two perennial powers, the other being the USA. Like many traditional powers, they have a very specific style of play and tactical system. When Mexico takes to the pitch in Qatar, they will set out in a 4-3-3. The objectives are dominance in possession, dictating temp, and aggressively counterpressing. Regardless of the opponent, Mexico wants to play on the front foot.

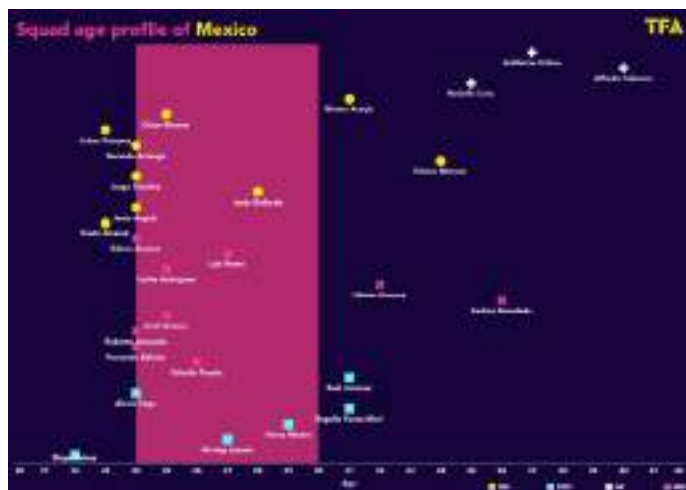
That identity has inevitably hurt them in the past, but it has also produced many incredibly entertaining games. When you watch the Mexican national team in action, you'll always see the pride they have for their country and the honour of defending the badge. They'll bring energy, intensity, and aggression to Qatar.

Looking at the predicted starting XI, it's Ochoa time. It seems like every four years he puts on a Golden Glove-worthy performance at the World Cup. At the age of 37, this will likely be his last hurrah.

The veteran, Moreno, will anchor the backline. He's surrounded by three very talented players in Montes, Arteaga, and Sánchez. The two outside-backs will take very aggressive positions when Mexico is in possession. Look for them to be highly involved.

In midfield, the young Ajax stand-out, Álvarez, is undoubtedly the most talented player in the middle of the pitch, if not the entire squad. He's an emerging talent and a vital piece of Mexico's World Cup fate. Rodriguez will likely play the #10 while Guardado and Herrera rotate at the #8.

Up top is full of question marks. Tecatito Corona suffered an injury and will miss the World Cup, leaving Mexico without their preferred right forward. To make matters worse, Jiménez is struggling to regain his fitness. Though he should make the roster, Mexico can hardly count on him to be productive while out of form. That puts a lot of pressure on Lozano. Antuna looks like the choice on the opposite flank, but it's the star power of Chucky that Mexico will lean on. Should Jimenez miss the tournament, the burden only increases.



Looking at Mexico's squad age profile, they have a lot of key members on the wrong side of 30. Moreno should do well at centreback and Ochoa will be just fine as the goalkeeper, but the diminishing physical qualities of Guardado and Herrera are major concerns for the Mexicans, which will be seen throughout this analysis.

Mexico does have a talented group of players just entering their peak years. Overall, the starting lineup will feature a blend of promising young players and veterans on their last leg.

ATTACKING PHASE

To give a sense of Mexico's qualifying campaign, we'll look at the data, first for their attacking metrics, to see where the strengths and weaknesses in the squad lie. At first glance, it's abundantly clear that Mexico's glaring weakness is the struggle to convert possession into quality chances.



Rating in the 82nd percentile for possession among the 32 teams competing at the World Cup, Mexico was able to convert their high share of possession into shots, coming in at the 76th percentile.

While they can take positives from those two data points, holding them in comparison to goals and xG per match gives a sense of their issues. Despite their dominance in possession, they rate slightly below average in xG per match and were among the worst teams in the field for goals per game. Jiménez has been Tata Martino's go-to striker, but the Wolves player is coming back from an injury and was struggling for minutes even before the fitness concerns.

To score at the World Cup, Mexico will have to be exceptional in open play. In their 4-3-3 system, that starts with a strong build-out. Mexico's game model is a very standard 4-3-3. Two centre-backs split into the half spaces, outside-backs will push high and the midfield triangle will remain tightly connected with a single pivot. That pivot player will oscillate between a higher position in midfield and dropping in between the centrebacks.



Mexico's midfield does rotate very effectively. If Álvarez, who will play the six, steps into the midfield, the player in the box-to-box role, typically Guardado or Herrera, will drop deeper to maintain the triangular structure.

If Mexico builds out, they'll look to play through the lines and progress the ball near midfield. As the team chooses to attack left, centre, or right, the forwards will adjust their positioning to coordinate their width with the sequence of play. If the ball is in the wings, expect the near-sided winger to check towards the ball, the striker to pinch into that near half-space, and the far-sided forward to look for opportunities to get in behind.



If play is built centrally, look for the two wingers to maintain their width, at least initially. El Tri will look to stretch the backline in an attempt to get him behind. If the opposition's backline remains narrow, Mexico will look to play into the wingers, either looking for them to engage in 1v1 duels or drive inside to create the overlap for the oncoming outside-backs.

Once Mexico gets into the final third of the pitch they will look to push numbers into the box. They routinely get at least three players into the box, overloading centrally to increase their chance of latching onto a service. In this example against Columbia, a clever dummy of a through ball got Mexico behind the backline, leading to their second goal of the game.



In terms of Mexico's attacking tactics, they should show well at the World Cup in the way they build out of the back and play through the lines. It's when they get to the final third, or really the box, that issues emerge. Without Chicharito's trademark poaching in the 18, Mexico may struggle to find the back of the net in Qatar. That will increase the attacking burden on Chucky Lozano, especially if Jiménez is not in form. Without a comparable replacement at the

#9, Mexican fans and the federation will closely track Jiménez's fitness leading into the World Cup.

DEFENSIVE PHASE

In the qualifying rounds, Mexico conceded just eight goals in 14 games, tying Costa Rica for the fewest goals against in the continent. Certainly for a side like Mexico, keeping possession of the ball is the best form of defence. Expect them to rack up a lot of possession against Saudi Arabia and Poland. For that critical Argentina matchup, an even split or slight possession advantage to the Mexicans wouldn't surprise us.

Looking at their World Cup qualifying pizza chart, that possession is probably for the best. Despite conceding 0.57 goals per game in qualifying, Mexico rates very poorly in most critical defensive metrics relative to the other nations competing at the World Cup. One of the most troublesome percentile ranks is their PPDA, or passes per defensive action. Rating in the 9th percentile, Mexico's issues in transition are a red flag, which we'll touch upon in a moment. Another troublesome statistic is that they're one of the worst teams in the tournament in terms of recoveries in their own third. They are a team that will press high, so if they can be effective in the attacking half of the pitch, that metric may not be a concern. However, the 34th percentile for recoveries in the final third for a high-pressing team with an aggressive commitment to counterpressing is hardly inspiring.



Expect Mexico to use the high press against Saudi Arabia and Poland. However, against Argentina, we could very well see them drop into a 4-4-2 mid-block with an ageing midfield that can't play a box-to-box game. Those compact lines will create easier backtracking opportunities for Mexico.



The mid-block takes care of one vulnerability, namely, an ageing squad with the inability to play an end-to-end game. It should also help Mexico's box defending. With the midfield sitting a little bit deeper, they should offer better support for the backline and better track runners into the box.

They did have an issue tracking runners in the Columbia match, leading to a well-taken second goal. This comes despite sitting a little deeper in the game. As Columbia made their way into the box, they were able to find lanes to send

negative passes, as well as gaps in the Mexican lines that allowed the South Americans to get good looks at goal.



Improved organisation, placing intense pressure on the opposition's first attacker, and timing of pressing triggers will be massive for Mexico. They have had issues in all three areas leading up to the tournament, leading to concern among the fan base.

Take this example against the USA. All 10 Mexican outfield players are in that shaded area. The camera angle distorts the size a little bit, but it's approximately a 25m square. The press is very aggressive, which is fine provided Mexico wins the ball. They simply can't afford to let the USA play out of their press.



However, that's exactly what happens. The Yanks can play into the forwards and clip the ball behind the backline. That puts them into the box and leads to a beautiful delivery across the goal mouth. Chelsea's Christian Pulisic puts his shot right at Ochoa, keeping the game knotted at zero, a score line that would not change despite the ruckus crowd in the famed Estadio Azteca.

Given Mexico's issues in front of goal, they simply can't afford to slip up defensively.

TRANSITIONS

As this analysis progresses to transitions, let's start with the attacking phase. When Mexico looks to counterattack, they will look to get behind the opposition's outside-backs. Notice the centre-forward occupying both Colombian centrebacks. That's a perfect scenario for Mexico. If Chucky and the other wide forwards can consistently get behind the opposition's outside-backs, they will create 3v2s and 3v3s.



In those attacking transitions, the front three and #10 will bear the brunt of the attacking burden. Part of this is down to the system, but another part is the personnel in midfield. At the risk of beating a dead horse, Mexico's midfield simply won't have the legs to consistently get in support of the front three.

Take this example against Canada. Mexico recovered the ball in their defensive third, then immediately played into the forward line. Initially, this was a 4v3 scenario in Canada's favour. Three seconds after the ball is initially played in, look at the evolving context. While it's still 4v3 to Canada behind the ball, they have another four players quickly recovering. In the end, the Canadians were able to snuff out the counterattack and comfortably restart their attack.



At the World Cup, when Mexico's opponents progress into the attacking half of the pitch, El Tri must get organised quickly and slow the tempo of the game to encourage the opponents to take more aggressive starting positions. As the opposition becomes more expansive, Mexico will increase the likelihood of the front three's success in attacking transitions.

And the flip side is true for Mexico. Since they prefer to dictate tempo through possession, Mexico must closely guard against unstructured attacks. Better opposition can hurt them if the CONCACAF Gold Cup runners-up send too many numbers into the final third. If Mexico's rest defence is too expansive with too little cover behind the ball, their opponents will find a lot of joy in the counterattack, much like Canada did during World Cup qualifying.



Mexico's ineffectiveness in attacking transitions has been an issue the past 18 months, as has an expansive rest defence that has led to poor counterpressing and quality chances conceded during opposition counterattacks. They ask a lot of their two centrebacks and defensive midfielder. Every so often, the squad asks too much of them. There's simply too much ground to cover.

Mexico's fate at the World Cup will likely come down to the quality of their attacking and defensive transitions.

ATTACKERS

Looking at Mexico's forwards, Jiménez and Lozano are certainly the headliners. Though the former has fallen upon tough times in the EPL, Chucky and his Napoli side are flying in Serie A.

Lainez is the next most recognizable name among the forward group. Once Mexico's Golden boy, his time at Real Betis was underwhelming, leading to a loan move to Braga. Though he is primarily coming off of the bench in the Portuguese League, Lainez is gradually showing the talent that made him such a prominent young prospect.

Chivas Guadalajara's Vega is enjoying a strong season and will likely get some time.

If Jiménez is unfit for the World Cup or suffering a glaring lack of form, Mexico does have some options. Martín and Funes Mori are playing well in LigaMX, plus there's the exciting young Giménez at Feyenoord.

Lozano is the lone lock in Mexico's front three, but there is plenty of talent for Martino to fall back on.

MIDFIELDERS

This analysis has admittedly been harsh on Mexico's midfield with the 24-year-old Álvarez operating as the pivot player and 25-year-old Rodriguez likely to start as well. Perhaps calling this an ageing midfield is unnecessarily critical.

That said, it's the third member of the midfield, which will typically be either the 36-year-old

Guardado or 32-year-old Herrera that slows this group down. Mexico's playing style places extraordinary physical demands on the midfield three. When the box-to-box players are incapable of filling their function, it places additional stress on the #6 and #10. One issue is that these two are highly respected and still quality players, making it difficult for Tata to sit them.

There are other options, such as Monterrey's Romo, as well as a few players who are on the final roster bubble. Regardless of who makes the flight to Qatar, expect Guardado and Herrera to command significant minutes in the Mexican midfield.

DEFENDERS

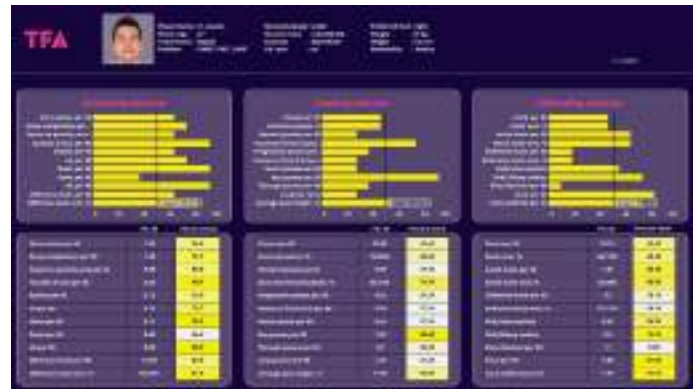
Defence is another area of strength for the Mexican national team. While there are not many who are considered household names in the global game, many of the players are either based in LigaMX or have recently left the league for Europe such as Arteaga and Sánchez. Arteaga is having an excellent season with Genk and Sánchez is gradually picking up minutes with Ajax.

At centreback, look for the leadership of Moreno, who is back in LigaMX after a storied career that took him to La Liga and Serie A. His club teammate at Monterrey, Montes, is the likely partner at the back, giving the Mexicans excellent chemistry along the backline.

N. Araujo and Angulo offer depth at centreback while a talented group of outside-backs will make their way to Qatar. This group has a lot of talent and will end in some unfortunate cuts, one of which could be Julián Araujo of the LA Galaxy. Álvarez has been excellent for Pachuca, as has Gallardo for Monterrey, which may give them the edge in making the final roster.

There's a lot of quality on this Mexican backline, especially in the wings.

BEST PERFORMER



A couple of years ago, this spot would definitely have gone to Jiménez. But, with the Wolves man suffering a series of injuries and coming into the World Cup with poor fitness levels, Chucky must take the mantle. His playing time at Napoli has been somewhat sporadic this campaign, making nine Serie A appearances, four of which are starts. He's also made three Champions League appearances and played exceptionally well.

His passing and defending metrics are more good than great, but that's not the focus for Chucky. When he dons the Mexican kit, he's there to be a playmaker and box presence. His xG, shots, and touches in the box p90 all rate in the 90th percentile in Serie A. We do get a glimpse of the below-average goals p90 data, which could be an issue for Mexico, but Chucky is irreplaceable in this squad.

He's not only Mexico's biggest talent, but he's also the most consistent player in the squad. Mexico will need him to put his goal-scoring woes behind him and come through in the final third. Their attacking production depends on it.

TOURNAMENT PREDICTION

With seven consecutive Round of 16 exits, Mexico's goal has consistently been to take the next step, to reach the quarterfinals. They haven't advanced to that stage since 1986, 36 years ago.

Argentina is not only one of the favourites in the tournament, but they're also heavily favoured to win the group. If, hypothetically, Argentina does secure the first spot and Mexico finish second, that likely sets up a Round of 16 match against France, a top-two favourite to win the World Cup. Breaking the Round of 16 curse is once again a tall task.

There is a great deal of pessimism among the Mexican cohort. Martino's men have just two wins in their past seven games, one of which was against Suriname. They're entering the tournament on a low note.

The first match against Poland is critical. Mexico should have the quality to see off Saudi Arabia, but it's the Poles who look most threatening for that second spot in the group. Mexico expects to progress to the knockout rounds of the World Cup, but they certainly cannot overlook Robert Lewandowski and Poland. If they do so, the likely Round of 16 opponent is France.

Knockout tournaments are especially chaotic. Anything can happen. That said, an 8th consecutive Round of 16 exit seems likeliest for Mexico.



POLAND



GROUP C

— BRANDON LISS // @brandthebeast —

The last couple of international tournaments have been ones to forget for Polish football fans. After a run to the quarterfinals of the 2016 European Championships two years prior, big things were expected going into the 2018 FIFA World Cup. However, this ended up being far from the case. The Biało-czerwoni finished bottom of their group, which spelled the end of Adam Nawałka's five-year spell in charge of his country.

Fast forward to 2020, and under the management of Portuguese manager Paulo Sousa, Poland found themselves once again struggling in a European tournament, finishing bottom of their EURO 2020 group with only a single point after three matches.

Still in the Polish ranks is the prolific Robert Lewandowski, now of Barcelona. However, going into the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, the Polish national team has become somewhat of an unknown commodity. A new manager is again in the hot seat, with former Poland U21 boss Czesław Michniewicz now in charge going into the tournament. Young talent has also started to break into the senior squad, with Spezia's Jakub Kiwior, Feyenoord's Sebastian Szymanski, and AS Roma's Nicola Zalewski all likely to be not just on the plane to Qatar, but in the starting lineup for the first group stage match.

They should be a side to watch come the end of November, as this tactical analysis and scout report will illustrate — especially with this likely being Robert Lewandowski's last World Cup.

PREDICTED STARTING XI



Through his short time in charge of the Polish national team so far (eight matches), Czesław Michniewicz has experimented with different personnel and starting formations to try and find the best solution. The graphic above shows what he will likely go with in the opening match of their group on the 22nd of November against Mexico. This 3-4-2-1 system has been what the Polish boss has used in their last warm-up games before the World Cup.

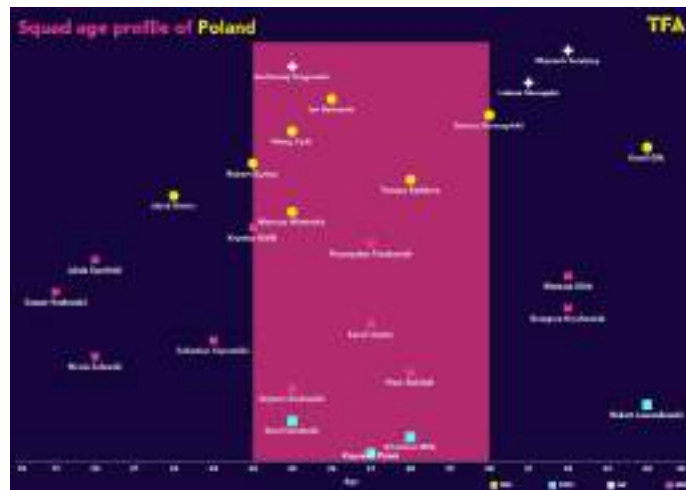
Looking at the defence, Juventus's Wojciech Szczesny is an absolute lock to start in goal for Poland. The 66-cap international has become the undisputed #1 between the sticks since Łukasz Fabiański's retirement from international football last year. Moving forward into the

defensive line, we predict that Michniewicz will stick with three centre-backs. Aston Villa's Jan Bednarek and Benevento's Kamil Glik will likely start, with Spezia's Jakub Kiwior being a surprise addition to the starting lineup. Though he only has 4 senior caps to his name after making his senior international debut earlier this year, the 22-year-old has begun to establish himself firmly in the manager's plans.

Moving up the pitch into midfield, 93 cap man Grzegorz Krychowiak will once again be the anchor in the midfield at another international tournament for Poland, with the Al-Shabab player being Poland's most experienced starter in midfield. Next to him will likely be Torino midfielder Karol Linetty, who after an indifferent campaign for his club in the 2021/22 season, has excelled for club and country so far this term.

Moving out to the wing-back/wide midfielder positions, Nicola Zalewski and Matty Cash look like the likely starters. The former broke into the AS Roma side last season under José Mourinho and has become one to watch in the very near future. As for Cash, the defender has made the starting spot on the right side since switching his international allegiance from England to Poland last year.

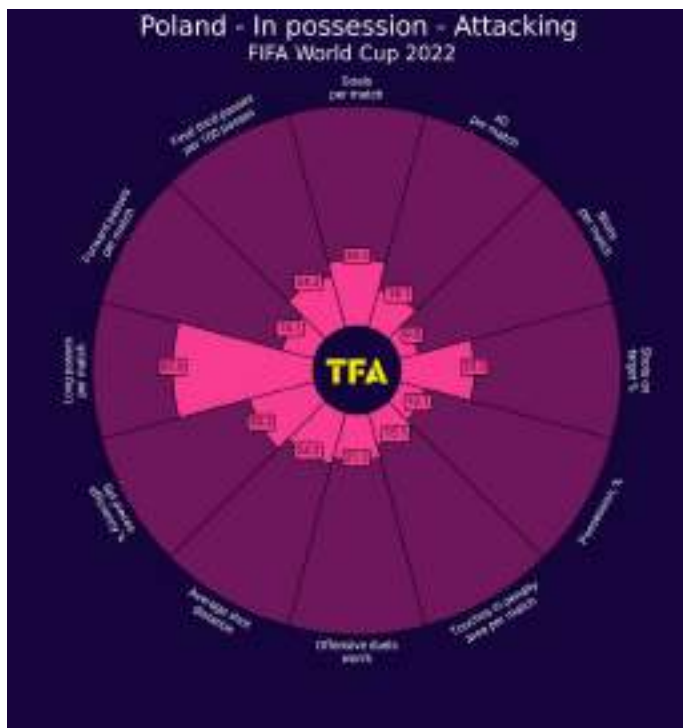
In the attacking positions, Sebastian Szymański will likely start alongside Piotr Zielinski in attacking midfield. Szymański has had a very good start to the season for Feyenoord, with 4 goals and 4 assists across all competitions so far this season. Michniewicz will be hoping that Zielinski can also transfer his form from the club scene to country in November, with the Napoli playmaker having scored four goals and provided six assists across all competitions for the Partenopei this season. Finally, leading the line for Poland will be none other than Robert Lewandowski. Poland's all-time leading goal scorer with 76 goals for his country will be hoping he can add to that tally at the end of November.



As of the time of writing this, the final 26-man squad has not been announced by Czesław Michniewicz. However, the scatter plot above shows the age range of the likely squad that he will bring to Qatar. Poland has a relatively healthy mix of different age groups of players, with the majority between the ages of 24-30. This indicates that the majority of the playing squad are in the "prime" of their playing career, with young talent and the older, more experienced international players mixed in as well.

Out of the possible starting XI, four of the likely starters (Lewandowski, Glik, Szczyński, and Krychowiak) are older and more experienced, while the other seven players will likely be a combination of both young talent and players in the primes of their careers.

ATTACKING PHASE



The attacking pie chart metric above takes a look at how Poland look to play in the attacking phase of play, with Michniewicz opting for a style of play based on quick ball progression by playing it long towards a centre-forward or into the channels for the attackers to run onto, with the side ranking in the 63rd percentile in this metric. They are also not a high possession side, with Poland only ranking in the 12th percentile for possession %. Following are a couple of examples of Poland's attacking style of play that we expect to see them utilise in the World Cup.



As we saw in the data metric above, Poland are not a high-possession side. They instead look to win possession back and then quickly attack,

looking for space in behind the opposition's defence, and playing long balls into these channels. An example of this is shown above from Poland's recent UEFA Nations League match against Belgium.

In the phase of play above, notice how the player in possession has options to play the ball short and continue to build, notably a square ball to his direct right. However, with Belgium playing a back three, the wing-back on the far side is advanced and out of position as a result of the last Belgium attack. The Poland player then plays a long crossfield ball into the space on the opposite side of the field. This allows them to break the Belgian press, and attack quickly while their defence is not organized.



Above shows an even better example of Poland's preferred route one style of attacking football. Preceding this image, the ball was played all the way back from the Belgian attacking third to Szczęsny in the Poland net. He then played the ball out wide to the defender, who was able to send a cross in behind the Belgian defence towards the forward running in behind. The ensuing long ball can find the forward running in behind the defender's back shoulder. However, the shot is sent over the bar, but the movement and pass are, again, what Poland will look to produce plenty of during the World Cup.

Another thing to notice in this attacking phase from Poland is that all 10 outfield players are essentially beyond midfield and in the opposition's half. While it is rare for them to send all of their outfield players forward, this

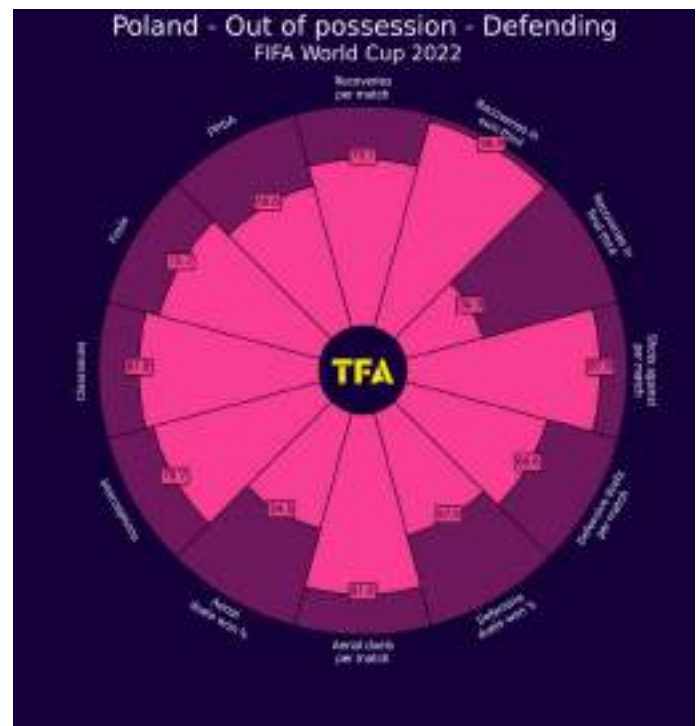
allows Poland to overwhelm their opposition in the attacking half of the pitch. It also allows them to be prime targets to win either first or second balls when they are played long from the backline. As a side that is not possession-oriented, the ability to win these first and second balls is key to being able to attack successfully.



While they may be categorised as a long-ball team and not really possession-based, Poland are still capable of using quick passing sequences as a means of getting into the attacking half of the pitch. In the phase of play above, this is demonstrated. The goalkeeper plays the ball long into the wing-back. The defender can head the ball on first-time to the midfielder who is running unmarked in behind the Dutch fullback who is isolated in a 2v1. The flicked-on ball is played into the space for the midfielder to run onto and move into the attacking half, making it a 4v4 against the Dutch backline in a span of only three passes.

Though Poland will not be the most expansive team to watch from an attacking perspective at this winter's World Cup, they will create chances. They also likely won't create many per game, but all they may need is one to win if their defence can hold firm, which will be analysed in more detail next.

DEFENSIVE PHASE



When looking at the graphic above that shows how Poland's defence ranks in different categories, a few things immediately stand out. Recoveries in their own third and shots against per match are the first two categories that people may look at. These high percentile rankings show that Poland are a team that will drop back and sit in a defensive block most times.

Their high PPDA, in the 66th percentile, also indicates that they don't tend to press very high up the pitch. With that said, Poland will adapt their game plan defensively to whatever it may call for. Following are some examples of Poland in the defensive phase.



The image above shows Poland's defensive shape and shows why they rank highly in blocked shots and recoveries in their own third. In their back-three system, they defend in a back five, with it turning into a 5-3-2 defensively. Notice how eight outfield players are behind the ball with the midfield and defensive lines staying tight and compact, not allowing much space at all centrally. Poland allows the space out wide for teams to attack them, but can stay tight and compact to not allow the play to get moved centrally.

That is exactly what happens in the defensive phase shown above, as Belgium are unable to move the ball centrally as a result of Poland's defensive numbers in this area. Due to this, the ball is closed down by the Polish defenders in the wide area and they can eliminate the Belgian attack.



The defensive phase of play above shows another tactic that Poland tends to do when they are in a low defensive block. After they force the play into the wide channel, the wing-back, along with the ball side midfielder, look to close down the player in possession, with them looking to win back possession or force them to play backwards.

In this example, the Wales winger is forced to play the ball backwards, allowing the Polish defence to relieve some pressure. Notice also how Poland have numbers back in the box defensively, and because they are strong in the air, they would consider themselves favourites to be able to clear the ball away from danger if a cross were to have been sent into the box.



This final example also shows Poland looking to double up against the player in possession out wide. Once again, the Dutch player is forced to play the ball backwards, as there are no options for him to play forward to in advanced positions. With the Polish defence forcing the Dutch to play the ball backwards, it once again allows them to reset defensively.

As this section has illustrated, Poland are a team that prefers to sit back in a low block and absorb pressure when they lose possession. However, with that being said, don't expect Poland to just sit back in a low block defensively at all times; they may alter their defensive tactics at times based on the opposition.

TRANSITIONS



With Poland not being a possession-oriented side under Michniewicz, transitional moments are some of the most dangerous attacking moments for the team. The image above shows a good example of exactly what Michniewicz's side is capable of when regaining possession in vulnerable areas for the opposition. After Belgium lost possession in Poland's final third, the Polish players were able

to break quickly on a counterattack as a result of Belgium pushing a lot of their numbers forward. Seven of Poland's outfield players can break, allowing them to possibly engage in a quick attacking move.



The image above shows another example of Poland attacking quickly as a result of a turnover by the opposition in a dangerous area. After the ball is turned over by the Netherlands, Poland can quickly counter to try and create a goalscoring opportunity. In this phase of play above, the Dutch full-back is caught out of possession, allowing for the ball to be played into the wide channel and behind the Dutch centre-backs.

Poland will be dangerous in transitional moments, so this will be something that other sides need to watch out for come World Cup time.

ATTACKERS

When looking at the forward group that Poland possesses, all eyes immediately turn to record goalscorer Robert Lewandowski. The Barcelona forward is by far the biggest goalscoring threat for his side, with Poland being heavily reliant on him being able to put the ball in the net. Goals in general will be where Michniewicz hopes his forwards can contribute, with Poland's style of play favouring playing the ball behind the backline for the forwards to try and score.

So far this season, between all of Poland's forwards who will be in their predicted squad, they have scored 32 goals for their clubs, and the manager will hope that this goalscoring form can transfer to the World Cup come the end of November. They also are all decent passers of the ball, with the numbers being decent concerning their ball progression. For Swiderski, his pass accuracy for this season between club and country is 75.7%, Milik — 82.8%, Piątek — 79.5%, and Lewandowski — 79.2%.

MIDFIELDERS

With Poland's style of play being long balls and quick passing movements in behind to try and catch the opposition's back line out, the long passing ability of the central and wide midfielders will be key for this strategy to pay dividends. Starting with Sebastian Szymański, for club and country this season, his long passing accuracy sits at 59%, Linetty at 54.6%, Zieliński at 61.5%, Krychowiak at 61.3%, Matty Cash at 40.8%, Frankowski at 49.4%, and finally Zalewski at 42.2%.

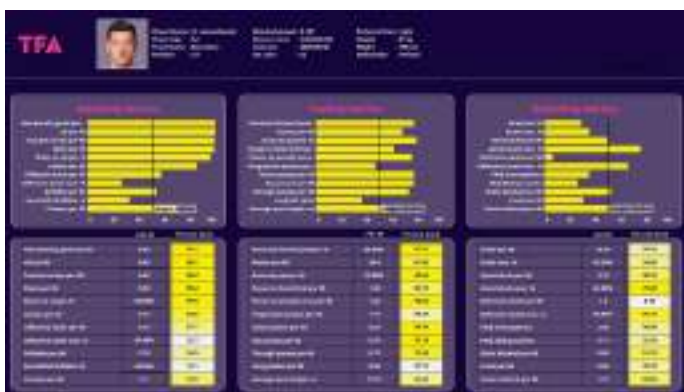
While some of these numbers may not seem impressive, if Poland can complete over half of their long passes into the forwards during this World Cup, they will be able to create some good goalscoring chances. Another thing that will be key to chance creation for Poland is the ability of the advanced attacking midfielders to be able to play the ball into the forwards.

This is where looking at the final third passing accuracy of both Szymański and Zieliński could be crucial. The Napoli midfielder is averaging 7.97 passes to the final third per 90 minutes, with an accuracy of 83.8%. Szymański, on the other hand, averages only 2.67 per 90 minutes, with a success rate of 67.4%. If Poland want to be successful going forward, these are what the midfielders need to do well.

DEFENDERS

As we looked at in the defensive phase section, Poland are a team that will sit in a low block at times and absorb pressure, aerial duels will become key to clear the ball away from danger so they can relieve some pressure. Jakub Kiwior has won 3.18 aerial duels per 90 so far this season between club and country, with a success rate of 56.6%. Glik sits at 4.51 aerial duels per 90, with a success rate of 59.7%. Wieteska averages 3.43 aerial duels per 90 with a success rate of 52.3%, and finally, Jan Bednarek averages 4.78 per 90 with a success rate of 59.9%. If Poland are to be successful defensively, then the centre-backs will need to come up big in the air.

KEY PLAYER



When trying to find a key player for Poland, it is virtually impossible to look past Robert Lewandowski. The former Bayern Munich and current Barcelona striker is who Czesław Michniewicz and Poland will be relying on to score the goals, with Lewandowski the all-time top scorer for Poland at international level.

When glancing at the attacking metrics for the striker, it is easy to see why he is so prolific. He ranks way above the league median in almost all the key goalscoring metrics. In fact, the only two that he ranks below the league median in are percentage of offensive duels won and

percentage of successful dribbles. This is because Lewandowski is not a striker that will take defenders on with the ball at his feet. This is not to say he won't attempt to dribble at times, or take defenders on to win possession back, but with an xG of almost one goal every match, it is hard to not see Lewandowski scoring a few times during this tournament.

The Polish striker is also a relatively good passer of the ball, which is shown in the passing metrics section of the data viz above. The two that stand out the most are his key passes per 90 as well as his smart passes per 90. Lewandowski ranks in the upper percentiles for both of these statistics, showing that he will attempt to create chances for his teammates, and not just try to be the player on the end of them.

Another interesting one is his passes to the penalty area per 90 minutes, with his 1.82 ranking in the 75th percentile among forwards. What this can illustrate is Lewandowski's ability to move outside the penalty box, normally dropping deeper to receive possession and help build up play.

When it comes to Lewandowski's defensive metrics, not much really stands out on paper. His aerial duel success rate percentage is relatively high, however, with him ranking in the 75th percentile in this metric. All in all, Robert Lewandowski will have to play a large part should Poland progress far in this World Cup.

TOURNAMENT PREDICTION

Poland have not had much success in their last two international tournaments. In both the 2018 World Cup and the 2020 European Championships, they were unable to progress past the group stages. For the manager, players,

and fans, the goal should be to make it to the round of 16 or even the quarter-final stage, something that the country accomplished at the 2016 European championships.

The quarter-finals may be a step too far for Poland in this international tournament; the round of 16 however, should be the goal, with Poland in a group with Argentina, Mexico, and Saudi Arabia, one that realistically many expect them to be at least the second best in. Poland fans will be hoping their team could be a dark horse, and while this is very much possible, the round of 16 looks like it could be their ceiling this time around.



SAUDI ARABIA



GROUP C

SELIM BEN HMIDA // @mrziguen

Saudi Arabia will participate in the World Cup for the sixth time this year following their deserved qualification at the top of group B of the third round of the qualifiers. Saudi Arabia have been preparing for a long period for this participation as they would like to make up for their failed 2018's World Cup journey by surpassing the group stage during the upcoming World Cup.

Indeed, the mission will not be as easy as it sounds, but at the same time, the circumstances are not going against Saudi Arabia in terms of opponents. In other words, Saudi Arabia could have been drawn into a much more complicated group than Group C in which they'll face Argentina, Mexico and Poland.

In fact, all of this group's teams are hard to beat, especially Argentina. However, Saudi Arabia are capable of challenging both Mexico and Poland and they have almost equal chances with these two teams to fight for the second spot. Therefore, if Saudi Arabia prepare well and are at their best during the competition, they can threaten both Mexico and Poland and why not aim to take four or more points out of these two games?

What will also help Saudi Arabia in this competition is that their head coach, Hervé Renard, is known to be a very ambitious person who has had various successful international experiences, especially with African national teams, and he will certainly need to use all of that experience to aid his Saudi Arabian World Cup journey.

PREDICTED STARTING XI



Saudi Arabia have been alternating between the 4-3-3, 4-4-2 and 4-2-3-1 formations lately and they can play well according to these three types of formations. However, Renard is more likely going to opt for the 4-2-3-1 one and might change to the 4-3-3 during the game if needed.

He will start the tournament with Al Owais as a goalkeeper since he has been the starting goalkeeper for the last period and he is the most experienced current Saudi Arabian goalkeeper. At the same time, Fawaz Al-Qarni, Mohammed Al Rubaie and probably Nawaf Al-Aqidi will be the backup goalkeepers. The defensive line will be composed of Sultan Al-Ghanam as a right-back, Abdullah Madu and Abdulelah Al-Amri as centre-backs and Yasser Al-Shahrani as a left-back.

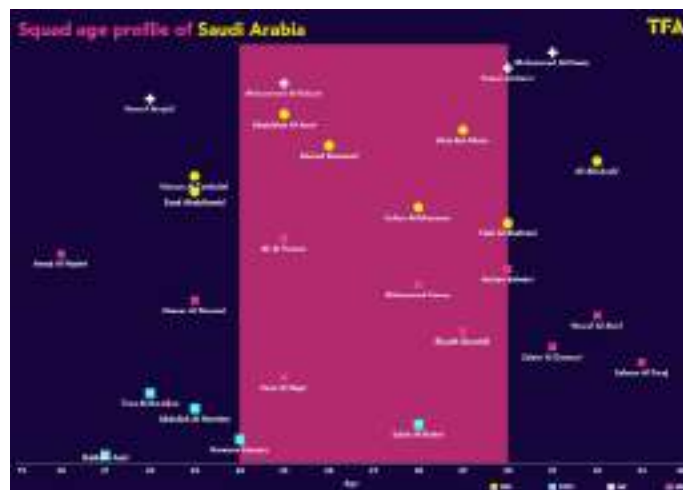
This defence is composed of experienced players who played with each other a lot and therefore it is expected that the defensive line will be solid during this tournament. In midfield, the team will most likely rely on Salman Al-Faraj and Mohamed Kanno as central midfielders while both Fahad Al-Muwallad and Salem Al-Dawsari would play on the wings, knowing that the two players can be very dangerous in these positions. On the same line, Hattan Bahebri will bring his experience to this attacking midfield line while playing as an advanced playmaker behind the striker Firas Al-Buraikan who can be challenged by Abdullah Al-Hamdan, Saleh Al-Shehri, Haroune Camara and Haitham Asiri.

The squad looks balanced on paper even though it lacks players with physical strength. Therefore, the team will have to prove on the field that they are capable of handling attacks like Argentina's, Poland's and Mexico's, and that will certainly not be an easy ask.

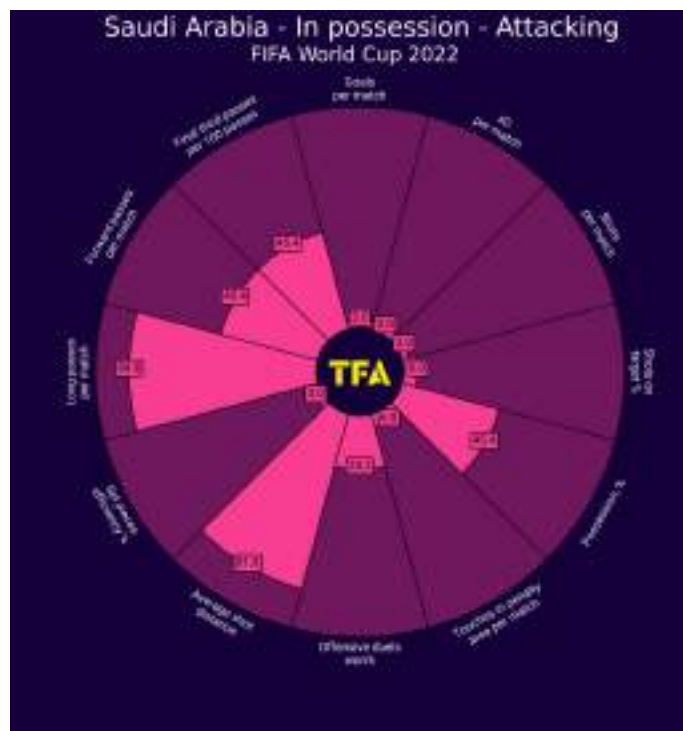
To score goals, they will need to exploit set pieces very well and make sure to make use of counterattacks, knowing that they have got some quick and efficient attacking players like Salem Al-Dawsari and Hattan Bahebri. Also, midfielders will have to serve the ball accurately whenever they intercept the ball and make sure they provide key passes whenever possible in order to surprise opposing defences.

Having an attacking line of players below 25 years of age, except for Saleh Al-Shehri, can serve the team in terms of physical abilities and especially in terms of stamina. The team should exploit this strength and rely on these attacking players more often during their games and not just focus on defending or playing for a draw. Such players can represent a threat to defences that have some weaknesses such as the Argentinian defence, the Mexican defence and even Poland's defence.

In reality, these teams are not known for having some of the best defences in the world and Saudi Arabia should exploit this fact in their favour without leaving spaces behind or attacking without reasoning. The age profile shown below also indicates that numerous players are actually at their peak and not many of them are past their peak years — knowing that for goalkeepers like Al-Owais the peak years can start at 30.



ATTACKING PHASE



Saudi Arabia's attacking statistics are not really encouraging. The team doesn't win a lot of offensive duels, the players do not shoot on target a lot per match and more importantly, their goalscoring statistics are quite low.

If they play with the same attacking tactics and keep having the same statistics, it is unlikely that they will score goals during this group stage. To overcome this problem, Saudi Arabia will have to focus on assessing their opponents' defensive weaknesses and try to work on exploiting them. For instance, they will have to work a lot on set-piece efficiency to use them against one of the teams that are weak in defending set-pieces. However, if the team fails to spot their opponents' weaknesses, they will not be able to harm them or be dangerous.

Shooting from distance is one of the tools Saudi Arabia are good at and they should focus on using this in their favour, especially when playing against goalkeepers who are not excellent in saving shots from distance. Saudi Arabia have got numerous players who can shoot well from distance, such as Salman Al-Faraj.



At the same time, the team will have to alternate between their attacking tactics and not rely solely on low-probability shooting from distance. Crossing from the wings can be effective and cutting inside from players like Salem Al-Dawsari can be extremely useful and the coaching staff can build movements and combinations on that. Relying on shooting from distance only would make the team's moves predictable and defending against such actions will become easier for opponents.

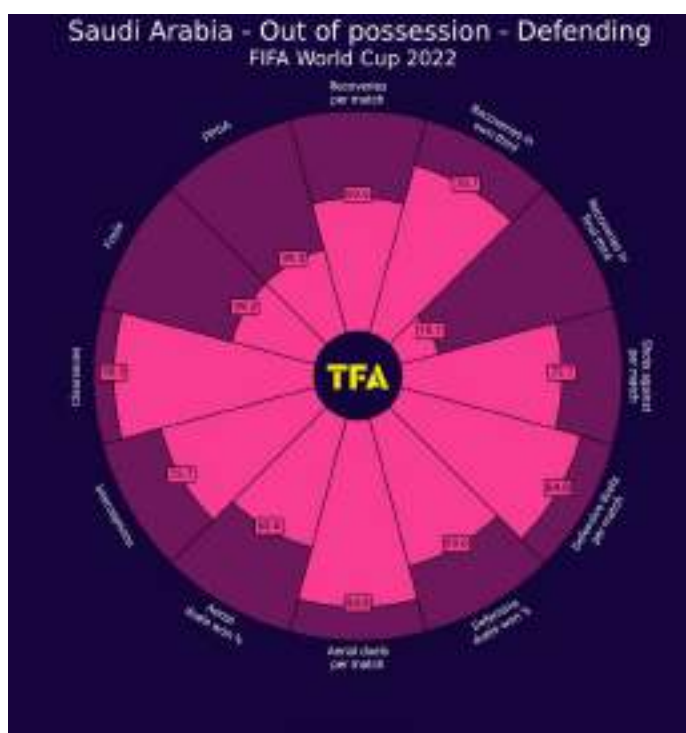


At the same time, the attacking players will have to be focused 100% on scoring and there will be no excuse for missing chances like the one shown below. In this action, Hattan Bahebri preferred to provide a pass to his teammate when he could have scored a goal by himself. Instead, he gave a wrong pass to his teammate and the ball, therefore, was intercepted. Missing such chances in the World Cup will certainly be regrettable and the coaching staff will have to work with the players on finishing and decision-making inside the box.

For example, the player intending to shoot in this action could have passed to his teammate who was asking for the ball as both of them could have opted for a passing combination to exclude the opposing defenders. Instead, he automatically went for the shot without even looking at what was surrounding him and who was asking for the ball.



DEFENSIVE PHASE



Saudi Arabia's defensive phase will be crucial during the tournament as the level of endurance and resistance of this defence will play a big part in determining Saudi Arabia's overall result. The team will have to be prudent throughout the three games as they will need to limit their errors to not concede numerous goals.

As opposed to their attacking statistics, Saudi Arabia's defensive numbers are quite solid as they win a fairly good number of defensive duels and aerial duels. And at the same time, they intercept the ball a lot and make numerous clearances per match. This coincides with their tendency to spend most of their time without the ball.

The big issue concerns the high number of shots against they concede per match as this would cause a lot of trouble against players who have excellent finishing skills.

Saudi Arabia must be very organised and time their movements very well to not commit crucial mistakes. For instance, they will have to control when to play with a high defensive block and

when to avoid using a high defensive block, knowing that a very advanced defensive block can lead to conceding goals by breaking the offside with a single pass and a well-timed movement from the striker.

Saudi Arabia have already suffered from such errors and this example from the match against Australia shows how this high defensive block may lead to dangerous opportunities. In this action, Saudi Arabia were lucky because there was an offside position of the striker, but on other occasions, the team risks conceding goals, especially against teams with great passers and excellent strikers like Argentina.



In addition, Saudi Arabia will have to avoid keeping the ball too much in dangerous areas and against quick players with high pressing abilities. In other words, midfielders and defenders will have to know exactly when they can keep the ball and when they have to pass it quickly to avoid the opposing pressing.

Saudi Arabia doesn't seem to deal well with such pressing and they showed on some occasions that they might commit some individual mistakes and concede the ball to opponents. In this game against Ecuador, Saudi Arabia's midfielder exceeds in keeping the ball and puts himself in trouble as he didn't know when to get rid of the ball. The result was conceding a very dangerous counter-attack and a one-on-one situation with the goalkeeper. Such mistakes should not happen during the World Cup if Saudi Arabia want to get some points and aim at qualifying for the next round.



TRANSITIONS

In terms of transitions, Saudi Arabia usually start their actions with Al-Faraj, who is their key midfielder player. He has a great vision and excellent passing technique and he is responsible for controlling the rhythm of midfield and dictating the play. He often provides short passes to one of the attacking players on the wings or near the wings to find space and advance better.

In the following picture, he passes towards the right and on other occasions, he provides passes to Al-Dawsari who is one of the best in Saudi Arabia in terms of dribbling skills and penetrations. Therefore, the team often rely on him for penetrations from the left wing, cutting inside or early crosses towards the striker.



Whenever possible, Saudi Arabia rely on quick passing combinations to exclude the opposing players and start counter-attacks. And although this doesn't always work well, Saudi Arabia often succeed in getting the ball in their opponent's half using such passes and movements, especially from midfield players before passing to the more attacking players. Saudi Arabia tend to opt for short passes rather than long passes when it comes to transitions. And their tactics are often effective, concerning transitions.



ATTACKERS

Saudi Arabia has got plenty of powerful attacking options to choose from and Renard will have to choose the best players for each match of the group stage. As wingers, Fahad Al-Muwallad and Salem Al-Dawsari represent great additions to the team, as they are responsible for both wings and especially for supporting the striker and creating opportunities for themselves and for the striker.

Therefore, their role is fundamental in the team. For the striker role, Renard will have to adapt his choice to the type of defence he is facing and to the tactics he would like to use in that specific game, which means that all of Firas Al-Buraikan, Abdullah Al-Hamdan, Saleh Al-Shehri, Haroune Camara and Haitham Asiri can be useful either as starters or as subs knowing that they don't have the same abilities nor the same physicality.

MIDFIELDERS

The midfield will have to resist a lot during this competition and make sure to intercept passes regularly and help the defensive line continuously since it will be impossible for four players to defend against attacks with dangerous players like Argentina's.

Therefore, Mohamed Kanno, Salem Al-Dawsari, Hattan Bahebri and perhaps Abdullah Otayf should give a lot of support to the defence in the non-possession phase to concede the minimum number of opportunities or goals. Midfielders will also be fundamental in transition

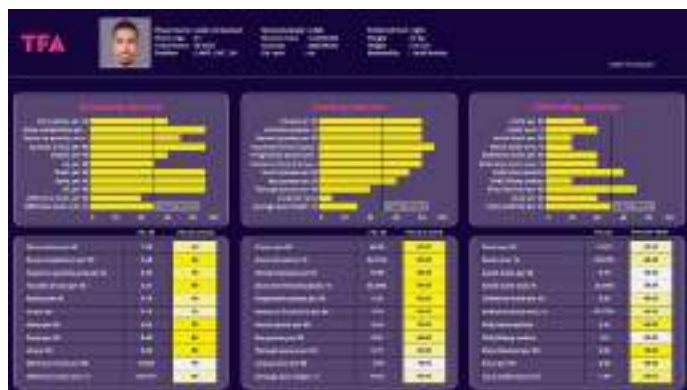
as we explained above and players like Salem Al-Dawsari and Hattan Bahebri will have to advance whenever possible, pass accurately and why not attempt at shooting from distance as their support is needed in attack, knowing that both players are excellent in this regard. Hattan Bahebri will also be required to link between midfield and attack and between the wingers and the striker when needed as his position demands such roles.

DEFENDERS

The defensive line will be the most crucial part of this team as the defensive performance of Saudi Arabia will determine if they will have a chance of progressing or not. The back four will have to remain organised throughout the three games and avoid making marking mistakes whether in set pieces or in open play to avoid conceding unnecessary goals.

At the same time, Renard will have a difficult task in finding a way to stop a team like Argentina without conceding spaces. Perhaps the best thing to do in such situations is to instruct players to double-mark dangerous players like Lionel Messi whenever they touch the ball to prevent them from finding spaces or playing finding solutions easily.

KEY PLAYER



Salem Al-Dawsari is Saudi Arabia's key player in this tournament as he is one of the most skilful Saudi Arabian players at the moment if

not the best. He is mainly a left winger who plays at Al Hilal and this player can definitely solve Saudi Arabia's attacking issues given his great individual skills.

He is a very agile player with excellent technique whether in terms of passing, shooting or dribbling. As you can see in the graphic, his numbers are generally very good and they reflect the importance of such a player in a team like Saudi Arabia.

Renard will have to exploit Al-Dawsari's abilities in the best possible way to help the team score goals and make positive results. Indeed, defensively speaking, Al-Dawsari is not a player who can be helpful enough, but he makes up for that by being an excellent passer and a very good finisher.

TOURNAMENT PREDICTION

Saudi Arabia have the chance to progress from the group stage, but this will depend essentially on how the team will approach the three group stage games. Saudi Arabia can win points in any of the three matches if they remain concentrated, defend well and do not make crucial errors.

However, if the team keeps performing at the same level seen in the previous friendlies and in the Asian qualifiers, Saudi Arabia are unlikely to finish second in the group and will most probably finish third or fourth.

GROUP D PLAYERS TO WATCH

VENKATANARAYANAN VENKATESAN // @VenkyRedDevil

The first-ever winter world cup is almost here. It's time to look at which teams are the strongest and which players are the ones to watch out for specifically. In order to list down the players to look out for, we have specifically looked at the U23 category and players who play quite often for their respective clubs this season. It is to be noted that, these players might not start all the matches for their teams in the World Cup and could potentially miss out on getting called up altogether, but if and when they do represent their country in Qatar, they definitely have the potential to be game changers.

Group D consists of defending champions France, Australia, who were in France's group in 2018 as well, Euro 2020 semi-finalists Denmark and Tunisia.

The following visualisation represents the U23 players to watch out for from Group D. All data is from the current season.

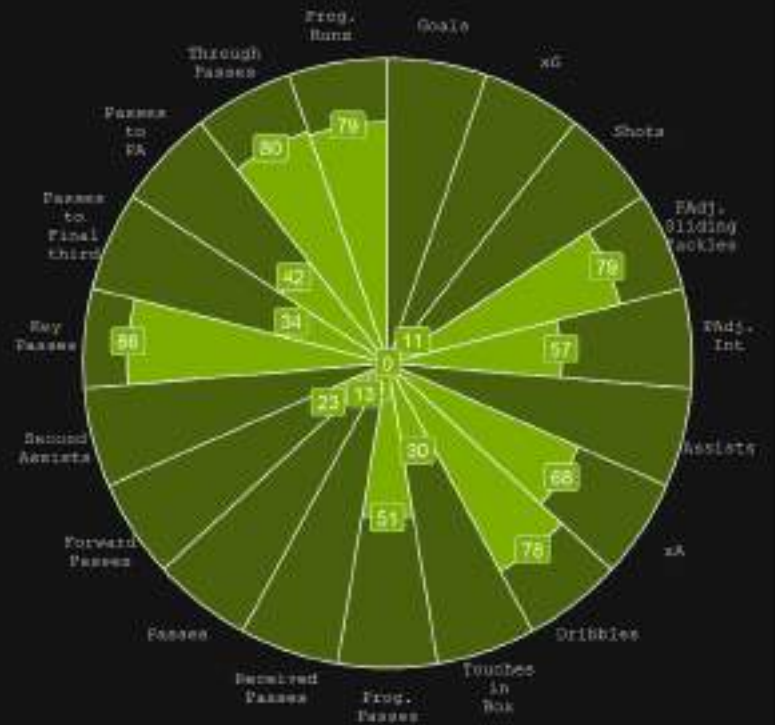
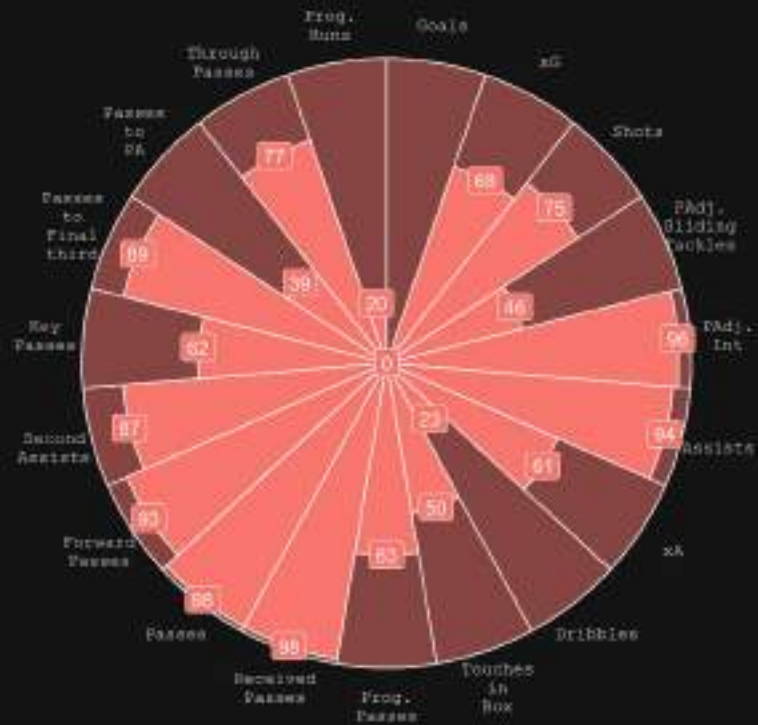
Aurélien Tchouaméni | Real Madrid | France | 22 years old

Real Madrid beat a number of top clubs in Europe to secure the signature of midfielder Aurélien Tchouaméni from Monaco for a record fee in the recently concluded summer transfer window. There is a lot of talk about the French international's fee so far but he seems to have settled in well at the Spanish capital. Having made his international debut in September of last year, 22-year-old Tchouaméni has gone on to become an integral part of France's squad over the last year. Given that N'Golo Kanté and Paul Pogba are injury doubts for the World Cup, it wouldn't be a surprise if the Madrid midfielder starts every game in Qatar. Primarily, Aurélien Tchouaméni has played as the deepest midfielder for Madrid and France this season. The midfielder plays a key part in the build-up on attack and hence ranks high for progressive passing metrics. Defensively, he is a strong tackler and has a good awareness of the game. His offensive numbers don't rack up like his defensive ones but that is not his primary role. Aurélien Tchouaméni, in his first world cup, will be expected to play an integral part in helping France progress to the latter stages of the tournament.

World Cup 2022 | Group D

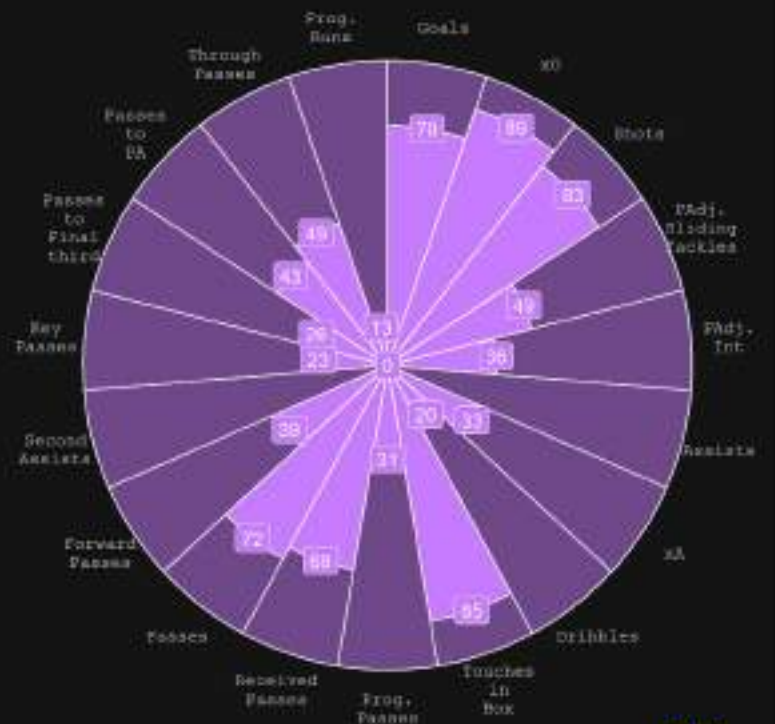
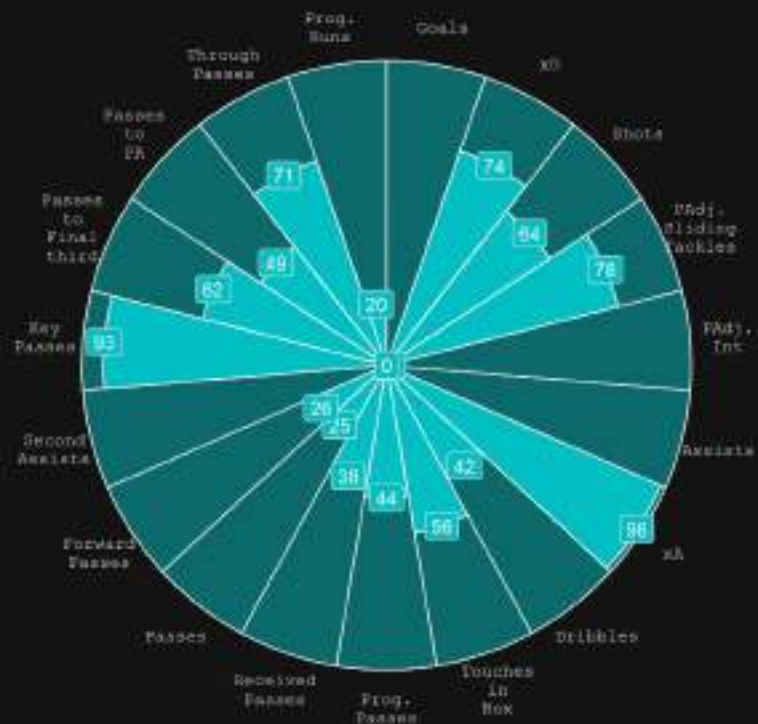
Percentile ranks among players from respective positions in respective leagues | Min. 200 minutes played

A. Tchouaméni | Real Madrid | France H. Mejbri | Birmingham City | Tunisia



M. Damsgaard | Brentford | Denmark

R. McGree | Middlesbrough | Australia



Data: Wyscout | Visual by @VenkyReddevil | All stats are 'per 90' unless mentioned otherwise
Data as on 14th Oct, 2022

Riley McGree | Middlesbrough | Australia | 23 years old

Middlesbrough midfielder Riley McGree made his senior debut for Australia in June 2021. Riley joined Middlesbrough in January 2022 after being a regular at Birmingham City on loan from Charlotte FC. Playing as an attacking midfielder, Riley ranks 89th percentile for Expected Goals(xG) per 90. His creative numbers are not very good. However, he has shown the ability to be closer to the goal and score/create often every time he has played. McGree, after some off-field issues, is back on the Australian squad regularly and is expected to be a part of Australia's journey this World Cup.

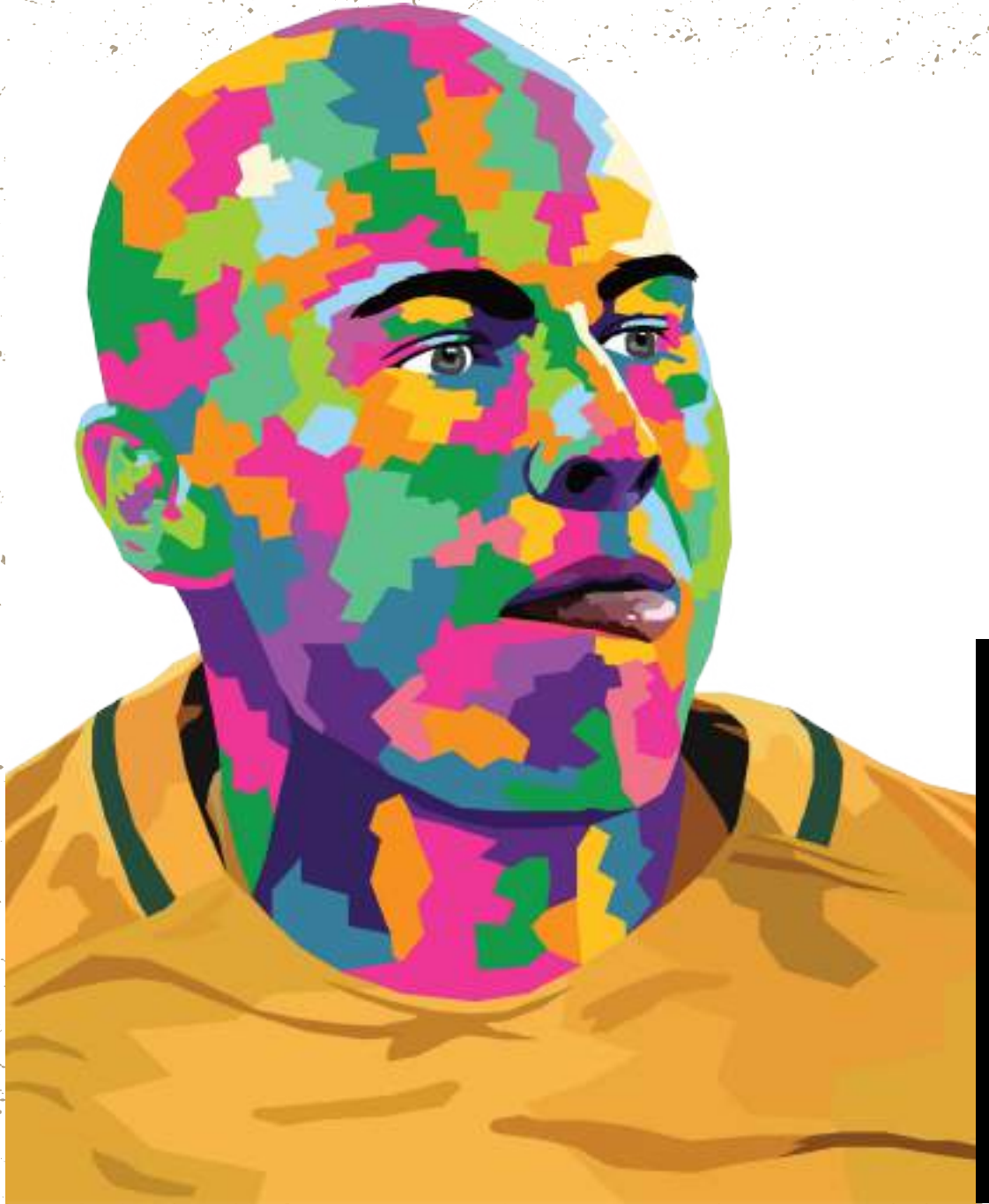
Mikkel Damsgaard | Brentford | Denmark | 22 years old

Mikkel Damsgaard caught the eye of everyone at Euro 2021 but even before that the midfielder was one of the biggest prospects to come out of the Nordsjælland academy. One of his best seasons, the 2019-20 campaign for the Danish side, earned him his move to the Italian side Sampdoria. He missed a major chunk of last season because of an injury. In the summer of 2022, Damsgaard secured a move to English side Brentford and has since had a very slow and steady to his Brentford career. The midfielder is quite versatile and can play in any of the attacking midfield positions. Damsgaard is one of the best creators in that Denmark team, probably only next to Christian Eriksen in terms of creating chances. This can be seen in his very high percentile ranking for Key Passes per 90 minutes and Expected Assists(xA) per 90 minutes. Damsgaard is lacking match sharpness before he enters the World Cup period. However, there is still time and Damsgaard, surely, is expected to play a key role in Denmark's continuous rise on the world stage.

Hannibal Mejbri | Birmingham City | Tunisia | 19 years old

One of the brightest talents to come out of the Manchester United academy in recent years is midfielder Hannibal Mejbri. The 19-year-old Tunisian international is known for his ruggedness on the pitch. Mejbri carries a lot of swagger in his way of playing. Currently on loan at Championship club Birmingham City, Mejbri has had an excellent start to his senior-level club career. Having represented France at U16 level, Mejbri made his senior international for Tunisia only last year. All in all, Mejbri is definitely one to watch out for from not only Tunisia but the entire list of players this World Cup.

AUSTRALIA



GROUP D

— DAVID ASTILL // @DavidPAstill21 —

When thinking of countries that have been consistent attendees at World Cups in the 21st century, the names that immediately spring to mind are the likes of Brazil, Germany and England. However, an often-forgotten team who have been ever present at football's most prestigious tournament in recent times are Australia, yet 2022 will be their sixth appearance in total in the tournament and their fifth in a row, with that run stretching back to Germany 2006.

Despite consistently making it through the qualifying rounds, the Socceroos are never expected to progress far, with the last three editions of the tournament seeing them fall at the group stages. Nevertheless, the arrival of the World Cup and the chance to see their team locking horns with some of the best national sides in global football always leads to a lot of excitement down under, and this year will be no different.

Graham Arnold's side have been drawn into Group D this time around and will meet old friends in France and Denmark, who both faced Australia four years ago in Russia, as well as Tunisia, who are a team that some people might underestimate and yet have some dangerous players who will cause problems for their opponents, including former Sunderland forward Wahbi Khazri, who currently plays for Ligue 1 side Montpellier.

This tactical analysis will look at the Australian national team in more detail, with analysis of their players, preferred tactics and key statistics. The scout report will identify the players that they will be reliant on when the tournament gets underway, as well as form a prediction on how far realistically they might go.

PREDICTED STARTING XI



The most likely starting formation that Australia will use is a 4-2-3-1, given that it has featured in 52% of their matches this year and is therefore their preferred setup. However, it should be pointed out that they do have other structures to fall back on if things need to be changed around, with a 4-4-2 their second most-used formation, having been utilised 44% of the time.

In goal, the most obvious candidate to start is former Brighton and Hove Albion stopper Mathew Ryan, with the experienced stopper currently the Socceroos captain and therefore a player that holds a lot of influence in the side. However, he will have strong competition from players like Sydney FC's Andrew Redmayne,

who became a national hero when he made the penalty save against Peru that sealed Australia's place in Qatar.

In defence, the two full-backs will be tasked with getting up the pitch and supporting attacks as often as possible, with both Nathaniel Atkinson and Aziz Behich having shown themselves to be adept at that side of the game. In between them, it will be important that Arnold selects the right combination of players, making sure that he can be strong without the ball and have a good passing range once they win the ball back, and the most likely partnership is that of Bailey Wright and Kye Rowles, as they give Australia a mix of qualities but also some much-needed experience.

In the two holding roles, again it will be important to find the right combination of players, with Arnold likely to want one player who can sit back and one who prefers to push forward. Aaron Mooy, formerly of Brighton and Huddersfield Town and currently of Celtic, has proven to have a strong presence in the defensive midfield roles throughout his career and will have a key role in offering defensive protection when it is required, and he is likely to be joined in that area by former EFL player Jackson Irvine, who is the archetypal box-to-box player and has shown speed around the field and poses a significant goal threat, as well as being a key figure at set pieces.

Ahead of them, Riley McGree is a very highly-rated player who Australia will need to be at his creative best, with the amount of space that he can move into likely to dictate how many chances the Socceroos create. However, he will need options on either side of him to play at his best, and the two obvious candidates for the wing roles are Mathew Leckie and Awer Mabil, who are both capable of getting behind opposing defences and exploiting any spaces that they leave open.

However, whilst it is important to create opportunities, Australia will also need a player who is capable of converting them, and it will be especially important to have the right player on the pitch given that the formation only allows one striker to be on the field at a time. The most likely player to fill that role is Mitchell Duke, who has shown during recent friendlies that he can lead the line and pose a threat in the final third, and the fact that he has featured in their last few matches suggests that Arnold trusts him to be his main target player.



There is still a long time before the World Cup, meaning that Australia, like every other team, will not rush naming their final squad. However, this graphic indicates every player who has a strong chance of being included and shows how Arnold could split his squad across youth, prime and experienced age ranges.

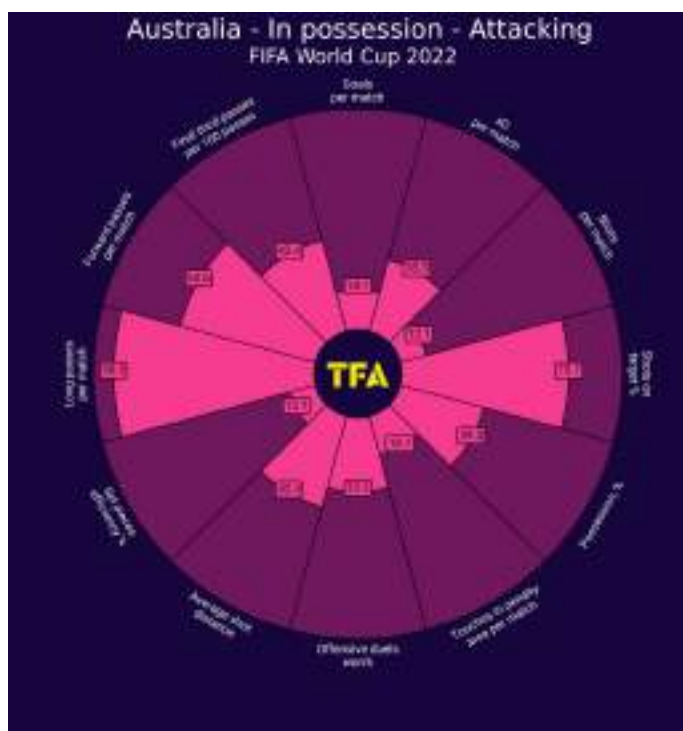
Looking at the goalkeepers, it is evident that the Socceroos favour experience in between the posts, with this likely to be down to them wanting to settle those in front of them and have a player at the back who can look at the bigger picture ahead of them and dictate how the rest of the team plays, and the fact that the majority of the defenders named in this chart also fall within the prime or experienced sections shows how they want players who will be hard to beat.

However, when looking at their options in midfield, it is clear that the need for experience is not as important, with most of them nearer

the start of their international careers as Arnold looks for raw pace and creative quality in the central third, trying to keep the ball moving at speed and make it as difficult as possible for their opponents to win possession.

Meanwhile, at the top of the field, he once again is looking for experience, with the majority of the players who will spend the most time in the final third either in their prime or in the experienced age range, and this is likely down to his desire to give the rest of the team target players that they know will have the stamina to feature in the majority of their games and therefore will allow those behind to recognise how they like to play.

ATTACKING PHASE



The key point to make about Australia's offensive phases of play is that they have different ways of building attacks, with them able to vary their tactics depending on what their opponents are doing. Primarily, they will look to win the ball and then send it up the pitch to find those target players mentioned in the last section of this analysis, and this is reflected in the above graphic through the Socceroos ranking near the top in percentile terms of long passes

per match. In conjunction with that, they have a lower percentile ranking for possession, which shows again how their game plans tend to focus on winning the ball and then counterattacking when spaces open up.

However, when needed, they are capable of playing shorter passes and building play up, but the focus in these moments remains focused on moving the ball up the field and ensuring that they can pose a threat at every possible opportunity, which is shown in the graphic by the way that they rank highly for forward passes made per game. However, the difference with these situations is that they rely on the pace of the wingers to take the ball behind opposing lines, and the passing skill of their midfielders to move the ball into their paths, and that shows again how they can attack in different ways and alter their style of play if there is a need to do so.

However, for all of their hard work when moving the ball up the field, where they often slip up is their goal conversion rate, with it clear to see in the graphic that they have a very high percentile ranking for shots on target, but a low ranking for goals per game. Therefore, whilst it is likely that they will create plenty of chances in Qatar, it should not be expected that they will score many goals, which will hinder any chance that they have of progressing to the knockout stages.



As mentioned, Australia's primary tactics are to move the ball into the final third as quickly as possible and to target key players, and one of those who often receives long passes is Leckie. The reason that the Melbourne City winger is

trusted with this responsibility is that he can slow play down or to speed it up, depending again on what the opposing side is doing. Here, he has received a long ball and is holding onto it, waiting for support to arrive from their own half, and this is because he knows that he is not in a realistic position to shoot at New Zealand's goal.

Therefore, those watching Australia's matches in Qatar should look out for how Leckie and others control the flow of their play, because the more that the Socceroos get these players on the ball and lean on their awareness and calm judgement in situations like this, the more chance that they will have of keeping the ball and converting some of their opportunities.



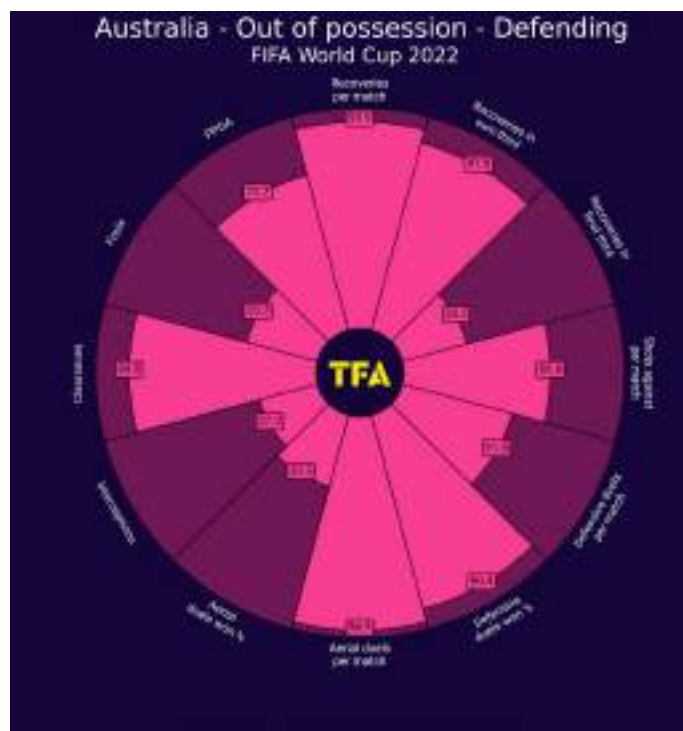
When numbers do arrive in the final third, Australia's focus immediately switches towards creating space and allowing their more inventive players to take the ball into areas where they can either penetrate the opposing defensive line or have a shot at goal. This relies on a great deal of teamwork, with players needing to know their roles, and this situation is a good example of how dangerous they can be when they get these details right.

Here, the trio of Hearts defender Atkinson, Fagiano Okayama striker Duke and Melbourne City forward Marco Tilio have found themselves in the forward line and all push forward simultaneously, which forces the New Zealand players around them to also move backwards as they look to protect their goal area.

This opens up the space in front of the defensive line and gives Australia a chance to move the

ball infield and have time to control the ball and drive towards the goal. In this case, it is Middlesbrough midfielder McGree, in the blue circle, who makes that forward run, and he then opts to take the ball forward and set up Tilio to have a shot at goal, which doesn't find the back of the net. However, the key thing to take from this tactically is that the Socceroos are an effective team when given spaces to play in inside the final third, and it will be interesting to see if they can manipulate their three World Cup group stage opponents in the same way once the tournament gets underway.

DEFENSIVE PHASE



When defending, Australia tend to focus on getting numbers back behind the ball and making it as difficult as possible to score against them, and, as this graphic shows, they don't engage in many defensive or aerial duels but do win a lot of the ones that they get involved in. They also don't make many recoveries in the final third, and yet rank highly when it comes to recovering balls in their own third, and that again shows how their main aim once they lose possession is to get back and protect the goal at all costs.



This determination to not let teams score easy goals against them is shown here, with five players forming a protective line in front of the box and four more moving around in front and trying to apply pressure on New Zealand and force them into making a mistake. The five-player line is compact and disciplined, with players tending not to move out and try to close the ball down when there isn't a realistic chance of them winning the duel.

It is also worth noting that their favoured formation only allows four defenders at any one time, so there is a great deal of reliance on the midfielders and even some of the forwards to get back here and play their part in making the team hard to beat. Therefore, again, there are clear indications of the team ethic that is ingrained in so much of the Socceroos' play.

With all of this now in place, New Zealand have no clear route through to goal, meaning that their only option is to play sideways and to try and find a weakness in the Australian defensive line. Therefore, it is an effective way of playing when out of possession and one that immediately shuts down opposing attacks, and it will be interesting to see if they manage to hold out the types of attackers that France and Denmark in particular will throw at them when the group stages commence.

It is important to note though that they are not watertight, and there are ways of breaking them down and getting into the spaces behind them. New Zealand worked this out and subsequently stationed Newcastle United striker Chris Wood in front of the defensive line, targeting him with long balls, as this situation shows.

This tempted individual Australian players to come forward and win the ball, as Trent Sainsbury did here, but they struggled to compete with the strength of Wood and allowed their geographical rivals to exploit the gaps left open in their defensive line, with this situation ending in a goal narrowly being avoided. Therefore, this is what Australia need to watch. Equally, it is something that opponents can look at when forming their game plans ahead of their meetings with the Socceroos.

TRANSITIONS



It has already been mentioned that Australia's primary focus when they lose possession is to get players back behind the ball, but it was also mentioned that not all of their players do get back, with some staying higher up the field to enable any long counterattacking passes to be made.

However, the role that those players have in the initial stages is to press their opponents and to try and force them to move the ball up the field quicker than they would like to, increasing the potential for them to make a mistake. In this case, New Zealand's Brøndby midfielder Joe Bell is being closed down by three Australian players and needs to make a quick decision, and the lack of time that he has decreases the accuracy of his pass towards forward, Alex Greive.

As a result, Greive is unable to control the ball cleanly enough and Socceroos defender Harrison Delbridge is able to get forward and win it back. It is not always as easy as this situation was, but this does show a different side to Australia's defensive play that France, Denmark and Tunisia will all need to be aware of.



When in defence-to-attack transitions, Australia are again adaptable, with their different tactics meaning that they can assess the situation ahead of them and then act depending on what the best option is.

In this case, they are looking to move the ball around at the back and see whether Peru would apply any pressure on them, and, once they realised that there would be no Peruvian press, they knew that they would have time to keep the ball on the ground and increase the accuracy of their passes. Irvine was the player who came back to offer the passing option here, and, as the yellow arrow shows, he was then able to turn and pick out the run of Mabil with a well-weighted pass.

Mabil is just one of several quick players in the Australian side, with striker Garang Kuol, who will join Newcastle in January, another who has pace to burn. Therefore, if the Socceroos are allowed to keep the ball on the ground, then these players running into open spaces will give Australia's opponents definite cause for concern.

ATTACKERS

With Australia putting a lot of focus on their wingers controlling play, either through winning long balls or running onto shorter passes, it would be expected that the players who operate in those areas would be good at creating opportunities and winning duels against opponents.

However, this is not where their strengths lie, with the four players likely to feature in those positions on most occasions (Tilio, Mabil, Leckie and Hibernian's Martin Boyle) not showing many promising statistics for deliveries into the middle (these statistics are from international matches only).

Tilio has the highest average value out of this group, with 50% of his crosses finding their intended target, but it then goes down as Hibernian's Martin Boyle's accuracy is just 31.7%, Leckie's is 29.9% and Mabil's is 25.4%. It was mentioned earlier when looking specifically at Leckie's role that he often holds the ball up and waits for teammates to get up the pitch, and this goes some way to explaining why he doesn't send long crosses into the box instead.

Another area where they might be expected individually to be strong is in winning offensive duels, and this could be important in the World Cup when considering the calibre of player that they will be facing. However, again, all four players have low values, with Boyle this time having the highest percentage, having

succeeded in 47.6% of his duels, whilst Tilio has won 43.8%, Mabil 42.6% and Leckie just 35.7%.

This might look like a problem, but actually, it reflects how Australia don't specialise in winning duels and prefer not to be caught in 1-v-1 battles, with them ranking in the third lowest percentile band for this area of the game. Therefore, whilst it might be what lets them down at times, the fact that it is not something that they focus on tactically during matches means that it will not give Arnold too many major concerns.

The striker options also offer different qualities to the team, with some of the likely candidates for that position staying high up the pitch and some tending to drop back and play a larger role in their build-up play. As a result, how Australia approach a game tactically will ultimately determine which player starts, with Duke's average of 4.27 touches in the penalty area and former Fulham striker Adam Taggart's four meaning that they would be ideal players to include if Arnold wanted to have a target player on the pitch.

If, however, he wanted a striker who could drop back and help to move the ball around the pitch, then the best options would be either Andrew Nabbout, who was used in the role in Russia until an injury ruled him out of the tournament, and who averages 2.01 touches in the penalty area or the aforementioned Kuol, who has only played once for his country and averaged just one touch inside the box. Therefore, these two players are more likely to link up with teammates and potentially draw opposing defenders out of position, giving Australia a different way of playing in the final third if they felt that they needed a tactical alteration.

MIDFIELDERS

The main roles of the midfielders are to offer defensive protection and, if Australia looked to play short passes along the ground, to give the defenders passing options and to help transfer the ball through the thirds. Therefore, those who play in the central third will need to be good at one aspect of the game or the other, with this scout report already mentioning that getting the combination right will determine how effective the Socceroos are in possession.

Beginning with the defensive side of things, the statistics suggest that the best player to have sitting back would be Denis Genreau, as he averages 4.4 interceptions per match, whilst Irvine averages 4.05, Mooy 3.62 and Blackpool's Kenny Dougall just 1.22. However, the reason that Mooy was selected in the predicted starting XI is that he offers experience that the other players don't have so much of, which fits in with Arnold's desire to have older players nearer the goal area.

When passing up the pitch, the same four players have different values, with the best player to give this role to being Dougall, who has an 83.7% accuracy for passes to the final third. The next best option would be Mooy, who has a 77.8% accuracy, whilst Irvine's value is 74.7% and Genreau is the lowest out of this group of players, with just a 67.6% accuracy. Therefore, what is clear is that Dougall is at his best when given licence to get forward and work with those ahead of him, and the best combination statistically would be him and Genreau. However, with Irvine's speed and quick decision-making, he will likely start and both Dougall and Genreau will be used as impact players, with the way that the matches go determining which of them is required.

DEFENDERS

With defending being such a key aspect of Australia's tactics, the players in this section of the pitch will need to have high statistics in all areas of the role to have a chance of featuring in Qatar. These include winning duels both on the ground and in the air and passing out from their own third, and finding the right centre-back combination could be what decides whether the Socceroos keep a clean sheet or not.

Beginning with their duels won, the best player to have in the team for this statistically is Rowles, who, despite playing just twice for his country, has won 87.5% of his individual battles. The next best value for this statistic comes from Sainsbury, who has won 61.5% of his duels (although can be caught out against stronger opponents), whilst Wright has won 60.9% and Delbridge, who has only played once for the Socceroos, exactly 60%.

However, when examining the aerial battles, it is Delbridge who has the highest value, with him winning 89% of his individual battles in the air, so he would be a useful player to have if Australia find that they are facing a team who play a lot of long balls and try to target spaces behind them. In comparison, Wright has won 63.2% of his aerial duels, Sainsbury 58.8% and Rowles just 33.3%, so the right combination in theory would be Delbridge and Rowles. This doesn't change when considering how each of these players ranks when it comes to passing out from the back, as Rowles has the highest accuracy with 93.8%, whilst the worst of the four in this area of the game is Wright, although he still has a 90.1% accuracy.

Therefore, when all of this is considered, what seems the most likely is that Arnold will put together one of Delbridge or Rowles, depending

on what they think they will face, and then one of Wright or Sainsbury, giving the team some experience at the back and leadership qualities, but getting the right mix of abilities will be critical for them in every match.

KEY PLAYER



This analysis of the Australian national side has so far largely focused on their defensive strength and the different roles of the forwards, but the one position that has not been discussed and yet brings the whole team together is the attacking midfielder.

More often than not, this role will be given to McGree, who has grown as a player in recent seasons, with the media praising his work ethic and versatility during his loan spell at Birmingham City whilst he has shown promise since his permanent switch to the Riverside Stadium in January. On his first start for the Australian senior team, he assisted two goals against Chinese Taipei and was named man-of-the-match for his efforts, and he will quite simply be a vital player to have in-form if the Socceroos are to have any chance of being competitive in Qatar.

It's telling that, in the above graphic, he ranks well above the league median for the majority of attacking metrics, which shows how involved he is in his team's offensive play both in terms of creating chances and shooting at goal. However, the one area where he doesn't rank as highly is in offensive duels won, with him succeeding in

just 33.46%, although the likely explanation for this is that, because he stays in open spaces so much, he doesn't often win the ball on his own as other players are more suited to that aspect of the game.

When it comes to moving the ball around, the metrics indicate that this is a strong area in his game, with an 84.17% passing accuracy showing that his teammates can rely on him to find them around the pitch and to create opportunities in the central and final thirds. He doesn't rank highly for progressive passes and passes to the final third, but this is likely down to the fact that he tends to stay in and around the final third anyway, so other players will be tasked with moving the ball into his path and allowing him to then look for others ahead of him, and this also explains why his pass length percentile rank is so low, with an average of just 16.47m made every time he sends the ball onwards.

Being an attacking midfielder, the defensive side of the game is not one of his main responsibilities. However, what Australia will be happy about is that he has a high percentile ranking for the number of duels that he engages in, and he also blocks a good number of shots each game too. Therefore, whilst it is not his main role, they can ask him to get back if required and fill in, and he would be able to contribute something to their efforts.

TOURNAMENT PREDICTION

Given everything that has been mentioned in this analysis, it is clear that Australia have a great deal of quality in their squad and are not a team to be completely written off, with a clear idea of how they want to play football and the ability to adapt in all areas through formations, tactics and personnel if things aren't going their way.

However, it is still difficult to see them reaching the knockout stages, given that their first three games will be against the defending world champions, a team who reached the Euro 2020 semi-finals and a team who have claimed recent wins against Japan and Chile. The Socceroos will be the clear underdogs in all three matches and therefore the side least expected to progress, and even the most optimistic of Australian fans would admit that their chances are not great.

However, the thing about the Socceroos is that they don't know when to accept that they are second best, with their win in the final playoff match against Peru upsetting the odds and pre-match predictions and showing that Graham Arnold's side are a tough team to throw off. Their fans will hope that, whatever happens, they will be able to leave Qatar with their heads held high and the squad will be ready for another qualifying push ahead of 2026.

DENMARK



GROUP D

— LORIHANNA SHUSHKOVA // @LorihannaSh —

Denmark are one of the teams that although they mightn't be favourites in the FIFA World Cup 2022, are expected to display an entertaining style of play and make life difficult for every team that competes against them.

The Danes have shown character against some of the most challenging teams in the last calendar year thanks to a squad full of experience and talent and a suitable strategy. With most of the players playing in the top 5 European leagues on a club level, it is no surprise that they achieved victories against the current World champions France twice in the UEFA Nations League tournament.

The team has also earned six wins in their last seven games of the World Cup Qualifications, showing consistency and making a statement that they will be fighting for the top spot in Group D, where they will compete against Australia, France and Tunisia.

Kasper Hjulmand, who has been in charge of the team since 2020, has managed to build a flexible side that reached the European Championship semi-final last year and showed potential for the upcoming tournament in Qatar.

The Danish Dynamite are expected to show a solid performance off the ball, but to experience struggles with it, considering the lack of a distinguished finisher who can take advantage of the chances created by the experienced midfield.

PREDICTED STARTING XI



The manager's tactical flexibility sees him easily switch between 4-3-3 and back-three formations, constantly seeking different ways to improve the team performance and surprise the opposition. It is expected that he will predominantly rely on the 4-3-3 scheme throughout the tournament, although his starting XI is equally as unpredictable as his tactical changes.

However, some players have earned his trust, and he is expected to rely on them for this new challenge. The 35-year-old Kasper Schmeichel remains the main option for the goalkeeping spot as his experience and leadership are important not only for the team's defensive performance but for their confidence as a unit.

While his club, Nice, are not convincing in the current Ligue 1 season, he has secured his starting spot with his performance on the international scene.

The left-back position will be occupied by Joakim Mæhle, who is capable of disturbing the opposing players by constantly joining in the attack and creating overloads. He became a crucial part both of the Denmark national team and his club Atalanta, where he strolls up and down the left flank, trying to threaten the opposition while still meeting the expectations in defence.

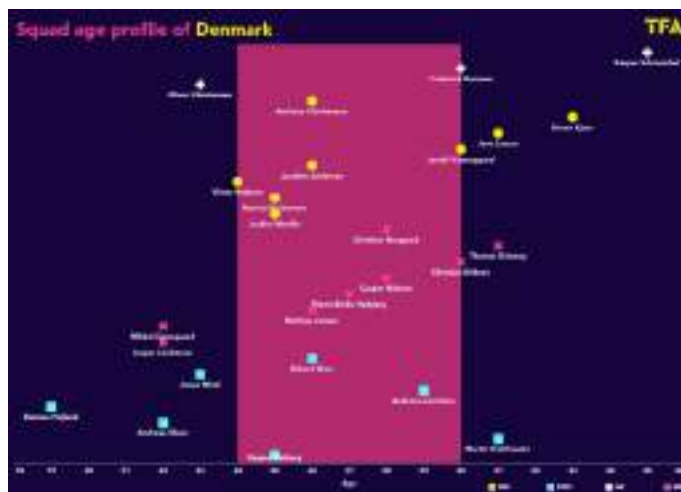
The other full-back spot is expected to be covered by Rasmus Kristensen. The 25-year-old has been one of the best performers for his club Leeds United since the start of the season and will balance out the team's defensive performance by compensating for Mæhle's offensive movement.

Andreas Christensen and Joachim Andersen will be the pair in central defence as they formed a good partnership for Denmark, with Simon Kjær most likely to be left as an additional option, despite his leading qualities and experience.

However, Hjulmand won't take any risks with his midfield picks, lining up Thomas Delaney, Christian Eriksen and Pierre-Emile Højbjerg to dominate centrally and have stability both on and off the ball.

The manager's quality options in attack are more limited, and it is yet unclear if he will rely on a particular player for the whole tournament or rotate them. The left-wing is reserved for Mikkel Damsgaard, while the in-form Andreas Skov Olsen will be the threat from the right.

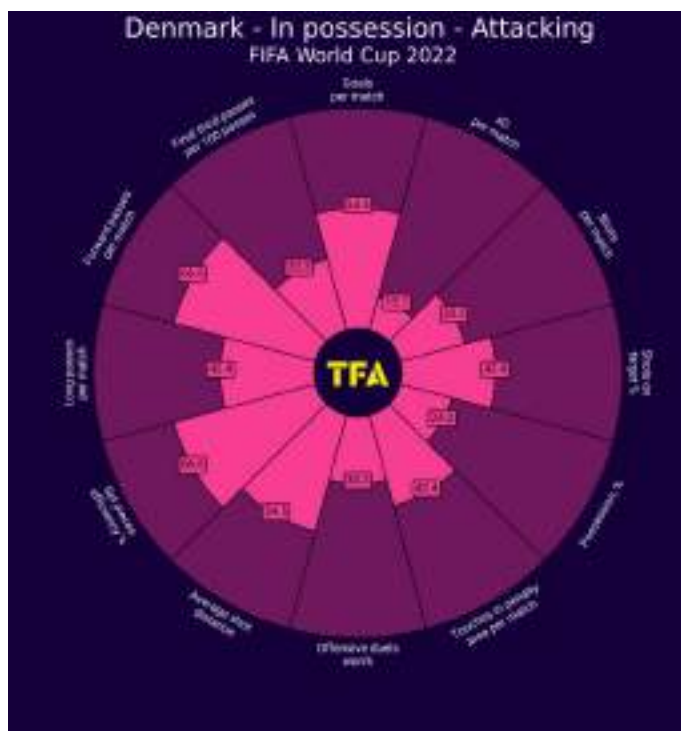
The 25-year-old Kasper Dolberg might get the chance to lead the attack, despite the slow start of his spell at Sevilla, where he is yet to score.



Denmark's age profile shows that Hjulmand prefers to rely mainly on players in their prime years instead of risking with too many youngsters. As the graph underlines, most of the squad players are between 24 and 30 years of age – having gained enough experience but still being in their prime.

There are still figures like Eriksen, Delaney and Kjær whose presence gives the rest of the players confidence and guidance.

ATTACKING PHASE



As already mentioned, the Danish Dynamite might experience struggles in the attacking phase. The graph here confirms their weaknesses

compared to the rest of the teams participating in the World Cup. Despite the percentile of forward passes that they complete and their aim to perform high-intensity football, the number of shots per 90 isn't satisfying enough.

That's often a result of their inability to hold onto the ball in the advanced areas and to take advantage of their chances. They often find difficulties in exploiting quality areas and occupying the box. However, their secret weapon in attack has been their set-piece opportunities, which they succeed in converting into goals. The team do not have different outlets in attack, and often their crossing attempts are not enough to threaten the goal.

Most of their attacking movement is executed through the flanks. They usually focus their actions on one side, while they keep the other one more passive to balance out their defensive performance and not leave gaps behind.

The players' inability to retain possession in the advanced areas and to win their offensive duels often stops them from creating goalscoring opportunities. Even in the cases where they manage to reach the final third, the lack of a distinguished finisher results in a low number of accurate shots, respectively low efficiency.

DEFENSIVE PHASE



Things look different defensively for the Danes. As the graph illustrates, they perform better than the average compared to the rest of the teams in the competition. The team try to apply constant pressure on their opponents, and that results in a high number of recoveries per game. The high press that they employ helps them in recovering possession in the final third rather frequently, which helps them in avoiding dangerous attacks and being solid defensively.

The team rely on the players' anticipation skills as well and focus on intercepting passes, which decreases the number of conceded shots per 90, although the shots they do allow are often from quality areas and on target.

They succeed in their direct defensive challenges and their well-measured actions rarely result in fouls, which decreases the opposition's chances to create goalscoring opportunities.

The only thing that takes off of their defensive performance is Mæhle's active offensive role. His movement to the advanced areas often means

that the spaces behind him can be exploited should the opposition recover possession and make a quick turnover. However, in most cases, the midfield players do provide additional support and cover depth whenever any of their teammates are out of position.

TRANSITIONS

Denmark rely on frequent passing and focus on a high pass completion rate in their aim to retain control of the games. The team have averaged an 85.3% accuracy of their passes in the last calendar year, which has helped them in being more efficient in their attacking movement and in dominating over their opponents.

They actively involve Schmeichel in their ball retention and build-up from the back which allows the team to occasionally move into a more advanced position and bypass the opposing press more easily.

Not only does the team try to overload the central areas so they have better options in attack, but it also helps them focus their pressing efforts in the midfield where they can block the opposition's attacks and recover the ball successfully. This happens with the active involvement of the full-backs who move into more advanced positions and create overloads by joining the midfielders.

ATTACKERS

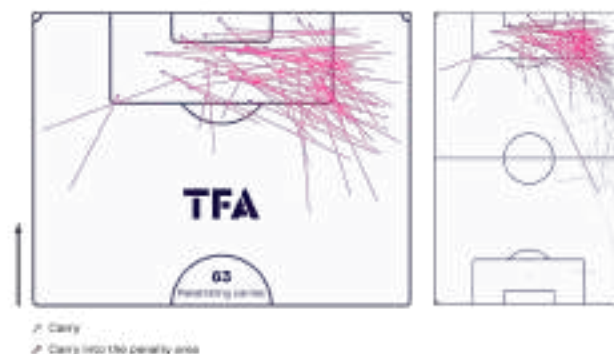
The forwards' data is not satisfying enough both at club and international level, which is why it is considered that the manager might have difficulties picking the right partnerships upfront. Surprisingly, one of the most efficient players in front of the goal during the qualifications has been the left-back Mæhle, who has scored five goals. Only Skov Olsen has matched this achievement, with none of the other attackers creating enough opportunities.

Most of the attackers are struggling at club level as well, not getting enough playing time and respectively failing in fulfilling their responsibilities.

Skov Olsen is the only one who has impressed in the league too, scoring seven goals and assisting three more in 16 games for Club Brugge. His aim to cut inside with the ball allows him to provide a direct threat instead of sticking only to crossing and supporting his fellow attackers' movement. As his Penetrating Carries map in the Belgian First Division A shows, he frequently carries the ball to quality areas which allows him to convert the team's chances into goals.

A. SKOV OLSEN PENETRATING CARRIES

All games from First Division A 2022/2023



MIDFIELDERS

The midfielders are the ones that balance out the team's performance. As already explained, the manager has relied on experienced players, which all can be described as "key" for their performance both on and off the ball.

The three of them have perfectly split responsibilities and have different profiles, which allows Denmark to achieve that balance. Delaney is more supportive of the defensive phase and his presence centrally is key for breaking opposition attacks and keeping the ball away from their own goal.

Højbjerg's role is connected to ball progression and distribution as he often orchestrates play and supports the team movement with his passing. Eriksen, on the other hand, is more involved in attacking actions and trying to create opportunities for his teammates. He is also considered a major threat from attacking set-pieces.

P. HØJBJERG PASS MAP

All games from UEFA Nations League - League A 2022/2023, WC Qualification Europe 2022, Qatar



Højbjerg's pass map from the World Cup Qualifications shows his huge contribution in possession. The frequency and accuracy of his actions are key for the team to be able to advance the ball.

The midfielders create a good connection between the lines, although they often lack support from the attacking players as they struggle in exploiting quality areas and making good combinations.

DEFENDERS

The manager has a few defensive options but seems to have found the right partnerships at the back. The central pair Christensen and Andersen proved solid enough and have minimised the mistakes done in dangerous areas and the number of lost balls in the games.

As mentioned, Kjær is another option for the central defence as his experience and composure

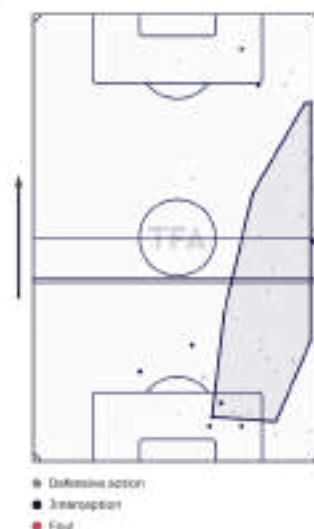
can help the team in critical situations. However, the timing of his interventions is sometimes off, which results in losing possession or committing fouls, hence the team conceding dangerous attacks.

The full-backs' contribution defensively is equally as important. Mæhle constantly applies pressure on the opposing players and adds to the team's performance with 8.14 recoveries on average per game.

Kristensen's defensive performance is even more efficient as he is more focused on his actions off the ball, averaging an 80% success rate in his defensive duels.

R. KRISTENSEN DEFENSIVE TERRITORY

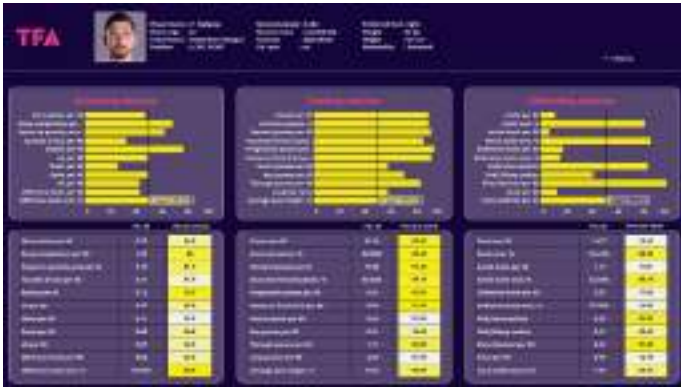
All games from UEFA Nations League - League A 2022/2023



The map of Kristensen's defensive territory throughout the UEFA Nations League games underlines the areas of his defensive engagement. It shows that he contributes with defensive actions both in the advanced areas and deeply in Denmark's own half.

KEY PLAYER

TOURNAMENT PREDICTION



Højbjerg is one of the most important players in Denmark's current set-up, and his player profile shows what are the strengths that make him a leading figure. Of course, the focus falls on his passing data, which underlines his distinguished abilities and his contribution to ball progression compared to the average for his position.

As shown, he overperforms in every indicator, starting with the frequency and accuracy of his passes and moving to the number of forward-directed passes. His determination to help the team move forward and retain possession is underlined by passing metrics and, in particular, his 90.96% pass success rate and the 8.42 progressive passes per 90 that he completes.

He isn't as efficient in attack, though this is something affected by his role and main responsibilities. However, we can see that he still provides more passes to the penalty area compared to the other players in his position.

As his defensive stats show, while the frequency of his defensive actions is low, his efficiency is impressive as he succeeds in most of the indicators. His success rate in the direct interventions is positive and above the average for the position.

Denmark have a real chance to reach the top spot in Group D, as France have been disturbed by the injuries of key players who are expected to miss the competition.

While they have proved they have the quality to resist every opposition defensively, not being able to convert chances into goals might be a huge deal-breaker for them both in the group and if they eventually proceed to the next stage.

If they find the right formula in attack, the Danish Dynamite have the chance to move past the round of 16, although, realistically, there are teams with much more quality in the squad.

FRANCE



GROUP D

— BRYANT MARQUES // @bryantmt_ —

France line up for the 2022 World Cup with one of the best and largest squads, full of incredible and generational talent, including this time the recent Ballon D'Or winner, Karim Benzema, something they haven't enjoyed in past years when competing for past major honours.

After lifting the prestigious World Cup in Russia back in 2018, France wants to repeat their recent success, while also aiming to erase what happened in the UEFA European Championship — being beaten by Switzerland in the penalty shootout.

Didier Deschamps has a massive squad at his disposal — one which grows day by day with ability in every line of the team. From goalkeepers to centre-backs, full-backs to midfielders, and finally forwards where we can see the likes of Antoine Griezmann, Kylian Mbappé or Karim Benzema playing together.

However, they have been in a tactical decline after the European Championship. With a possession-based football style, they have turned into a very slow side that can't be clinical through their ball dominance. Let's deepen into this.

PREDICTED STARTING XI

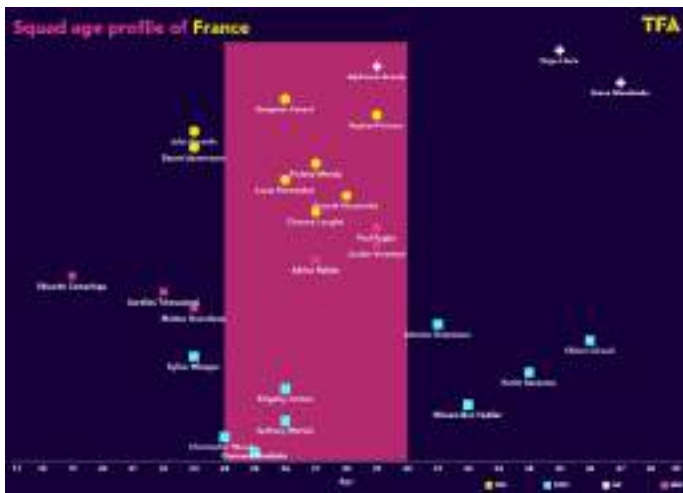
Although France have one of the most changeable starting XIs, with even their formations constantly changing, Deschamps has found the balance inside his large squad, setting up in a 3-4-1-2 with Hugo Lloris in what it's going to be his last World Cup, behind Lucas Hernández, Raphael Varane and Jules Koundé in what seems to be a very solid, yet young and experimental defence, along with Kingsley Coman, who has started to play as a

wing-back for them, and Ferland Mendy, whose performances have helped him to become a starter for his National Team.

Adrien Rabiot and Aurélien Tchouaméni would surely be the midfield partnership after N'Golo Kanté's injury setback leaves him set to miss the tournament. Up front, France will likely play with a trio of Antoine Griezmann, Kylian Mbappé and Benzema.



In the age profile, we can see France enjoy of a team full of players at their peak, such as vital ones like Raphael Varane, Benjamin Pavard or Presnel Kimpembé. Also, young guns with the quality of Jules Koundé, Aurélien Tchouaméni or the obvious Kylian Mbappé end to settle up a team that as well have veteran players in positions where everyone would want to. The goalkeeper, the '10' and the centre-forward spots.



ATTACKING PHASE

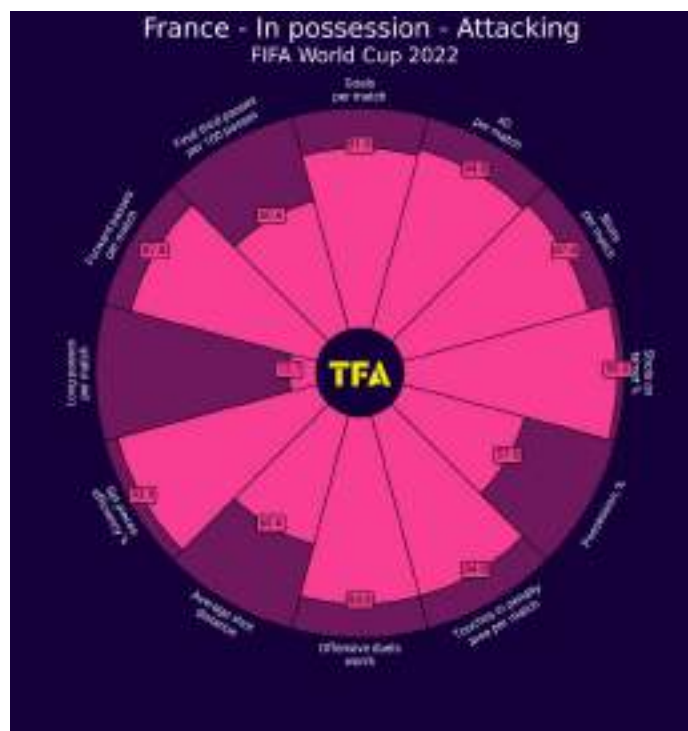
As mentioned before, France like to use a possession-based style where players can create a fluid system via their freedom to move around the pitch, but also with certain roles to contribute in the build-up. Players like Tchouaméni have become vital for the team because of their fantastic ability to break pressure between the lines.

have initially started with three centre-backs. In this stage, Aurélien Tchouaméni has started to turn into a key and irreplaceable player, due to his capacity to progress the team through the thirds.



But when he's not on the team sheet, problems can happen: The build-up is a bit static, with lots of sideways passing that does not lead to progression, and this starts to make life difficult for the centre-backs, wing-backs and midfielders as they're always in the same phase, without making harm to the opposition.

France rely on their pivot's ability to drop deep and find these kinds of players in the half-spaces or in the central areas, being undetectable behind the midfielders. This is a very simple way to escape the first line of pressure and with the right profile, it can be the easiest way to play and not disturb their organised shape.



Although they've been changing their structure to a back-three, when playing with a back-four, there are other automatisms and situations where the right-midfielder has a big part in the build-up. As we can see, Guendouzi is located as the midfielder over on the right-hand side. If the ball is played through his zone, he adds himself to the back three or as a right-back to allow the actual wing-back to advance up the field.

France have become a slow team that doesn't find the correct answers quickly and consistently when setting up with the ball. Usually, their starting position is in a back three — this could be because the pivot joins the line or because they



In the middle third, France start to accelerate their game as technical quality from players like Griezmann or Benzema moves the team forward and creates opportunities for them. The wing-backs also play a key role in this phase as they pin very wide to make space through the middle for the strikers and for the attacking midfielder.

In the figure below we can see Griezmann leaving his zone to occupy congested lanes and move the team forward as the midfielders and centre-backs couldn't find the way. After receiving in this position, he releases a pass to the centre-back at his right making the move forward.



Deschamps' team often relies very much upon some players and profiles to make their attack work, and one of these, besides Griezmann, is Benzema. His quality helps France to create frequent chances with two or three touches. Although he doesn't drop that deep to help the build-up, in the final third, he's the cornerstone thanks to his undetectable movements and sensitivity in his footwork. Playing almost in slow-motion, he makes an incredible disorder in the rival's defensive shape.

France has many different ways of scoring goals. One of the most recognisable is the runs in behind from Kylian Mbappé or his long carries that start at the middle of the pitch and end up almost every time in a 1v1 duel against the goalkeeper.

However, one-two situations on the edge of the box are also a usual sign you see before scoring a goal. This is where Karim Benzema makes himself even bigger, because of how he drags defenders out of their zone and plays football in a very simple and direct way. Additionally, Antoine Griezmann joins as the frontman to execute through passes.



The following action of the picture above us, is a brilliant one, as Mbappé plays the ball to Rabiot quickly, he then opens the ball wide to Benzema, who executes an incredible pass to Mbappé who plays it back to him in a one-two and scores a beautiful goal.



DEFENSIVE PHASE

France likes to place a mid-block defensively which varies a lot if they are playing with a back-four or a back-three. Even when playing

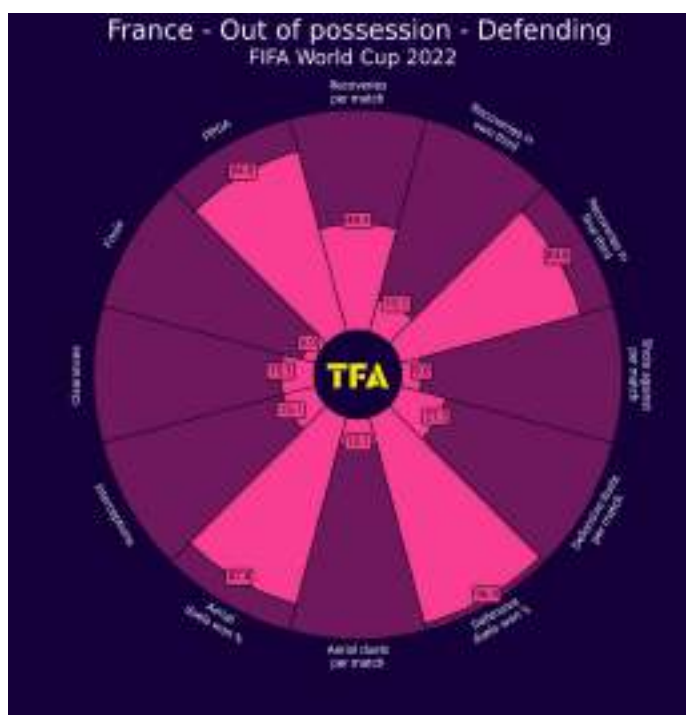
the first one, they like to be more aggressive and higher on the pitch to try to rob the ball in the opposition's own third, to create rapid transitions. Although, having the long runs of Kylian Mbappé, the mid-block has fit in perfectly, trying to win the ball back through the middle, where long-distribution players can execute through-balls for the PSG forward.

This example shows what we are explaining perfectly: France sets a mid-block against Finland, in a 5-2-3 structure, with a zonal marking and jumps of some players to tightly mark opposition players at the strong side of the ball.



However, France has not been looking that good defensively with many signs of concern including the rival forwards breaking with runs-in-behind between the centre-backs, as well as defending their own box, where they have been conceding penalties or leaving free players at their backs.

As we can see in the data viz above us, they have been very passive in their own third, not making many interceptions and not recovering that much. This, on many occasions, could be because they do not spend that much time in their own third; nevertheless, they have been poor when trying to win the ball in this zone.



When playing in a 4-3-3, obviously, this changes several things but not the principles: They still set up to mark zonally with very narrow lines, overloading the central zones, applying a trap to make the rivals play to the wings, where full-backs can jump to win the ball, with the support of the midfielder of that side.

Their high pressing is normally guided by the attacking midfielder blocking the passing circuits of the rival pivot, the strikers waiting to pull the trigger to suffocate centre-backs and midfielders very high on the pitch, with one of them even going into wide areas to block passing options to full-backs.

TRANSITIONS

In attacking transitions, 'Les Bleus' like to rely very much on probably the world's best player running into the space: Kylian Mbappé. At the very first moment France's players receive the ball in transitions from defence to attack, they get their heads up to find the PSG forward, to then release a through pass to activate him with space to make the run-in behind the full-back — one of the common movements you'll see from the 23 year-old.

Defensive transitions have been one of the biggest issues in France's game of late, as their centre-backs have been displaying a worrying problem of anticipation when jumping off their lines and in their speed to track players that can run behind their backs while being seemingly

undetected. The wing-backs also don't tend to do the recovery runs as efficiently as Deschamps might want, so the back-three feels very unprotected at times, adding to their individual issues and coordination problems.

DEFENDERS

Hugo Lloris, Alban Lafont and Alphonse Areola are surely going to be the three goalkeepers in the squad, replacing the injured Mike Maignan. France's large list of talented players at the centre-back spot is going to cause a selection headache for Deschamps, with names like William Saliba, Dayot Upamecano, Presnel Kimpembe, Raphael Varane and a very long shortlist of defenders that deserve to be in the tournament all vying for a place in the squad.

Full-backs are also well-covered and it'll be another dilemma for Deschamps to select the best ones, with the likes of Ferland Mendy, Léo Dubois, Jonathan Clauss, Benjamin Pavard or Lucas Digne all available.

MIDFIELDERS

Midfield presents another tough selection for Deschamps, as if this squad could present any easy choices. Names like Mattéo Guendouzi and Jordan Veretout are in the running for a spot in the squad, but with the injury to N'Golo Kanté, the call for Tchouaméni and Adrien Rabiot to be the starters at the double-pivot is surely going to happen. The former AS Monaco and recent Real Madrid signing has shown everyone why he has to be a starter in the most prestigious tournament in the world, thanks to his ball-winning abilities, adaptability to tough moments, as well as his passing ability that often break lines. However, the other side of the coin sees the severally criticized Adrien Rabiot who hasn't lift-off his level to the top one he always

look to turn in the future, but Didier Deschamps see the potential in him to contribute greatly in the midfield's team.

ATTACKERS

Having players like Kingsley Coman, Wissam Ben Yedder, Ousmane Dembélé or Christopher Nkunku to play alongside Karim Benzema, Antoine Griezmann and Kylian Mbappé has to be one of the most difficult decisions Deschamps is going to make. However, talent is everywhere in the forward line for 'Les Bleus'. The synergic mix in the attacking-trio France has make is basically unbelievable and something all coach would want to have in their teams. A speed and 1v1 duel beast that likes to harm defenders with his runs; An intelligent forward that drops off his zone with magical touches playing with his back to goal or in the half-turn, with an attacking-midfielder with a technical ability that very little players have to play front to the goal, finding pockets of space to connect. That's Mbappé, Benzema and Griezmann.

KEY PLAYER



Recent Ballon D'Or winner Karim Benzema has the chance to show what his football is capable of. His magical season at Real Madrid where his team won the double thanks to his goals, assists and his synergy with the system and especially Vinicius Jr, has made him one of the standout players for the tournament and one to follow in his return to the France National Team.

TOURNAMENT PREDICTION

Although France haven't been playing beautiful football in recent matches, and even in the recent major competitions, they always have an extremely talented squad with world-class players that can't be underestimated. It wouldn't be a shock to see them progress to the semi-finals and even, once again, to the final of the World Cup, running it back to 2018 and the last edition of this most prestigious competition.



TUNISIA



GROUP D

SELIM BEN HMIDA // @mrziguen

Tunisia will participate in their sixth FIFA World Cup following their qualification to this global tournament after beating Mali in a two-legged knockout fixture. Tunisia grabbed their qualification ticket and started preparing for the competition by participating in an international friendly tournament called Kirin Cup, hosted by Japan and including Ghana, Tunisia, Japan and Chile.

Tunisia lifted the Kirin Cup trophy after beating both Chile and Japan while putting on some solid performances, especially from a defensive and counter-attacking point of view. The team looked well-motivated and focused in both phases and efficiently exploited their opponent's weaknesses.

They were also able to score beautiful goals and gain a lot of much-needed confidence ahead of their upcoming big games. Following this Kirin Cup, Tunisia played other two friendly games against Comoros and Brazil as final preparatory games for the tournament. They won 0-1 against Comoros and lost 5-1 against Brazil at Parc des Princes. In fact, this latest match against Brazil showed a lot of weaknesses in the Tunisian squad and perhaps the most impactful ones include the inability to defend well against quick players, the individual marking mistakes and the inability to react against well-organised teams after conceding goals.

Therefore, the coaching staff will have a lot of work to do ahead of the first match of the tournament and the aim will be to correct the defensive mistakes that occurred during Tunisia vs Brazil, implement a solid defensive organisation and work on attacking plans to use during the group stage games. But despite the mentioned weaknesses, Tunisia have a very promising squad that can play well against their opponents and at times they can even be very dangerous, especially when using counter-attacks. However, they often commit individual

mistakes and fall into the trap of losing their concentration at key moments.

Tunisia will be playing in Group D alongside France, Denmark and Australia. It is definitely going to be a complicated group stage for Tunisia, who will start by facing Denmark and then aim to beat Australia before challenging the World Cup holders, France, in the last group stage match. Tunisia's most difficult test in this World Cup will be the way with which they deal with their first match against Denmark. Playing well in this first game and getting a positive result against a tough Denmark team will change everything in the Tunisian players' minds and make them very confident to win the second match which would mean guaranteeing the qualification.

However, we should bear in mind that Denmark are actually one of the best teams in the world in terms of results and playing style. They were able to win twice against France lately and are definitely a powerful team from all aspects. Therefore, Tunisia will have to prepare for this match very well before thinking of anything else. In reality, the encounter with France would mean nothing to Tunisia if they don't approach the Denmark game in the necessary manner.

It is true that Tunisia will most likely adopt a defensive tactic against a team like Denmark, yet the players shouldn't remain passive and give in to Denmark's attacks. Having possession and attempting to attack without losing the defensive stability would make Tunisia's goalscoring chances bigger and therefore they will be more likely to create problems for their opponent.

PREDICTED STARTING XI



Tunisia will most likely start the tournament with Aymen Dahman as a goalkeeper as this Club Sfaxien goalkeeper is favoured in comparison with Bechir Ben Said and Sedki Debchi. Dahman participated in the national team's latest games including the one against Brazil and will therefore have the advantage over his two teammates who are also solid goalkeepers and can surely be used during the group stage.

In defence, head coach Jalel Kadri has got some good options to choose from and he will more likely rely on Mohamed Dräger as a right-back and Hamza Mathlouthi as his backup. It should be said that former Salernitana's right-back is also worthy of a place at this World Cup, but

he is unlikely to be called up. In fact, Wajdi Kechrida proved to be the second-best option for this role alongside Dräger. Nevertheless, he has often been avoided for undeclared reasons.

The central defensive duo will most likely include Lorient's Montassar Talbi and Salernitana's Dylan Bronn, knowing that both of these players have been consistent throughout this first part of the season with their respective clubs and have been putting on some solid defensive performances that favour them over the other Tunisian centre-backs. We should stress that both Bilel Ifa and Nader Ghandri have also proven their worth whenever they participated with the national team and are capable of doing very well should Talbi or Bronn encounter issues prior to or during the tournament, especially when bearing in mind that Bronn loses concentration quite often on certain occasions and the head coach might prefer to not use him in certain games.

On the left flank, Ali Maaloul proved during the last few years that he is the best actual left-back in Tunisia, especially from an offensive point of view. He has been consistent with Al Ahly and contributed to a lot of their successes during these last seasons.

Moreover, his chemistry with players like Youssef Msakni, Naim Sliti, Wahbi Khazri and others was obvious to everyone and helped Tunisia win numerous games previously. Therefore, it would be essential to preserve this kind of chemistry and work on improving it. Despite these offensive abilities, Maaloul can also be less efficient in defence especially against wingers with great pace such as the ones Tunisia will encounter during the group stage.

This might be the reason to rely on Ali Abdi on certain occasions over Maaloul as Abdi is a more balanced left-back who is more athletic than Maaloul, and that would make him better suited to defend against star wingers.

Jalel Kadri can also try to adapt his team to suit the opponent's strengths and weaknesses by switching to the 3-4-3 as he did in last year's Arab Cup where he used Talbi, Ifa and Meriah as centre-backs to secure the defensive line while relying on Dräger and Maaloul or Abdi as wing-backs.

This formation might be more balanced for the team against teams like Denmark and France, but the coaching staff will have to work a lot on positioning when using this formation in order to not leave gaps for the opponent. Midfield is the strongest area of this Tunisian side as the players existing in this area have excellent quality and are among the best in their respective teams. The team will certainly rely on Ellyes Skhiri, Aïssa Laïdouni and one of Ghaylène Chaalali or Ferjani Sassi since both of these players can replace each other and have quite similar characteristics.

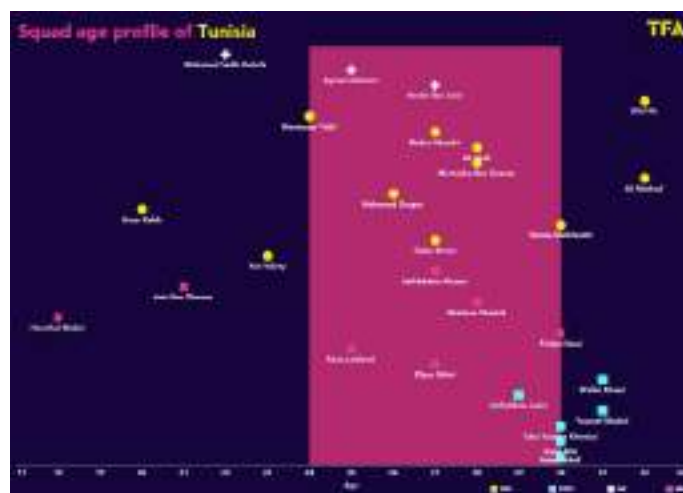
Skhiri will most likely act as a regista in front of the defence and the two others will play as central midfielders, even though Laïdouni can also interpret the defensive midfielder role perfectly especially when the team needs to defend rather than advance. Another midfielder can help Tunisia a lot during this competition but he is unlikely to participate due to injury. We are talking about Mohamed Ali Ben Romdhane.

In terms of attack, Tunisia doesn't really have plenty of excellent options and will rely on Youssef Msakni's magic on the left wing, one of Naïm Sliti or Anis Ben Slimane on the right wing, and an alternation between Wahbi Khazri and Seifeddine Jaziri for the striker role. Issam Jebali can also be useful for the striker or second striker role and he might participate as a sub in some of the games after he proved his worth and showed his finishing skills during the Kirin Cup lately.

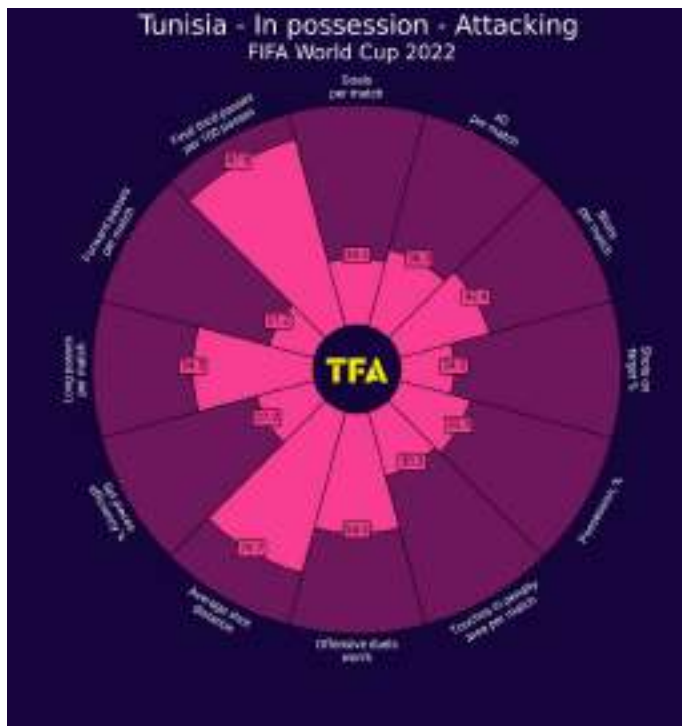
When looking at the age profile of Tunisian players, one can immediately notice that the

majority of their attacking players are past their 30s. The more experienced players of the team are mainly attacking players, including Wahbi Khazri, Youssef Msakni, Khenissi, Naïm Sliti and even Issam Jebali. This can be useful for Tunisia in certain circumstances when they need experience. However, they need to be careful in terms of attack because lacking the dynamism of youth in this part of the pitch can affect the team's attacking performance.

At the same time, the Tunisian squad is full of players who are at their peaks, such as Talbi, Chaalali, Abdi, Ben Ouanes, Dräger, Laïdouni, Bronn, Skhiri, Jaziri, Dahmen, Ben Saïd and others. This means that the majority of the Tunisian players are actually at their peak. Indeed, this squad does not have plenty of young players, but names like Hannibal Mejbri, Ben Slimane, Omar Rekik, Yan Valery and Sedki Debchi can provide a great addition when needed knowing that they all have great potential.



ATTACKING PHASE



The above graphic shows detailed statistics on Tunisia's attacking style, their weaknesses and strengths. In fact, what we can understand from this pizza plot is that Tunisia pass a lot inside the final third but don't score a lot of goals despite shooting so often during games.

Therefore, they will have to improve their finishing accuracy in order to exploit the chances they create and more importantly, it would be important to try shooting more often on goal instead of passing the ball passively.

Moreover, working on the offensive duels would help Tunisia a lot during this World Cup in order to have more possession in their opponent's half. The team should focus more on intercepting the ball in their opponent's half by applying pressure intelligently and efficiently. They were able to do this very well against Japan when they obliged them to fall into committing mistakes in their own third.

Msakni was intelligent enough to time his pressing attempt well as soon as he knew that

the Japanese defender could have trouble controlling a difficult ball. He believed in his ability to intercept the ball and did it while putting his body in front of the ball to protect it despite being surrounded by Japanese players, before passing to Sassi who was unmarked and scored the goal.

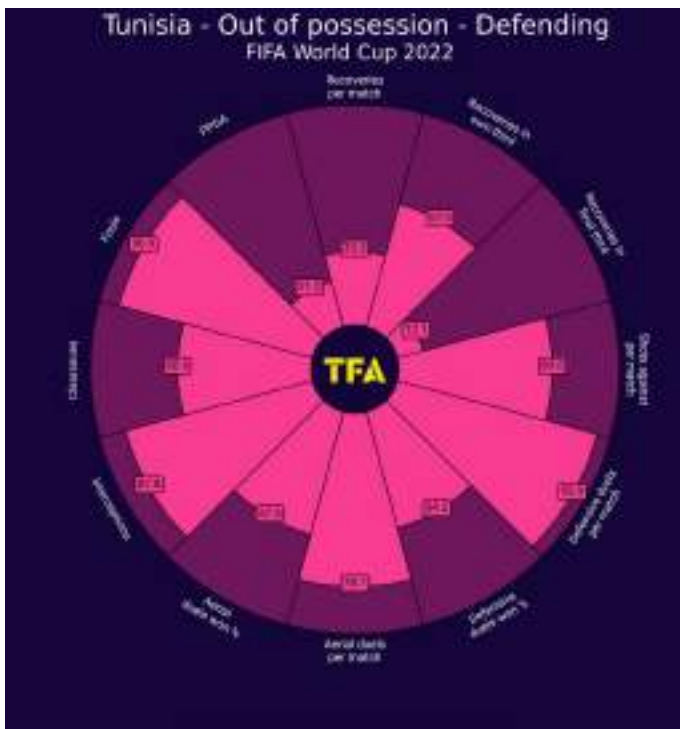


Tunisia can be excellent on the counter especially when their players are 100% focused and they have proved on several occasions that their xG in counterattacks is higher than their xG in open play. They do have some quick and skilful attacking players who often exploit the counterattacks in the best possible way, either by shooting from distance or by penetrating towards the box.

In the following picture, Jebali had a counterattacking opportunity in the last minutes of the match and had two teammates asking for the ball as you can see. These two players offered great passing options but at the same time made defenders hesitate. Jebali exploited this situation in the best possible way by showing that he intends to pass while shooting the ball with great power towards the top left angle to score a beautiful goal.



DEFENSIVE PHASE



When it comes to defending, Tunisia proved during the Arab Cup and the AFCON that they are solid in defence and that they are improving a lot from this aspect. The team make a lot of interceptions per match but they still do not win a lot of defensive duels. They need to improve their statistics in this regard in order to be more efficient in defence.

Moreover, the team plays a lot in the air despite not winning a lot of the aerial duels per match. And at the same time, Tunisia concede numerous shots per game, which can be very dangerous for them especially knowing that they will face teams with great shooting accuracy.

The Tunisian defence will have to be very careful when it comes to passes played at the back of this defensive line. Since their opponents will certainly include numerous technical midfield players, Tunisia's defence will have to be attentive to possible penetrations throughout the 90 minutes to not let something like what happened against Brazil occur again.

In the following picture, we can see how Raphinha was penetrating through the back of Talbi while Ben Ouanes didn't try to cover for his teammate. Both players should have defended better in this situation and more importantly, they had to react in a more effective way as soon as Thiago Silva crossed the ball. Such errors might lead to conceding goals, especially against France and Denmark and therefore, Tunisia should be alert to similar actions.



In addition, Tunisia will have to avoid conceding too much space to skilful attacking players inside the final third as such players are usually going to create danger if not score goals, like what Raphinha did in the next picture when Tunisia left too much space for him on the right-wing.

Tunisian players will need to remain in the match mentally speaking even if they concede a goal or two, and they should not lose their temper and start committing unnecessary fouls because that will add to the problem and not fix it.

The way the team approached the Brazil match especially after conceding two goals was not good enough as the players started to become very aggressive and that cost the team a red card in addition to conceding a penalty. If they want to succeed from a defensive perspective, Tunisia will have to be patient and defensive as a unit while remaining attentive for the whole match. And what should be consolidated is the individual marking capacities as the Tunisian defenders can defend well in 1v1 situations and they have to work on this aspect to improve it even further in the group stage.



TRANSITIONS

Tunisia's offensive transitions are usually quick and quite direct. They rely on one of Skhiri or Laïdouni to start the first pass and then the ball always gets to Msakni or Sliti who are very good dribblers and can advance well with the ball. These two key players often find the best solutions inside the final third either by penetrating with their runs and then trying to shoot from distance or by playing one-two passes with each other. On other occasions, they can also serve the striker if the latter moves well without the ball and asks for it.

In the next example, Msakni is advancing with the ball and looks at the striker to see if there is a passing possibility, and when he notices that the striker is being marked, he fixes his direct marker and attempts to play a one-two combination with his closest teammate to break a line. The same happens when Sliti gets the ball too and that's usually how Tunisia advance in such situations.



The Tunisians can also opt for direct passes towards the strikers whenever they detect the adequate opportunity to do so. They do have some very

good passers who can create a lot of danger in such situations by providing long passes or through passes to one of Khazri, Jaziri, Khenissi or Jebali, exploiting the dynamism and the continuous off-the-ball movement of these players.

Tunisia scored the second goal against Japan thanks to a surprising through pass from Ben Slimane towards Khenissi who knew how to get the advantage over his marker and win a penalty. Therefore, Tunisia would try to exploit this attacking solution during the upcoming World Cup games and have a great chance to succeed in executing such plans.



ATTACKERS

As mentioned earlier, Tunisia have various options in attack and will mainly rely on Khazri, Jaziri, Khenissi and Jebali. Although these players are all 29 or older, all of them are still delivering some solid performances with their respective clubs and are capable of helping their national team by scoring goals during this tournament, knowing that they have the experience needed to help the team.

Khazri, for instance, has already scored in the previous World Cup against Belgium and Panama and we can expect to see goals from him. The same applies to Jaziri who has been excellent during the past few seasons with Al Zamalek and will represent a great weapon for Jalel Kadri knowing that he has some great finishing skills and pace.

MIDFIELDERS

We have already explained that this might be the team's best area as the players existing in this part of the field are excellent and will be fundamental for the team both from a defensive and an attacking perspective. Players like Skhiri, Laïdouni, Chaalali, Sassi and probably Ben Romdhane will have a key role during the tournament and will be responsible for dictating how the team will play. Also, they will have a very delicate mission which is protecting the defensive line and covering when necessary, according to the head coach's instructions.

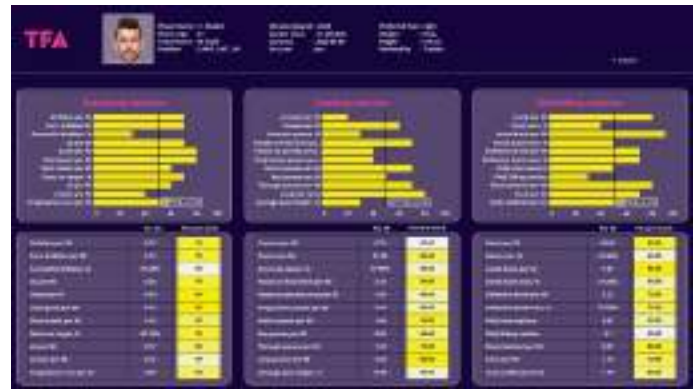
DEFENDERS

This might be the most delicate and fundamental section of the team as it is the part that will suffer the most and endure a lot during the group stage, given the quality of the opponent's attack. Tunisia, indeed, have some excellent names in defence. Nevertheless, it will not be sufficient to be excellent on an individual level. It is going to be necessary to defend as a unit and have a very organised defensive line in order to avoid mistakes and limit the attacking threats. Otherwise, Tunisia would be in trouble.

KEY PLAYER

Tunisia's key player in this tournament is Youssef Msakni. The Al Arabi 31-year-old international will be the team's leader in this competition as he is the most skilful player in the team and the most experienced player to boot. He was forced out of the 2018 World Cup due to a last-minute injury that ruined his World Cup journey at that time. Since that moment, Msakni wanted to make up for that frustration and showed on several occasions that he wants

to play in this World Cup and take "revenge" for himself.



Msakni plays in most attacking positions and doesn't have problems with adapting to different formations or positions. He plays mainly in all final third positions and can also play as a false nine. But most of all, he excels when playing as an advanced playmaker or as a leftwinger.

According to this graphic, we can detect that Msakni is an outstanding dribbler who can beat any defender thanks to his quick moves and unexpected tricks. When he is physically fit, he is able to cause a lot of trouble to any defence as his passing accuracy is also excellent.

Over recent seasons, Msakni developed a lot from an athletic point of view and started to make a lot of effective pressing per match, which makes him even more useful. And although he is not a very physical player, Msakni is able to win duels relying on his ball protection abilities and on his dribbling skills mainly. In fact, Msakni represents one of Tunisia's most dangerous attacking players as he is capable of creating unexpected actions out of nothing.

TOURNAMENT PREDICTION

Tunisia have got slight chances to qualify from the group stage mainly due to the level of the opposing teams they will have to face. Getting points from teams like Denmark and

France will represent a very complicated mission for Tunisia, knowing the gap that exists between these teams.

Nevertheless, the team will certainly aim at doing their best to get a point or two from these two matches and do their best to win against Australia. In reality, the match against Australia will also be a difficult one and Tunisia will have to be at their best in order to win.

Otherwise, this would be a failed World Cup for Tunisia. Another factor that can help Tunisia a lot, especially from a psychological level, is the fact that Tunisia will play in an Arab country where there will be a big number of Tunisian supporters to push the team in difficult situations. Tunisia will have to exploit this in their favour and use it to disturb Denmark and France, and why not exploit the issues and injuries of the French squad as well.



GROUP E PLAYERS TO WATCH

VENKATANARAYANAN VENKATESAN // @VenkyRedDevil

The first-ever winter world cup is almost here. It's time to look at which teams are the strongest and which players are the ones to watch out for specifically. In order to list down the players to look out for, we have specifically looked at the U23 category and players who play quite often for their respective clubs this season. It is to be noted that, these players might not start all the matches for their teams in the World Cup and could potentially miss out on getting called up altogether, but if and when they do represent their country in Qatar, they definitely have the potential to be game changers.

Group E consists of 2014 World Cup winners Germany, 2010 World Cup winners Spain, one of the most successful Asian teams Japan and one of the most surprise packages from the 2014 World Cup – Costa Rica.

The following visualisation shows who are the players to watch out for from Group E. All data is from the current season.

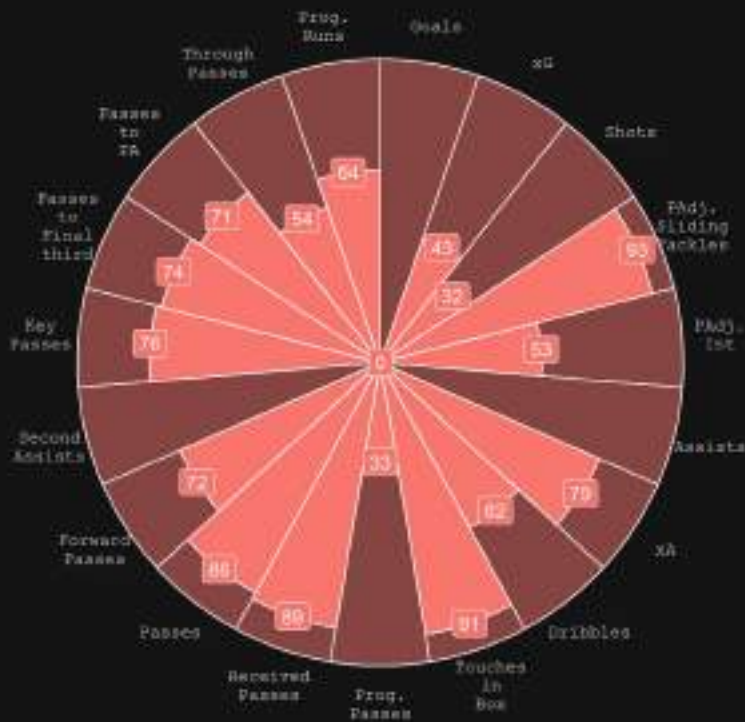
Gavi | Barcelona | Spain | 18 years old

The latest winner of the prestigious Golden Boy award is the 18-year-old midfielder from Barcelona, Gavi. Barcelona have been criticized for selling several talents coming out of the famous La Masia academy in recent times but one of the gems to come out of the same is midfielder Gavi. He made his senior Barcelona debut in 2021 and in only a little over 12 months, Gavi has gone on to become one of the untouchables in that Barcelona squad. The midfielder usually plays on the right side of the holding midfielder in a 4-3-3. His radar above shows he is quite an all-around player. He plays an active part in the ball progression as indicated by his percentile ranks for some of the important passing metrics. He also likes to make that late closer to the box. In 2021, Gavi became the youngest-ever player to play for Spain when he made his debut against Italy in Nations League. Since then, he has been a regular part of the Spanish national setup and is likely to be a key player for Luis Enrique's side at Qatar.

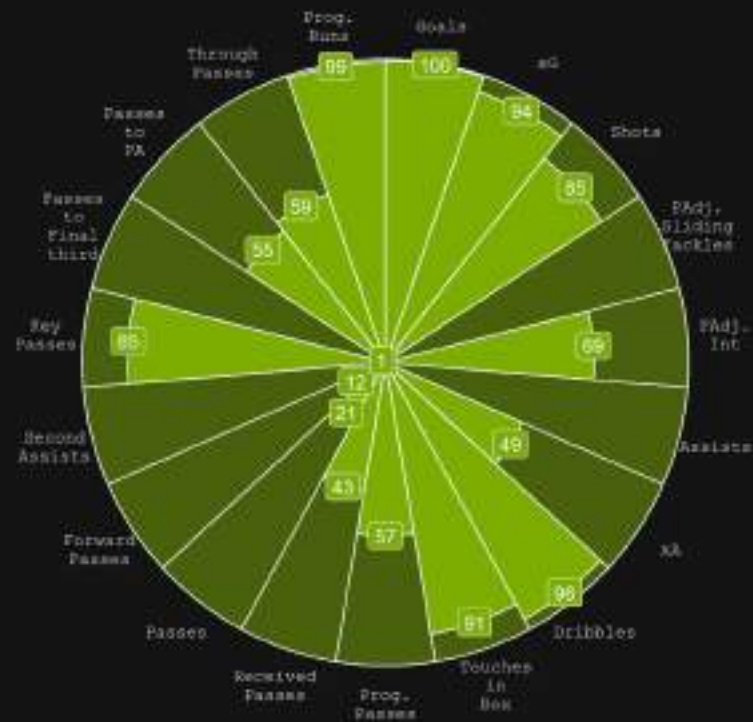
World Cup 2022 | Group E

Percentile ranks among players from respective positions in respective leagues | Min. 100 minutes played

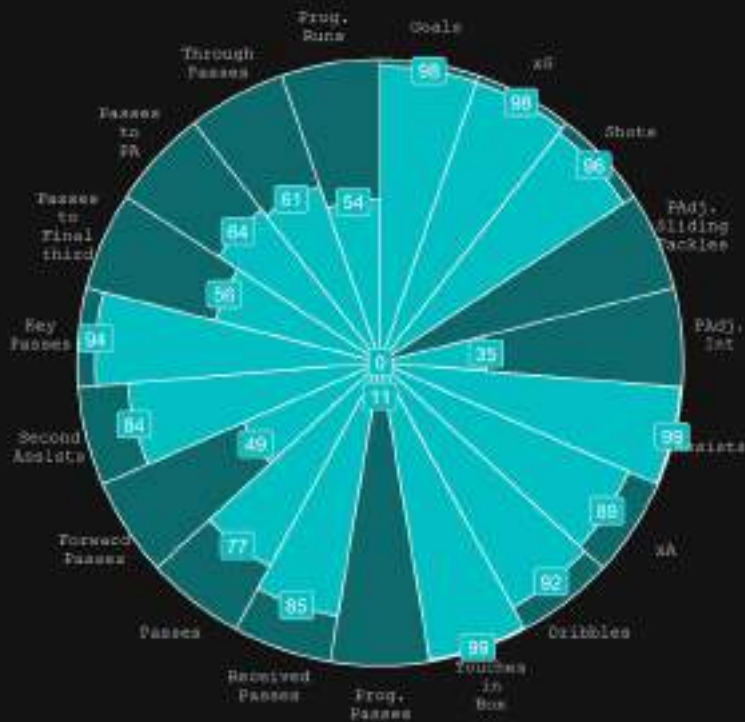
Gavi | Barcelona | Spain



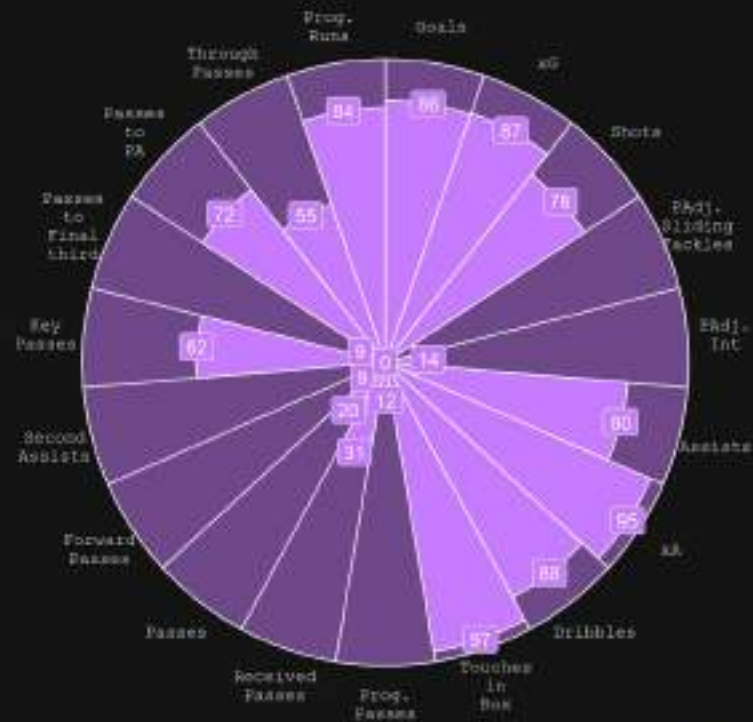
J. Bennette | Sunderland | Costa Rica



J. Musiala | Bayern München | Germany



T. Kubo | Real Sociedad | Japan



Data: Wyscout | Visual by @WeskyReddevil | All stats are 'per 90' unless mentioned otherwise. Data as on 14th Oct, 2022

Jewison Bennette | Sunderland | Costa Rica | 18 years old

One interesting player to look out for when the Costa Rica squad is announced for the World Cup is to look for Jewison Bennette's name. The 18-year-old left-winger currently playing for Sunderland made history when he became the youngest player to represent Costa Rica at senior level towards the end of last year. He then helped his team secure their place in Qatar. Playing predominantly as a wide forward, Bennette is yet to start a game for the Sunderland senior team this season but has made 6 appearances scoring 1 goal. The forward, in a very small sample size, has shown to be a very excellent dribbler with the ball and a very good finisher as well. It is unlikely that Bennette will start or even play all games for Costa Rica if called upon to the squad at the World Cup but whenever he does play, it will be interesting to see how he does.

Jamal Musiala | Bayern Munich | Germany | 19 years old

Jamal Musiala has undoubtedly been one of the players from the Bundesliga this season. The midfielder's rise to this position has been nothing short of an amazing story so far. Musiala has five goals and four assists to his name so far — ranking third-most for non-penalty goals and joint second for assists this season in the Bundesliga. Musiala is one of the best examples of versatility in world football. His biggest strengths include his ability to find space and create chances for his teammates — ranking above average for creativity. Defensively, he lacks a bit of awareness and physicality in his game, but it is something he has a lot of time to improve upon. Musiala has already represented Germany in a major tournament (Euro 2020) but playing in a World Cup is a different kind of challenge. With that said, on current form, Jamal Musiala should definitely be up for it.

Takefusa Kubo | Real Sociedad | Japan | 21 years old

Takefusa Kubo has had an interesting club career so far. Having signed for Madrid in 2019, Kubo is yet to make a competitive appearance for Real Madrid. He has had multiple loan spells with different La Liga clubs. Currently, on loan at Real Sociedad, Kubo has been a regular and has scored 2 goals and assisted 2 times. A lot of eyebrows were raised when Madrid signed him but the 21-year-old has shown a lot of potential since then and is a key part of the Japanese National Team. Kubo is a strong dribbler with the ball and his ability to create chances for his teammates is his biggest strength. Japan almost knocked out Belgium in 2018 but if they have to rise for a challenge like that this time around, they will have to cross a tricky Group E and they will very much rely on Kubo for that.

COSTA RICA



GROUP E

— BRYANT MARQUES // @bryantmt_ —

Costa Rica are one of the most balanced teams in terms of age with a large number of players of more than 30 years, along with several youngsters who are performing highly in domestic competition, such as Brandon Aguilera or Anthony Contreras, and they have earned a place on football's grandest stage at the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar.

Their Colombian manager Luis Fernando Suárez has done a great job with one of the most shockingly successful national teams of recent years thanks to their incredible success at the 2014 World Cup, where they were eliminated in the quarter-finals against the Netherlands, following a legendary penalty-shootout performance from Tim Krul.

Now, they will try to keep creating history for their country, with names like Keylor Navas — one of the biggest starlets in the squad — in their ranks. Though in Group E, where they'll face Spain, Germany and Japan, they won't have it easy, that's for sure.

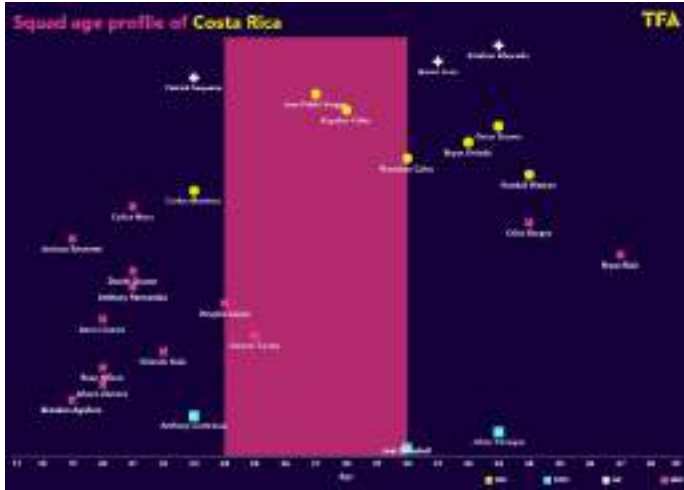
PREDICTED STARTING XI



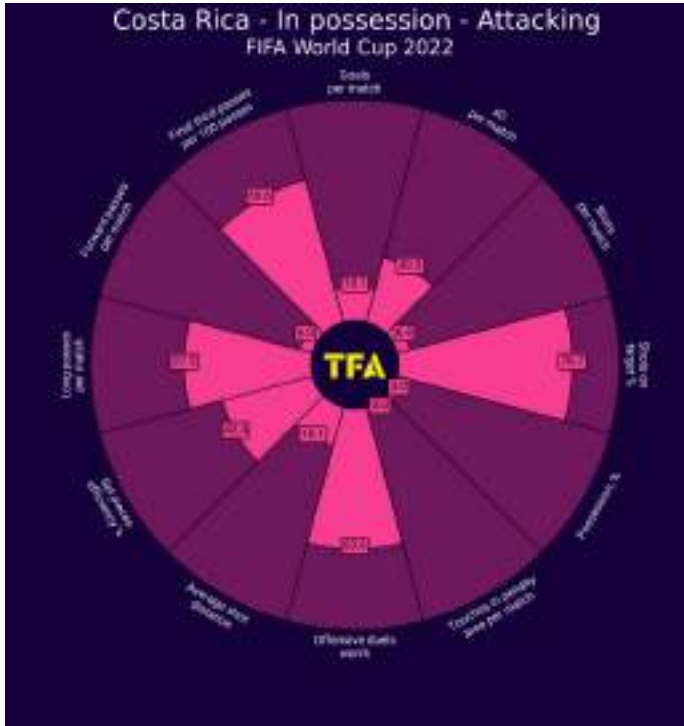
Costa Rica usually like to play in a very wide 4-4-2 in possession of the ball; in this shape, the wingers offer great width and pace from the outside. Keylor Navas would be shielded by Francisco Calvo and Oscar Duarte in front, and Bryan Oviedo and Keysher Fuller in the full-back positions. Celso Borges and Yeltsin Tejada form a double-pivot with Jewison Bennette and Gerson Torres on the wings. This set of players is joined by Joel Campbell and Anthony Contreras making up the forward line.

Costa Rica have started a great youth development project in recent years that has allowed them to produce players like Brandon Aguilera who can earn a transfer to the Premier League, as the attacking midfielder signed for Nottingham Forest from Alajuelense.

Players like Aaron Suárez, Anthony Contreras, Anthony Hernández or Jewison Bennette are some of the most underrated guns Luis Fernando Suárez could have at his disposal this winter. Although they are a very exciting and promising team, they also fill up their squad with lots of leaders and veteran players that keep performing well in the Costa Rican setup, such as Celso Borges or Johan Venegas.



ATTACKING PHASE



In the data viz above us, we can see that Costa Rica likes to be an offensive and direct team with a high percentage of long passes and passes to the final third, in comparison to other teams we'll see in action at the World Cup.

Costa Rica like to go long to escape the pressure from deep, with the utilisation of Keylor Navas and his good long distribution to skip steps in the build-up and connect rapidly with wingers or full-backs out wide in the first phase. The example below shows us this direct intention to break lines quickly with long deliveries from deep, in this case being executed by the centre-back to the left-back.



In the first stage of build-up, Costa Rica likes to give license to Keylor Navas to send long balls constantly, to start attacking transitions or to be moved quickly to the middle third, where the full-backs and wingers can play one-tuos to progress the ball into the final third and create goalscoring opportunities. The figure below shows an example of the kind of pass frequently made by Keylor from the back.



Again, the centre-backs show the ability to break lines and take responsibility for progression from the back, with good movements from the strikers who occasionally like to drop deep to give their deeper teammates options in the build-up phase.

The right-centre-back carries the ball this time through the middle and sees his forward, who has dropped very deep into their own third

to receive the ball, showing for the ball. On receiving, the forward then turns to accelerate the team's march on the opposition's final third.



In the middle third, Costa Rica often create overloads out on the left-hand-side where the midfielder on this side joins to create numerical superiority, helping the left-winger and left-back to beat the pressure and escape with powerful runs and great dribbling ability to escape from small spaces. In this case, the left midfielder joins to be activated as a third man before his winger releases the ball to the full-back, who is then going to pass it to the middle where space has been created.



Costa Rica like to finish periods of possession with overlapping full-backs and aim to overload the box with players that can be a surprise factor to anticipate defenders and try to score headers. After they move the ball from wide to the middle, they change the ball immediately to the full-back on the weak side.

In this example, the right-back is the one to receive the ball with time and space to take a cross into the box, which is very congested thanks to the supporting runs of the midfielders and the two strikers who try to pin defenders.

DEFENSIVE PHASE

The data viz below shows us some information about Costa Rica's performance out of possession. Something worth noting when analysing this data is how Costa Rica like to apply little intensity versus the opposition high upfield when defending, as their PPDA is a very high one. Typically, they are a team that sustains a lot of pressure from the opposition out of possession and have to clear constantly and win the ball back several times in their own third.



Luis Fernando Suárez's teams like to defend in a narrow and rigid 4-4-2 position-oriented structure. In this system, the double-pivot tends to be a very proactive one to jump off their line and mark tightly rival midfielders. Both strikers perform the task of blocking passing options in front of the centre-backs, and the midfielders

are required to mark zonally, protect this space, suffocate the opposition in central midfield positions and try to win the ball back via this rather passive approach.



As we mentioned before in the defensive phase data viz, Costa Rica generally don't press rivals very high on the pitch. However, they do on occasion, and it very much depends on the in-game situation at that moment, though we don't expect to see them pressing with great intensity in Qatar very often.

They'll try to accumulate plenty of players on the strong side of the ball to try and stress players, eliminating short passing options and forcing them to send long balls, thus ending the opposition's possession phase by forcing them into a risky pass that gives Costa Rica's deeper players a chance to regain possession. This example is a perfect visual of what we are explaining, as the six players of the midfield and forward lines mark very tightly in the final third of the pitch on this occasion.



TRANSITIONS

In attacking transitions, Costa Rica like to rely on long passes from Keylor Navas and the centre-backs to pacey Joel Campbell up front. The attacker has a brilliant synergy with Anthony Contreras, and their movements off the ball open spaces for each other and their other attacking teammates. Additionally, the wingers are frequently being activated to run to the box and take cut-back crosses.

In defensive transitions, Costa Rica have issues tracking runs from opposition players who can cause lots of harm with their runs, as their defensive line is not the fastest and can't contain players at full speed, coming from the inside carrying the ball or defending through passes.

DEFENDERS

Keylor Navas forms a big part of a defence full of players who will try everything to protect their line, with the likes of Francisco Calvo and Oscar Duarte in the centre-back partnership, inside Bryan Oviedo and Keysher Fuller as the starter full-backs. Carlos Martínez and Kendall Watson are other young players that could be primarily rotational parts of the team.

MIDFIELDERS

Yeltsin Tejeda and Celso Borges bring experience and leadership in the double-pivot, but players like Brandon Aguilera, Anthony Hernández or Orlando Galo can help the team with a lot of creativity and proactivity through the middle. Bryan Ruíz, Gerson Torres or Johan Venegas are the experienced attacking players but Jewison Bennette, at only 19 years of age, will surely be a tempting option for Suárez.

ATTACKERS

Anthony Contreras has been really amazing and exciting for his country of late, he has already made his full debut, and we expect to see him lining up alongside his veteran partner Joel Campbell, who has continued to be a pacey and threatening option, pushing the last line of the defenders and making a nuisance of himself in-game.

KEY PLAYER

Keylor Navas continues to be the most vital player in the Costa Rica national team, thanks to his clutch shot-stopping ability that helps his team to maintain clean sheets, as well as his contribution in the build-up, with the ability to make long deliveries to find free-men in width, to then open space through the middle.

As we can see in the example below, he has a high percentile considering prevented goals and save rate, as well as through passes — important areas of his game that Costa Rica will need to make the most of in Qatar if they are to progress in the tournament.

TOURNAMENT PREDICTION

Costa Rica have a very balanced squad with legendary players for their nation occupying places in their team — such as Keylor Navas, Joel Campbell and Bryan Ruiz who remain truly vital for the side on and off the pitch.

However, players from the Costa Rican national league, like Contreras in the forward line or recent Nottingham Forest signing Brandon Aguilera excite the entire country in their bid to progress at least to a last-16 spot. This will be a tough ask for Costa Rica, who will have the odds stacked against them in the tournament and we struggle to see them progressing, given the strength of the other sides in their group, but, of course, they can't be written off entirely.



GERMANY



GROUP E

— MARCEL SEIFEDDINE // @MarcelS_02 —

Germany will be heading into the World Cup with the aim of avenging their disastrous campaign in 2018 when they went crashing out of the tournament in the group stages. Germany came bottom of their group, finishing behind Sweden, Mexico and South Korea with a squad and manager who were both coming to the end of their cycle. This time around, they've replaced the ageing players and have included a new set of dynamic attacking players.

On their journey to the World Cup, Germany were given a fairly easy group, where they won nine out of 10 games, scoring 36 goals and only allowing four on the route to the World Cup. However, their toughest opponent, 65th-ranked North Macedonia, shows that this is irrelevant when compared to the level they will face in Qatar.

In this upcoming competition, they have been drawn into a group with Japan, Costa Rica and Spain. Germany are currently sat in 11th place in the FIFA rankings, while Spain may be seen as favourites in the group, currently sat in seventh place. 24th-placed Japan and 31st-placed Costa Rica will be seen as outsiders, and while they do not possess the quality of the two European sides, Germany may face difficult challenges in overcoming the two lower-ranked nations.

After the most recent UEFA European Championships, Germany replaced their head coach, Joachim Löw. This much needed change in leadership will hopefully allow the Germans to continue the success that some of the more recent German coaches have had at club level. The German philosophy has seen 3 of the last 4 Champions League trophies be lifted by German managers, proving that their breeding ground has been very effective in recent history.

The new head coach, Hansi Flick took charge of the German national team after their defeat to England at Euro 2021. Flick came to international

management off the back of a record-breaking two seasons with Bayern Munich. Soon after taking charge, Flick went 30 games undefeated in all competitions, in a season where he won the Bundesliga, Champions League and DFB Pokal. His aggressive and attacking style of play helped Bayern to score 159 goals in all competitions, with 52 of those scored by players in the German national team.

This tactical analysis will break down what to expect from Germany under Hansi Flick's leadership. A scout report will detail the key players for Germany, and how they can cause chaos in Qatar. Furthermore, there will be an analysis of the squad as a whole, and how each player can help play a part in the German's potential road to the trophy.

PREDICTED STARTING XI



In Flick's 15 games in charge, he has mainly used the 4-2-3-1 that he famously used during his successful Bayern Munich stint. On occasion, Flick altered the tactics, to move to a back five, at the expense of a creative player further up the pitch. This formation could be seen during the tougher fixtures, against nations that possess more threat or to match up against sides who use a three at the back. However, we do not expect this to be seen in the group stages. As was the case at Bayern, we can expect a gegenpressing side, with a heavy focus on creating chances through pressing and transitional situations, although Flick can definitely create chances against a deep block.

Manuel Neuer will lead his country out on the pitch in goal, as the 36-year-old will look to win his second World Cup. His ability to sweep will enable Germany to play with a high line, making their block more compact and difficult to play through. Neuer's ballplaying ability will also be important in aiding the build-up for Germany to allow them to retain possession of the ball.

In the German back line, Niklas Süle and Antonio Rüdiger are likely to form the defensive duo. The pair are both comfortable in possession, strong in aerial duels and have a nice balance, with Rüdiger as the aggressor while Süle will hold his position to cover balls in behind. The pair are also both skilled at carrying the ball up the pitch, in case they run out of options, they can simply evade pressure and find a teammate further up the pitch.

In the full-back positions, there is a possibility that a more defensive player replaces one of the predicted starters if Germany progress into the later stages. Against sides with less offensive threat, Germany have used a 2-2 build-up and rest defence, while against tougher opponents they replaced an attacking full-back with a third central defender. Both David Raum and Jonas Hoffman are more offensive-minded full-backs,

while Hoffman plays on the wing for his club. The pair are both good dribblers, so can maintain the width of their sides whilst also having the ability to deliver dangerous crosses into the box.

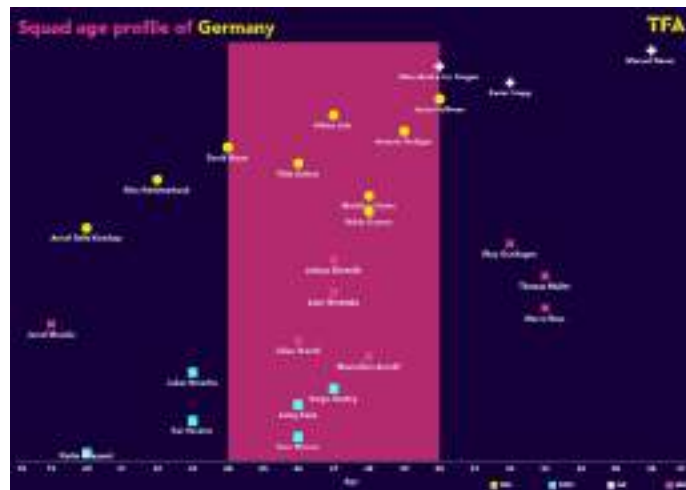
In the pivot role, a pairing of İlkay Gündoğan and Joshua Kimmich are likely to continue their partnership. Kimmich's passing range and creativity are key to Germany's chance creation. He is reliable on the ball in both the build-up and further up the pitch, which allows Germany to control possession of the ball. Gündoğan will act as a deeper lying midfielder, allowing Kimmich to neglect some defensive duties to have a bigger impact in the final third. Gündoğan's positional awareness, press resistance and passing range allow him to take on responsibility off the ball. He has the nose to sniff out counterattacks, and the intelligence to launch attacks with line-breaking passes from deep. While at Manchester City he was responsible for more offensive actions, Gündoğan has had to act as a defensive midfielder in the pivot during group rival Rodri's absence.

Thomas Müller is likely to begin as the attacking midfielder, sitting just behind the centre forward. During the two-season spell at club level under Flick, Müller tallied up 79 goal contributions in the attack hungry Bayern side. His experience at past World Cups, as well as his past performances under the very same manager, give Müller a good chance of retaining his spot. Müller is an extremely intelligent player who will likely play in his 'space invader' role, the same role that brought out the best of his abilities.

On the wings, Leroy Sané and Serge Gnabry will both be making their debuts at the World Cup, after being overlooked 4 years ago. Gnabry and Sané have both had strong starts to the season, and have been regarded as some of the best wide players in world football for the past couple of years. Both players are blistering quick, have the ball manipulation skills to play in

tight spaces, have the ball striking to score from anywhere and have the vision to combine and create for others. The pairing will both likely play in the half spaces, but will also act as outlets in transitional situations.

Leading the line, Kai Havertz is expected to continue his role as the centre forward for Germany. The centre-forward position is one where Germany haven't been able to produce a consistent performer, since their triumph in 2014. Havertz has showcased some strong performances, with his ability to link up play, hold the ball up, and get into the correct goalscoring positions. The 23-year-old hasn't been too consistent this season, so he will have to step up in the coming weeks to cement his position in the starting lineup.



The above image shows the age of every player we believe may get called up to the World Cup. The majority of the squad is aged between 24 and 30, showing that this is a group of players who are mostly in their prime and also have the experience of squads in previous tournaments. The players over the age of 30 are all players who have been playing at the top level of club football for the past decade. They have shown the skill required to compete at the highest level and will carry their talent and experience into the World Cup, to share their expertise with the rest of the squad.

ATTACKING PHASE



Germany's aggressive game plan leads to multiple goalscoring opportunities. As shown in the chart above, Germany are in the top 90th percentiles for goals, xG, shots and touches in the penalty area. This dominant approach all stems from how Germany build-up play in deep areas, rather than booting the ball long. Gündoğan and Kimmich are both heavily involved in the build-up by dropping deep to form a 4-2 shape in their own third.

As the ball is retained by Germany, the centre backs gradually move wider and away from each other, while Kimmich drops in between the two defenders. Having 3 central players in the build-up allows the two full-backs to push up high and stretch the opposition's back line. Leaving the two fullbacks high and wide, allows the wide German players to come inside and operate in the half-spaces.

As we can see in the image below, Leroy Sané drops deeper to find an open space. He is free to move inside as Raum is in his position at LW. Furthermore, as we highlighted earlier, the likes of

Süle have excellent passing abilities to break the lines and progress the ball through central areas. Receiving the ball in a central space, like Sané, means that he has more options around him than he would if he was stuck out on the left wing.



Another key tactical aspect which enables Germany to dominate their opponents is the superb positional structure that helps them to easily sustain pressure. While the image below doesn't fully capture the scene, Germany use a 3-2-5 structure to probe the opposition defence in the final third when playing against a team which provides threat on the counter. The three defenders are always ready to cover for each other, and delay counterattacks by forcing their opponents into wide channels. The double-pivot of Gündoğan and Kimmich circulate possession between each other while Kimmich roams forward to try to unlock the opposition's defence.

On the left flank, David Raum is used to retain the width and stretch their opponents' backline. Havertz is used centrally as a point of reference for the team. In the image below, Musiala has rotated with Hoffmann, so Musiala is keeping the width on the right, while Hoffmann and Sané roam in the half-spaces to combine with the wide players and pick the ball up between the lines.



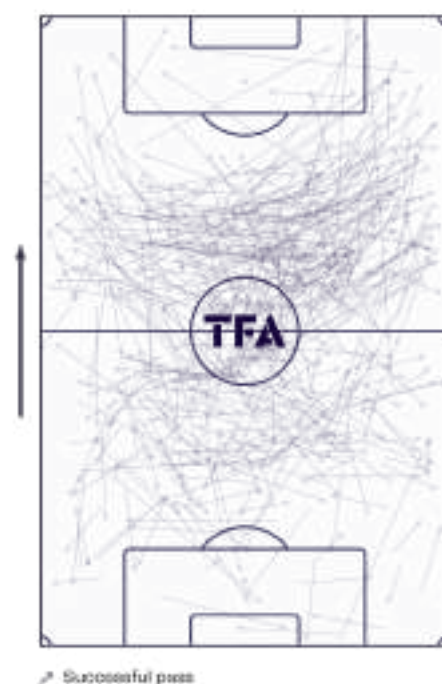
When Germany will face stubborn defences, Joshua Kimmich's range of passing is an excellent tool to unlock a defence. In games like the one pictured below, there is no space between the lines to pass through and combine between teammates. When you can't go through a defence, you must either go over them or around it. While Kimmich won't dribble around a defensive block, he can take matters into his own hands by perfectly playing dangerous balls behind a defensive block. This style of pass is a trademark Kimmich move, and has often been utilised when losing in games.



The pass map below shows how Kimmich frequently attempts to play balls into the box. As we described earlier, Kimmich has recently been in a more advanced role, where you can see a heavy volume of passes in and around the final third.

J. KIMMICH PASS MAP

All games from UEFA Nations League - League A 2022/2023



DEFENDING PHASE



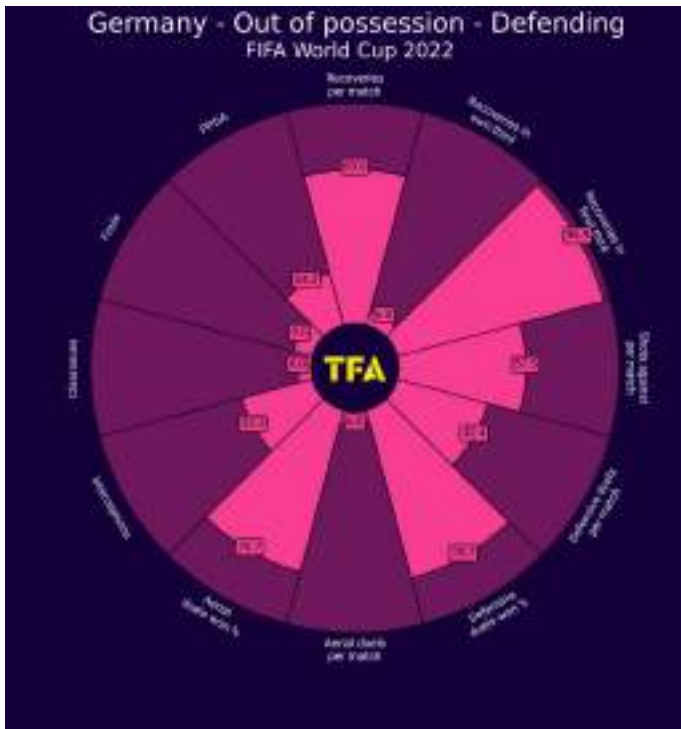
TRANSITIONS

With so many German players residing in Germany, the home of the Bundesliga, many of the players are used to constant transitional scenarios which are a common theme of their domestic competition. The front trio of Germany is usually very quick, which makes them very dangerous in offensive transitions. The image below shows an example of Germany's players being comfortable with each other and combining with each other. They play the ball to the furthest available forward, before giving the ball to someone who is facing forwards and can therefore pick out a pass.

Another dangerous asset Germany possess, is the number of powerful ball carriers which allow them to be dangerous in transitions even without the pass being on.



The problem with a double-pivot which isn't the most energetic is that there can be too much space for opposition players on the counter to run at the defence. The double-pivot duo are tasked with not allowing their opponents to receive the ball in space, as they would be



Defensively, we can see that for a large number of metrics, Germany rank low. However, this is not due to their defence being weak, but the fact that Germany have so much of the ball means that their defence has to make fewer interceptions and tackles per game. Germany fall in the 96th percentile for the number of recoveries in the final third, proving that they consistently win the ball back in high areas due to their strong press.

The image below displays how Germany set up to press their opponents, with Timo Werner forcing play to go to one side by cutting off one side due to the arc of his run. After Germany force a team in one direction, they put an immense amount of pressure to force their opponent into a mistake or to just clear the ball long. Germany's strong back line allows them to be comfortable in winning aerial duels, allowing Germany to regain possession of the ball and sustain pressure.

able to pick out a pass too easily otherwise. The image below shows how when the midfielders can't get close enough to the ball, they allow their opponents to pass the ball in behind which causes problems against fast players on the counter.



DEFENDERS

In the back line, the likes of Matthias Ginter, Thilo Kehrer and Nico Schlotterbeck will all be in contention for starting spots, especially when Germany come up against tough opposition where an extra defender who starts as a full-back will be required. All three players are capable of playing such roles, while Kehrer has been the player favoured for this position in the past.

Robin Gosens of Inter Milan will be a rotation option for either full-back position, with his experience as a wing-back allowing him to be comfortable marauding up and down the flank. Gosens has the added goal threat that these other defenders lack, which will make him an enticing option if Germany are chasing a game.

Armel Bella-Kotchap is a potential addition to the squad. There's a chance he may not make the squad, following his recent injury causing him to miss the most recent match. However, the young centre-back made his debut for the country in September, and his performances in the Premier League prove that he is a very strong player, capable of representing Germany at the World Cup.

MIDFIELDERS

At the base of midfield Max Arnold and Leon Goretzka will offer rotation options for the double pivot. Leon Goretzka has a good chance of making it into the starting XI, however, Gündoğan's reliability in possession and defensive intelligence will give Flick more confidence in picking him for the starting role.

If Goretzka were to start, Kimmich would have to be deployed deeper, meaning his offensive impact would be reduced. As a key player, Flick will want Kimmich to have as much of an impact on the final third as possible. Julian Brandt, Marco Reus and Jamal Musiala all offer depth behind Thomas Müller. Musiala is the most likely of these to earn a spot in the starting XI, with his impressive performances for Bayern Munich recently gaining the attention of fans.

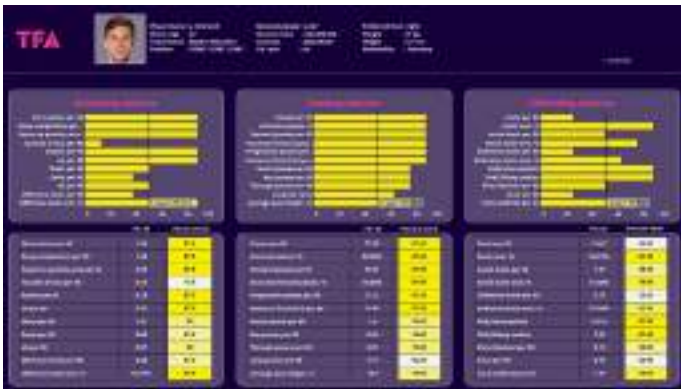
Musiala has been extremely impressive with 10 goal contributions in 8 starts in the Bundesliga. Due to the lack of experience, Müller is expected to start although there is nothing stopping Musiala from getting into the starting squad. Florian Wirtz is an exciting player who could also be competing for the role, although due to injury there is no chance for him to feature in this upcoming tournament.

ATTACKERS

In the front line, Germany arguably have the least quality depth. Timo Werner is a possible starter, who causes chaos for his opponents with his endless and intelligent movement, although his lack of composure and ball-striking discourage managers from starting him as a centre forward. Lukas Nmecha and Karim Adeyemi are both young players who haven't had many opportunities with the first-team squad as of yet.

They have shown their talent in the Bundesliga, albeit Adeyemi hasn't found the back of the net yet. A lack of depth may cause problems for Germany, should a starting player get injured during the World Cup. Some players that aren't expected to make the squad include Niclas Fullkrug, who has enjoyed a very good start to the season, and could offer a box presence that Germany seem to lack, while Yousofa Moukoko could be a wildcard pick with his dynamic play style that can grow into something special, for the 17-year-old.

KEY PLAYER



Joshua Kimmich will undoubtedly be one of the players of the tournament, and his performances will be key to how well Germany perform this winter. He completes four passes into the box per 90 on average with two of those ending up in shooting opportunities per game. With an xA of 0.22 per 90, Kimmich is likely to create a good goalscoring chance per game, which at this level could be enough to see it helping win a game. While Kimmich isn't necessarily a direct goal threat, he does have the occasional long shot in his locker thanks to his ability to curl shots in the top corner.

Kimmich's passing metrics are clearly out of this world. He completes 77 passes per game on average, showing that he is extremely comfortable playing for a possession-based side, whilst also being in the top 87.5% for forward passes and progressive passes into the

final third. Kimmich's long ball ratio and smart passes per 90 show that Kimmich doesn't only play short passes, but he can break lines and also play over the top of a defensive back line.

Defensively, while Kimmich doesn't get involved in defending scenarios too often, due to his possession-based team dynamics, his 63% win rate of defensive duels shows that he will get stuck in and is likely to win his duels, especially in defensive transition.

TOURNAMENT PREDICTION

Given everything that's been mentioned about Germany in this article, and the history of the Germans having World Cup success in their DNA, they will be confident about their chances going into Qatar. Germany are expected to get out of their group against Spain, Japan and Costa Rica. Spain go into the group as favourites but Germany are clear favourites for second place.

If Germany were to finish second, they would have to play the winner of group F. This could likely be against a Belgium side with several key injuries. The path through the knockout stages could be extremely difficult for Germany, and they could finish the group on top as well, as their free-scoring side could boost their goal difference in the early stages.

We expect Germany to reach the quarter-finals stage after winning their group and beating second place in Group F. However, they would then meet a Brazilian side seeking revenge. That is the potential banana skin which could see Germany collapse and come crashing out of the World Cup.

JAPAN



GROUP E

— FINTAN O'REILLY // @FintanFootball —

Japan have appeared in every FIFA World Cup following their debut at the tournament in 1998. This year's competition sees Japan enter the seventh FIFA World Cup of their history. They'll hope to get at least as far as the Round of 16, which remains the deepest they've gone in the competition, a stage that they've reached on three occasions (2002, 2010 and 2018).

However, getting out of the group will be no easy feat for Hajime Moriyasu's side, as their group includes two European giants of this competition who've enjoyed great success in the not-so-distant past — Spain (winners in 2010) and Germany (winners in 2014).

Japan boast a squad with exciting players that could cause problems for Spain and Germany (along with Costa Rica, who are also allocated to Group E). Celtic striker Kyogo Furuhashi has been in fine goalscoring form for his club this season and, at the time of writing, remains the only Hoops player to have scored for his side in the UEFA Champions League this season.

Bundesliga duo Daichi Kamada and Genki Haraguchi could represent good midfield options for Moriyasu, with Kamada enjoying a fantastic season with reigning UEFA Europa League champions Eintracht Frankfurt and Haraguchi playing for underdog Bundesliga leaders (at the time of writing) Union Berlin. Meanwhile, though Monaco's Takumi Minamino hasn't set the world alight with his new club so far this term, the attacker has been an integral part of his national team under Moriyasu and should be expected to play a key role in this tournament.

While Japan are damaged on the injury front, with Borussia Mönchengladbach centre-back Ko Itakura looking doubtful for the World Cup, along with VfL Bochum attacker Takuma Asano, they still have plenty of promising talent to offer and could get a result from Spain and/

or Germany, which would make Group E very interesting depending on other results.

This tactical analysis piece will provide analysis of Moriyasu's Japan squad via a team-focused scout report. We'll look at the team's strategy and tactics in possession, out of possession and in transitional phases via analysis of their recent games and World Cup qualification clashes.

Additionally, we'll delve into the squad selection options that Moriyasu has available to him in all areas of the pitch before going into some detail on Kamada, who we've identified as being Japan's key player for the tournament, and finally, providing our tournament prediction for the Samurai Blue.

PREDICTED STARTING XI

We'll kick off our analysis by looking at our predicted 26-man squad and strongest starting XI for Japan at the World Cup. At the time of writing, Japan's official 26-man squad has not been released, nor has their provisional squad been publicly released. However, in figure 1, we can see an age profile of a predicted 26-man squad that we don't believe will be too far off the squad that Moriyasu decides to take with him to Qatar.



Japan's biggest injury doubt is Itakura, who looks touch and go for the tournament at present. As a result, we've left him out of our 26-man squad. More than half of the squad (14) lies within or just on the border of the peak-age range (the pink strip on the graph) with four players lying in the 'youth' range and the remaining eight players falling into the post-peak 'experienced' range. Itakura (25) and Asano (27) would add to the peak-age range players if they're fit and Moriyasu wants to select them.

Alongside captain Yoshida (34), this makes for an experienced backline but also one that's got a lot of mileage. Still, we deem these to be the best options and their respective backup options are decent in terms of quality, along with falling in the peak-age range or below.

ATTACKING PHASE

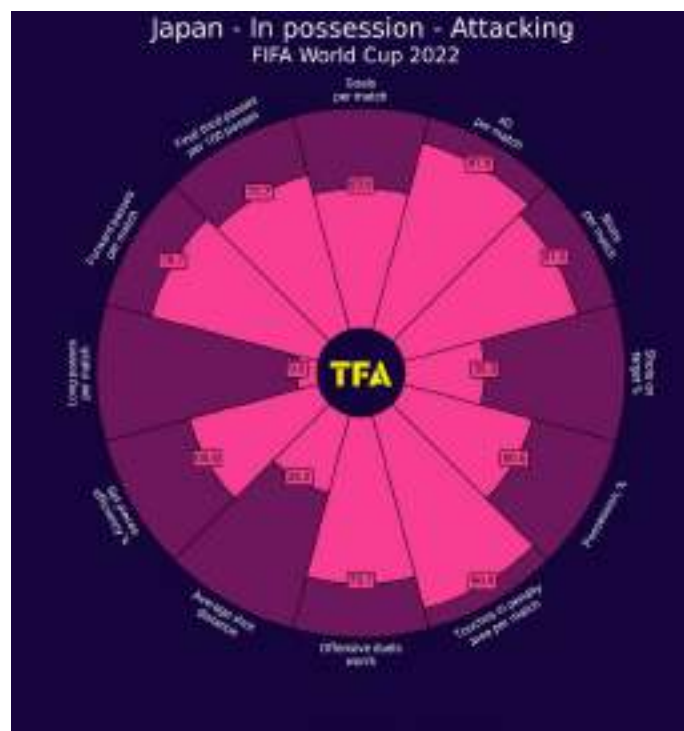
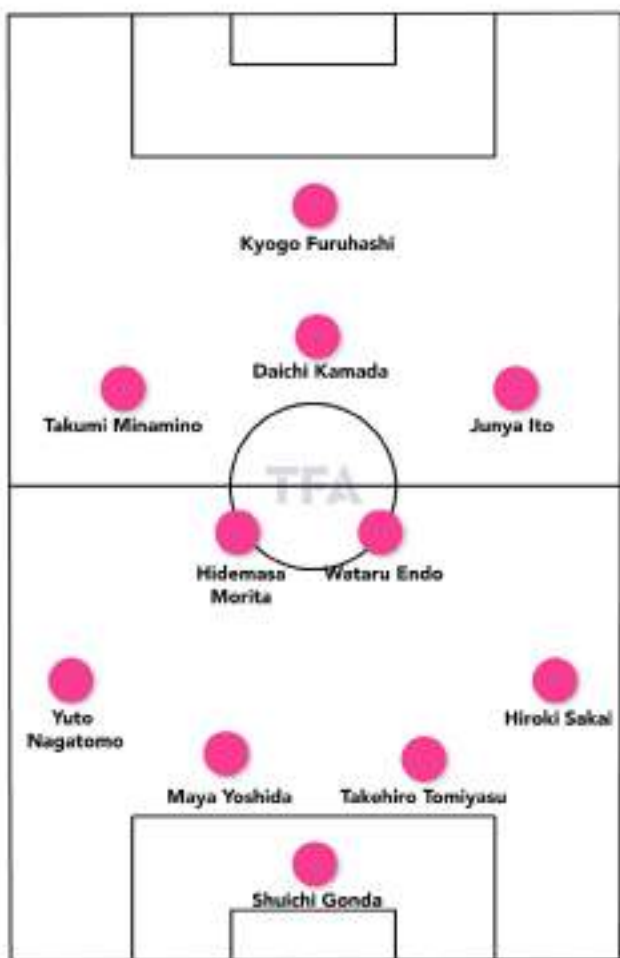


Figure 3 provides an overview of Japan's attacking game. The data for this radar was taken from their games over the last calendar year, and the percentile ranks shown compare them with the other 31 teams competing in Qatar this year.

From that 26-man squad, we've selected the predicted strongest starting XI in figure 2. We'll discuss the individual sections of Japan's squad in greater detail later in this scout report but for us, they're definitely strongest in the forward department in terms of depth. At the same time, they've got plenty of decent options in midfield too. With Itakura's injury, they are slightly weaker at centre-back, while their starting full-backs are 32-year-old Sakai and 36-year-old Nagatomo.

We must remember that the quality of competition Japan have faced over the last calendar year will largely differ from the quality they'll mostly come up against in the World Cup, and this shouldn't be used as a preview of what to expect from them in the World Cup or a measure of how exactly they stack up with their competition in this tournament.

However, we can still gain plenty of knowledge on their playing style and intent with the ball from this radar. The most significant data from this

radar, for us, in terms of Japan's playing style is the passing data. They play very few long passes per 90 but plenty of forward passes. Japan are quite a direct team with the ball but they don't go long much and don't generally use a target man striker.

When they do go long, it's all about winning the second ball via their subsequent press or playing someone in behind the opposition's backline, as opposed to getting somebody on the ball to hold it up or win the aerial duel.

Again, this Japan side is very direct. While their possession percentage has typically been high over the last calendar year, I wouldn't expect them to spend a lot of time on the ball in this tournament, especially against the likes of Spain and Germany. They thrive in transitions and if they can force opportunities to counter-attack against Spain and Germany, that'll suit them and their playing style perfectly.



Figure 4 shows an example of Japan's typical shape in the build-up phase. The centre-back duo will split wide on either side of the goalkeeper, while the two holding midfielders will provide options ahead of them, slightly more centrally and closer together than the centre-backs.

This creates kind of a 3-2 shape (including the goalkeeper) from goal-kicks, with the full-backs pushing high, getting in line with the attacking midfielder in this phase and the wingers moving into the half-spaces on either side of the striker as play proceeds, though generally staying wider at the start.



During this phase and the ball progression phase, it's common to see Japan's holding midfield duo stagger (one drops deeper while the other sits higher) to give their teammates better passing options and make it more difficult for the opposition to mark them. We see an example of this in figure 5, as play moves on from figure 4.

Japan are typically comfortable building out from the back via short passes. They are extremely patient in the build-up and ball progression phases, often almost exuding a sense of trying to bait the opposition out, asking them to press higher to try and dispossess them, with the aim of exposing the space behind their midfielders and defence as it opens up with the press getting higher and more intense.

This is a common tactic deployed by Moriyasu's Japan that we'd look out for at the World Cup. They'll try to bait the opposition out with patient passing at the back to create an opening to progress through them into space behind the midfield once they get aggressive. The defenders' patience, decision-making, composure, vision and technical passing quality are all key to ensuring this works, along with their attackers' movement into the space behind the opposition's midfield.

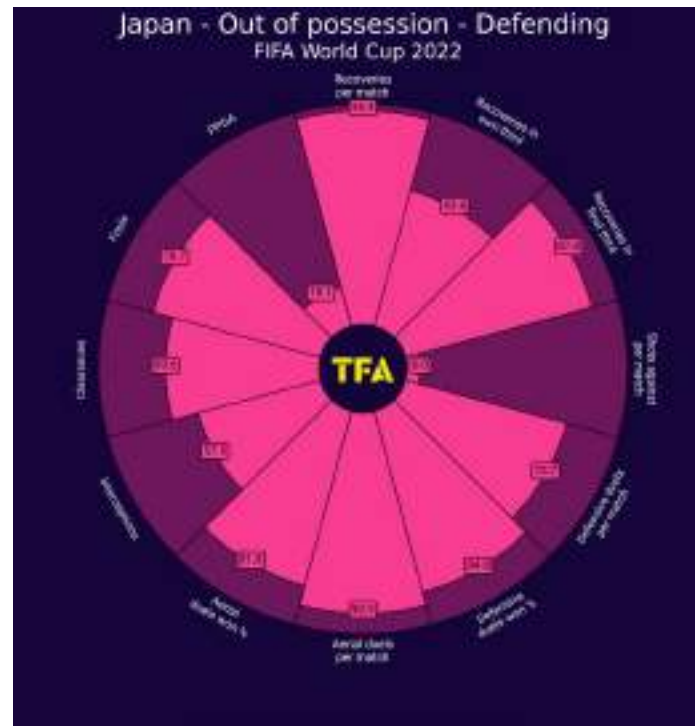
This can create opportunities for Japan to quickly break at the opposition's weakened backline and create overloads, similar to how they'd attack in transition. This kind of attack is when and where Moriyasu's side are at their best in possession.



DEFENSIVE PHASE

Additionally, watch out for Japan’s tendency to overload one side of the pitch with all but one of their players positioned inside the opposition’s half. That remaining one player will get wide on the underloaded side; the Samurai Blue will often look to pull off a switch to this player on the underloaded wing as they progress into the final third, creating a potentially great opportunity to attack the opposition’s penalty box.

We see a typical example of Japan executing this tactic as they progress into the final third versus five-time World Cup winners Brasil, in figure 6. Their centre-forward and attacking midfielder will generally look to help out the player positioned on the underloaded wing by moving centrally and trying to drag the opposition full-back on that side away with them via their run.

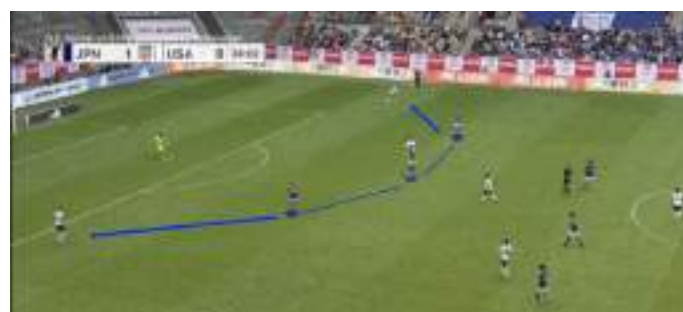


Moving on to look at Japan in the defensive phases, the radar in figure 7 looking at Japan’s performance in the defensive phases, similar to the previous radar we looked at in figure 3 for Japan’s offensive phases, was made with data taken from their games over the last calendar year, and the percentile ranks shown compare them with the other 31 teams competing in the 2022 FIFA World Cup.

What we’d like to focus on from this radar that’s significant to Japan’s playing style is their low PPDA, high recoveries per match and high recoveries in the final third. This is a result of the fact that Moriyasu’s side are very aggressive with their pressing and always set out to win the ball as high as possible to force transitions from sensitive areas for the opposition in which they are more vulnerable to a turnover and quick attack. This ties in with Japan’s attacking preferences — they thrive in transition and set up to exploit this strength as much as they can.



they generally display to a good standard, making life difficult for their opponents in the early possession phases.



Focusing solely on Japan's forwards for a moment, they will sit narrow in the high-block phase, and we typically see the opposition's centre-backs outside of them, as was the case in figure 9. Japan set up to press from in to out on these players, prioritising the protection of the centre as a result of this and the tight marking of the nearest passing options to the player on the ball.



It's common to see Japan's midfielders applying aggressive pressure from behind to the opposition receivers. This can occur as the players who aren't being marked tightly at that moment end up being found with a pass, leading to a near Japanese player springing into action behind them to halt their progress.

This can rush the opposition into a misplaced pass, resulting in a turnover and transition opportunity for the Samurai Blue, as was the case in figure 10 as the left holding midfielder, who'd been sitting deeper than the aggressive right holding midfielder in this instance, advanced to press the opposition receiver in central midfield when the ball was played to him from the left centre-back, while Japan's right holding midfielder was marking the opposition's left central midfielder more tightly.

Figure 8 provides a couple of examples (first in the top two squares, second in the bottom two squares) of how the Samurai Blue typically set up to defend in the high-block phase. The first example shows how Japan's 4-2-3-1 typically looks in this phase, with the front four typically orienting themselves more to the ball and the dangerous passing options near to their position in relation to where the ball is at that moment.

The centre-forward will generally press the centre-backs aggressively when they play the ball out from the back, with the ball-near winger also typically getting quite aggressive. Japan's attacking midfielder will mark the deepest ball-near midfielder, while Japan's full-backs typically defend quite aggressively too, with the ball-near full-back getting high to mark the opposition's ball-near full-back, as the top example shows. Japan's ball-far full-back will remain deeper.

In the second example, we see how Japan's deep midfielders defend in this phase a bit more. These players will generally remain deeper focusing on defending in relation to their position a bit more but when the ball is on their side, if a good passing option is available for the opposition higher in the midfield behind Japan's attacking midfielder, they will push up to mark that option, which we see Japan's right holding midfielder doing in this example.

Japan's forward line offers plenty of pace and defensive work rate to pull off this strategy as well as they do, while they also require plenty of tactical understanding and discipline, which



When defending deeper, as the opposition settle into a period of possession, it's common to see Japan use something of a 4-5-1 shape, as seen in figure 13. However, they still constantly apply pressure to the ball carrier and their nearest passing options — this never changes.

If they foresee the incoming pass early enough, like in figure 11, the Japan midfielder can intercept the ball themselves, directly creating a turnover for their side from a good position. After forcing the turnover here, Japan could drive into the final third and overload the opposition's backline.

One downside to this is that it can lead to Japan's structure getting ripped apart and played through a bit too easily if the opposition are comfortable and quick-thinking on the ball, as well as with their off-the-ball movement to exploit the spaces that open in Japan's shape as a result of their aggressive defending and aggressive marking of the ball-near opponents.



At the same time, it can rush the opposition into mistakes and force valuable opportunities to counterattack, which is always this team's priority.

TRANSITIONS

It's not just Japan's midfielders who press like this, we also see their defenders jump out from the backline and press aggressively, which we see an example of in figure 12. Moriyasu likes his centre-backs to be comfortable with stepping high and defending aggressively to cover the space behind the midfielders if it gets exposed as a result of their aggressiveness with pressing higher upfield.

We've touched a lot on Japan's love for transitions in the previous two sections, as their game in possession and out-of-possession are very much centred on creating opportunities to counterattack. We'll try not to repeat ourselves too much in this section, then, as we move on into figure 14 to look at Japan's counterpressing.

Successfully defending in this manner can create more opportunities for Japan to counterattack, which is ideal for them and their attacking preferences.



We see two examples of Japan's counterpressing in this image (the first taking up the top two boxes and the second taking up the bottom two boxes). In terms of counterpressing, again, think 'prioritise marking the nearest options to



the ball aggressively' while focusing on central occupation outside of that and we end up with the shape seen in the top-left corner. One holding midfielder sits deep, the other pushes on more. One winger presses aggressively, the other comes across into the centre.

What's key for Japan's counterpressing is that their centre-forward/wingers track back and continue applying pressure to the ball carrier even after they progress beyond their line. At the same time, players will come out from deeper positions to offer support, as the right-holding midfielder did in this example, with the left-holding midfielder and ball-far players shifting across to cover for him. This leads to the opposition ball carrier getting overwhelmed with energetic Japan shirts all around him, leading to the turnover.

We see a lot of the same principles in the bottom example. The forwards track back aggressively to support the midfield in pressing while cutting off a potential avenue of escape for the opposition ball carrier, allowing Japan to regain possession deep inside the opposition's half and create a good counterattacking opportunity.

After regaining possession, Japan's attackers will immediately look to provide options and exploit space where it's available — often behind the opposition's backline. Furthermore, it's still common to see Japan try to isolate one attacker on the ball-far side in situations like this and they can succeed in dragging opposition defenders away from that wing to create more space for the attacker via their movement.

ATTACKERS

Now, onto looking at Japan's attackers. As mentioned earlier in the scout report, up front is an area of strength for Japan even with the injury to Asano that may make him unavailable for the tournament.

The attackers we've selected for the predicted 26-man squad are Junya Ito, Kyogo Furuhashi, Takumi Minamino, Takefusa Kubo, Daizen Maeda, Yuya Osako, Kaoru Mitoma and Ayase Ueda.

Furuhashi, Maeda and Ueda are all performing well at club level but have not exactly replicated that at international level thus far. However, they remain solid options and Moriyasu will have to put faith in them for the World Cup and trust his team to create the right opportunities that his goalscorers need to produce. We've already analysed the way this team attacks and the kind of goals they typically score in this tactical analysis, so the team will know what's expected of them.

Mitoma is a very different case in that he's largely produced more at international level of late than he has at club level, and this will likely make Moriyasu comfortable with bringing him on the plane to Qatar, similar to Minamino who, though he's been quiet in recent international appearances, has been a key player throughout Moriyasu's tenure in charge of the Samurai Blue and has surely earned enough trust for a place in the starting XI.

Osako has been quiet in recent international games too but has a great goalscoring record at international level and this reliability, along with the fact he's coming off the back of a decent J-League season in front of goal and the fact he can offer a different profile up front to the other options may make him an attractive option for Moriyasu's attack.

Ito was a revelation for Genk in Belgium and has started life in Ligue 1 with Reims positively, though in a different more central role than the right-winger role he perfected with Genk. Nevertheless, he's an exciting attacker whose profile fits the type of football Moriyasu wants his team to play, and he is a player who has

typically delivered for the national team, so could well just about take a place in the starting XI ahead of Kubo, who's another exciting option that could offer something different to Ito again.

Additionally, Kubo has positional versatility and could also provide another option in attacking midfield. This kind of versatility is always appreciated for international tournaments. Along with his ability, this makes him a very likely contender for the Japan squad.

MIDFIELDERS

Our midfield selections for Japan include Wataru Endo, Hidemasa Morita, Daichi Kamada, Genki Haraguchi, Gaku Shibasaki and Ao Tanaka.

Endo and Morita have been a common sight at holding midfield for Japan during Moriyasu's tenure, they perform the roles expected of them well and we'd expect to see the partnership feature in Qatar. Reliability on the ball, press resistance, intelligent decision-making and good positioning without the ball will be crucial for this area.

Meanwhile, Kamada is a very well-rounded midfielder who can create opportunities from a slightly more advanced position. His bravery in possession and ability to break lines via his passing to set up dangerous goalscoring opportunities make him a very valuable option.

Tanaka and Shibasaki provide versatility but will likely deputise for Endo and Morita in Qatar. Their profiles can fulfil the necessary roles, though Endo and Morita will likely be the preferred first-choice pairing.

Meanwhile, Haraguchi will likely be the intended backup for Kamada (though Kubo could nudge him out for that role either) and, again, offers

plenty of versatility to Moriyasu, so could even fill in for other areas if required, though that will be unlikely. He lacks the passing quality of Kamada which could be an issue in terms of a starting place but, at the same time, offers better ball-carrying ability, so will be a useful option.

DEFENDERS

As for the defenders, our predicted back-four includes three very experienced options in Yuto Nagatomo, Maya Yoshida and Hiroko Sakai, while we've also got Arsenal's Takehiro Tomiyasu in our starting XI at the right centre-back position, adding some youth to the backline. Should Itakura remain out of action, we predict that Tomiyasu will be a very important member of this squad both for what he brings to the table in terms of profile and ability, as well as his positional versatility.

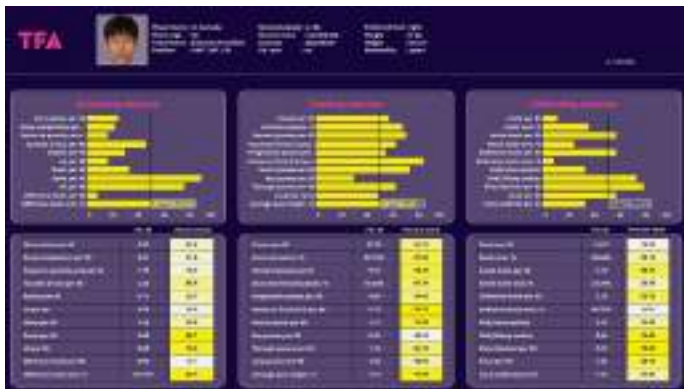
We've focused on hitting a balance between quality and versatility with the rest of our defensive selections too, with Yuta Nakayama and Hiroki Ito both capable of deputising at left-back or left centre-back and Shogo Taniguchi providing experienced cover at centre-back along with emergency cover in holding midfield, if required. Miki Yamane is a good option at right-back who could well pip Sakai to a place in the squad. Yamane provides an option who's arguably more comfortable on the ball and with progressing via passes, while Sakai is a reliable, defensively solid option who's likely to get forward as much as required and cause problems for the opposition via overlapping runs too, so really it may come down to what exactly Moriyasu wants from the full-back but we believe Sakai may be more in the correct mould.

Japan's defensive depth is an area of concern, which may be somewhat evident from our last defensive selection, Ayumu Seko, who's never made an international appearance. The World

Cup is some place to potentially make your international debut, but Seko could be the best option of what's available outside of the aforementioned players based on what the former J-League rookie of the year has shown with Grasshoppers of late.

In goal, we feel Japan may bring the trio of Shuichi Gonda, Daniel Schmidt and Eiji Kawashima. The starting spot is more likely to be contested between Gonda and Schmidt, and it's likely to be close. Gonda was Japan's first-choice throughout the qualification campaign so may be more likely to hold onto that place in the World Cup tournament itself, but Schmidt delivered some impressive performances in recent games, helping Japan to keep a clean sheet versus both USA and Ecuador in recent friendlies.

KEY PLAYER



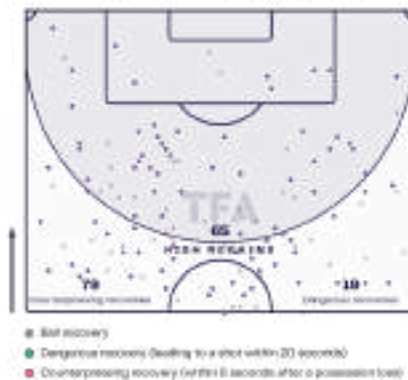
We've gone for Kamada as Japan's 'key player' for the tournament. The main area to focus on with Kamada, as mentioned previously, is his passing. He performs a relatively high number of forward passes, progressive passes and passes to the final third which makes him a key man for Japan and their preferred playing style.

If Moriyasu's men can find Kamada in space in front of the opposition's defensive line with runners ahead of him, particularly during a period of transition, that will spell trouble for the

opposition as the playmaker possesses excellent ability to create chances from those situations.

D. KAMADA HIGH REGAINS

All games from UEFA Super Cup 2022/2023, Bundesliga 2022/2023, DFB Pokal 2022/2023, UEFA Champions League 2022/2023, Kirin Cup 2022, Bundesliga 2021/2022, DFB Pokal 2021/2022, UEFA Europa League 2021/2022



Additionally, Kamada's defensive work rate will be important. Figure 16 shows the midfielder's 'high regains' from this season and last with his club, along with from the World Cup qualification campaign and Kirin Cup with his country. Figure 15 shows that Kamada engages in a relatively high number of defensive duels too and all of this will make him valuable for Japan's tactics, as discussed earlier in the piece.

TOURNAMENT PREDICTION

We feel Japan have a good chance of pulling off an upset in Group E but this depends on the team's ability to get the most out of their talented forwards, which they've struggled to manage in recent times. At the minimum, they should expect third place in Group E but there's no reason they can't get a result from Spain and/or Germany and perhaps sneak into the Round of 16 — it is a realistic aim that they can pull off with the right game plan.

We feel their defensive organisation and transitional style could cause big problems for their group-stage opponents and an upset is not out of the realm of possibility at all.

SPAIN



GROUP E

— BRYANT MARQUES // @bryantmt_ —

Going into the World Cup this year, Spain want to recover from their 2018 setback at the Russian World Cup, where they were eliminated by defending champions France. Luis Enrique has turned a doubtful squad into an incredibly talented team that has become a squad of monsters, mentally. The group work from the former Barcelona player has been one of the best in the history of the squad, and he has shut several mouths from the press in his national team career so far.

Young players like Gavi, Pedri, Eric García and Unai Simón have developed into real starlets inside the starting XI despite the critics from outside. They join the likes of Ferran Torres and Alvaro Morata who can offer incredible tactical intelligence thanks to their movements that have made Spain a typically impressive team, in possession.

However, recently Spain has lacked to build a threat in the final third, and their dominance with the ball hasn't been turned into big opportunities. With fellow European giants Germany, along with a high-octane Japan side and familiar underdogs on the international stage, Costa Rica to overcome in their group, Spain will need to kick their chance creation up a gear in Qatar.

PREDICTED STARTING XI

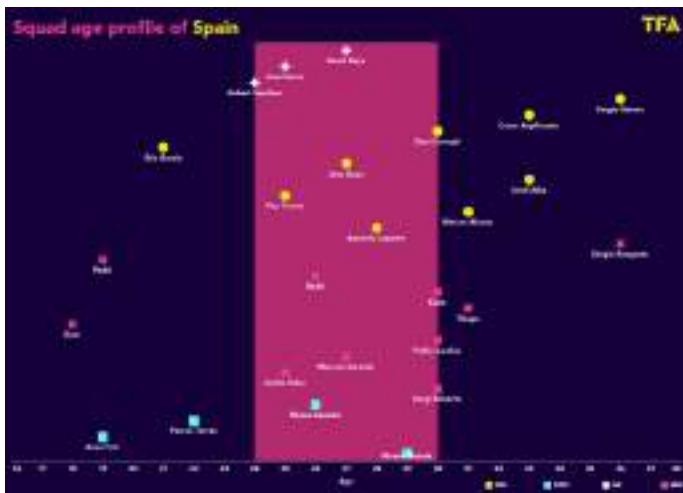
Goalkeeper Unai Simón is first in the running for Spain's number one shirt, despite facing competition from players with skills in different phases and stages like Robert Sánchez, David Raya or Kepa Arrizabalaga.

In the back four, we anticipate that the leader who's adaptable to every situation, César Azpilicueta, starts on the right of the defence,

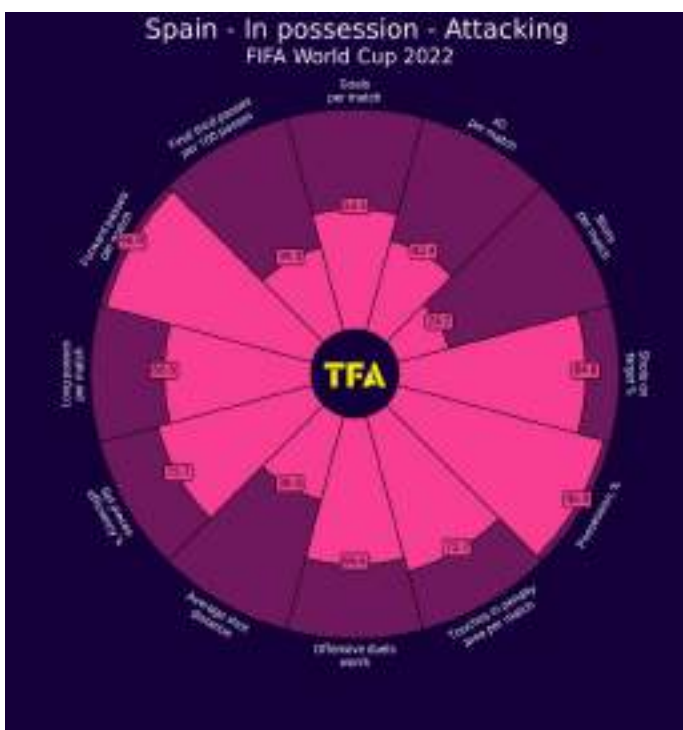
alongside a central defensive duo of Pau Torres and Eric García, with Jordi Alba on the left. Rodri and his great-passing ability plays as the unique '6' alongside Pedri and Koke; Ferran, Sarabia and Morata finish off the starting XI up front. However, names like Dani Olmo or Nico González surely present alternative options who can challenge for a starting XI spot.



Luis Enrique has started to give plenty of chances to young players such as Gavi, Nico González (who's not on the viz), Ansu Fati and Eric García in the recent matches ahead of the World Cup. These kinds of players can complement a mostly technically sound squad of players at their peak, joined by some who offer the lasting experience that could make Spain a mentally monstrous team to face, thanks to the desire and intensity of the youth players, those living the best moments of their career right now, and others who've been there and done that to complete the group.



ATTACKING PHASE



The first impression of what Spain can be offensively is what the data viz above us shows us: An incredibly dominant and accurate team in passing terms, being one of the teams that spend the most time with the ball. They can win offensive duels and enter the penalty box; however, the task that has been criticised by their fans is the low percentage of goalscoring chances, as they do not finish up their possessions.

As you would think, Luis Enrique likes his team to play with a possession-based style, making constant overloads with their goalkeeper from

the back, centre-backs with a massive technical ability to break lines, and a very fluid and mobile midfield line that can create confusion in markers to appear freely through many zones.

As we can see in the picture below, Spain's goalkeeper, Unai Simón, plays a pass to his left-centre-back. This player attracts very close pressure before then once again releasing the ball back to the goalkeeper, who then decides to execute a brilliant pass to Rodri, who can receive with time and space to turn and run.



One of the automatism seen constantly in Spain's build-up system is how midfielders get closer to centre-backs to attract more rivals. Koke is one of the biggest examples of this; he can play wide, joining the centre-backs to create a back-three or get very deep exchanging positions with Rodri, the pivot.

Here we can see some technical skill that happens often inside Spain's build-up, where players execute one-touch passes on the half-turn, with Koke choosing to play a risky but excellently executed pass to his centre-back.



Inverted wingers are also very important in Spain's attacking phase, as they are very

technical and have excellent capacities to play through the middle where they make one-two connections in the central areas to then activate the full-backs out wide. Pablo Sarabia is one of the wingers who understands this kind of movement to offer passing options between the lines for their centre-backs better than most.



As the wingers often drop from their lines to receive the ball, Morata's role is a very underrated one. His off-the-ball movements are perfectly done, as he's one of the most intelligent players in the team to create spaces for his teammates.

Luis Enrique requires Morata to be a very active player in the build-up, playing with his back to goal, retaining and holding markers and releasing excellent through passes or sideways balls to progress in different ways. The example below shows it perfectly: Morata has dropped deep to his own third, receiving a pass from his centre-back to then pass it to the man in front of him.



When they move to the middle third, Spain like to play with fast passes that make them travel to the final third quickly. One of the methods that Spain utilise to accelerate possessions and create big chances in the match follows strict

movements from the '6' to get wide, push his full-back forward, then pass it to him, who will try to find the inverted winger in the central areas. This is one of the most common ways goals are scored in Luis Enrique's system.



Finally, we can see the attacking shape of Spain: The traditional 2-3-5 applied by offensive-minded and possession-based teams that like to push the full-backs very far forward and display their wingers in an inverted role.



DEFENSIVE PHASE



Enrique's boys go and press them with intensity before they can escape their own third.



TRANSITIONS

Spain like to sit in a high block where players tend to defend very tight and close the rivals' build-up to recover the ball four-to-six seconds after a rival possession; so, it's clear that pressing high and, even more, counterpressing are key elements of their defensive tactics.

The first line of pressure, firstly, do the task to suffocate holders on the ball and force them to play passes to the central areas, where Rodri, Koke or Pedri make themselves even bigger on the field, thanks to their incredibly intense tackling and pressing.

In almost every match, Spain perform with intensity, acting as a high-pressing team that doesn't like to sit in their own third or in the middle third. After losses, they tend to be a counter-pressing side to win the ball back very quickly.

The example below shows a moment where Spain was very dangerous in the final third but Dani Olmo made a turnover. The opposition pick the ball back and try to carry it forward, but Luis

In attacking transitions, Spain have the capacity to be a very harmful team with technical players that can execute through passes and carry the ball with great physical power, such as Gavi, Koke or Pedri that can't be like this, but their lower centre of gravity usually helps them to maintain markers in the runs. Alvaro Morata makes himself key in this phase, and the wingers like to stay very wide.

In defensive transitions, Spain believe in counter-pressing where they go quickly after the players to block not just the passing options but close down the ball carrier with more than three or four players swarming around to intercept and tackle them with an active, intense attitude.

DEFENDERS

In a team with Aymeric Laporte, Pau Torres, Eric García or the versatile César Azpilicueta as options, the defensive selections have to be some of the toughest decisions for Luis Enrique. All of the aforementioned players offer significant input in various phases of the match, including the defensive solidity, especially in Azpilicueta and Laporte.

MIDFIELDERS

The midfield line is the best part of Spain's squad, considering the young and wonderfully talented players like Pedri, Gavi and Carlos Soler. Experienced midfielders like Sergio Busquets or Thiago would surely add even more to this team, balancing with players at their age peak, like the marvellous Rodri or the hard-working Marcos Llorente.

ATTACKERS

Alvaro Morata will surely lead the line in a team where only Ferran Torres can also play in the centre-forward role. Iago Aspas and Borja Iglesias keep waiting for that call that several fans have been asking for many months.

KEY PLAYER

At 19 years of age, Barcelona's wonder-kid Pedri has become the centre of creativity for Luis Enrique through the middle — a zone where the Spaniards are comfortable acting in small spaces. This is one of his most important aspects, as he can fight for the ball and dribble beyond two-to-three players that look to block him off. His incredible offensive, tactical and passing capacities at such a young age make him a dream option for Spain.

TOURNAMENT PREDICTION

Like France, Portugal and the other top teams vying for glory in Qatar that have lacked the ability to turn ball dominance into goalscoring situations of late, Spain have an incredible head-coach on board with excellent tactical and mental strategies and a strong mix of prime, youth and experienced, versatile players that have always shown great capacities to play good football for their national team that the Spanish supporters demand.

Nothing less than a strong, lengthy run in the tournament will please the Spanish fans but if they continue to struggle to convert ball dominance into goalscoring opportunities, they'll be set up for disappointment in Qatar despite the obvious talent Enrique's got at his disposal in this elite squad. We predict Spain can at least progress into the quarter-finals, all going to plan but may lack the goalscoring prowess necessary to go all the way.



GROUP F

PLAYERS TO WATCH

VENKATANARAYANAN VENKATESAN // @VenkyRedDevil

The first-ever winter world cup is almost here. It's time to look at which teams are the strongest and which players are the ones to watch out for specifically. In order to list down the players to look out for, we have specifically looked at the U23 category and players who play quite often for their respective clubs this season. It is to be noted that, these players might not start all the matches for their teams in the World Cup and could potentially miss out on getting called up altogether, but if and when they do represent their country in Qatar, they definitely have the potential to be game changers.

Belgium, after their best finish at the World Cup 2018, are now in Group F with Canada, Croatia and Morocco.

The following visualisation shows who are the U23 players to watch out for from Group F. All data is from this season.

Amadou Onana | Everton | Belgium | 21 years old

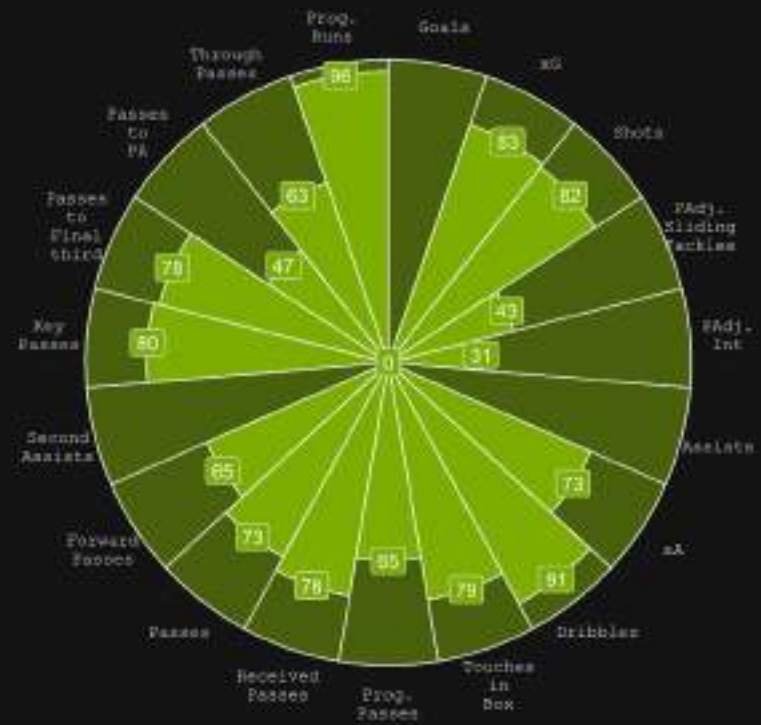
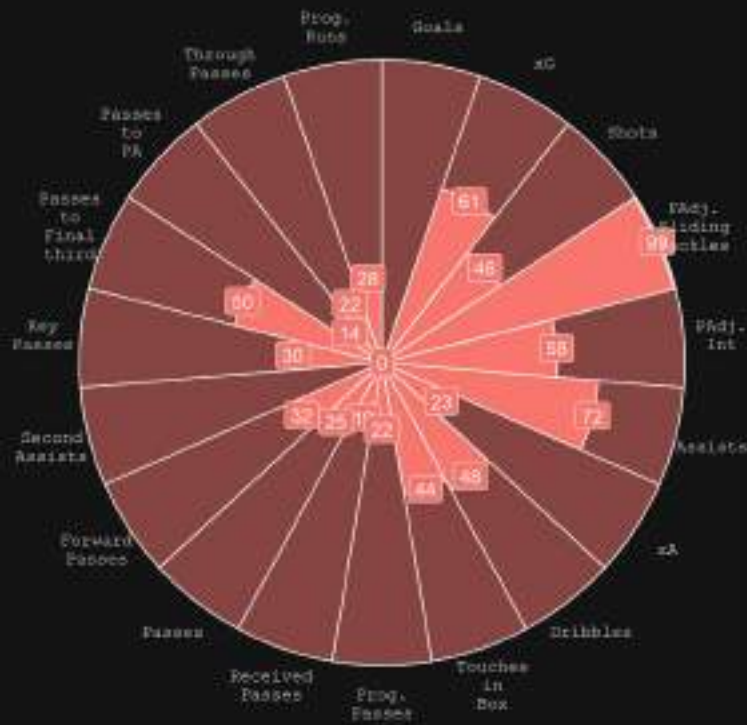
Amadou Onana moved from Lille to Everton in the summer of 2022. The midfielder has since been one of the best players at Everton. He also only made his senior debut for Belgium in the summer. The visual above shows where Onana ranks for some of the relevant metrics. Onana plays as a no.8 for Everton in a 4-3-3 but his responsibilities are mostly on the defensive side. 21-year-old Onana ranks in the 99th percentile for PAdj. Sliding Tackles per 90 minutes and in the 58th percentile for PAdj. Interceptions. He, however, lacks very much when in possession as his percentile ranks for some of the important passing metrics don't seem good. Onana was not a regular starter for Lille last season, but his performances, whenever he did play, earned him a big move to one of the best leagues in the world. This will probably be the last World cup for some of the players in the Belgium squad. It is up to Amadou Onana himself to show the world what he is capable of and fulfil his potential.

World Cup 2022 | Group F

Percentile ranks among players from respective positions in respective leagues | Min. 200 minutes played

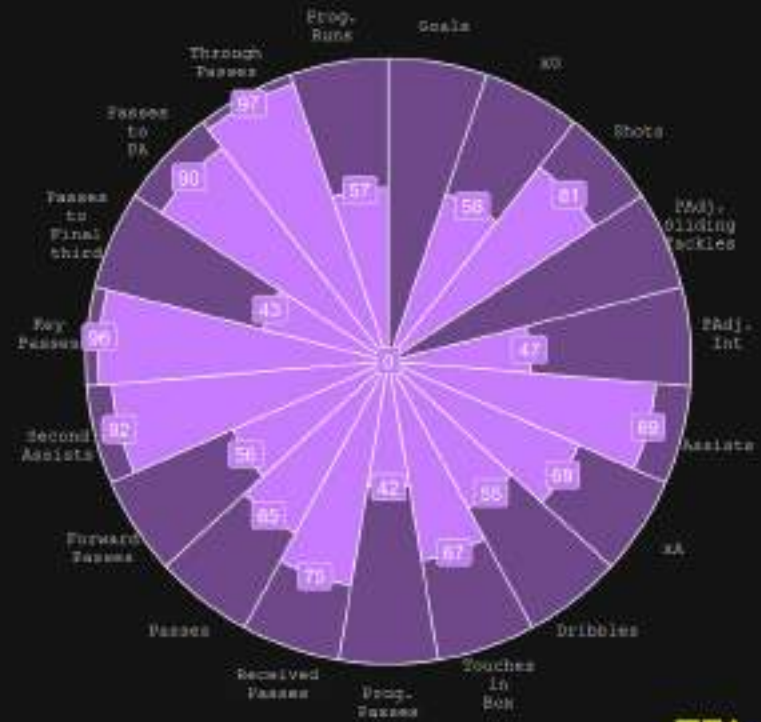
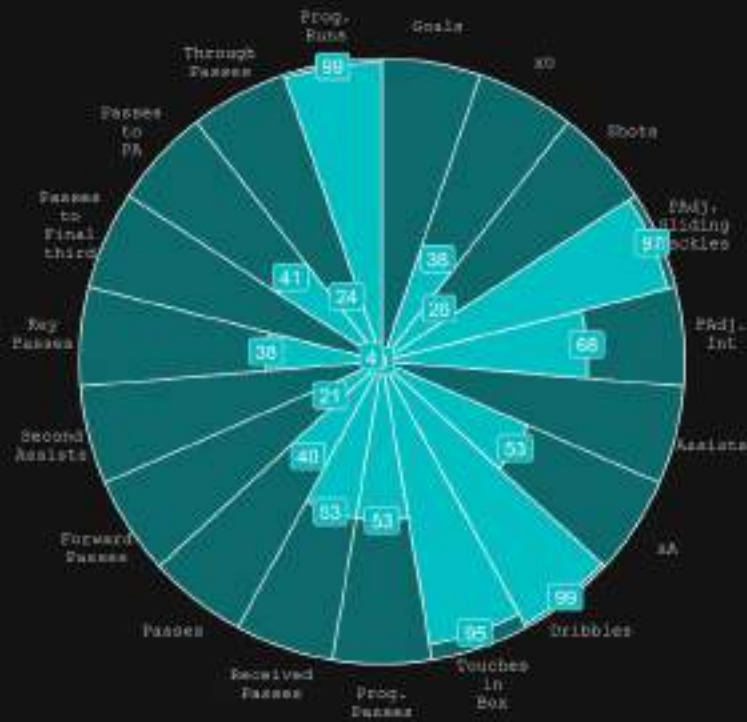
A. Onana | Everton | Belgium

A. Ounahi | Angers SCO | Morocco



L. Millar | Basel | Canada

L. Sučić | Salzburg | Croatia



Liam Millar | Canada | FC Basel | 23 years old

Only three other outfield players accumulated more minutes for FC Basel than Liam Millar last season. The midfielder was also FC Basel's second-highest scorer with seven goals in the league last term. 22-year-old Millar is versatile but usually plays as an advanced midfielder on the left side. He likes to make those late runs to the box — ranking 99th percentile for Progressive runs per 90 minutes. Originally from the Liverpool academy, Millar made his senior international in 2018 as an 18-year-old and was a big part of Canada's Qualifying campaign. Millar is surely expected to play plenty of minutes at Qatar and is definitely one of the players to watch out for from this Canada team.

Azzedine Ounahi | Morocco | Angers SCO | 22 years old

22-year-old Moroccan International Ounahi has played the third most minutes for Angers this season in Ligue 1. Azzedine Ounahi made his senior Morocco debut during the 2021 African Cup of Nations and has since been a regular in the starting XI. Ounahi ranks above average for a number of attacking metrics when compared with players who have played in a similar position to his. Ounahi is a strong dribbler and is a player who takes an attempt at goal quite often. Ounahi has been an integral part of the Moroccan team setup since making his debut and will be key to his team's journey in the upcoming World Cup.

Luka Sučić | Croatia | Red Bull Salzburg | 20 years old

Luka Sučić has the joint-most assists for RB Salzburg this season. The 20-year-old Croatian can play anywhere in the front three or even in a slightly deeper midfield role. Luka Sučić is strong on the ball ranking higher for a number of passing metrics including Key Passes per 90 minutes. Sučić, having been unlucky because of injuries during his Youth International career, made his senior international debut towards the end of last year. He has not been a regular since. However, his performances this season at club level mean there is a very high chance Luka Sučić becomes a regular with the Croatian national team soon.

BELGIUM



GROUP F

CHRIS WINTER // @ChrisW_D

After spending most of Roberto Martínez's reign on top of the FIFA world rankings, Belgium are now ranked as the second second-best team, behind Brazil.

They qualified for the tournament in good form remaining undefeated throughout their qualifying campaign, winning six and drawing two. Their form in the UEFA Nations League this year has been positive, although Roberto Martínez will be concerned that they came up short twice against the Netherlands, failing to score in either game.

They remain the clear favourites to top their group in Qatar which includes Canada, Morocco, and Croatia. Many consider this as the last chance for this golden generation of players to win major honours together.

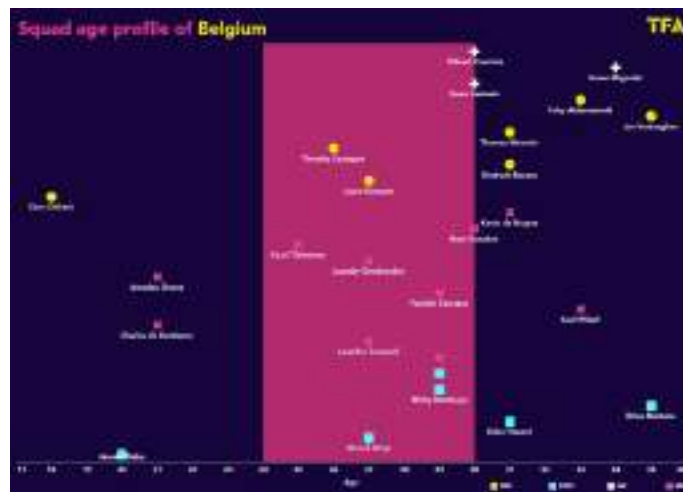
This tactical analysis will provide an in-depth look at Belgium's tactics and how they plan to go at least one step further than their performance in 2018. We will provide data analysis on their attacking threat and defensive strategy, along with reviewing which players are likely to influence their tournament.

PREDICTED STARTING XI

The general perception is that this World Cup represents the last chance for Belgium's "golden generation". When you consider the age of the players that form the core of that generation you can understand that point, as the Belgian squad has ageing players across each position on the field.

Romelu Lukaku, Kevin De Bruyne, Eden Hazard, Dries Mertens, Alex Witsel, Toby Alderweireld, and Jan Vertonghen all remain fundamental to Belgium at this stage but in the team's next

tournament in 2024 the youngest of them will be 34.



Jeremy Doku they have talented players who are young with huge potential and who are all now becoming mainstays in Roberto Martínez's squad, but the selection of players available to Belgium won't match the quality of players who are now beyond their prime years.

Below is the starting XI we believe Roberto Martínez will be hoping he can start the tournament with.

Roberto Martínez will set Belgium up in a 3-4-3 formation. However, what variant of the 3-4-3 he plays will determine who plays as part of the three-man attacking line. The former Everton Manager has been flexible with his attacking line throughout both the qualifying and UEFA Nations League campaigns, switching between a 3-4-3, 3-4-2-1 and a 3-4-1-2.



an alternative option would be to play Jason Denayer in defence and have him play in the centre of the three. This allows Alderweireld to play on the outside and get involved in the way Martínez requires. It also provides defensive benefits as Denayer can provide a quicker recovery to Vertonghen and Alderweireld which could help counter their vulnerability to balls played over the top and through the half-spaces.

Yannick Carrasco and Thomas Meunier are likely to start the tournament in the wing-back positions, but this will be the area that Roberto Martínez rotates the most throughout the tournament due to the demand on the wing-backs in transition. Timothy Castagne will feature as the main backup and could even start in place of either Meunier or Carrasco as he can play down both sides.

ATTACKING PHASE

The 3-4-2-1 formation with two number 10s allows Martínez to be able to get both Hazard and De Bruyne in the team at the same time without compromising any defensive structure. They will no doubt be playing Romelu Lukaku, who is Belgium's top scorer. Witsel and Tielemans will start as the double pivot that provides the balance in midfield and Amadou Onana will feature as the primary backup in this position.

Anderlecht defender Zeno Debast has started the last two UEFA Nations League matches and could well be the player to start the tournament alongside Jan Vertonghen and Toby Alderweireld. Although how Martínez sets them up positionally could prove decisive. Debast has been playing as the right centre-back, with Alderweireld playing in the middle of the three.

In possession, Martínez wants his outside centre-backs to play wide, he enjoys them being involved either through carrying the ball or acting as a decoy and stretching the pitch laterally. So,

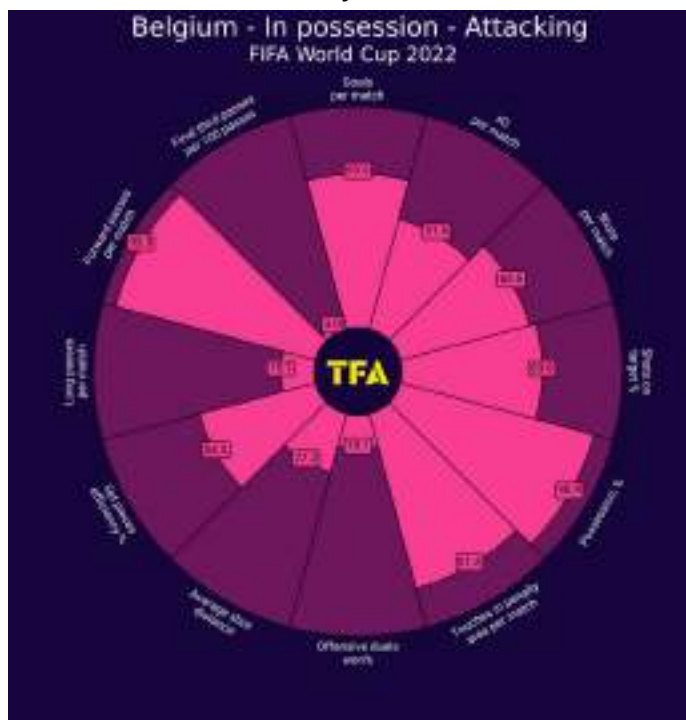
Belgium will attempt to control each game through possession. Keeping possession and being patient with the ball is the core of Roberto Martínez's tactical philosophy. Belgium's percentile ranking of 90.9 for possession shows they keep the ball more than most teams.

Coming into the tournament their percentile ranking for forward passes per 90 ranks as one of the highest, as Martínez wants the team to play vertically and be purposeful with the ball.

However, he doesn't want the team to force the play, he wants them to recycle possession and attack when the opportunity arrives. This shows as their numbers confirm a percentile ranking of 15.1 for long passes per match.

When compared to other teams this is a small number, as is the number of final third passes they make. The number of final third passes they make per every 100 passes is one of the lowest

as they have only made more than 3% of the other national side this year.



During the build-up phase, Belgium will build up through the centre-backs. The team will then transition into a 3-2-4-1 shape during the first phase of the build-up. The wing backs will start to push high and maintain width as the image below shows.

As the two central midfielders drop deeper so will the two number 10's. This creates a box midfield centrally. Overloading the pitch centrally during this stage of the build-up draws the opposition inside and makes them stay compact as they attempt to block the passing lanes into De Bruyne and Hazard. Creating more space out wide and giving Belgium the chance to move the opposition's defensive block from side to side.



When the opposition presses them high and tries to stop them build up through the centre,

Belgium will look to beat the press by creating overloads in the wide areas to attract the opposition towards the Ball. You can see the 4v2 overload in the image below and how Poland has six players moving further towards Belgium's goal. This suits Belgium as it creates more space to attack.



As they build from the first phase to the second phase of the build-up their attacking shape maintains the 3-2-4-1 as they look to put as much pressure on their opponent's defensive line. The two number 10's will play higher and pick up pockets of space closer to the striker and look to exploit the space in between the lines.

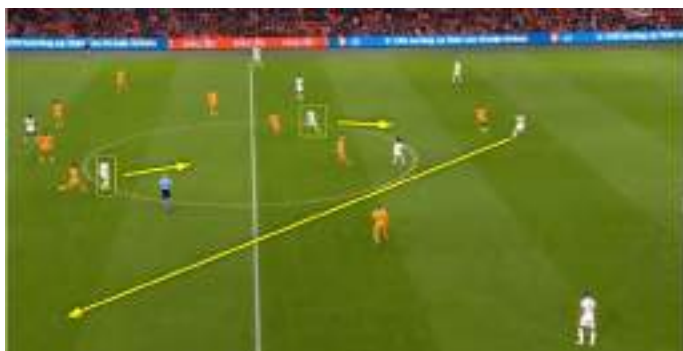


The image above shows how Belgium entered the attacking third. In this image, De Bruyne and Hazard split their runs with one running behind the midfield and one running in front. This disrupts their opponent's midfield line. Having players with this level of individual ability allows Martínez to give his players freedom within his tactics.

Teams tend to allow Belgium to keep possession of the ball and look to combat that with a solid and organized defensive block. This is when the importance of the two numbers 10's in Belgium's formations comes to show. Their ability off the ball and their ability to see space to exploit help

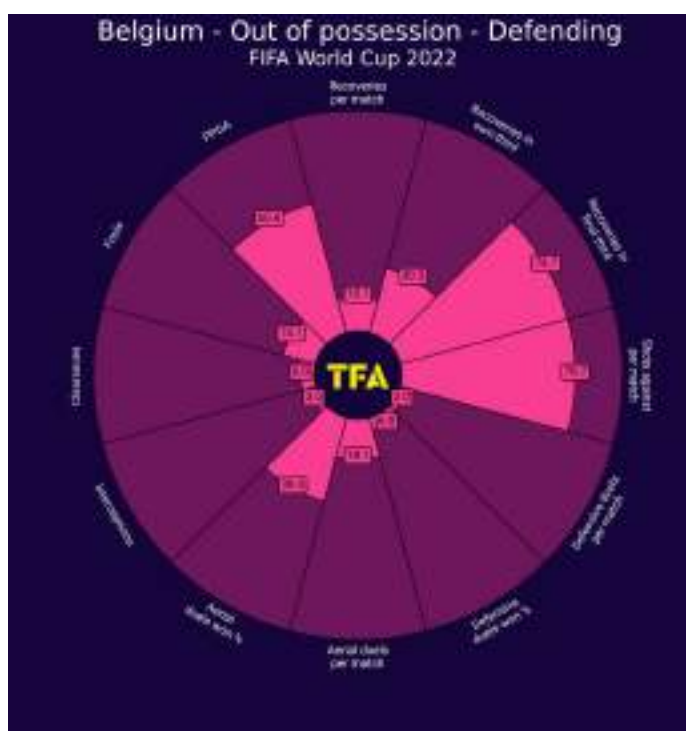
disrupt the opponent's defensive shape but also create space for others.

Look at How De Bruyne and Hazard both move towards the ball carrier in this pattern of play below. Realistically, they know Alderweireld won't play that passes as the Netherlands have been blocking the passing lanes centrally, but by doing this they are moving the Dutch players from their position. It allows Alderweireld to be more direct and creates a 1v1 out wide.



DEFENSIVE PHASE

The Pizza chart below shows the defensive output of Belgium from this calendar year. It measures their percentile ranking for each defensive statistic and how they fare against the other national sides.



For a team that looks to keep as much of the ball as possible Belgium are a lot more vulnerable when they lose possession than they should be. At times it is clear the team lack a plan on how to react when they lose the ball.

They allow their opposition too many shots at goal. Their percentile ranking of 78.7 for shots conceded per match confirms they concede too many attempts on goal for a team whose individual talent should make them more difficult to play through.

The number of defensive duels, aerial duels and interceptions they make and are successful with is far too low when compared to other teams.

The team's defensive stats along with the age of the squad will have played a role in how Roberto Martínez set up his team's defensive shape. A team who wants to keep possession of the ball naturally will want to win the ball back as soon as they lose it, so they will inevitably look to counter-press to win the ball back. Belgium don't press as aggressively as they did when Martínez first took over in 2016.

When they lose possession, Belgium now looks to transition to a 5-2-3 or a 5-2-2-1 defensive block with minimal space between the lines and a limited distance between the last of defence and the first line of the defence.

This image shows The Red Devils defending in a low block. They are still maintaining pressure on the ball but it is man orientated while the rest of the team maintains the shape. You can see how they pushed Poland to one side of the pitch with little opportunity to play through them or play over them because of how compact they are.



Once the play is forced backwards, they will move to a middle block as a unit, their principles don't change. The team protects the pitch through the centre and forces the play out wide through man-orientated pressing.

Once the ball progressed through the wide areas. The team's intent on winning the ball becomes more aggressive. The image below shows Yannick Carrasco immediately looking to put pressure on Poland right back before he receives the ball.



Their high block differs, as they don't look to pressure on the ball until the first pass out of defence is made. They will let the opposing centre-backs hold possession and then once the first pass is made the individual press is triggered.

The image below shows this. Michy Batshuayi is not putting pressure on the ball carrier. The whole team is keeping shape until the first pass out of defence is made. This is so the team can keep a limited amount of space between the two number 10s and the two central midfielders.



Playing high up the pitch and not exerting constant pressure on the ball leaves Belgium vulnerable to long balls behind their defence and with the lack of pace between the centre backs it represents a high-risk approach.

TRANSITIONS

The way Belgium set up their defensive block makes it look like they will counter-attack aggressively during their attacking transition. However, this is not the case. When Belgium win possession, they look to regain control of the ball and regain a positional play structure.

This image is a prime example of how Martínez wants them to remain patient when they win the ball. As Poland's attack breaks down and Tielemans regains the ball, you can see how he has two possible passing options available to progress the ball forward and transition quickly into an attack. Carrasco, Castagne and De Bruyne are all in space to implement a quick transition. However, Tielemans opted to pass back to the centre-backs and the team restarts the build-up phase.



This can be counter-intuitive as the team's defensive block is set to lure their opposition

forward and vacate space to attack. With Belgium not aiming to take advantage of the space then they are allowing their opponents the opportunity to regain defensive stability.

Their defensive transition is when they are at their weakest and most vulnerable. That initial period after losing the ball is when Belgium lacks any organisation and loses all defensive structure.

The image below shows Belgium's defensive transition. At this point, there is lots of space behind Belgium's wingbacks for Poland's attack. The wing-backs are out of position which is expected because of the attacking influence they hold when Belgium are in possession.



A common problem we have noticed with Belgium during their defensive transition is that whilst the wingbacks attempt to regain their defensive position, they don't disrupt their opponent's attack. When a team loses the ball, they should either counter-press their opponents immediately to stop them from attacking or should drop into a defensive shape immediately and protect a specific area of the pitch.

The example above shows Belgium can get caught not doing any. Poland regains the ball down Belgium's left-hand side, and then they pass inside straight away. The ball carrier holds possession in the centre of Belgium's box midfield and is under no pressure and the wingbacks have yet to regain their shape. This puts Belgium in a poor position defensively. Poland has the choice to attack the space right across Belgium's defensive third.

This will prove to be Belgium's undoing as they progress through the tournaments and face better teams with more quality.

DEFENDERS

How Belgium performs defensively will play a key role in their overall performance. Both Jan Vertonghen and Toby Alderweireld are still likely to play in the manager's preferable starting XI and whilst their ability to play out from the back and experience will be vital, their age indicates their best years are behind them. Vertonghen is 35 and Alderweireld is 33.

As we have already mentioned in this analysis, Belgium will look to control the game through possession, play as high up the pitch as possible and use full coverage of the pitch when doing so. The wingbacks could either push high and provide the width or push high and play inside. When possession is lost, the space in behind and the lack of pace between Vertonghen and Alderweireld will make Belgium vulnerable to quick transitions and direct balls when the play is turned over.

MIDFIELDERS

The midfield will be crucial to how well Belgium controls the game in possession.

They will be heavily involved in the first and second build-up phases of play as they will have the responsibility of linking the play through each third of the pitch. We know how Belgium will play; Roberto Martínez won't change his approach. They will look to build through the defence into midfield and then through to the attack. Witsel's and Tielemans' distribution from this area will be important to how well Belgium perform when they hold possession.

Their positioning out of possession will also play an important role in how far the Belgians progress. Belgium are likely to attack in a 3-2-5 shape. Tielemans and Witsel will form the double pivot in that shape. This allows Belgium to keep five men behind the ball and provide protection for the three central defenders. Their ability to be able to control the space and protect the pitch centrally will determine how well Belgium perform defensively.

The wing-back positions can be the deciding factor on if the 3-4-2-1 formation works or not. Their ability to be able to switch between playing as a winger in the attacking third and a full-back in the defensive third determines how well the team transitions between attack to defence and defence to attack. The wing-backs occupy the wide channels and provide wide width when Belgium attacks in a 3-4-2-1 or 3-2-5 and they defend the wide areas and join the defensive line to allow the team to defend with a five-man defence.

ATTACKERS

This could depend on the fitness of Romelu Lukaku. The Inter Milan striker has only played three games this season and has been injured since August. Although he is on track to be fit for the world cup, it is uncertain how much match practice he will gain beforehand.

If he is fit, he will start and be the focal point for the team and therefore this will see Martínez play with two attackers behind Lukaku in a 3-4-2-1 formation. If Lukaku is not fit and they want to play the same formation, then Michy Batshuayi will start in his place so he can keep that same approach.

Playing Eden Hazard or Dries Mertens as the lone striker could be an option if needed. Although this would mean a change in Belgium's attacking

play. If either of them plays they would look to operate as false nine meaning you see them dropping between the line and pulling away from the central space to occupy pockets of space. Martínez would then have to change the team's attacking structure and make sure he has someone capable of attacking the space that a false nine vacates.

KEY PLAYER

There is no doubt that Belgium has a raft of talented players within their squad. However, it is Kevin De Bruyne who remains the stand-out player in this group and whose performances are vital to how well the team plays and how well the manager's tactical approach is implemented. Despite the talent of Eden Hazard, Romelu Lukaku and Thibaut Courtois, it's De Bruyne whom this Belgium team is built around, as one of the best players in world football.

Making sure Kevin De Bruyne gets on the ball in key areas will make sure Belgium are purposeful in possession as they build up to the final third and penetrate the defence of the opposition.

For Manchester City, Pep Guardiola allows him the freedom of the attacking third. He is often played in midfield in a 4-3-3 formation but because of how Guardiola wants his team to attack and how the players are positioned to allow De Bruyne to be less disciplined positionally, his role could be considered a free 8. This enables him to affect the game further forward.

It's the same with Roberto Martínez and Belgium. The 3-4-2-1 formation is set to allow the number 10s to be able to move around the attacking third and support the play out wide, through the centre and in the opposition's penalty area. Given the data we have compiled below, it shows this is a good tactical ploy playing De Bruyne as one of the number 10s.

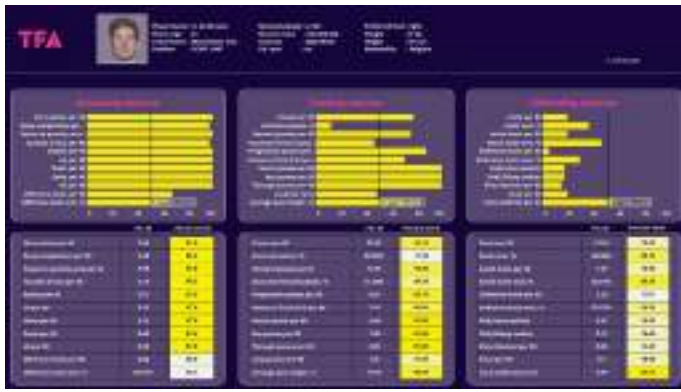
TOURNAMENT PREDICTION

The quality of the individuals that Belgium have available will ensure they perform to a certain standard, and this time will be no different. This will be Roberto Martínez's second World Cup in charge and third overall, and they will be expected to go deep into the tournament.

After reaching the quarterfinals in Brazil in 2014 and then reaching the semi-finals in Russia in 2018, both Martínez and the fans will be hoping they can go at least one further.

However, their route to the final won't come easy. If they win their group, which is expected, they are likely to face Germany or Spain in the second round. If they manage to be successful in that tie, they will likely meet one of Portugal, Brazil, or Uruguay in the quarterfinals.

If the Red Devils manage to repeat the third-place finish they achieved in the last World Cup it would be an exceptional achievement for Martínez and his side this time around.



We have compiled Kevin De Bruyne's data and measured how well he performs against all the other attacking midfielders in the Premier League for this calendar year. The data shows the stats he achieves per 90 minutes played along with the percentile rank showing how well his stats measure against his peers.

The data shows how well he performs in his team's attacking output. For his passing ability, you can see his percentile ranking is 97.60 for smart passes, key passes, and through passes. As well as having a percentile ranking of 85.70 for progressive passes, it shows how creative De Bruyne is with his passing range and cements him as the one of world's best and most creative passers.

His attacking output also makes him one of the world's best attackers in the final third. Other than offensive duels his lowest percentile ranking for attacking statistics is 95.2. That includes shots per 90 goals per 90 and expected goals per 90. So, as well as being one of the most creative players through passing, he is clinical in front of the goal.

CANADA



GROUP F

— SCOTT MARTIN // @CoachScottCopy —

The last time Canada made the World Cup, the Berlin Wall was still intact, the internet was nothing more than a tech dream, and the Soviet Union regime was still in power.

In fact, during the 1986 World Cup, the Canadians lost their third group-stage match to the Soviets, a 2-0 result.

The hockey-crazed nation left the 1986 World Cup without a win, draw, or goal scored, leaving this Canadian national team with a plethora of firsts to accomplish in Qatar.

Canada's CONCACAF rise has been meteoric. With stars like Alfonso Davies and Jonathan David, there was a perception that Canada was a fringe competitor to claim a top-four spot and make their way to Qatar. What transpired exceeded everyone's expectations, well, at least everyone outside of the Canadian national team program.

Exceeding all expectations, Canada topped the CONCACAF table, finishing ahead of perennial powers USA and Mexico. If there's one theme to pull from their qualifying campaign, it's the power of the collective.

This tactical analysis will largely serve as an introduction of the Canadian national team to the world. In emerging power, Canada's defensive tactics and exceptional counterattacking led to a surprising qualifying campaign, but it also sends a message to their group-stage opponents. This analysis will show why Canada is not a team to take lightly and how this group is built for tournament play. Beware Les Rouges.

PREDICTED STARTING XI



For those who followed Canada's journey to the World Cup, some of the standout features of the squad were tactical versatility and an extraordinary youth movement. Let's start with that first point.

At the World Cup, Canada will likely feature either a 4-2-3-1 or a 4-4-2. Against stronger opponents, they tended to play in a 4-4-2, then went with a 4-2-3-1 when they expected to have more joy and possession. Given the quality of their group, which features Belgium, Morocco and Croatia, a 4-4-2 may very well be the go-to system.

That said, in recent matches, we have seen more of the 4-2-3-1, which is the reason it is our featured system. The formation may also depend on the personnel that is seen as the best fit for specific matches. Though Canada's largely a younger team, we will find the likes of 39-year-old Atiba Hutchinson, 35-year-old Steven Vitória, 33-year-old Samuel Adegugbe, and 32-year-old Junior Hoilett throughout the tournament. Depending on their fitness levels and early group-stage results, it would not be surprising to see Canada rotate their squad over the course of their first three matches.

In that starting XI, Milan Borjan of Red Star Belgrade will start in goal. Vitória and Kamal Miller are the likeliest centrebacks, flanked by Richie Laryea on the right and Adegugbe on the left. Expect Alistair Johnston to rotate with the outside-backs as well.

In midfield, Porto's Stephen Eustáquio and Toronto FC's Mark-Anthony Kaye will likely see the majority of time at the pivot positions with the captain, Hutchinson, rotating in. His recovery from injury will largely dictate his playing time in this tournament. If fit, he'll certainly see the pitch as he is the emotional leader of the team.

Tajon Buchanan, the Club Bruges winger who featured twice against Atlético Madrid in the Champions League, will likely start on the right while Bayern Munich's Alphonso Davies leads the attack from the left. Though the Bundesliga star plays left-back for Bayern, he will feature as Canada's left midfielder. Junior Hoilett will play the #10 role with Jonathan David of Lille as the striker.

One notable absence is Toronto's Jonathan Osorio, the 30-year-old with 55 caps for his country. He is unlikely to recover his fitness in time for the World Cup. If he does, look for him to play in that central attacking midfielder role, which would then free Hoilett to see minutes on the wing as well.

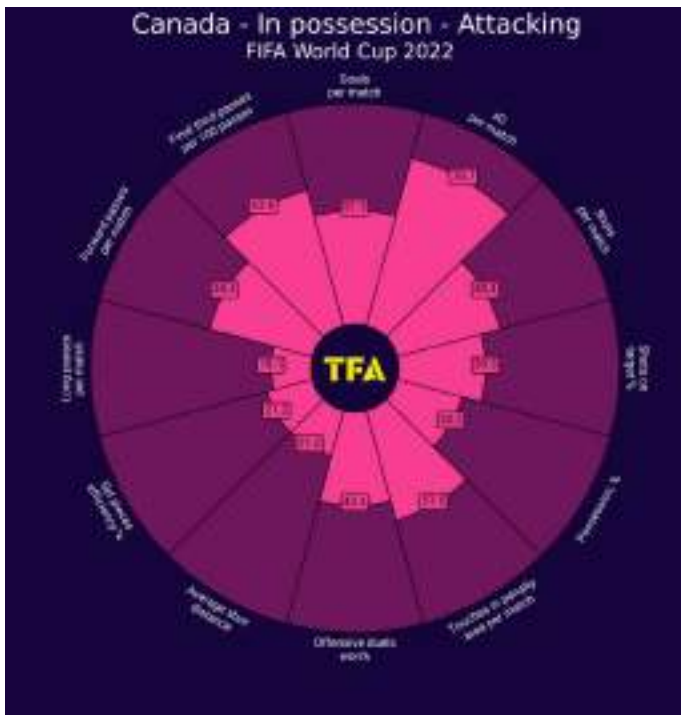


Looking at Canada's squad age profile, the five players on the other side of 30 are key pieces for this team. They'll provide the leadership that this young squad needs. Borjan and Vitória will likely play every minute whereas the other three are given opportunities for rest.

Looking at the rest of the team, many of Canada's top players are either young or just entering their peak years. This is an exciting squad with a lot of upside and a bright future ahead of itself. They topped CONCACAF in World Cup qualifying and arguably show the greatest team unity and intensity throughout the qualifying process. They are a classic, "greater than the sum of their parts" squad.

ATTACKING PHASE

With the squad details in hand, let's turn our attention to how Canada sealed their place in Qatar. The pizza chart shows Canada's World Cup qualifying metrics relative to the World Cup's other 31 participants.



One of the categories that catches attention is the 30th percentile in possession percentage. Even against CONCACAF nations, Canada was likely to concede possession to the opposition. But that worked out well for the Maple Leafs.

Their narrow defensive shape and highly effective counterattacking led to approximately 50th percentile ratings in goals and shots per match. Those numbers may be average but they resulted in a 79th percentile xG per match. By and large, Canada lives by the counterattack and direct possessions. Looking at their group, we anticipate Les Rouges shifting the burden of attack to all three opponents. In turn, Canada will prioritize their defensive shape and counterattack, especially utilizing the pace of Davies on the left.

When Canada does play from the back, look for an asymmetric build-out with a strong rest defence and overloads near the ball.

Looking at our first tactical image, which comes from their match against Uruguay, we see the asymmetry of Canada's 4-2-3-1. The backline is rather compact and remains fairly deep. One of the two pivots will move towards the ball in support of the first attacker while the other

finds the balance between a central position to safeguard against a loss of possession and providing an overload on the far side.

The central attacking midfielder will often move in the direction of the ball, especially when it is on the right side of the pitch. His positioning, as well as that of the #9, offers Davies the isolation he enjoys. Should he receive on the left wing and find an opponent without cover, he's going to run at them and make something happen. That's when we'll see the connection with David as Canada enters the box.



The possessions tend to be very direct, looking to break lines early. One thing Canada does very well is getting between the opposition's midfield and backline when recovering the second ball after a long pass into the front line. In possession, this is when Canada's most dangerous. If their midfielders can run onto a ball between the lines while in a forward-facing position, their pace in the wings and David's movement centrally will cause problems. From Canada's perspective, this is the best-case scenario when breaking lines and getting into the final third.



Once Canada gets into the box, they do arrive with a lot of numbers. Should the initial

possession not lead to a shot, look for the Canucks to cut the ball back to one of their two outside-backs. As that happens, the forward and attacking mids are very good at offering a clear target in the box. In their match against Qatar, their runners overloaded at the far post and created a 3v2 against the host nation. The result of this sequence was a Larin goal.



Davies and David are well-known across the globe. While this is a Canadian squad that will lean heavily on the collective, expect John Herdman to design the team’s tactics to bring out the best qualities of their two young stars.

DEFENSIVE PHASE

This is where Canada excels. This is a hard-working, tactically disciplined and fiercely competitive team with complete buy-in from the squad when the team is out of possession. If Canada can make it out of a difficult group, their quality out of possession will likely be the reason for their success.



Looking at the pizza chart, most categories rate in the top half of the World Cup squads. Canada rates very well in recoveries, interceptions, and defensive duels per match, though their duel efficiency is among the weaker marks from tournament teams. The standout metric is the number of fouls Canada commits per match. Reading in the 88th percentile, opponents are likelier to get hacked than counterattack. If Canada loses the ball while in a more expansive attacking shape, they’re quick to foul.

Even though Canada is a counterattacking team, they break the mould with their aggressive high press. In fact, qualifying nations like the USA and Mexico found it difficult to break Canada’s high press. Looking at the first tactical image, Canada does well to pressure the centrebacks and funnel play deeper, often into the wings. As opponents receive the ball out wide, Canada is quick to apply pressure on the first attacker and move additional numbers around the ball to seal the opposition into the wing. When successful, which it often is, Route 1 football is the likeliest outcome.



The sequence against Mexico plays directly to a high recovery by Canada and a Larin goal. That goal was the direct result of Canada's effective high press. The black lines indicate the marking responsibilities while the shaded area shows how intensely Canada seals opponents.

Player for player, the odds of Canada's progression seem unlikely. However, based on their collective production and their quality in the defensive phases of the game, this side has the knockout rounds on their minds. Don't be surprised if Canada's out-of-possession tactics carry them forward.

When opponents break the high press, Canada will settle into a mid-block, typically with a 4-4-2. The #10 will push into the front line while the two wide-attacking midfielders drop in with the pivots. The team does well to take away central options and funnel play into the wings.

TRANSITIONS

We've already touched upon Canada's counterattacking in this analysis, but it bears repeating that Canada's attacking output will largely come down to the effectiveness of their counterattacking.



The other side of that coin is how quickly they counter-press and become organized when out of possession. Canada's attacking structure is designed with defensive transitions in mind.

Once in the wings, Canada will again attempt to seal the opposition. Looking at the final image of the section, which is again from the Mexico match, Canada has seven players in that shaded area. Top to bottom is approximately 25 m and the width is around 20 m. The narrow pitch, and frigid November temperatures, certainly contributed to Canada's victory against Mexico.

We showed their asymmetric build-out in the attacking section. Our first image in transitions touches upon a similar note. The image against Uruguay shows Canada's rest defence as they enter the final third. Notice the numbers near the ball and the diamond produced by the four deepest players. Even if Canada loses the ball in this scenario, they are well placed to counterpress, recover numbers behind the ball, and eliminate the opponent's direct moves to goal.



While their PPDA was average relative to World Cup squads, the most important aspect of Canada's defensive transitions is getting numbers behind the ball, and recovering into their solid defensive shape.

During attacking transitions, look for Canada to prioritize the wings. The pace of Davies on the left will be a burden for any opponent, as will the progressive runs of Buchanan on the right. Getting either of the wingers behind the opposition's outside-backs is a priority.



Even when Canada counterattacks centrally, their narrow defensive shape positions the wingers to run behind the backline through the central channel. That's what we have in the final image in this section. David plays Davies behind the backline, using the Bundesliga star's pace as the targeted outlet. A race against Davies in the central channel to get onto a through ball is a nightmare for opponents.

Canada's play in transition was exceptional in qualifying. Should it carry over into the World Cup, you'll find the squad is difficult to break down and a threat in attacking transitions. Their group-stage opponents must design their tactics to account for Canada's exciting young talents up top.

ATTACKERS

It's high up the pitch that we find many of Canada's top young talents. Buchanan and Larin play their trade at Club Brugge, David is enjoying an exceptional campaign with Lille in Ligue 1 and the brightest star of them all is Bayern Munich's Davies. Hoilett will feature as well, and we may see the likes of Cavallini and Millar throughout the tournament.

They may not have the household names that Belgium enjoys, but this is a very talented group of players with the right blend of emerging young stars and veteran leadership.

Larin, who should recover his fitness in time for the World Cup, also gives Canada the tactical versatility to move to a two-forward system, working him and David off of each other. Canada has used the big/small combo up top with great success. Should they defer to a 4-4-2, Larin is the likeliest to see the pitch.

MIDFIELDERS

Midfield is certainly the thinnest part of Canada's team. That said, the midfielders listed in the World Cup squad are specifically on the team to play as defensive midfielders. Regardless of the system, Canada will likely deploy a double pivot.

Porto's Eustáquio is a mainstay in the starting 11. Kaye and Piette are the likeliest to join him with Koné, an emerging young talent from CF Montréal, joining the mix. The wildcard is Hutchinson. The captain of the squad, between his recovery from injury and age, he'll see the pitch, though he may be used more reservedly.

Should Canada play with a four-midfielder system, Davies and Buchanan are the incumbents in the wings. Though listed as forwards, they will cover Canada's wing needs regardless of the depth of their positioning. Hoilett is another example of a player listed as a forward who will play as an attacking midfielder. Laryea can play right midfield as well.

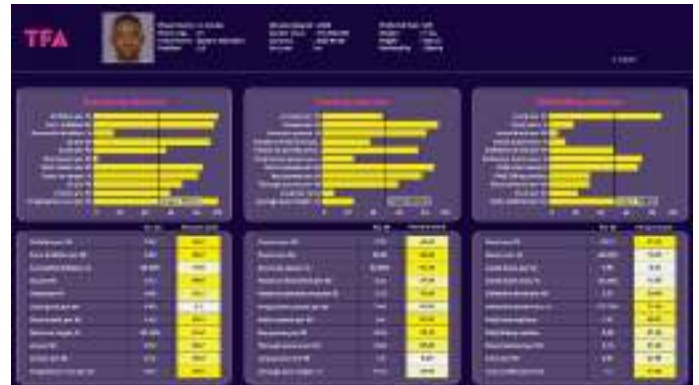
Ultimately, this group is thin on paper only. When looking at the five players listed as midfielders, these are the five defensive midfielders Canada will take to Qatar.

DEFENDERS

Along the backline, Canada will feature several players who are either in or nearing their prime years. Then there is Steven Vitória, the 6'5" Chaves centre-back who leads the line at the young age of 35. He's the veteran leader of this group. The son of Portuguese immigrants from the Azores Islands and a member of Portugal's youth national teams, Vitória started representing his native Canada in 2016.

Hutchinson can also play along the backline, but it's widely expected that Miller will start beside Vitória. Johnston has featured regularly for Canada giving the squad depth behind Laryea and Adekugbe. Cornelius adds some experience at the centre-back position while Kennedy and Waterman add depth.

KEY PLAYER



There's no questioning Canada's star man. Alfonso Davies, the Bayern Munich superstar who was born to Liberian parents in a Canadian refugee camp, immigrated to Canada with his family in 2005. His leap from Vancouver to Bayern Munich was unprecedented in the league's history.

Entering the World Cup fresh off his 22nd birthday, Davies is the uncontested star on the team. Though he will play higher up the pitch as an attacking left midfielder, the same position he played at Vancouver, Davies is as well-rounded a player as you'll find at the World Cup. His role with Bayern Munich transfers exceptionally well to Canada's defensive commitment and counterpressing responsibilities. With more freedom to play higher up the pitch, the world will see a side of Davies that keeps CONCACAF opponents up at night. His runs behind the backline and aggression on the dribble are paramount to the Canadian team's counterattacking success.

TOURNAMENT PREDICTION

Odds makers list Belgium and Croatia as the heavy favourites to make it through the group stage but don't sleep on this Canadian team. They're built for tournament play.

With their solid defensive tactics and exceptional transitional play, expect them to keep each game close and pull off a surprise or two. CONCACAF has traditionally been USA's or Mexico's to lose. For the past two decades, it has largely been a two-nation race for the top continental honours. Canada took eight points off of them in the four qualifying matches. This is not a side to underestimate.

Though the odds are stacked against them, this is a Canadian team with the firm belief that they can, and should, advance to the knockout rounds. Though they find themselves in a challenging group, there's a belief that they can make it to the Round of 16.

At a minimum, securing a couple of results and putting in good performances are expected. But Canada wants more, and so does this team that's built heavily on the collective. Watch out for Canada.



CROATIA



GROUP F

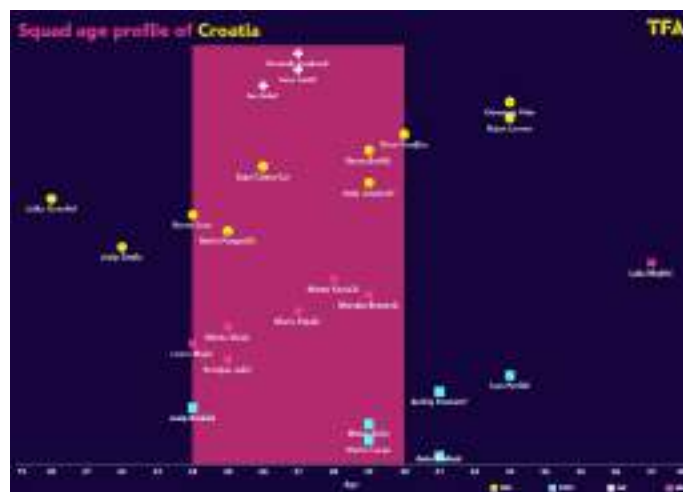
— DOMAGOJ KOSTANJSK // @DKostanjsak —

The 2018 World Cup runners-up, Croatia, will be looking for a repeat later this year as they aim to claw their way out of Group F and onto the podium once more. It's difficult to keep expectations in check considering their success in Russia, followed up with the convincing Nations League campaign and World Cup qualifiers. But Vatreni will have to do exactly that. This is a fresh team; a team that's been blessed with a healthy mixture of experience and youth. But also a team that's still very much a dark horse in the tournament despite their silver medal status from 2018.

Zlatko Dalić is, however, growing into the role of manager and Croatia seem to be rising in form just in time for the main event. Their qualifying run was far from easy but topping the group that had the likes of Russia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Cyprus and Malta with 23/30 points was an excellent first sign of even better things to come. The Nations League, however, would prove a far more formidable test. But Vatreni would still persevere. Their clashes with France, Denmark and Austria were entertaining and strategic and ultimately, they would come out on top more often than not, tallying 13/18 points to finish the group. This means we'll see them again next June in the Nations League finals alongside Spain, Italy and the Netherlands.

With Real Madrid's Luka Modrić leading the line with Inter's Marcelo Brozović and Chelsea's Mateo Kovačić, Croatia have the ingredients for another sensational run deep into the grandest football stages of them all. This tactical analysis will go over their tactics, using data and analysis to preview Dalić's squad. Finally, at the end of the piece, we'll give you our prediction for their World Cup run.

PREDICTED STARTING XI



Before we move on to Croatia's tactics for the World Cup, let's first do a quick analysis of their squad depth. The first graph you can see here represents their squad age profile. Players younger than 24 are considered youth players while everyone from 24-29 would be classified as being in their prime years. Players above the age of 29 are entering their experienced years. We can see that Dalić is actually working with a healthy mix of all three types of players but the majority of them are indeed in their prime years.

Considering the magnitude of the tournament, having players who are physically and mentally at their best may prove to be an invaluable asset for Croatia. At 37 years of age, Modrić will be the captain of the ship one last time before hanging up his boots. When it comes to other 'older' players we're likely to see more of, both Ante Budimir and Ivan Perišić have proved their worth, cementing Dalić's trust in them. While other experienced players like Domagoj Vida and Dejan Lovren are still more than capable of competing, it is likely they will have smaller roles to play in Qatar. This is where the youth comes into play.

Joško Gvardiol and Josip Šutalo are Croatia's breakthrough talents who are already showing

impressive first-team levels of quality. As we've already mentioned, however, most of the players are in their prime years, which is a good sign for Vatreni.



As for the starting lineup itself, this is where it gets tricky for both us to predict and Dalić to choose. The goalkeeper position is arguably one of the weakest links of this otherwise impressive squad. Both Dominik Livaković and Ivica Ivušić are likely to find themselves between the sticks and, truthfully, both offer similar levels of quality, on and off the ball. At this point, however, we see Livaković as more likely to be given the nod due to his superior experience.

When it comes to the backline, the youth tandem of Gvardiol and Šutalo seems the way to go given Croatia's possession-based style of play. Both defenders are strong on the ball and will aid the team's build-up phase greatly. When it comes to the full-backs, Borna Sosa is Croatia's high-flying option whose impact out wide means he's more likely to start ahead of

his more defensive namesake, Borna Barišić. Josip Juranović offers a similarly more offensive output than his 'rival', Josip Stanišić and could, in our eyes, get the nod for that same reason.

The midfield is Croatia's bread and butter. We don't need to spend too long on the incredible trident of Brozović, Modrić and Kovačić but one potential worry for Dalić heading into the tournament is his pivot's fitness. Brozović's injury puts the whole system in jeopardy and while he may still recover in time for the event, it remains to be seen how Dalić decides to tackle his absence, should it come to that.

There are a couple of options available with Kristijan Jakić probably being the likeliest to fill Inter star's boots. However, the defensive midfielder position is definitely among Croatia's weak links as the quality plummets with Brozović out of the picture. All of Jakić, Nikola Moro and Josip Mišić have their strengths and could do the job decently well but none are as good as the player they'd be replacing.

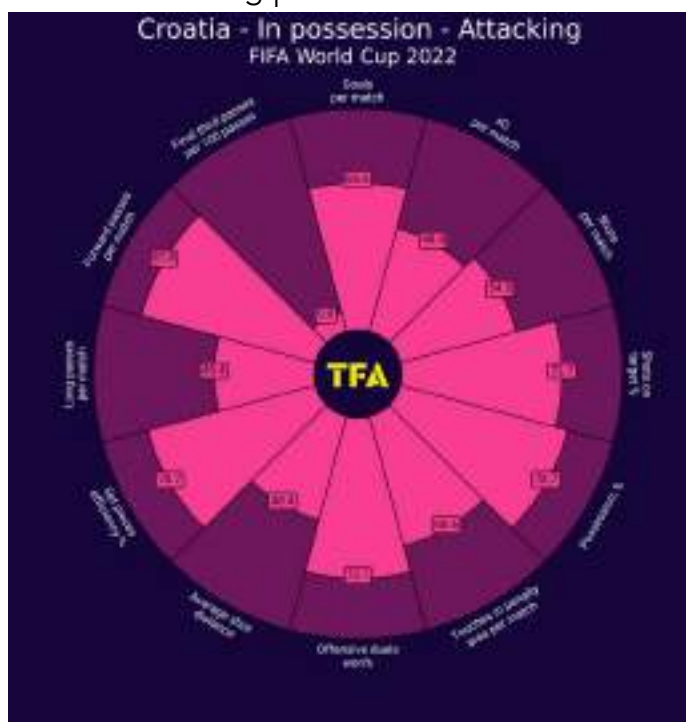
Finally, we have the forward line. Croatia's firepower is impressive but the lack of a clear number 9 in the squad is a reason for concern. We've decided to go with Andrej Kramarić but the outlook of this team changes completely depending on who starts at centre-forward. Kramarić is the roaming, false 9 type of striker while someone like Ante Budimir offers a more traditional blueprint for the position.

There's always an option of Bruno Petković (should he get the call-up) and Marko Livaja, who's been excellent domestically, but at this point, it's very difficult to say for sure who's going to start. A similar thing can be said for the right-wing position as all of Mario Pašalić, Nikola Vlašić and Lovro Majer have their unique traits but also change the system with their inclusions. The only constant is, therefore, Perišić on the left. The veteran is among Croatia's most

important players and will surely continue to have a prominent role in Qatar as well.

ATTACKING PHASE

So how do Croatia attack? Before delving into the tactics, let's first consult the stats to determine their general style of play. Our pizza chart compares Croatia to the other teams competing in the World Cup and then gives us their percentile rankings for each of the selected categories. This specific graph focuses on Vatreni's attacking power.



As we can see here, Croatia are a formidable force in possession of the ball. We can't say they top any of the charts but they do come close in several categories such as forward passes per match, set piece efficiency and possession. This on its own is a great outlook of their general tendencies in attack. Croatia like to have the ball but are not afraid to be very direct with it and hurt teams on the break and through set pieces. Given the quality they have, especially in midfield, it doesn't surprise that they can indeed hold onto the ball and then quickly and efficiently move it up the pitch.

But the fact they win so many offensive duels tells us they are also combative, physical and can overpower teams closer to the penalty area. Their 60.6 percentile ranking in touches in the box per match is both a testament to the squad's proficiency with the ball and a nose for finding great pockets to exploit within the danger zones. They may not always score goals galore but are more than capable of hurting practically anyone they face. Case in point being their 1-0 victory over France in the Nations League. But what are some of their distinct traits in possession when it comes to tactics?

Dalić has already confirmed Croatia are likely to stick with their 4-2-3-1 or a 4-3-3 formation, depending on the personnel available and chosen. This is why we kept emphasising the point of players directly affecting the system deployed. Brozović's absence may force Croatia into a different structure altogether while the same can be said for the choice of their right-winger. On paper, however, none of the preferred choices for that position are natural wide wingers. Whether that's Pašalić, Vlašić or even Kramarić when deployed out wide, they all tend to drift inside and roam the final third.



Take this sequence as a great example of this. Croatia will generally build in a 2-1 shape but depending on the opposition's press, they will drop an additional midfielder to make it a 2-2 and that will also largely affect the height of the full-backs' lines. Often, the full-backs will be deployed in an asymmetrical shape where one aids the build-up while the other creates an isolation higher up the pitch. Given both of their full-backs are likely to be highly offensive should

both Sosa and Juranović start, which we predict will be the case, this can be a major offensive weapon for Vatreni.

In this example, however, we see them overload the middle of the pitch. This is done because it plays to their strengths; most of their star power comes from the middle of the pitch and this is where they can dominate even the best of teams. But for a possession-based team, Croatia can be very direct in their approach too. This is generally due to two things: the goalkeeper profiles and the excellence in the delivery of their midfielders, especially Modrić. Both Livaković and Ivušić are quite similar in this regard and picking one over the other shouldn't, in theory at least, affect their style too much. Seeing them go long from goal-kick or open play won't be a surprise, especially if they opt to play with a target-man up front such as Budimir or even Petković. But being direct doesn't only stem from goalkeeper tendencies but also their in-possession traits.



It's not uncommon for Modrić to drop deep and then deploy either a line-breaking pass into space or simply a lofted ball over the top, both of which complement the runners Croatia have in their arsenal. The example here is a perfect demonstration of such a scenario. Interestingly, it's also a sequence that ultimately ends in a goal for Dalić's squad. Leaving a player of Modrić's calibre with ample time and space on the ball is something not even the best of teams will be able to afford, come the World Cup in Qatar.

The final thing we need to address when it comes to Croatia's attacking tactics is their ability to create

threat through their quality in tight spaces. Even though the data doesn't always reflect that, Vatreni are extremely technical, albeit mostly due to their midfield. The directness of their approach aside, Croatia can and will dismantle teams through smart and quick interplay down the middle before an inevitable ejection of the wingers.

Dalić may not be a master tactician but he needn't be when he's got such incredible talent at his disposal. The following example shows us that perfectly.

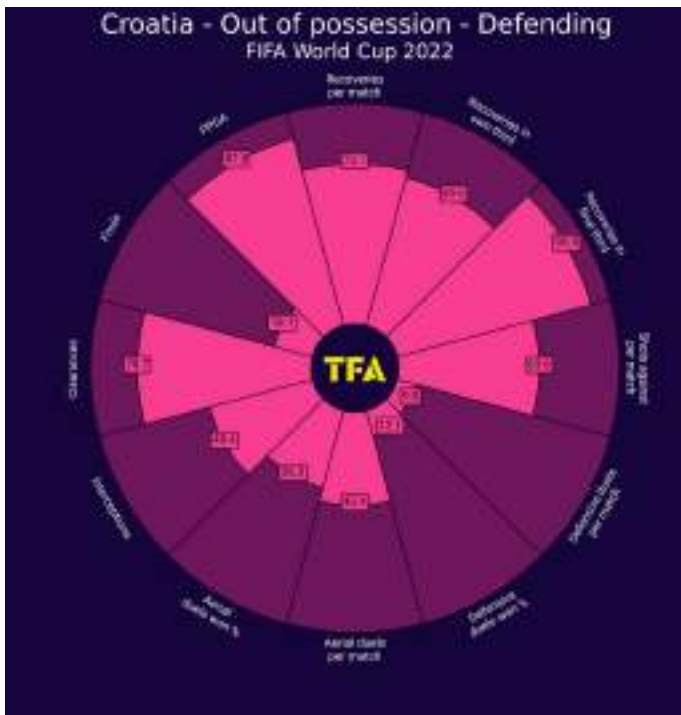


Most of Croatia's attacking sequences do end up in a delivery from out wide but the interplay also often originates down the middle where they can 'out-tech' teams to a ridiculous extent. A lot of it is due to their immense quality on an individual level but they are also quite disciplined and well-structured.

In attack, Croatia are a force to be reckoned with.

DEFENSIVE PHASE

Moving onto Croatia's defensive tactics, we'll follow the same blueprint once again. Before doing a more in-depth analysis of the structures and tendencies, let's first get data out of the way. Just like we had in the section before this one, here is a pizza chart again. Just to reiterate – the percentile rankings represent Croatia's results in their respective defensive categories against other World Cup teams. The rankings are also not reversed, meaning lower PPDA means better performance in that category.



Looking at the pizza chart, we can conclude a couple of things. Firstly, despite their high success in final-third recoveries, Croatia are not a high-pressing side. Yes, they can and will generate chances by defending high but are more comfortable defending in a slightly deeper mid-to-low block. The high PPDA (passes allowed per defensive action) percentile ranking, in this case, means they will generally allow the opposition ample time on the ball, rather congesting the deeper areas than flooding the other team's half with players.

It's quite interesting to note, however, that they are still pretty intense in both the middle and the final third of the pitch. Given their PPDA numbers, this is still very much a dosed aggression but a successful one nonetheless. So we can say Croatia's pressing is not about quantity but rather quality. More concerning, however, is the low win percentage in duels across the board. This is where the low numbers do give cause for alarm as their shots against also leave a lot to be desired. When combined, this lacklustre defensive duelling paired with a low foul count and not stopping the opposition from shooting can become an issue. But let's explore their actual defensive tactics next.

As mentioned earlier, Dalić's troops will sit back in a deep and compact block, often assuming a 4-5-1/4-1-4-1 or a 4-4-2 shape, depending on whether they're more aggressive or conservative.



This shape aims to optimise their coverage off the ball while also congesting the danger zones on the pitch. Leaving the striker up front is also a way for Croatia to quickly transition from defence to attack but more on that later in this tactical analysis. The deep block varies from a 4-5-1, 4-1-4-1 to a 4-4-2 and the difference is usually in the way the midfielders are deployed. In the first scenario, the wingers will drop deeper and the midfielders will be deployed roughly at the same height. However, this often morphs into a 4-1-4-1 if the pivot is dragged deeper through marking.

If Croatia decide to push up and disrupt the build-up without aggressively pressing, they will usually instruct one of the midfielders to position himself next to the striker, creating a make-shift 4-4-2 structure. This can then further evolve into a 4-3-3 shape when trying to recover the ball high. In terms of pressing, Dalić generally goes for a heavy man-marking system, sometimes matching the opposition player-for-player.

We can actually see a very similar scenario in the following example.



pros and cons, of course. When executed well, it yields great results in terms of ball recovery, as we'll soon see. However, it's also highly susceptible to manipulation and the very best teams will know how to use it against the Croats. But given their great recovery numbers despite not being an overly aggressive pressing side, we can conclude they are calculated and well-drilled in what they do.

The final image we'll analyse in their defensive tactics are the recoveries they made in their last four games in the Nations League. With the exception of the clash against France (bottom-left image), we see Croatia were most aggressive in the middle third of the pitch and that's where the majority of their recoveries come from.



Very rarely do they actually go all the way to the final third or even the opposition's box but as already explained, when they do, they're often very effective.

TRANSITIONS

In this final tactics section of this analysis, we'll shortly discuss Croatia's transitional prowess. As alluded to before, despite being a team that enjoys having the ball, Vatreni can be quite direct in their approach. Given the profiles of their players, we can also state it suits them nicely.

Just like in almost any phase of the game, midfielders are key to Croatia's transition tactics. Both Modrić and Kovačić are excellent carriers

of the ball while also possessing a great passing repertoire, of course, the former player much more so than the latter. The same can be said for Brozović, who, despite a more conservative pivot role, is a great first and second-phase distributor with an impressive engine. It stands to reason then that Croatia break quickly and directly through their midfielders whenever the chance arises.



It's not uncommon to see Croatia start their transitions by winning the ball in the middle third of the pitch, where they are undeniable most aggressive, and then having either Modrić or Kovačić carry it upfield before ejecting runners into space out wide. You can see one such sequence here as well with Modrić unsurprisingly taking the lead role. Having wingers such as Perišić to aim for, Croatia can always pose a threat in transitions.

Another option in attacking transitions presents itself in the form of their centre-forward. Whether they deploy someone like Budimir in a traditional striker mould or someone like Kramarić or Petković in the freer, modern outlook, the link-up with the player up top is key. We can expect layoffs regardless of the type of no.9 Dalić picks for his squad and this once again goes hand in hand with the runners they will get from deep.

Moving onto defensive transition tactics, it all comes from coordinated gegenpressing in the middle third and providing the team with a safety net should that fail.



Croatia will often hunt for the ball relentlessly in the first couple of seconds of losing possession so it's common to see them swarm the area, pushing up with numbers. Of course, should the opposition resist their efforts, they'll quickly revert to their deep block. If, however, the other team manages to break into a counter-attack themselves, Croatia are hard-working in tracking back, which may make or break their defensive efforts the deeper they go in the tournament.

ATTACKERS

In the following sections of our tactical analysis, we'll dissect Croatia's squad line by line, starting with the forwards. Even though they aren't lacking firepower, there are question marks that can be raised for both their striker and right-wing positions. The former, of course, being one of the major 'flaws' (or just conundrums?) of an otherwise well-assembled team. As things currently stand, we don't know who Dalić is going to pick as his starting no.9 once the World Cup rolls in.

In our predicted XI section, we decided to go with Kramarić but to call him a striker may be a bit of a stretch. He is a forward but not exactly a no.9 of the traditional mould. He likes to drift, roam and combine in deeper and/or wider areas, making him more of an inverted forward or a second striker. However, he can and already has been used in the centre, with varying levels of success. Sure, Croatia would have to be far more combinatory down the middle and keep those direct sequences to a minimum but that's what possession-based teams do best. And Croatia are a possession-based team.

Along the same lines, Dalić could opt for Petković, albeit it still remains to be seen whether the Dinamo Zagreb star will even travel with the team to Qatar. His back-to-goal quality paired with excellent technical traits make him a true nuisance for the opposition defence. However, Petković blows hot and cold, which means he ranges from unplayable to invisible depending on how the mood strikes him that day. Then there's Budimir who might be Croatia's best option for a traditional striker.

The LaLiga centre-forward has an eye for goal, can be used as a target-man and is excellent in the air too, playing to Croatia's set-piece proficiency. Not only that but he is by far their best defender from the front when it comes to pressing and shutting off passing lanes. If Croatia were to be more aggressive off the ball and suffocate the opposition's build-up phase, going with Budimir might be their best bet.

The last option would be going with Hajduk Split's Livaja but despite an excellent domestic season and his undeniable quality, it's likely we see him in a rotational role coming off the bench.

MIDFIELDERS

The crème de la crème of Croatia's squad undoubtedly lies in their midfield line. This is where their individual quality can break any game and tip the tides in their favour. If everyone was fit and firing, there would be no doubt about the starting trident of Brozović, Modrić and Kovačić. However, they're not all fit. At least not as of yet. Having sustained an unlucky injury just before the World Cup, Brozović is still on the mend.

Considering there is no other clear option for that pivot position, it poses a huge question to Dalić: who is going to replace the anchor of the team? Let's lay out the option and try and predict the outcome too. We also have to state there is still a chance Brozović

features so that's why we've decided to plug him into our predicted XI. However, on the off chance he doesn't, the first name that comes to mind when discussing his replacement would be Jakić.

He is the safest option as he'd provide the team with more defensive coverage while also being the more conservative option in possession. Of course, given Croatia's tendency to at least try and hold onto the ball, having a pivot who's less proficient in possession could be a cause for concern. That's where we come to Mišić, a more technical option who can aid the build-up significantly better but would fall short when compared to Jakić's defensive quality. Moro would be the last option as a project player but would Dalić be so brave to 'risk' having a largely inexperienced player at such a high level playing such a crucial role in the squad? For now, that seems less likely.

When it comes to the other two midfielders, provided they're also fit, there is no question that both Modrić and Kovačić will feature, on the right and left side of the trident respectively. Croatia's midfield quality is indeed off the charts but it's also true that it dwindles significantly when you go beyond the starting XI personnel. That is a testament to their best midfielders' prominence but also a potential flaw for Dalić to look out for.

DEFENDERS

Finally, we have to address the backline, including the goalkeepers. Let's cover the men between the sticks first. Between Livaković and Ivušić, the choice may not be crystal clear and this has been an ongoing debate in Croatian media for a long time now. However, the answer to that conundrum really isn't a simple one. On paper, both goalies are painfully close to each other in terms of quality and both offer similar traits to the team when selected. The only difference would be in the experience.

Livaković has already had the chance to be Croatia's no.1 on the biggest of stages and this might be the aspect that finally tips the choice in his favour. At the end of the day, considering there isn't much to separate them in quality, we couldn't really blame Dalić for going for experience. This is the World Cup after all.

When it comes to the centre-back tandem, going with Gvardiol and Šutalo makes the most sense given Croatia's system and style of play. Both are excellent in progression from the back and both are also quite young. Gvardiol, of course, is also perhaps Croatia's most valuable player at the moment and undeniably one of their biggest prospects as of right now. There could be an option of playing someone like Martin Erlić next to Gvardiol, which would give the backline more defensive solidity and experience, sacrificing some progression in the process. However, with Dalić emphasising the need for Croatia to be a possession-heavy side, it's difficult to see Šutalo dropped for anyone else in that squad.

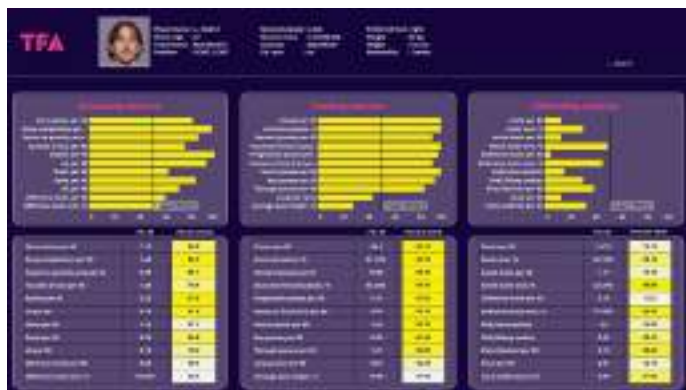
We shouldn't forget that Dalić also has the option of deploying Lovren and/or Vida but there are better, younger and more reliable options out there so the veterans may have to get used to a significantly smaller role in Qatar.

To round off this section of our tactical analysis, let's quickly address the full-backs. As stated earlier, Sosa and Juranović could both get a nod ahead of their respective counterparts simply due to their more offensive nature. Croatia need attacking full-backs to either complement the movement of their wingers, as predominantly seen on the right, or to double down on the wide delivery threat, as seen on the left.

For those reasons, they are more than likely to be Dalić's preferred choices once the tournament starts.

KEY PLAYER

TOURNAMENT PREDICTION



Was there ever any doubt? Even at the 'tender' age of 37, Modrić is still Croatia's best and most influential player. The captain will be looking to bow out of the national team with a bang and what better way to do it than to have one last go at the big trophy?

Modrić the player needs little to no introduction. He's an all-action midfielder who glides across the pitch as if he was 17, not 37. His attacking, progression and retaining capacity are off the charts and we can see he regularly tops almost all the on-the-ball metrics as well. There aren't many other players at this World Cup who can go toe-to-toe with the Croatian maestro as he's basically the best at what he does. And he does it all. Well, almost.

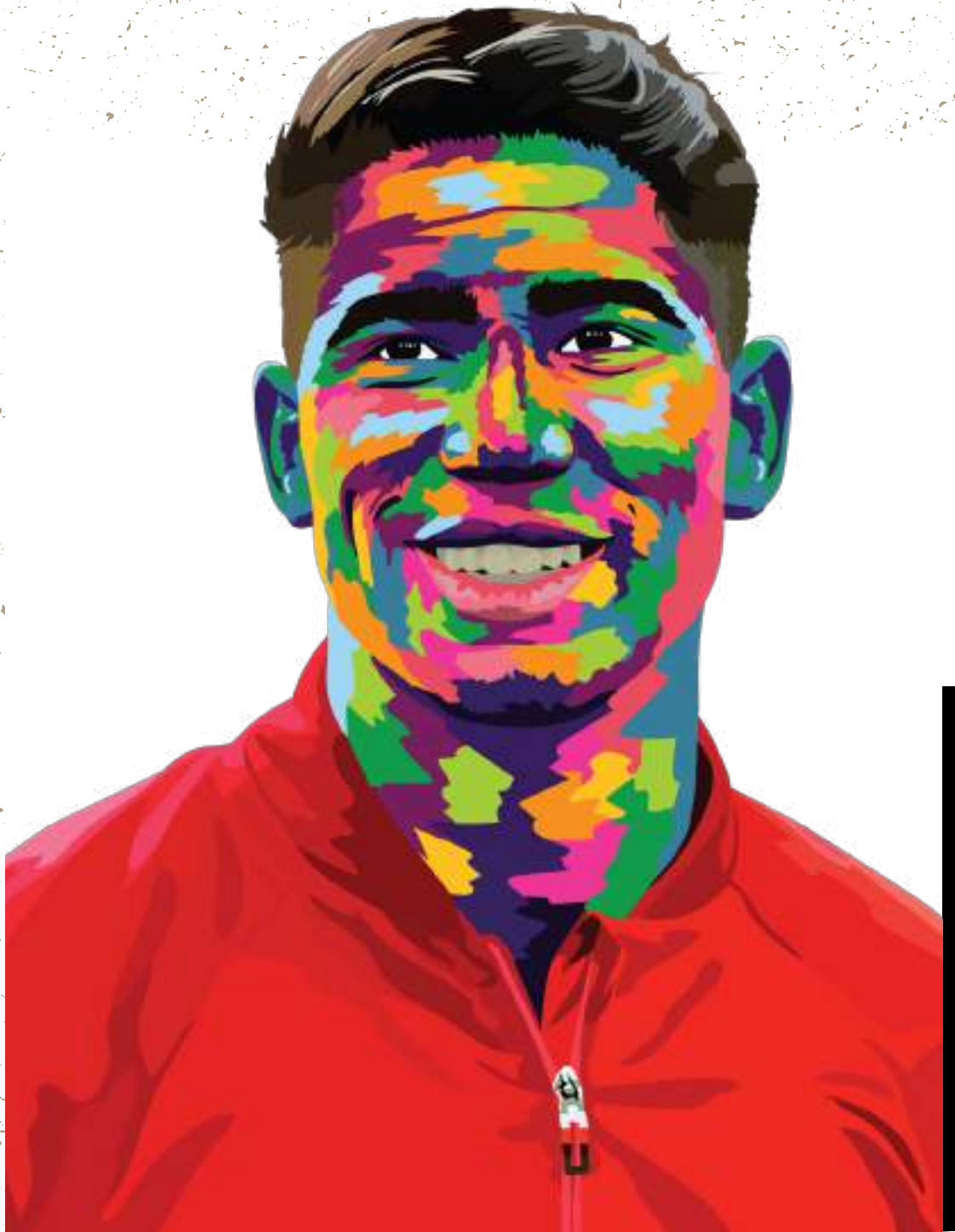
The Real Madrid superstar might not be the best and most active defender in the tournament but that doesn't mean he's a liability out of possession. Despite being 37, Modrić still has an impressive engine and it's his experience and footballing IQ that make him a competent defender too, more so than his physical attributes.

How far Croatia can and will go largely depends on the form of this little man. And judging by his season so far, both for club and country, Modrić is as good as he ever was.

The 2018 silver medalists are back for more in Qatar. It's very difficult to predict how far they will go because they could just as easily reach the final again as they are to somehow implode halfway through the tournament. They are the dark horses in every sense of the word as you cannot really say they're among the favourites but you also cannot really say they won't win the whole thing either.

But predictions we promised so predictions we'll provide. Given their potential opponents and the quality of group-stage opposition, reaching the quarter-finals and going beyond that is possible and desirable for Vatreni. However, if Brozović recovers in time, Modrić retains his top form and Dalić's troops get lady luck on their side again, the quarters are the very minimum they should achieve.

MOROCCO



GROUP F

— MARCEL SEIFEDDINE // @MarcelS_02 —

Morocco are heading into the World Cup with fresh ideas and a rejuvenated squad. The ex-manager Vahid Halilhodžić was sacked by the Moroccan FA following disagreements over how the team should be run. With this being the third time he has been sacked just before a World Cup, and public disagreements between key players at old clubs, it can be assumed that there was some tension in the squad.

The arrival of the new manager, Walid Regragui, has brought excitement back to the team, with key player Hakim Ziyech coming back into the squad after being frozen out by the previous manager. Regragui only took charge of the team in September, so while Morocco may have bossed their qualifying group and won every game, this is now a new team with a different identity and different ideas.

Last time out, Morocco were put into a group which was extremely difficult to progress from, with Portugal and Spain being the favourites to make it out of that group in 2018. The two heavyweight European nations and a strong Iran side proved too much for a Morocco side which was unlucky to end up with only one point.

In the upcoming World Cup, Morocco have been placed in group F with Belgium, Croatia and Canada. Morocco are ranked 22nd in the world, while Belgium are second and Croatia are 12th, making Morocco third-favourite to get out of the group. Canada sit in 41st, and have been mentioned as dark horses for the tournament.

This tactical analysis will demonstrate what tactics we can expect from Morocco in the lead-up to the World Cup. We will include a scout report on the squad, detailing which players will be key in any potential success for Morocco at Qatar, and an analysis of how far they can get in this competition.

PREDICTED STARTING XI



Since the appointment of the new manager, we only have two friendlies to go off of for the predicted starting XI. In the past two games, Morocco have lined up in a 4-1-4-1 formation, with a style based on creating chances through combination plays and attempts to keep possession of the ball in a patient system.

In goal, Yassine Bounou is one of the first names on the team sheet. The 31-year-old has been a regular for Sevilla and his strong shot-stopping abilities have the potential to help Morocco advance through a few extra rounds.

Arguably Morocco's strongest area is their back line. Achraf Hakimi is one of the best full-backs in the world, with his immense speed, ability to attack the box and ability to cross the ball into

dangerous areas. Hakimi is an important element of the team, and his combinations with Hakim Ziyech will likely be a key difference between failure and success in Qatar.

At left-back, Noussair Mazraoui from Bayern Munich will provide an excellent technical base from which Morocco can build play. Originally a right back, Mazraoui has the technical ability and ability to play with either foot which allows him to be comfortable on the left-hand side. He is vital to how Morocco have been trying to progress the ball through the thirds, as well as providing a threat in the opposition box as well.

At centre-back, we can expect a pairing of Romain Saiss and Nayef Aguerd. The new West Ham signing has been injured all season but is expected to feature in the Hammers' final few games before the World Cup. Aguerd's strong box defending and his reliability on the ball in possession are just a few of the things that made West Ham want to splash £30 million on him, and he will have to make sure he gets back to full fitness in time for what will be a roaring hot tournament. On the other hand, Romain Saiss has been playing all season, but he recently picked up an injury, which makes it unclear if he will be available for selection or not. His aerial presence would be missed if he were to be unavailable, but Morocco do have a young defender in Achraf Dari available for selection who was trusted by the coach in the September friendlies.

Moving onto their midfield, Sofyan Amrabat sits at the base, with an important role in the build-up phase. Amrabat has been key as he drops deeper to collect the ball from the defence and helps progress it up the pitch. Amrabat's ability to stay patient, and always offer a passing option are key ways in how Morocco will attempt to keep possession of the ball when they win it.

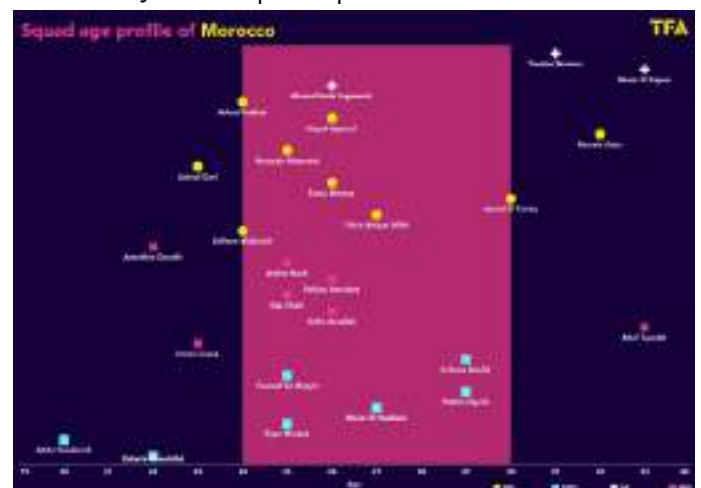
Ahead of the pivot, Azzedine Ounahi and Amine Harit are the #8's for Morocco. Ounahi was pivotal in the qualification phase for the World Cup, scoring

the goal that sent them to Qatar in the playoffs. Both he and Harit are creative midfielders, with excellent dribbling qualities that make the pair tricky to press, and difficult to tackle in the final third.

In the front line, Hakim Ziyech makes his return to the squad after coming out of international retirement. Ziyech has seen his game time become limited in the past few seasons, after becoming merely a rotation option for Chelsea. He has a wand of a left foot, and the creativity to cause problems to any defence, but his inconsistency has made him unreliable at the highest level. Nevertheless, on his day, Ziyech can cut onto his left foot from the right wing and whip it into dangerous areas like no one else, and also can score with the same technique as well.

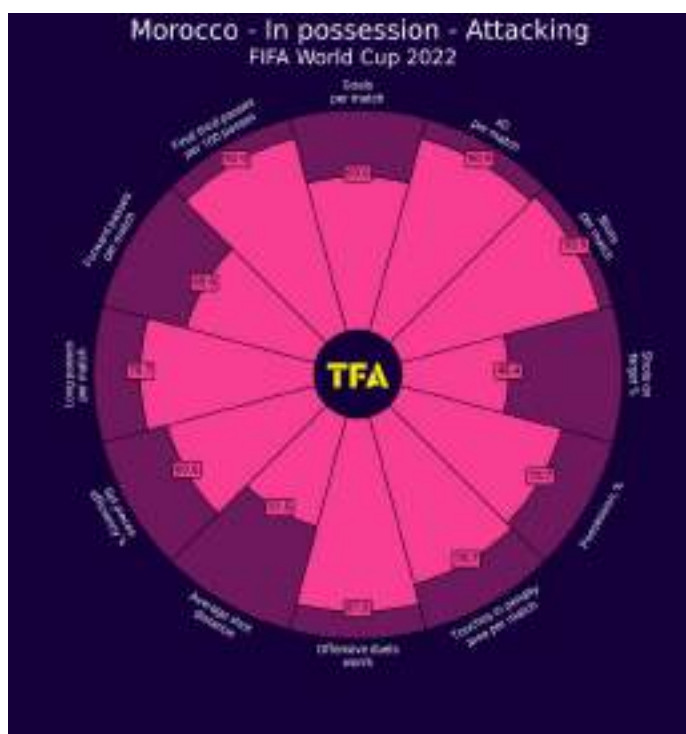
On the left wing, Sofiane Boufal is expected to retain his place in the starting XI. Boufal has had a strong start to his season at Angers, and his explosive dribbling and quick feet make him impossible to dispossess. For Morocco, he is tasked with combining on the left-hand side, while also being the main outlet for counterattacks by running onto the end of the through ball or by carrying the ball past the opposition's rest defence.

Youssef En-Nesyri leads the attack for Morocco. The Sevilla striker has struggled for first-team minutes this season but has scored 14 goals for Morocco in 48 appearances. The target man will thrive off crosses coming into the box from the likes of Ziyech, or perhaps cutbacks from Hakimi.



The Morocco squad is coming into the World Cup with a squad which has experience from the previous World Cup, but with the extra added experience of playing in top leagues all over Europe that would have surely helped them to improve. Some of these players were very young at the previous World Cup, so while some players showed signs of inexperience, the likes of Hakimi, En-Nesyri and Harit will now step up to play more important roles for their nation. The majority of the squad is aged between 24 and 27, which means that this group of players are in the prime of their careers and will be coming into the World Cup fully firing.

ATTACKING PHASE



As we can see on the chart above, Morocco rank very highly amongst over nations in the World Cup in their attacking metrics — though it must be noted that the standard of competition they’ve faced over the last calendar year differs from the quality they’ll come up against in Qatar.

Morocco keep a lot of possession, while they also rank in the 91st percentile for xG per match and final third passes per 100 passes. These statistics show that Morocco are usually a side that look

to be on the ball and create chances through intricate combination play and deliveries into the area rather than a reliance on transitional moments.

When Morocco gain possession of the ball, they look to build play out from the back rather than going long. Sofyan Amrabat stays in the pivot, while the two central defenders split apart, which leaves Morocco with a 4-1 build-up shape. They aim to find the lone pivot before he can progress the ball centrally to a player further up the pitch.

On occasions where the pivot is being marked, Morocco look to bypass the press by progressing down the flanks. The technical quality of both Hakimi and Mazraoui allow them to do so consistently, which allows them to keep possession more often. In the past, they would’ve had to go long to avoid losing the ball in their own third which could lead to a dangerous opportunity.

The image below shows a great example of how Mazraoui can evade pressure through the use of ball manipulation to get out of a tight situation. Evading the high press allows Morocco to have an artificial transition, one where they can attack an out-of-position defence because so many stepped up to press. These situations often lead to high xG opportunities, as the far post runner is often unmarked due to how many opposition players stepped up to press. Morocco’s ability to retain possession in their own third can help them to dominate possession at games during the World Cup, something that hasn’t been the case beforehand.



When Morocco face a mid-block, Hakim Ziyech usually drifts into central midfield, from where he can make the most of his brilliant passing range and ball manipulation. Sofyan Amrabat drops between the two central defenders, which allows the team to set up in a 3-3-3-1. Ziyech comes into the hole that is left by Amrabat, while Mazraoui and Hakimi move up the pitch with the role of outlets in case the ball needs to go long.

The image below shows Ziyech in that central space, where he turns on the ball, looks up and plays a diagonal ball to the left-hand side for Mazraoui. Ziyech can dribble past his opponents in tight areas, evade pressure and progress the ball in the second phase. This will be a common occurrence at the World Cup, and Ziyech's passing range will be key to creating chances for Morocco.



In the final third, Morocco try to set up in a 2-3-5 formation and make use of wide triangle combinations with the wide central midfielder, wide player and player operating in the half space. The two full-backs retain the width for Morocco while the two wingers become narrow and sit in the half spaces during settled attacks. What makes the attack so dangerous is the use of player rotation, which makes the players hard to mark and Morocco's attacks become unpredictable.

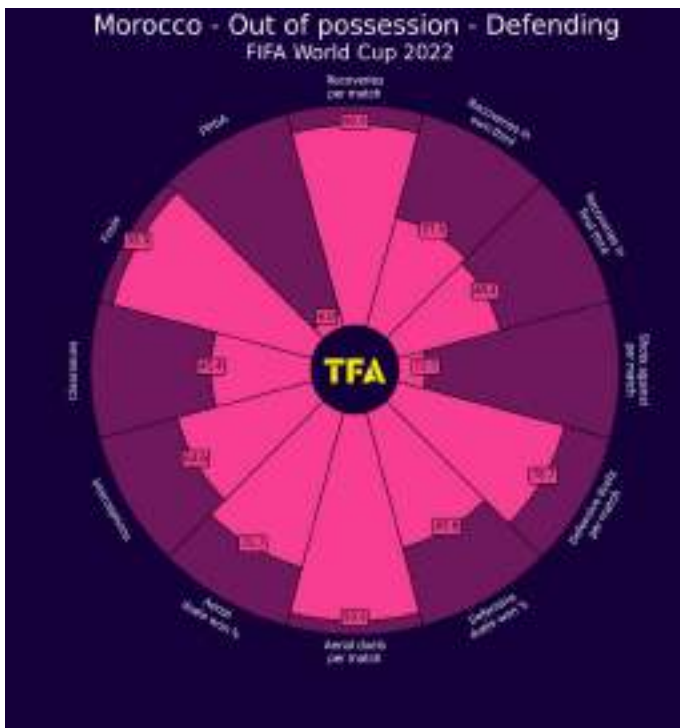
The two #8s allow Morocco to sustain possession due to their on-ball qualities, while the further forward players all have either excellent creative or goalscoring abilities that allow them to be a constant danger in the final third.

In this attack pictured below, Ziyech has drifted into the wide space, which has caused the Chilean left-back to follow him, thus leaving a huge gap between the left-back and left-sided centre-back. Hakimi makes use of his blistering pace by attacking the gap that Ziyech has created. Ounahi plays the pass into Ziyech, who can play the pass at a perfect weight for Hakimi to run onto inside the box. In these situations, the centre forward, left winger and player in the left half-space all attack the box to cause problems for the opposition back line.



Morocco have shown several different ways in which they can sustain possession and create threatening situations in the final third. It will be no surprise to see Morocco have large spells of possession at the World Cup and they are likely to score against some backlines that they will be coming up against. It would not be overly surprising to see Morocco score in every group-stage game.

DEFENDING PHASE



Morocco have a very strong backline, which will give confidence to the rest of the squad. Ranking in the 63rd and 72nd percentiles for aerial and defensive duels % won, the Morocco players are very strong in their individual duels, whether it is on the ground or in the air. Being in the 12th percentile in shots against per match, further shows how strong Morocco's defence is, and backs up the fact that Morocco like to keep possession of the ball so that they don't have to face as many attacks.



From dead balls, such as goal kicks and throw-ins, Morocco look to press their opponents aggressively. Morocco match up man to man, to prevent their opponents from progressing the play and try to force them to go long, where they trust their defenders to win the aerial duels. The image above shows how tight Morocco get

to their players so it becomes impossible to play out of it.

However, in settled play, Morocco opt for a mid-block, which has not been as successful. Morocco set up in a 4-1-4-1, where either of the attacking central midfielders presses the ball while the pivot, Amrabat, looks to cut off the passing lanes to offensive players. There are some problems with this defensive setup, with one being that the centre forward is always outnumbered, which makes it very easy to keep the ball against Morocco.

Another problem is that the Morocco players seem to be a bit confused, as to who should press the ball and who should sit off and protect the space. The image below shows Ziyech pressuring the ball, but the distance he has to cover is so large that the player on the ball has lots of time to make a decision and release the ball. Furthermore, the horizontal spaces between the midfield of Morocco are too large, so it becomes very easy to pass the ball through the gaps and into players further forward.

The other problem with this system, and arguably the biggest one, is the massive vertical gap between the midfield and backline. The Morocco defenders are worried about the space behind the defence so naturally drop off while the midfield holds their position to prevent the opponents from getting possession closer to goal.

As a result, opposition players can drift in the spaces between the lines, where they can move into the blindside of their markers which makes it easy for them to receive the ball, and the lack of pressure from behind means that they can easily turn with the ball and drive towards goal. What ends up happening is that Morocco's midfield is nearly non-existent, and opponents can easily give the ball to the front line and leave the defence unprotected.



Morocco's lack of structure off the ball is largely worrying and will be the biggest reason for any potential failures and losses. Morocco have to decide whether they want to hold a high line and win the ball back high, or drop off to protect the space behind. Currently, they are doing neither to a high standard and so will begin to leak goals when they come up against tougher opposition.

TRANSITIONS

In offensive transitions, Morocco are very difficult to defend against due to the number of skilful ball carriers they have running in the open space. The likes of Hakimi and Boufal are very quick, and their dribbling ability combined with that speed means that they are very dangerous when running in open space.

The image below shows an example of Boufal's excellent dribbling skill. We can already see one player on the floor, after they've attempted to tackle Boufal by sliding, and later on Boufal goes on to make another player unbalanced and beats him. The skilful dribbling allows Morocco to have a 3v2 attack in transition, although the lack of potent goal scorers means that they do become wasteful in front of goal.



When Morocco lose possession of the ball, they are inconsistent with their actions off the ball. At times they look to counter-press their opponents while on other occasions they drop off into their positions. Dropping off can be a problem, as it means the opposition is allowed to control possession without much risk of losing the ball. The Morocco players lack the bravery, and at times the legs to quickly counter-press their opponents every time.

On other occasions, Morocco are braver and attempt to win the ball back high. This example below shows just how every player in the front line moves to mark an opponent and then press the ball while cutting off the passing option forwards. This example comes from the fourth minute of a match, which perhaps suggests that some of these players lack the energy or work rate to continue to do this throughout the entire game.



DEFENDERS

While the depth in defence isn't the largest, there are plenty of possible players who may look to work their way into a starting spot if their performances improve in the last few weeks before the World Cup. Jawad El Yamiq has recently regained his spot in the starting line-up for Real Valladolid, who have gone on a slight winning streak in La Liga. The central defender provides adequate cover should some of the starters not recover from their injuries in time.

Samy Mmaee is another player who could gain some minutes at central defence. He has scored two goals in four matches in the league, which could be a benefit should Morocco need extra goals from set pieces. Sofiane Alakouch and Yahia Attiyat Allah will provide cover for the full-back pairing of Hakimi and Mazraoui, although their lack of game experience at the highest level will likely see them stay on the bench unless there is fatigue in the squad. Adam Masina could've provided strong cover at left back, but he hasn't had any game time since the end of August due to an injury which will see him miss the World Cup.

MIDFIELDERS

Adel Taarabt has been used in deeper areas in the most recent parts of his career. He hasn't featured for Morocco, and only found a club near the start of October. His place in the squad is not guaranteed, but he could provide some experience and a cool head if the occasion gets too big for some players. Imran Louza is another player who can slot into the midfield role. However, there are doubts about the fact he has been injured for the entirety of the season and is only coming back to training now.

Ilias Chair and Selim Amallah both can feature in the attacking midfield roles, as both have the vision to produce defence-cutting passes and the technical ability to dribble in tight spaces. Morocco have the adequate depth to make changes if necessary, or to add extra creativity when chasing games.

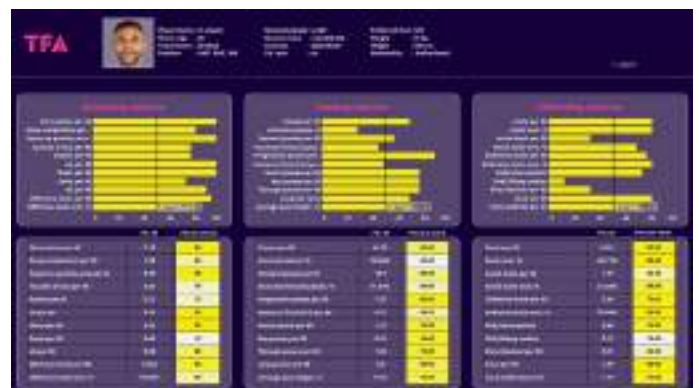
ATTACKERS

Munir El Haddadi has struggled for minutes at his current club Getafe, and while he has shown promising signs in the earlier stage of his career, he has struggled to get consistency in his

performance and not been up to the required level. He can provide a threat off the bench after playing for Morocco 11 times in the last 18 months with 2 goals for the nation.

Abde Ezzalzouli is a promising young player who is currently on loan from Barcelona. He was given his debut in September, and after a few good performances whilst out on loan, he may be given a chance to try to spark a change after coming off the bench. Ryan Mmaee has delivered strong performances for his nation, although he hasn't played in the top leagues in Europe. Mmaee has scored 4 goals in 11 appearances for Morocco and could provide an alternative threat if his side require a goal.

KEY PLAYER



Hakim Ziyech hasn't featured for a long time for his club and is a player that seems to be slightly forgotten about. His inconsistent performances for his club have shown that he may not be at the world-class level. However, Ziyech is capable of producing magic moments and when in form, he can carry his country to big results.

Cutting in off the right wing, Ziyech provides over two shot assists per game on average, and 6.33 into the penalty area per game. Ziyech is in the 96th percentile for such stats, showing that he can create multiple dangerous chances per game with his ability to play deadly passes. Ziyech also achieves 0.29 xA per 90, and 0.28 xG per 90, showing that he can both create

and move into good goalscoring opportunities regularly.

The Moroccan magician doesn't have the greatest pass accuracy, due to his ambitious passing in the final third. While the accuracy isn't high, these passes are difficult to pull off, usually against a settled defence which gives huge rewards should it be successful.

TOURNAMENT PREDICTIONS

Morocco find themselves in a tough group with second-ranked Belgium, finalists of the previous tournament Croatia, and a promising young Canada side. Morocco's opener against Croatia is likely to show us which of the two has a chance of progressing into the next stage. Belgium haven't been on top form of late, so there is a slim chance that Morocco may beat them and even head to the top of the group, but that is unlikely to come to fruition.

Should Morocco progress into the next stage after a second-placed finish, they will face the winner of Group E, likely to be either Spain or Germany. It is unfortunate for Morocco that they would need a miracle to even get through to the quarter-finals, but the difficult path they've been given can't be changed, and so this strong group of players will have a tough time showing what they can do, and are likely to be on the way home by the start of December.



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GROUP G

PLAYERS TO WATCH

VENKATANARAYANAN VENKATESAN // @VenkyRedDevil

The first-ever winter world cup is almost here. It's time to look at which teams are the strongest and which players are the ones to watch out for specifically. In order to list down the players to look out for, we have specifically looked at the U23 category and players who play quite often for their respective clubs this season. It is to be noted that, these players might not start all the matches for their teams in the World Cup and could potentially miss out on getting called up altogether, but if and when they do represent their country in Qatar, they definitely have the potential to be game changers.

Group G consists of high-flying Brazil with Serbia, Switzerland and Cameroon.

The following visualisation shows the players to watch out for from Group G. All data is from the current season.

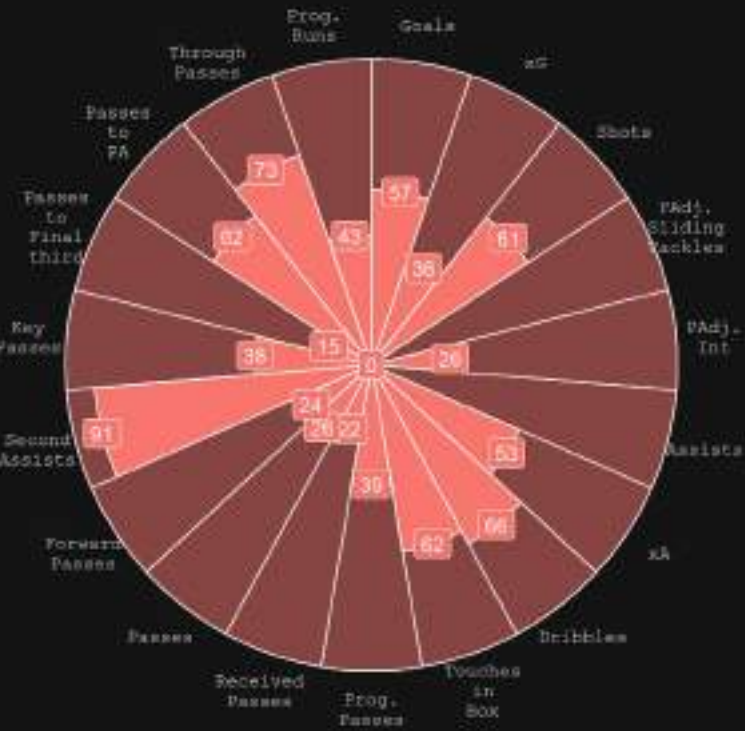
Matheus Cunha | Atlético Madrid | Brazil | 23 years old

Matheus Cunha signed for Atlético Madrid in the summer of 2021. The forward after a decent first season for the Spanish club is gradually becoming a constant presence in the Brazil national team setup as well. Cunha, primarily playing as an attacking forward, ranks average for a number of attacking metrics. He hasn't started every game so far this season for Atlético Madrid. However, his numbers go on to show he has put up a decent display every time he has been on the pitch. Cunha will find it difficult to get into this Brazil team given the level of talent, especially on the attacking side, this Brazil side possesses. However, Cunha adds a bit of variety to what other player offer and it will be interesting to see if he gets his chance during the World Cup.

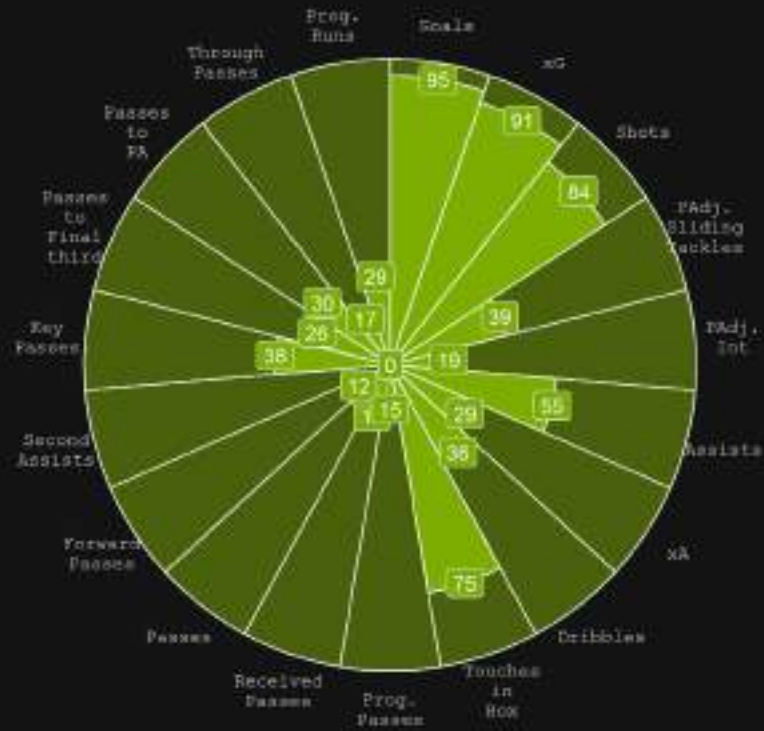
World Cup 2022 | Group G

Percentile ranks among players from res. positions in res. leagues | Min. 200 minutes played

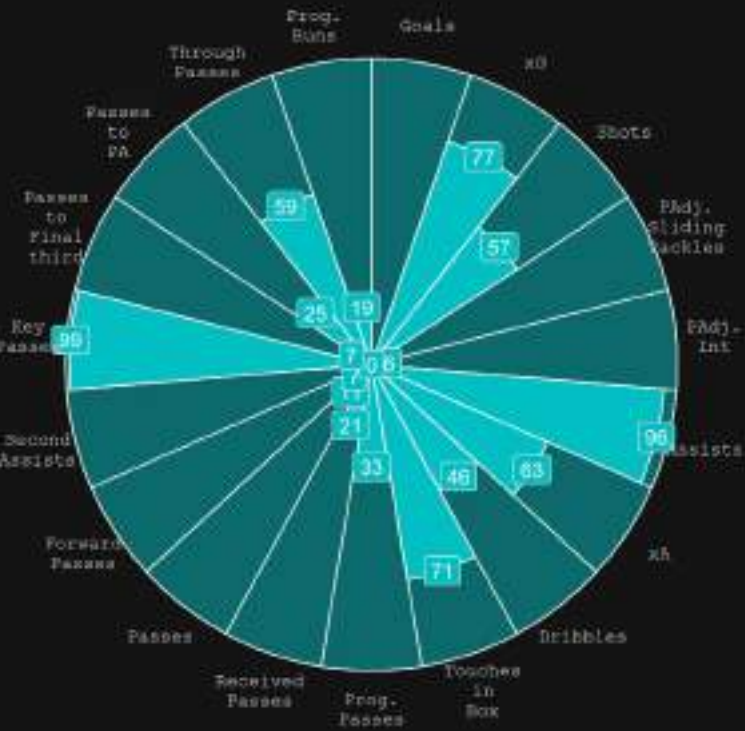
B. Mbeumo | Brentford
Cameroon



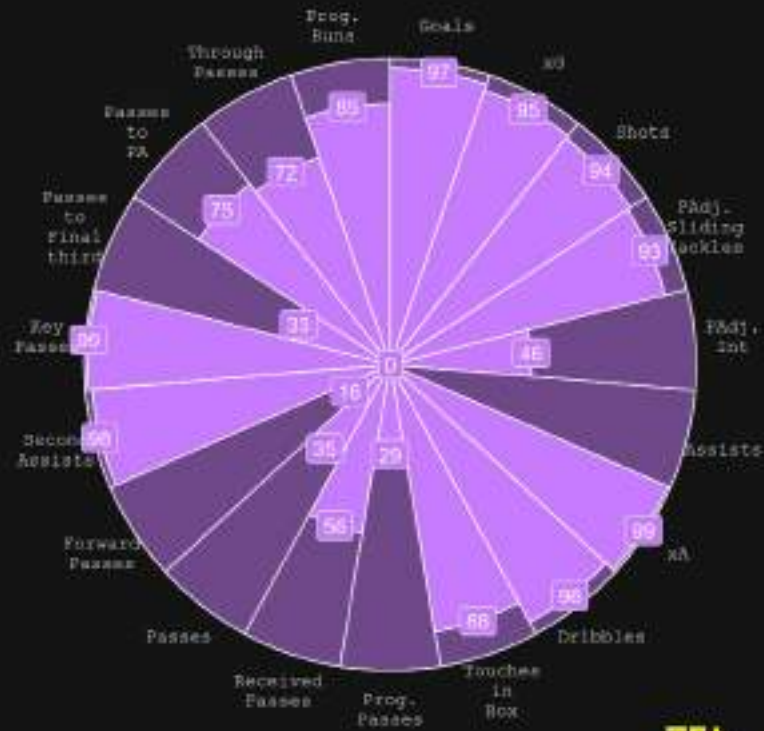
D. Vlahović | Juventus
Serbia



Matheus Cunha | Atlético Madrid
Brazil



N. Okafor | Salzburg
Switzerland



Dušan Vlahović | Juventus | Serbia | 22 years old

Juventus secured the signature of Dušan Vlahović in January 2022. Since then, the Serbian has been one of the best players, if not the best player at Juventus. Juventus have not been up to their mark this season so far. Vlahović, however, has continued to rise and rise in his performances and has currently 6 goals to his name(joint-top). When we look at the overall gameplay of Vlahović, it is very typical of a perfect no.9, staying closer to the box and finishing off the chances. Vlahović made his senior debut for Serbia in 2020 and has since been on a hot streak of goalscoring. Vlahović is surely expected to rock at Qatar 2022.

Noah Okafor | Red Bull Salzburg | Switzerland | 22 years old

Noah Okafor, the centre-forward from Red Bull Salzburg has five goals to his name at the time of writing and is the club's second-highest scorer in the league this term. Okafor has played most of his minutes as a centre-forward but has also played as a winger on either side. The above visualization shows Noah Okafor brings a lot of variety to his game on the pitch as indicated by his high percentile ranks for some of the key attacking metrics. Okafor has not been a regular starter for the Swiss national team since making his debut in 2019. However, he has been involved in the squad regularly and is definitely expected to go to Qatar as well with his team. When given the chance, the electric Noah Okafor will definitely be a player to watch out for in this World Cup.

Bryan Mbeumo | Brentford | Cameroon | 23 years old

One of the key players in Brentford's journey to the top flight of English football is Bryan Mbeumo. Mbeumo, originally of Troyes' academy signed for the English club in the summer of 2019, since then Mbeumo has been one of the best U23 players in English football. Mbeumo can play anywhere in the front three but prefers to play on the right side. His pace allows him to dribble past opponents at ease and finish chances. Mbeumo, after choosing to represent Cameroon at international level only a couple of months back, made his senior debut last month. Given his current form and the timing of his decision to choose Cameroon, it would be no surprise if Mbeumo starts every game at the World Cup for Cameroon.

BRAZIL



GROUP G

CAIO MIGUEL // @osegundovolante

The five-time world champions unsurprisingly enter the 2022 FIFA World Cup as one of the favourites to win it all. Brazil is the only country in the world to have qualified for every world cup and with such a rich football history, it is only normal for the South American giants to be among the favourites in the World Cup once again.

However, this time around, things are different in the Brazilian headquarters. Tite is the first manager in decades to lead Brazil in consecutive world cups and after a bitter lesson in 2018, the Seleção have significantly evolved tactically. Additionally, this promising generation, who was only entering the world stage four years ago, is coming into this World Cup in full form.

In the South America WC Qualifications, Brazil led the continent with the best campaign in the history of the competition. Without losing a single match, the Seleção scored 40 goals while only conceding five. Under Tite, for over six years now, Brazil have only lost five matches from 76 played. Needless to say, Tite has the experience and full control of this talented Brazil side as they search for a historic sixth-world title. With some of the world's best players in Real Madrid's Vini Jr. and PSG's Neymar and Marquinhos, there is no shortage of talent in Tite's squad.

This tactical analysis aims to break down Brazil's tactics under Tite in the 61-year-old manager's second World Cup cycle. In addition to looking at the Seleção tactics throughout all four phases of play, this analysis will also provide a detailed insight into Brazil's squad as they challenge for the unprecedented Hexa.

PREDICTED STARTING XI



Over the past year, Tite has experimented with a number of players and variations while still adhering to his uncompromisable style of play. Brazil have numerous world stars with varying characteristics, and Tite looks to maximise each individual's ability while still ensuring collective organisation and balance.

At any rate, he has often fallen back to the same group of players for his starting XI. Although these players generally form a 4-3-3, the actual shape during the game is constantly changing. Tite adopts a strict positional play system, and under these rules, Brazil have numerous variations.

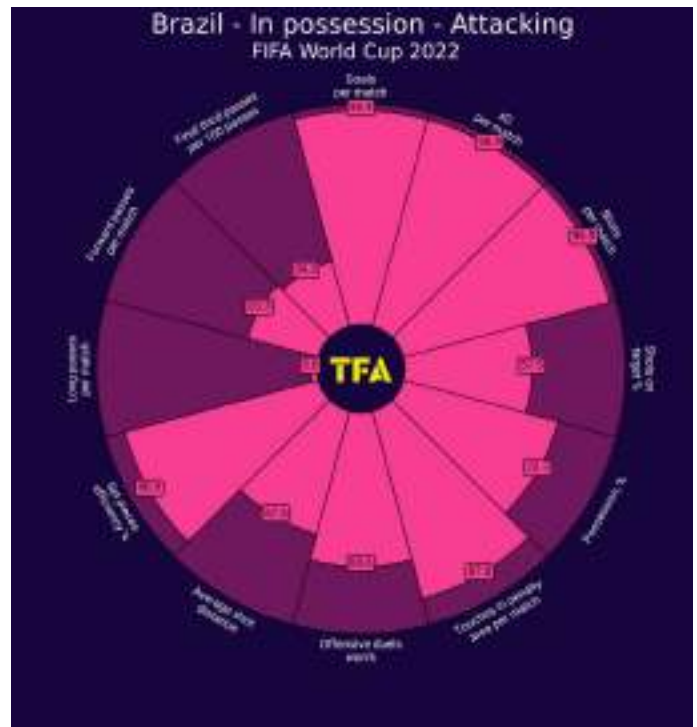
With Alisson being the undisputed first choice in goal, Tite prefers a backline of Danilo,

Thiago Silva, Marquinhos, and Alex Sandro. However, with Alex Sandro's recent drop in form at Juventus, Alex Telles could be a direct replacement. In the midfield, Man United's midfield duo of Casemiro and Fred is used. Lucas Paquetá is a more advanced player flanked by Vini Jr. and Raphinha. Finally, as more of a false nine, Neymar leads the line. In possession, this is far from a regular 4-3-3, and with numerous world-class players also available, changes could be made here and there.



Brazil's age profile further emphasises this squad's growth and maturity compared to the 2018 World Cup. With a few deadwood players falling out of the picture, young and emerging stars have entered the stage. There are still experienced leaders such as Alex Sandro, Casemiro, and Thiago Silva. However, the addition of players like Antony, Rodrygo, Vini Jr., Raphinha, and Bruno Guimarães brings a whole new face to Tite's side. With a balance between youth and experience, Brazil come to Qatar with one of the best squads in the competition.

ATTACKING PHASE



Statistically, Brazil's attacking output cannot be denied. Among all nations in the World Cup, Brazil rank in the 96.9th percentile for goals per match, xG per match, and shots per match. Additionally, their 87.8th percentile for touches in the penalty area per match only further highlights their attacking volume. Tite's side like to dominate possession — ranking in the 72.7th percentile for it — while still maintaining a high chance creation volume.

Furthermore, their extremely low 3rd percentile in long balls per match illustrates their rather controlled approach with the ball, looking to progress through the zones with absolute control and superiority.

More specifically, in 2022, the Seleção averaged 524.13 passes per 90 with only 5.61% of them being long. Their 215.13 lateral passes per 90 are also much higher than their 142.63 forward passes per 90. These metrics serve to highlight the incredible control Tite has introduced to the Seleção. They are looking to ensure absolute control over matches and allow the opposition

little to no time on the ball. By maintaining maximum organisation, they also ensure optimal and structured chance creation.

As mentioned, since 2018, Tite has adopted a positional play system in possession. As such, Brazil's actions in possession, both on and off the ball, have become much more systematic and structured. Regardless of the formation or players, there are numerous variations Brazil use in possession. The most common is the 3-2-5 famously used by Pep Guardiola at Man City.

There are multiple ways they can form this structure, and it all depends on the players on the pitch. In the example below, Alex Telles drops to become the third centre-back while Danilo forms a double pivot with Casemiro in the midfield. When the ball is on the other side, the opposite can happen. Tite's men are extremely flexible and fluid.



In the example below, Brazil begin in a 4-2-4 structure, with the front line pinning Japan's backline. As Marquinhos initiates the attack, Fred pushes higher to pin the opposition's midfielder. With the space created by Fred's movement, Dani Alves can push inside and become the second midfielder. Fred then moves to Dani Alves' previous position, where he receives the ball and progresses into the final third.

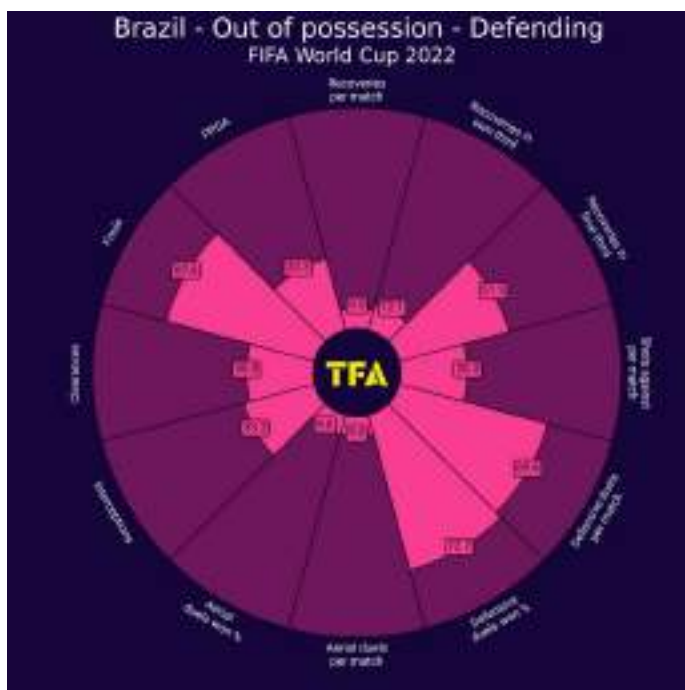


By maintaining maximum width in this positional play structure, Brazil are constantly able to stretch the opposition's defensive blocks. This often leaves the wide players in 1v1 scenarios, and with some of the best wingers in the world, this is extremely favourable for the Seleção. Additionally, by stretching the opposition's defensive organisation, there is significant space for Neymar to roam and create opportunities.



After a traumatising loss to Belgium in 2018, Tite wants to leave nothing to chance. Since then, the 61-year-old manager has adopted a dominant approach in possession where they seek to minimise the chaos and have absolute control of the match. With a positional play system guiding them forward, Brazil's attack in recent years has been extremely dangerous.

DEFENSIVE PHASE



Their high press is also conducted in a very compact manner. As they try to overwhelm the opposition into giving the ball away, they significantly reduce the playing area by remaining compact and narrow. As a consequence, when the ball is played into certain areas, they can collectively jump on it and pressure the receiver. In the example below, as Venezuela attempt to play into the midfield, Brazil surround the receiver with five players and force him to commit an error.



In lower blocks, although it does not happen often, Brazil revert to a traditional 4-4-2 with two very compact lines of four. In a zonal organisation, the Seleção demonstrate impressive coordination and communication as they keep the opposition from reaching the final third. They also aim to constantly have superiority around the ball with an extra man to cover, especially in the wide areas.



Unsurprisingly, Brazil rank extremely low for most defensive metrics. This is a direct result of their absolute control in matches, where they defend for very insignificant periods. Nonetheless, their tactics in the defensive phase still play a large role in ensuring their desired domination. For both defensive duels per match and the percentage of defensive duels won, they rank quite high. Their PPDA is in the low 33.33rd percentile, and finally, their 51.5th percentile for recoveries in the final third indicates their advanced defensive approach.

Brazil look to press in a structured yet incredibly aggressive manner. Tite wishes to recover the ball as early as possible, and this begins with an intense high defensive block. Below, as Argentina, begin their build-up on the left-hand side, Brazil shift their entire high block over. The press is initially led by two players, and as the ball is played to either side, one player will pressure the centre-back while the other tucks in on the opposition's defensive midfielder. With their block moved over, they adopt a man-to-man press and aim to keep the opposition from progressing into the midfield third.

TRANSITIONS

In transitional phases, Tite maintains an approach consistent with the other phases. The transition to the transitions is key, and that is what Tite has tried to implement with conscious attacking and defending organisations. In possession, part of their organisation is to ensure they can immediately counter-press and keep the opposition from countering should they recover the ball. Once the ball is lost, the players nearest to it will immediately provide pressure while attempting to close off near-passing lanes. If the ball is not immediately recovered, the objective is to delay the opposition's attack to get reorganised defensively.



Similarly, their defensive structure is conscious and prepared for their attacking transitions. As examined, their high press is extremely compact, often having numerous players around the ball. When the ball is recovered in the opposition's half, they already have a significant number of players to begin an attacking transition. In the example below, when Casemiro recovers the ball in the middle third, he immediately has four Brazilian players around him.



When launching counterattacks from deeper positions, Brazil are very good at working together to exploit a disorganised defensive organisation. In these transition scenarios, they are very conscious of their movements, especially without the ball. Constantly looking to manipulate and create space, Brazil's overwhelming talent tends to wreak havoc in attacking transitions.



ATTACKERS

Throughout history, Brazil have consistently produced some of the best forwards in the world. In 2022, this is no different. Brazil come to Qatar with an incredible production line in the attack. With numerous Brazilian stars entering the world stage in recent years, the Seleção's newest generation is becoming a reality. Neymar is still the star player and leader of this attack, but for the first time in his career, he has world-class players alongside him. Players like Vini Jr., Raphinha, and Antony have been leading the world's biggest clubs.

This season, Neymar is averaging 0.8 goals per 90 on top of 0.64 assists per 90. Similarly, Vini is averaging 0.39 goals per 90 while Raphinha has 0.4 goals per 90. The Seleção's forwards are coming into the 2022 World Cup with undeniable form, and should they continue this in Qatar, Brazil's attack will be a force to be reckoned with.

MIDFIELDERS

Tite's midfield can be broken down into two parts. The first is the more deep-lying role, which can be performed by Casemiro or Fabinho. Unlike in 2018, when Casemiro was absent in the Belgium game, Tite finally has a replacement at the same level. The other role tends to be performed by either Fred or Bruno Guimarães, and it is a slightly more advanced one. Lucas Paquetá belongs more in the forward unit, although he does tend to occupy the midfield in possession. Flamengo's Everton Ribeiro has been in tremendous form in 2022, and with Philippe Coutinho significantly dropping in form, the 33-year-old should make an appearance in Tite's Qatar squad.

In summary, Brazil will have around six midfield players who can perform a variety of roles. This time around, there is quality all-around, with no significant drop in level should somebody get injured or suspended.

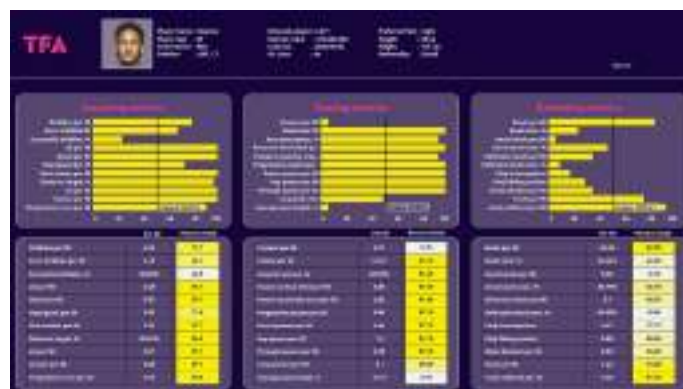
DEFENDERS

The Seleção have always had world-class fullbacks. From Roberto Carlos to Cafu, Brazil have always had reliable and consistent fullbacks. However, this time around, there is a significant lack of depth wide. In the last national team call-up, Tite opted for one right-back and five centre-backs in the squad, with Éder Militão being able to play as a right-back if needed. A similar approach should be taken in the final squad, especially as Danilo seems to be the only natural option on the right. On the left, Alex Sandro and Alex Telles should be the two options as Guilherme Arana is out with an injury.

As far as centre-backs, Thiago Silva, Marquinhos, and Éder Militão are guaranteed. The last one

or two spots will be decided between Arsenal's Gabriel Magalhães, Juventus' Bremer, and Roma's Ibañez. At any rate, Brazil come into this World Cup with an extremely solid defensive system.

KEY PLAYER



There is not much doubt regarding Brazil's best performer. Neymar has entered this season flying with PSG, already having contributed to 27 goals in just over two months. The 30-year-old's attacking and passing metrics are extremely above average, with most of them ranking in the top percentiles. His 97.1st percentile for both xG per 90 and goals per 90 is incredible, especially when put alongside his 97.1st percentile for both xA per 90 and assists per 90.

Neymar's attacking output is one of the best in the world. If the PSG star continues his club form into the World Cup, it will be very hard to stop Brazil's attack.

TOURNAMENT PREDICTION

It is no surprise that Brazil enter the 2022 FIFA World Cup as one of the favourites to win it all. Along with France, the Seleção have one of the best squads coming into the competition. Their performance in the South American qualifications was beyond impressive, and with a much more evolved squad from 2018, it will be hard to stop them from lifting their sixth-world title.

CAMEROON



GROUP G

ADAM SCULLY // @ascully24

The World Cup kicks off this month as the entire planet gets ready to watch the greatest festival of football within the sport.

Lovers of the beautiful game have been forced to wait four and a half years for all four corners of the globe to meet in this glorious tournament to decide who the best footballing nation in the world really is.

Europe have been victorious in every rendition since Brazil's last triumph in 2002, but with the European sides all underperforming over the past twelve months, with the exception of the Netherlands, it may provide another continent with the opportunity to take the golden trophy home.

In 92 years of history, an African nation has never been crowned victor of the World Cup, which is more of an indictment of the financial disparities within football and the failings of the geopolitical structure of the globe than anything else.

This time around, Ghana, Cameroon, Morocco, Tunisia and Senegal will all vie against one another and the other 27 nations in an attempt to make history.

One of the African countries with the best chance of progressing from the group phase is Cameroon. Led by former defender and the ever-stylish Rigobert Song, the Indomitable Lions will go to war against the European trio of Brazil, Serbia and Switzerland in Group G.

While perhaps being the underdogs out of the four, Song's Cameroon will not be a team to underestimate, having won five from six qualifiers against the Ivory Coast, Mozambique and Malawi before putting Algeria to the sword in the playoff to reach the promised land.

Having qualified for their eighth World Cup in history, Cameroon will be hoping to better their

feat of reaching the quarter-finals during Italia 90'. Can this be the year they go one step further against all the odds?

This article will be a scout report of Cameroon, using tactical analysis to observe the tactics that Song will likely use at the World Cup. It will be an analysis of what to expect from the African giants.

PREDICTED STARTING XI

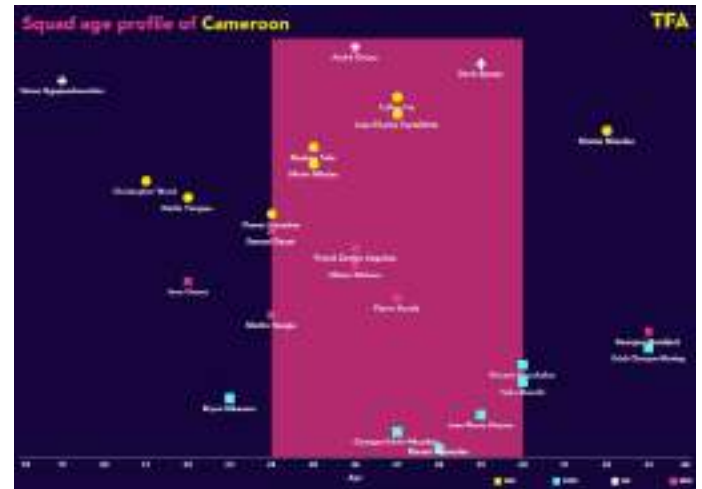
Since taking the job mid-calendar year, Song has deployed a plethora of different formations with Cameroon. Given the side's strength in depth in the midfield department, the manager has been able to chop and change the shape depending on the opponent.

Primarily, Cameroon shift between conventional back four systems, setting up in a 4-4-2, a 4-3-3, or its close cousin 4-1-4-1, as well as the 4-2-3-1, although this has been the structure least used by the Cameroonians.

Given that Cameroon will potentially be forced to drop off and defend for large parts of their games, particularly against the possession-dominant Brazil and Serbia, Song will likely line his players out in a 4-4-2 to cover the width of the pitch and offer perfect defensive balance, although one shouldn't be surprised to see a 4-1-4-1 either.



isn't too old either, with most players currently teetering around their primes.



Overall, Song has brought a nice blend with him to Qatar in terms of the disparity of ages. Within the squad, there is some experience to help keep the team calm during manic situations, some younger players to play without fear at their first-ever World Cup and a plethora of players at their peak to provide the bulk of the quality.

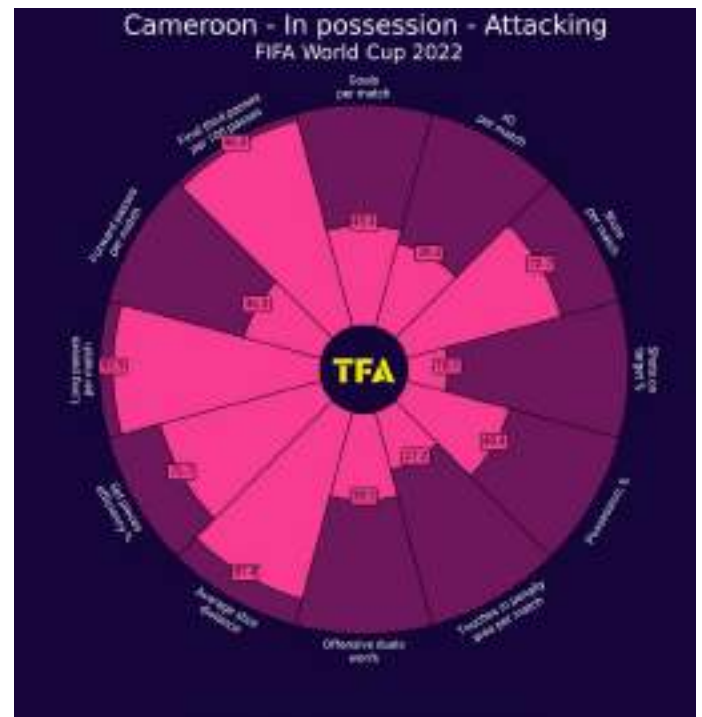
In the African Cup of Nations, which was hosted by Cameroon itself, the Indomitable Lions had an average age of 27.4 which was the eleventh-oldest squad in the competition, or the 14th youngest from all 24 teams, depending on whether you choose to see the glass half full or half empty.

This time around, there will likely be the same core group of players which is very Euro-centric now, including Napoli star Franck Zambo-Anguissa, Lens midfielder Jean Onana, KV Mechelen's Samuel Gouet, Lyon's Karl Toko Ekambi and even Bayern Munich striker Eric Maxim Choupo-Moting.

Even Brentford's Bryan Mbeumo may be given the nod by Song in the forward line as well as Georges-Kévin Nkoudou, showing the depth that the manager has in this area of the squad.

While Cameroon's side is certainly not youthful, with the exception of a few players, the squad

ATTACKING PHASE



Over the course of 2022 so far, Cameroon have boasted 56.34% of the ball per game, on average. During the AFCON last year, the side held the third-highest possession average in the

competition at 58.4%, losing only to Morocco and Algeria who had higher numbers.

However, Cameroon's numbers are greatly inflated due to Song's team playing a lot of worse opposition with far fewer high-class players among their ranks. In games where the Indomitable Lions face better opponents, they tend to cede possession quite a lot.

For instance, in Cameroon's recently friendly against South Korea, the African giants had merely 38.68% of the ball and lost 2-0.

In possession, Song is quite relaxed about his players having possession of the ball. It would be far from correct for any pundit to call Cameroon a possession-oriented team. This is because on the ball, particularly during the build-up phase, the manager is keen to play rather direct.

Cameroon do like to position themselves to play out from the back, giving off a façade that they will pass it short from the goalkeeper and try to build up from the first third to the final third.



When the Cameroonians do so, the centre-backs split wide to accommodate the higher positioning of the goalkeeper while the fullbacks move up the pitch on the flanks, keeping a forward-facing body orientation as they understand that they will not need to drop short to receive a pass from the backline.

Furthermore, the single pivot operates behind the opponent's first line of pressure. This is a

pretty standard set-up from the 2021 AFCON hosts, but the intention is never to play short.

Cameroon want to bait the opposition to press them high up the pitch by luring them forward with a false build-up structure.

In the end, the goal is to try to play forward as quickly as possible to their target men up top. In the previous image, we can see how Cameroon's number '6' is pointing for the goalkeeper to lump it long even though there are a plethora of passing options surrounding him.



Once the ball is played long towards the frontmen, the objective for Cameroon is to win the second ball by supporting the ball-challenger, whether that be by making a run in behind in case of a flick or else by moving in front of the player to collect it if it's knocked down.

In the last image, the left centre-back has hit the ball directly to the centre-forward who has managed to drag the entire Algeria backline into a deeper position. From there, the two nearest players move closer to the ball as quickly as possible to support the striker and win the second ball, retaining possession in the final third where they can crack on in a decent position.

Players like Choupo-Moting and Vincent Aboubakar are excellent aerially and with their hold-up play, making direct passes an efficient option for Cameroon to bypass pressure.

The same principle applies when Cameroon are set up in a structured positional attack around the halfway line and are attempting to break down an opponent's mid-to-low defensive block.



Again, here, we see both Cameroon's central midfielder and centre-forward making a run in behind the Burundi backline which is positioned relatively high in a medium-level defensive block.

Instead of trying to play through the tight areas, which requires an incredible level of technical skill, Song wants his players to hit the channels and then look to cross the ball where they can pack the box, giving them the best possible opportunity to score with the aerial prowess of forwards like Choupo-Moting, and Aboubakar and the deep, late runs of Zambo-Anguissa and Onana.

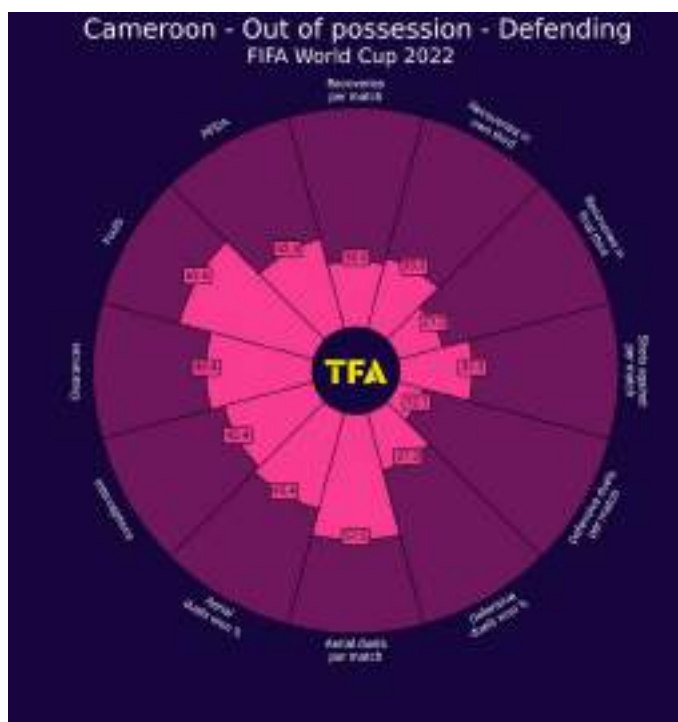


In attack, there is nothing overly innovative or astonishing about Cameroon. However, they do have proven, European quality among their ranks in attacking positions across the forward line and the advanced midfielders.

One of the key elements of Cameroon's play is that it is very direct and very physical. Brazil,

Serbia and Switzerland will have a tough battle on their hands in the middle of the park, especially against Zambo-Anguissa and Onana, while the backline will need to be wary of the forward runs of Toko Ekambi and Aboubakar as well as trying to match Choupo-Moting in the air.

DEFENSIVE PHASE



Cameroon are one of the highest pressing sides in Africa, certainly out of the teams from the continent that have qualified for the upcoming Qatar World Cup.

The Indomitable Lions are quite a brute side in possession, hitting the channels and crossing into the big men in the box, quite stereotypical of the English game for several decades before the turn of the Century. However, out of possession, Song is a highly progressive coach.

The gaffer wants his side to press high up the pitch, stifling the opponent's build-up play and attempting to win the ball in very dangerous areas where they can transition from defence to attack in an instant and try to create opportunities.

At the AFCON, Cameroon boasted a PPDA of 8.23 which was one of the lowest in the tournament. It's highly likely that at the World Cup, as Cameroon won't have much of the ball, they will be pressing in the attacking third, looking to force turnovers.

During the build-up phase, Cameroon's pressing structure is man-oriented. Essentially, each player is tasked with tightly marking one of the nearest passing options for the opposition.



Here, the players have all been assigned a man to mark when Burundi are attempting to pass out from deep. Each individual must be tight to their marker and be ready to aggressively challenge for the ball once the player receives it.

When pressing in a high block, Cameroon are actually really effective and cause a lot of trouble for their opponents which can be seen from the following data visual:

K. TOKO EKAMBI HIGH REGAINS

All games from Africa Cup of Nations Qualification 2023 Côte d'Ivoire, Africa Cup of Nations 2023 Cameroon



- Ball recovery
- Dangerous recovery (leading to a shot within 30 seconds)
- Counterpressing recovery (within 5 seconds after a possession loss)

Since AFCON in 2021, Toko Ekambi, who has been used as a winger as well as a centre-forward, has registered 8 high regains, 6 counterpressing recoveries and 3 dangerous recoveries.

However, Song has a tendency to only order his players to press against lesser opponents as these are games where Cameroon have the best opportunity to win their individual duels against each man.

In matches against teams of greater quality, such as Algeria or Morocco, Cameroon have primarily dropped off to defend in a compact defensive block, limiting the space behind the backline.



As can be seen from this image, Cameroon's 4-1-4-1 defensive block is narrow between the lines, with the first and second lines ensuring that the player in possession cannot penetrate their structure by playing through the central spaces. Access through the central corridors has been curtailed and Algeria are restricted to passing out wide.

Song deploys what is commonly referred to in the football analytics stratosphere as a zonal block. This means that the primary aim for the Cameroonian players is the protect the space inside the defensive block. If an opponent plays the ball inside the lines, the players must gang up to either win back possession or force a pass back outside before recouping the same shape.



Here, the Algerian midfielder has received and turned on the ball. In an attempt to negate the ball carrier carrying the ball further, the two nearest players quickly close him down.

Over the past calendar year, the Indomitable Lions have conceded just 0.8 goals per game, although this wasn't always under Rigobert Song himself.

Nonetheless, this is still a pretty good record, but Cameroon will face three incredibly difficult opponents in Group G, particularly against the attacking prowess of Brazil with the likes of Neymar, Antony, Raphinha, and Firmino, among others.

The sturdiness of Cameroon's defensive block will certainly be put to the test in their three group matches.

TRANSITIONS

Transitions are not overly important to the overall tactical set-up of Cameroon. While the vitality of both attacking and defensive transitions cannot be overstated in football, the Indomitable Lions can often look slightly rogue with how they handle both aspects of the game.

Defensively, there is more of a game plan or at least an idea of how to act in this phase. Unlike the titans of European football such as the Netherlands, Germany, Italy or England, Cameroon don't counterpress.

Counterpressing is a collective effort from numerous nearby players in a structured manner to close down the ball carrier, cutting off a counterattack at its source. Song's men are merely looking to delay their opponent's breakaway. This can be through fouling or by genuinely making an excellent tackle.



In this example against Burundi, the Cameroon player tracking back shuttled the carrier out wide, closing off the possibility of the attacker playing back inside. Using the touchline, the defender can then make a challenge to win the ball back or at least force the ball carrier to turn and play backwards, buying his teammates time to regain their defensive shape.

Basically, the aim is to delay the counterattack to allow as many players to get back behind the ball as possible where Cameroon can then recover into their defensive block.

When attacking, the manager allows his players to be freer with their movement, emphasizing plenty of ball-carrying, dribbling past opponents and running in behind.



Having players such as Zambo-Anguissa who is an excellent ball carrier as well as Jean Onana while Aboubakar and Toko Ekambi move beyond the opponent's backline is instrumental to Cameroon being dangerous during attacking transitions.

DEFENDERS

Nouhou Tolo on the left and Collins Fai on the right will be important at providing width for Cameroon who like to invert their wide forwards and so this pair will be tasked with holding their position in advanced areas and putting crosses into the box for the forward line.

Meanwhile, Jean-Charles Castelletto and Nicolas Nkoulou, providing this will be the duo in the middle of the back four, could form a decent partnership for the African nation. The duo, who have both played at a very high level in Europe, can offer a mix of energy and experience which will certainly be needed, particularly against Brazil.

Furthermore, André Onana will be vital at initiating Cameroon's attacks by either playing short and/or going direct to the frontline, while also keeping the side in games against some of the best players Europe has to offer.

MIDFIELDERS

Samuel Gouet has been Song's preferred option as the '6' for Cameroon over the past calendar year. The Mechelen midfielder will be instructed to make passes into the space between the lines to the forward line and advanced midfielders while also protecting the backline during transitions.

It is further forward in the middle of the park where Cameroon possess the most quality. Jean Onana and Zambo-Anguissa are two incredibly exciting midfielders. Both are wonderful at carrying the ball and will be tasked with supporting the frontmen in attack but also with offering energy in the centre out of possession to win the ball back.

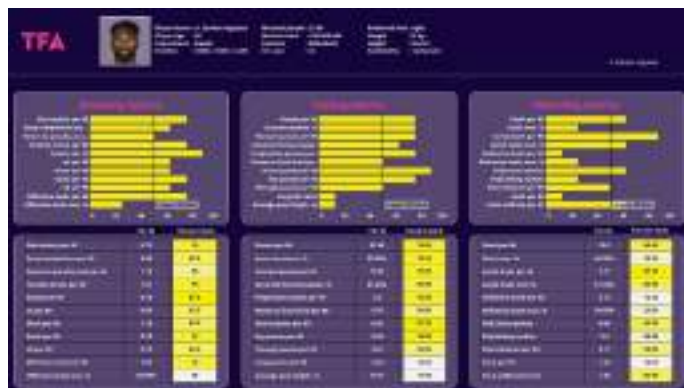
Off the bench, Song can even rely on the likes of Pierre Kunde and Olivier Ntcham to come on during games and put in a shift when Gouet, Onana and Zambo-Anguissa tire out.

ATTACKERS

In attack, Cameroon are stacked with experience, power, pace, strength, intelligence and goalscoring ability with players such as Vincent Aboubakar, Choupo-Moting and Toko Ekambi who have played at the highest level in Europe.

However, the depth from the bench will be equally important. Bryan Mbeumo and Georges-Kévin Nkoudou can come onto the field and give Song something different and score goals, as well as create chances.

KEY PLAYER



Cameroon have several excellent players within the squad, especially those who are applying their trade at some of Europe's biggest clubs including André Onana at Internazionale and Choupo-Moting at Bayern Munich, and so it was extremely difficult to pinpoint which player would be absolutely key for the Rigoberto Song in Qatar.

However, Total Football Analysis has selected Franck Zambo-Anguissa as the main man for the Indomitable Lions.

Having failed to adapt to life in the Premier League with minnows Fulham, the midfielder general moved on loan to Villarreal and later Napoli before permanently joining the latter last summer. Now, he is a star performer for Luciano Spalletti's Serie A table-toppers.

As can be seen from the player's statistics, Zambo-Anguissa is a menace in the middle of the park. His work rate is exceptional which is evident through his impressive defensive statistics, putting him in the higher percentiles on numerous metrics.

Meanwhile, the Cameroonian is also a wonderful carrier of the ball and can explode through midfield with the ball during the attacking phases as well as transitions.

The 26-year-old will be key for Song's side in trying to win their midfield battles against Brazil, Serbia and Switzerland which is one of the only ways Cameroon can possibly gain an advantage over their difficult opponents.

TOURNAMENT PREDICTION

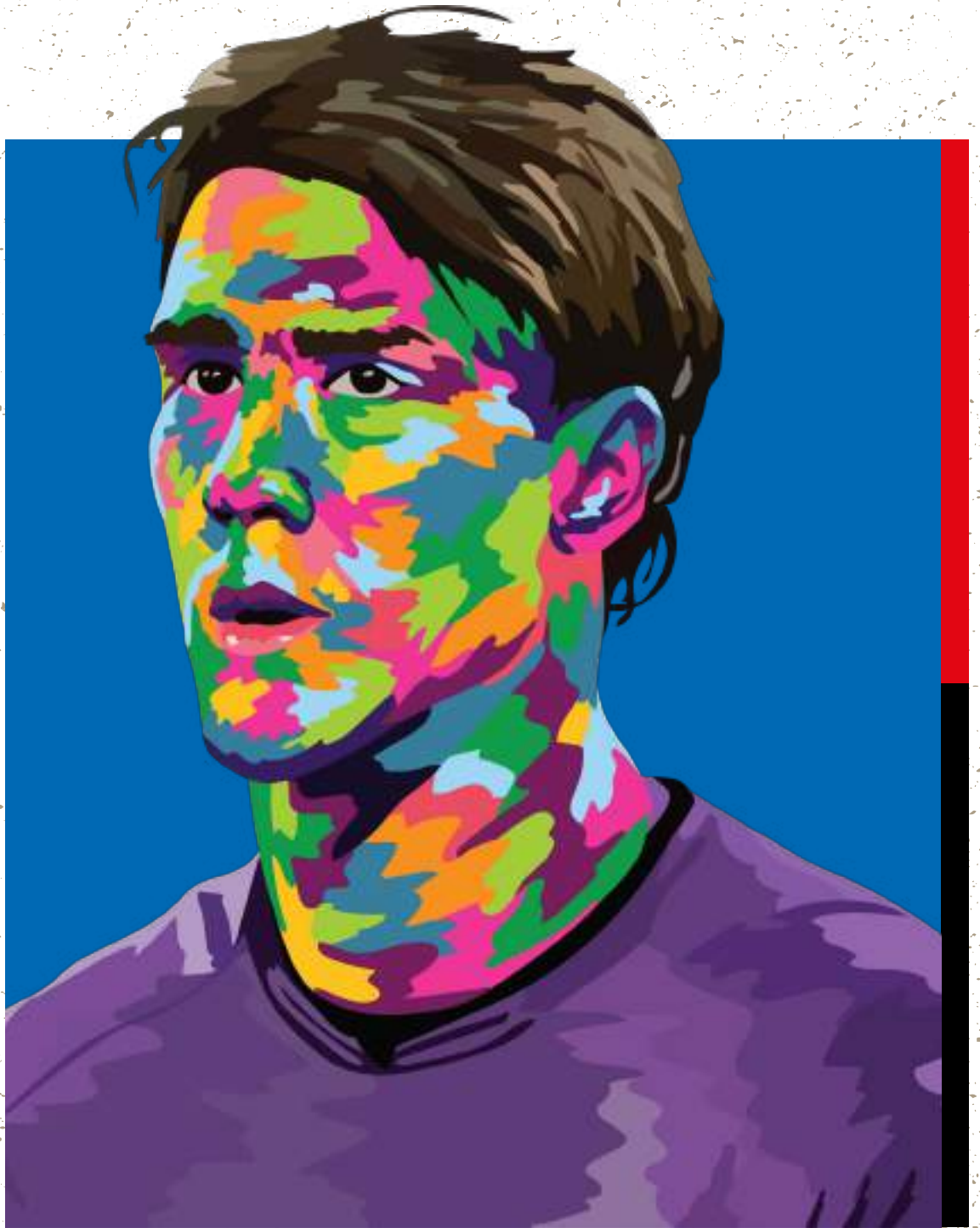
Cameroon were handed the short end of the stick when being drawn into Group G alongside Brazil, Serbia and Switzerland and are certainly the underdogs from the quartet.

Getting a result from the most decorated nation in the history of the tournament will be next to impossible, so Cameroon will need to look ahead to Serbia and Switzerland to be the games where they can pick up the points needed to progress to the knockout phase.

Chances are, Brazil will finish top of the group and so the remaining trio will be doggedly battling it out for the final place. Realistically, Cameroon

should finish bottom of the foursome but a win and a draw against Serbia and Switzerland could be enough to see Song's side advance.

SERBIA



GROUP G

JACK MANSHIP // @JManship19

There seems to be a modern trend at major international tournaments, in that we usually see a team filling the role of “underdog” or “dark horse” but putting on displays that capture the hearts and minds of football fans around the world. From Greece in the 2004 Euros to Croatia in the 2018 World Cup, we always seem to get at least one nation upsetting the apple cart that is the group of favourites.

One country that could fall into that category in Qatar is Serbia, a team who have recently topped their group in the UEFA Nations League, and also topped their FIFA World Cup qualification group, finishing above Portugal to do so. Serbia’s World Cup debut as just Serbia (not part of Yugoslavia or Serbia & Montenegro) was in 2010, but they are officially recognised as the successor of Yugoslavia, meaning they inherited all of the Yugoslavian records and history.

As Serbia, they have qualified for two World Cups so far, failing to get past the group stage. However, they are enjoying arguably the most successful time in their short history, and many fancy them to get through the group stage, in which they face Brazil, Switzerland, and Cameroon.

Current manager Dragan Stojković has been at the helm since 2021 and can take a lot of credit for his team’s form, winning 13 of his 20 games in charge so far. His squad has a good balance of youth and experience, as we will see with the visuals that follow in this tactical analysis.

PREDICTED STARTING XI

For some time now, Stojković has favoured a three-at-the-back system but likes to switch the overall shape based on the players he has available but also the opposition. In many of the

recent Nations League matches, they played a system of 3-4-2-1, with Aleksandar Mitrović leading the line alone. However, he has also experimented with 3-5-2 which allows for Dušan Vlahović to join Mitrović in attack to create a frightening partnership.



The number one goalkeeper spot really is up for grabs, with Serbia giving minutes to three different keepers in recent times. We predict that Vanja Milinković-Savić will be the first choice, but Predrag Rajković could also claim the number one spot.

We will likely see a back three of Milos Veljković, Stefan Mitrović and Strahinja Pavlović, with Filip Kostić and Andrija Zivković operating on the flanks offering support both in and out of possession. Skipper Dusan Tadić will operate in an attacking midfielder role, with the creative freedom to drift into wide areas in build-up phases.



Above is a representation of the age range in the Serbia squad, with players who we believe could be in the squad — goalkeepers down to attackers. As we can see, there is a variety of youth and experience, with the majority of the players falling in the 24-30 age range — around the time when players often reach their peak years as a player.

Experienced figures like Dusan Tadić and Stefan Mitrović could be very influential players both on the field and in the dressing room, while younger faces like Dušan Vlahović and Strahinja Pavlovic could offer a youthful sense to the squad.

rather than the technical side. However, they have some players that bring the balance to that, giving them another dimension in the threat department.

As expected, due to their physical ability as a side, they rate highly in the set-piece efficiency, coming in at 81.8 on the percentile rank. Their attacking unit that boasts strength and height certainly contributes to this.

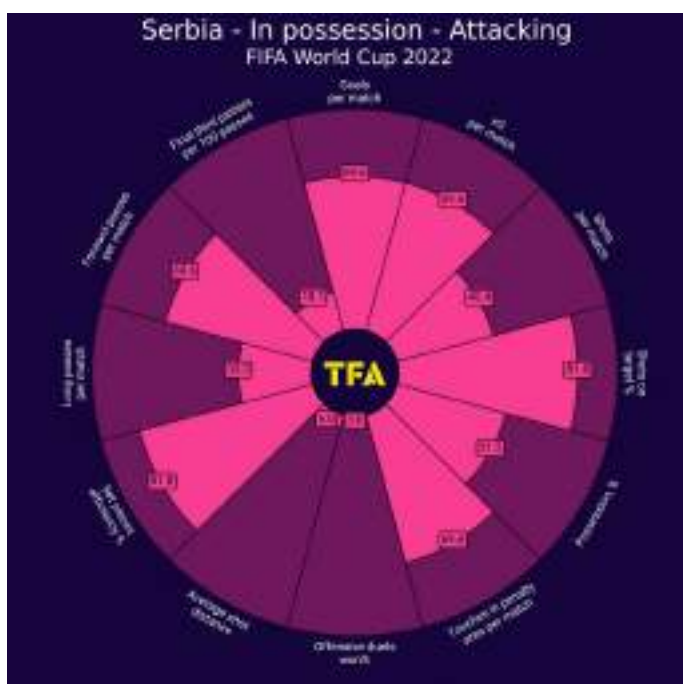
They also enjoy a high attacking presence, shown by their percentile rank of 69.6 for touches in penalty area per match, along with their rank for shots per match; they are a team that likes to take advantage of being in the opposition half.



While Serbia like to utilise the width of the pitch with the eventual aim of getting crosses into the box, they are not the one-dimensional, long-ball team that some people may have once thought. They have displayed an element of patience in their approach play which has allowed them to commit more players forward.

We see this above as they look to play out of defence to reach the midfield third with the chance of breaking into the attacking third. They have a high presence between the opposition back line and midfield unit, with options scattered from left to right.

ATTACKING PHASE



Historically, Serbia have been a team that's relied upon the physical side of the game



Their approach play when reaching the midfield against a deeper defence has good variation, but wing play is still their end game. To begin the move, they hold a passage of play in a central area, almost lulling the opponents into a false sense of security. As a result, the opponents adopt a narrow shape, giving space to Serbia's wide men — that is when the pass is executed.

From there, the presence in the box tries to find space and generally be a nuisance for the opposition as they await the cross — physicality and aerial superiority are two strong traits of this Serbian team in attack.



This example encompasses the tactical elements of both previous examples. With the opposition parked inside their own half, this acts as an invitation to Serbia to play as they wish. They

incorporate the element of high presence as previously discussed, again the attacking players' locations varying rather than staying nearby.

A line-breaking pass is fired into Kostić as he finds himself in an unbelievable amount of space, giving Serbia the chance to take the attack to the next level. This is a strong skill of the Serbians — recognising a chance and taking advantage of opposition downfalls, punishing any mistake.



From there, their attack is simple yet precise and effective. Everyone shows a tremendous understanding of the tactics and their individual roles. Good initial ball control on the half turn from Kostić allows the fluidity of the attack to remain, and he follows it with an accurate pass into space. The attack finishes with a neat cut-back cross before the ball is buried in the net.

Serbia are direct in their attacking approach, but not direct in the sense of just lumping the ball forward. Sure, we will see that from time to time, but their directness often lies in forward passes with a purpose, a genuine attacking intent.

DEFENSIVE PHASE



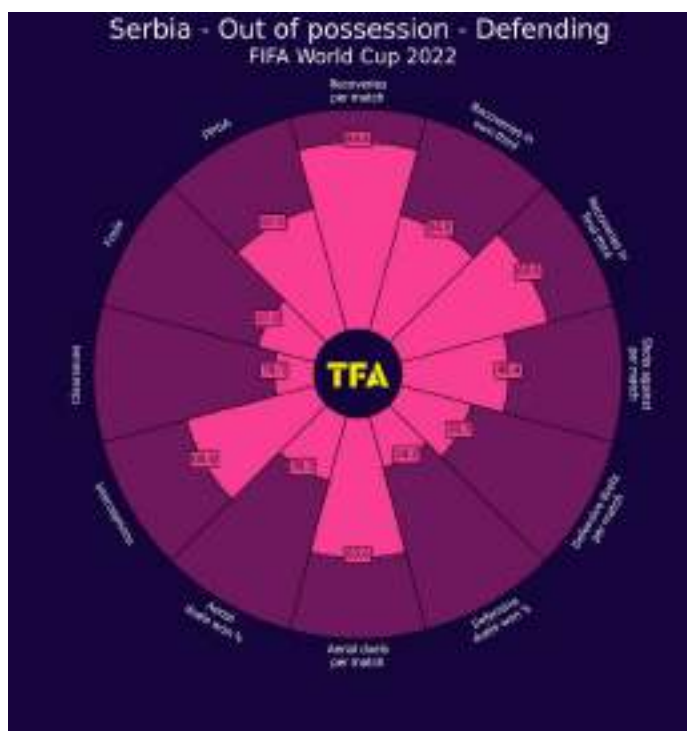
This first defensive analysis shows Serbia defending in the opposition's half. As we know by now, they are a highly energetic team that gives very little away in the form of time and space. They like to press — even the slightest trigger can launch a press, and, similar to their attacking play, everyone involved in the press seems to understand their role.

This has proven to be an effective method off the ball against teams who would not be considered one of the World Cup favourites, so they would have to be extra careful if they execute such a tactic against one of those sides.



When defending in their own half, we see some interesting variations in shape. While the numbers sometimes differ, there is a pattern; they look to bring midfielder(s) into defensive action to create a compact back four (alternatively, the wingers will drop in to make a back five).

This raises the presence in the centre, giving the opposition very little room to build an attack, and the narrow shape of the midfielders looks to force the opponents out wide. Interestingly, in between the makeshift back four and the midfield, the wingers sometimes operate, almost acting as protection to the narrow defence. A



As we have seen, the Serbian tactics demand a certain level of consistent energy, which is present in some of their defensive percentile ranks. Out of possession, they look to smother the opposition, demonstrated by their rank of 84.8 for recoveries per match. They also perform efficiently in recoveries in the final third and interceptions.

However, there are questions relating to their defensive work. While they excel in defensive reactions in the opposition half/immediate actions, they apparently lack that same energy and quality when it comes to clearances and defensive duels won per match. If they look to progress into the latter rounds of the World Cup, they will have to learn to adjust in a way that blocks out the attacks of higher-quality sides.

unique yet clever defensive method that leaves little in the way of space for the opponents.

TRANSITIONS

Serbia's width in possession is obviously a part of their desire to attack the flanks in the final third and get crosses into the box, and this comes in extremely useful in the event of a turnover. Unless they are looking to see a game out, when they retrieve the ball, particularly in the midfield third, they look to break quickly with a strong attacking presence.



After winning possession in their own half near the centre circle, the reaction of all and any Serbian player in front of the ball tells the story. Not one of them is caught on their heels as the team looks to hit the opposition quickly, taking advantage of any lack of shape. With multiple runners in the move, it is extremely difficult for the disorganised opponents to effectively shut down the move or mark the runners, which is where Serbia become deadly. Due to their highly aggressive players in attack, they could be one of the deadliest counterattacking teams at this year's World Cup.



In the event of a turnover where Serbia lose possession, their instinct is to win it back immediately. The aggression level of this counterpress depends on the location of the turnover. For example, the analysis above occurs in the opposition half, so Serbia look to swarm the Slovenian man and limit his options. Beyond the initial press, they also try to have at least one more midfielder behind offering protection.

ATTACKERS

Serbia's attack is probably the most predictable in the whole competition. Sure, some nations have a star striker but they also have impressive backup options that offer significant chances of damage in the final third. Serbia, however, lack some depth below Mitrović and Vlahović.

Mitrović has been present in English football for some time now but has only ever made a statement in the EFL Championship; this is not a reflection of his ability, but his team's adjustment to top-tier football. He excels in a team that provides frequent chances in the box.

Beyond those two, it is slim pickings in terms of quality. Concerning experience, they are layered. Luka Jović comes the closest to a quality replacement, but beyond that, their options diminish somewhat. While Aleksandar Katai may possess the experience, his international record does not reflect that of a player who will make an impact. Meanwhile, the lesser-experienced options also have offered little in the way of a major attacking impact.

In total even with limited options, Serbia have one of the most, if not the most dangerous attacking partnerships in the whole competition. Keeping them both fit and in form is a task of their own and will rely on the performance of the rest of the team.

MIDFIELDERS

In recent fixtures, some notable names have either been absent or not featured as much as some would expect. There may be some behind-the-scenes motives powering this, or it may simply be down to the plethora of talent at their disposal.

While the creativity and all-around solid nature of Sergej Milinković-Savić is essentially irreplaceable, there are other midfield figures they can bring in with a slight tactical alteration. Players who have been included in recent fixtures like Filip Đuričić and Ivan Ilić will offer another dynamic from the bench.

One player whose place is questionable is the experienced Nemanja Gudelj, who would certainly bring an element of quality to the table if called upon; his versatility as a midfielder opens up various tactical approaches.

The Serbians rank well in forward passes which shows an attacking determination which can be seen in a variety of actions from their midfield unit; they can also take some credit for the impressive xG percentile.

DEFENDERS

It would seem that Serbia's back three essentially picks itself, based on recent fixtures. There has been little change, with the three names matching those in our predicted line-up early on in the report.

The main competitors in contention for squad places are Strahinja Eraković and Nikola Milenković; both have played parts in the Nations League and World Cup qualifiers triumphs.

Serbia boasted the best defensive record in the recent Nations League, conceding five goals in six fixtures — defensive form they will have to replicate if they are to navigate their way to the latter stages of the competition.

As Serbia are expected to field a three-at-the-back shape, their wide midfielders will be required to fill certain defensive responsibilities. In line with this, they have wingers who can perform per team needs, but one that stands out is Mihailo Ristić – predominantly a left-back at club level, but one who has been used as a winger for Serbia in recent times, offering a more defensive option in that area.

KEY PLAYER



While there are arguments for players like Dušan Vlahović and Dusan Tadić could be considered key players for Serbia, we believe Aleksandar Mitrović will be the difference maker. His aggressive play style could benefit the Serbians in multiple areas, and his link-up play with the wingers could be a huge part of any success they have.

He excels in attacking involvement, which we can see in stats like non-penalty goals (0.77), xG per 90 (0.73), and shots per 90 (3.75) — all of which rank high on the percentile chart. He is

a player that rarely drifts into wide areas, often tending to operate in central zones, which links to his average of 9.83 offensive duels per 90, and while his win rate of 31.12% may initially seem low to some but when a lot of those duels will be in the box against opposition defenders, that rate is actually impressive as it indicates a dangerous presence in the box.

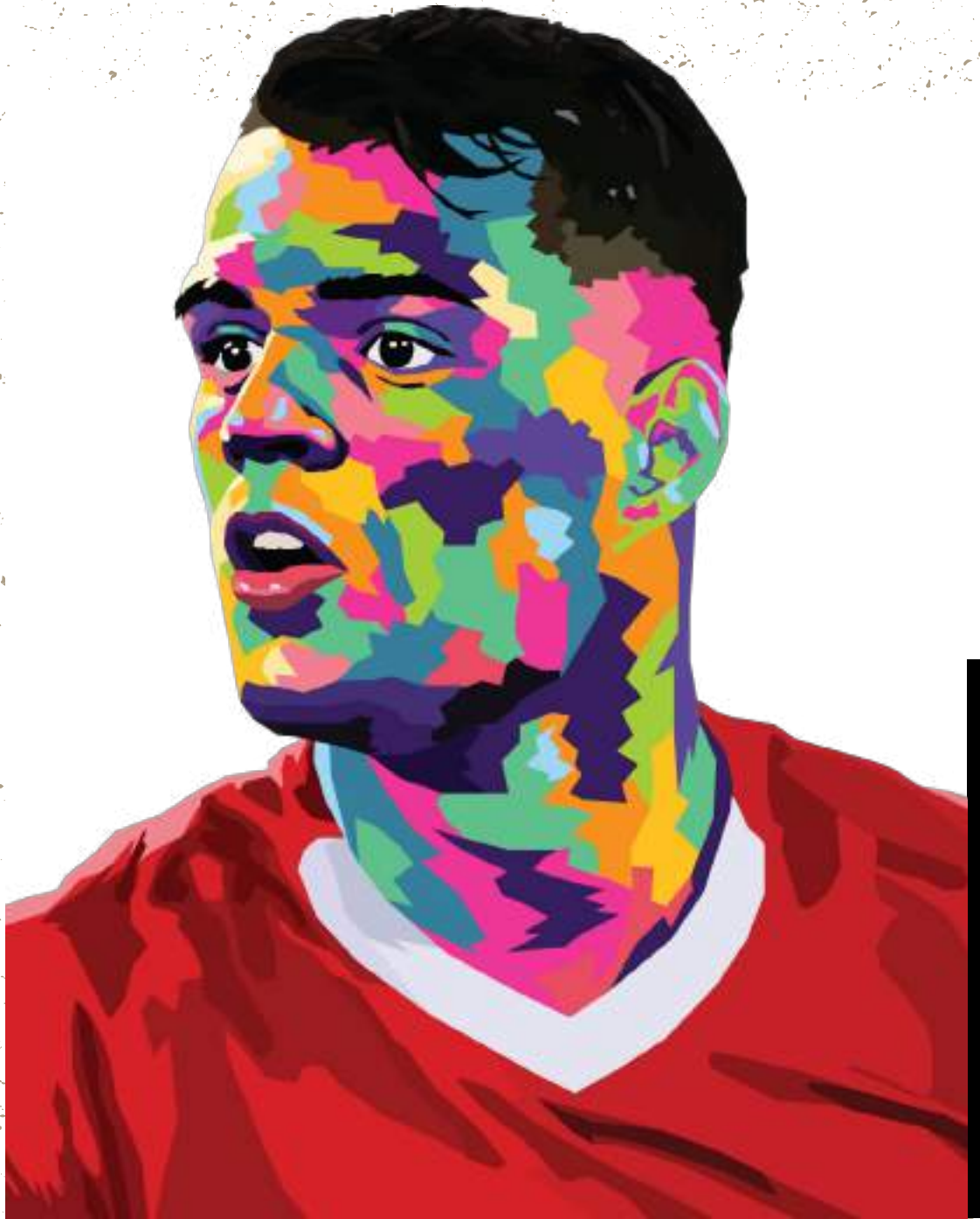
When it comes to his passing, we see his ability, or his impact at least, vary. He contributes nicely with passes to the final third (2.45) and through passes per 90 (0.96) — stats that indicate his involvement in the build-up phase is more frequent than he gets credit for, and the percentile rank for both of those suggests a consistency to it.

TOURNAMENT PREDICTION

There is somewhat of a hushed buzz about this Serbia side. We've seen the same energy/thoughts about Belgium in the past, as well as other hopeful nations, but Serbia will remain in the mid-card group of teams for many fans. They have players that can elevate them from this expectation and if they start the tournament on their own terms and manage to qualify, they could well upset proceedings and reach the semi-finals. Progressing from the group stage is likely a must in the Serbian camp.



SWITZERLAND



GROUP G

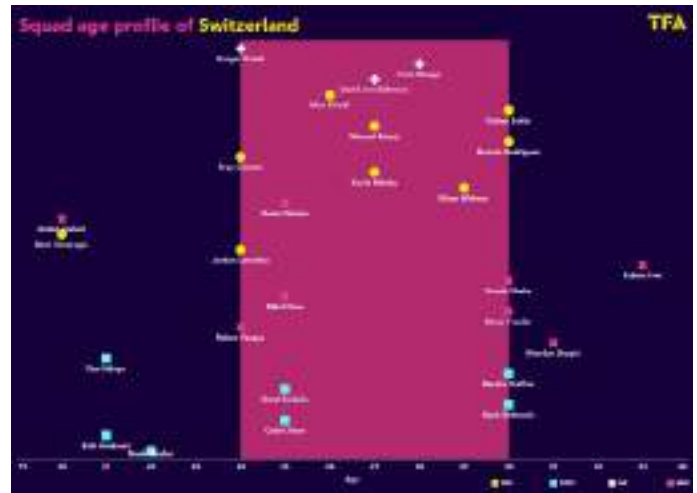
LUIS KIRCHER // @luiskircher

The World Cup 2022 in Qatar will be the 12th time that Switzerland appear in the tournament, having made their first appearance in 1934. Despite missing out on the tournament in 1998 and 2002, they returned in 2006 to progress all the way into the knockout stages. In the last two World Cups in Brazil and Russia, respectively, Switzerland reached the round of 16 both times.

Murat Yakin will be hoping that his men make it to the knockout stages for a third consecutive time. Though they will have a lot of work to do in order to advance to the next stages. They have a competitive group that consists of African giants Cameroon, Serbia and big favourite Brazil. With a decent squad at their disposal, Switzerland will be hoping to exceed expectations in this tournament. In this tactical analysis, in the form of a scout report, we will be discussing Switzerland's tactics and playing style. Let's begin the analysis.

PREDICTED STARTING XI

The graph below contains a breakdown of the probable pool of players that Switzerland's 26-men squad may be comprised of, along with their age and the number of minutes that they have played in the past year. The interesting thing to be inferred is that there are quite a few youngsters (less than 24 years) and just two players over the age of 30 and beyond their peak. Among those in the peak years, we see that the players are mostly clustered in two extremes. We see a lot of players have completed their 24th year or 29th year with few of them in between.



This means that their squad is quite balanced in terms of age, and it looks as though they'll feature mostly players in their peak years. There are a couple of obvious choices from each department. After Yann Sommer's injury in the Bundesliga, it remains unclear whether or not he'll be ready for the tournament. Therefore, Gregor Kobel is likely to be their number one.

In front of him, the obvious defenders would be Ricardo Rodriguez and Manuel Akanji while the likes of Kevin Mbabu, Silvan Widmer, Nico Elvedi and Fabian Schär are also expected to make it into the final squad.

Among the midfielders, Granit Xhaka is going to be their main man in the middle of the park, while the likes of Freuler and Djibril Sow will be partnering him. The other options could be Denis Zakaria who is also expected to make the squad. The attacking department will be spearheaded by Breel Embolo while other viable options include Haris Seferovic, Ruben Vargas and Noah Okafor.

Based on the players and Yakin's recent lineups from friendlies and UEFA Nations League matches, the probable starting XI will be similar to the one in the image below.



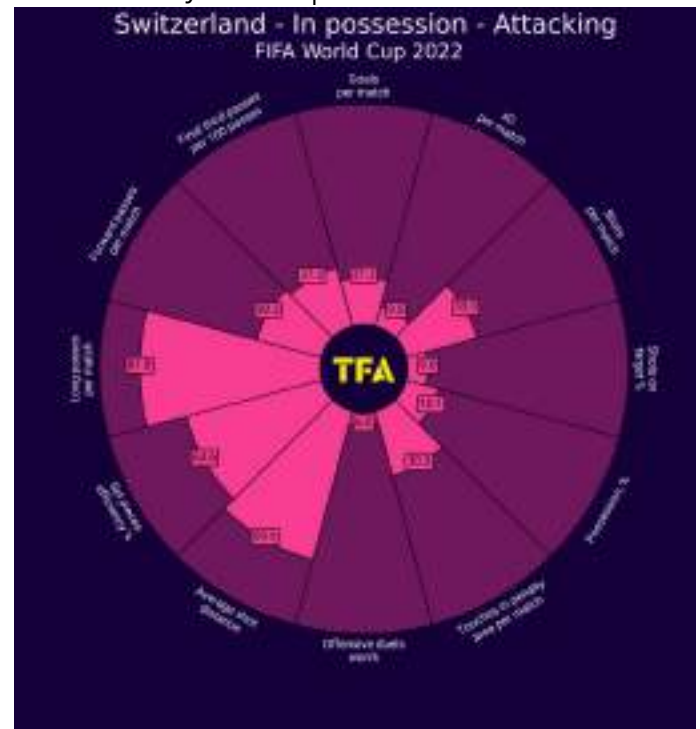
ATTACKING PHASE

The attacking metrics tell us that Switzerland are not a very dominant team when it comes to playing with possession. Their percentile rank of 15 for possession means that they average very little possession per game when compared to the other teams at the World Cup. They also rank below the median level for the number of shots taken per match and provide lots of shots from the distance. Because of this, they create very few high-quality chances as their xG per match is in the ninth percentile — way less than the average team playing at the World Cup.

Switzerland tend to use the long ball very often, as seen in the chart. At the same time, they don't play many progressive passes. Even when they play long balls they don't look to play it quickly due to their conservative approach. This has often led to teams immediately reorganizing

into a low block against them and they have often struggled to get into the penalty area as seen by their relatively low number of touches averaged in it.

Most of their chances come from crosses as they tend to use crosses more with the likes of Rodriguez and Widmer being very good crossers of the ball. They also lose too many offensive duels as they have a percentile rank of 6.



In most situations, Switzerland look to play the ball out from the back by inviting the opposition to press. With two centre-backs, they would look to split their centre-backs wide and their goalkeeper would help the backline by forming a +1 option against the opposition's press. This would result in a five-man backline (including the keeper) as the full-backs would now play higher and create a 2v1 against a player like in the image below.



Their shape in the final third is typically a 4-1-4-1, with Xhaka staying deeper in case of defensive transitions and Freuler pushing forward next to Djibril Sow in attacking midfield. This helps to stretch the defence horizontally.

Xhaka's importance to the team is huge; during their attacking phase, his positioning and ability to find players in space is crucial for Switzerland to move into the final third. We already saw from the chart before that they are very conservative on the ball. So Xhaka's ability to progress the ball for them is very important to their attack.

We can see him dropping as a centre-back in lots of situations. This means that the player marking him has to commit forward leaving space behind him. This can be used by another player to drop into that space. Having one player stretching the defence vertically, the other can use the space effectively.

Also, as a whole, the positioning of the central midfielders is crucial if the opposition looks to man-mark them. Switzerland usually does this to manipulate the opposition by dragging them out of their position. This opens a passing lane for one of the forwards to drop into and receive the ball as they do in the image below.



The likes of Shaqiri can benefit from these sequences as he can drop into these central regions and drive forward. If the opposition's centre-back decides to follow him, he can use his trickery to get past, and Switzerland will then have an overload with two other forwards already ahead.



Overall, the underlying metrics say that Switzerland, despite possessing some high-quality forwards and midfielders, have performed below average. If they want to progress past the group stage against Brazil, Serbia and Cameroon, they need to get their attack firing at their best. Their ability to get the most out of the likes of Embolo and Ruben Vargas will be crucial to their attack succeeding on the big stage.

DEFENSIVE PHASE

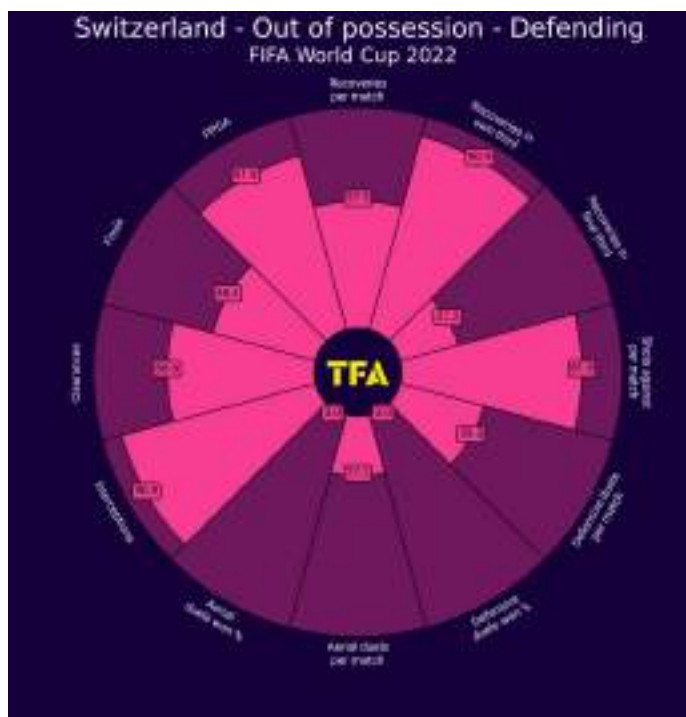
Looking into their defensive statistics over the last calendar year, we see that Switzerland are less intense when compared to the other teams present in the tournament. They have a very high value for PPDA, which is the number of passes they have allowed for every defensive action they make, which describes their less intense approach during defensive phases.

However, being a passive team in terms of their pressing has directly impacted the number of recoveries they make per game. They have an average ranking in recoveries but a very high ranking in recoveries in their own half, showing their defensive approach.

Switzerland don't contest a lot of duels per game, as this includes not only pressing and tackling but also other ground duels when they man-mark an opponent. Also to be noted here is that they have a very low success rate of winning these duels as their success rate is less than 97% of all other teams competing at the World Cup.

Their interception stats are very decent and are very much at the top level. This kind of explains their defensive style as they look to get their positioning right and stay in the right position to intercept the ball. This means that mostly when an opponent looks to attack them, they do not tend to commit very much and would often look to delay the process as much as possible and win the ball back by blocking passing lanes.

Their reactive approach means that they have often allowed a lot of shots from their opposition as seen from the chart. Despite that, they have conceded fewer goals overall as they block the shots very well and Yann Sommer has done a good job of preventing goals.



Switzerland look to deploy a ball-oriented pressing structure where they look to overload the ball side in most instances and try to force a turnover. Their idea behind the setup is to squeeze the space around the ball and block nearby passing lanes.

The issue with this form of pressing is that it leaves a lot of space for the opposition on the far side and a single switch by a player to that side would cause a lot of issues. An example of that is given below where Switzerland have a lot of players committed to the ball side but have left

huge space in front of the defence as they have left it underloaded. We can see an example of that in the image below.



In their low block, they maintain a 4-4-2 system which is not that unusual as several teams that use 4-2-3-1 tend to use a 4-4-2 as their preferred low-block setup. They can transition into this shape quickly from the 4-2-3-1 and this shape also ensures quick counter-attacks are always a possibility.



Overall, Switzerland are a very good team on the defensive front. They have some outstanding players like Akanji, Xhaka and Rodriguez who form the defensive backbone of the team and provide the team with the solidarity they need.

Akanji will also play a key role if Gregor Kobel will be the number one as he hasn't played much for the national team yet but knows Akanji's style of play very well from his time at Borussia Dortmund. Though systematically they have some deficiencies, their individual players are capable of masking that and pushing the team forward.

TRANSITIONS

We mentioned that they like to defend by delaying the attackers and mostly look to find the right situations to make recoveries and intercept the ball instead of diving into challenges. They use a similar set of principles even during transitions.

The reason why this would be effective is that it could effectively give them the time to have their players, who went forward, track back and form an overload. And also, against fast and skilful attackers, this method would ensure that the options for them are blocked while also not providing them with the space to go forward.

An example of this can be seen below where the Swiss players are tracking backwards while having the right body orientation so that Spain's attackers don't have the right options to pass or make runs into.



During an offensive transition, Switzerland generally look to commit just their three forward players to the counter-attack. By doing this, all three players are moving towards the centre instead of the wingers staying wide. With the likes of Embolo, Vargas and Okafor, Switzerland has several offensive players providing very good acceleration and high speed. An example of this can be seen in the image below.



With the pace and power from the likes of Embolo, Okafor and Vargas along with Xhaka and Sow providing creativity for them, Switzerland look to be a very threatening team on the break. Most of their counter-attacks have been stalled or unsuccessful due to decision-making in the final third. If they can sort that out, then it would be hard to stop them in these situations.

ATTACKERS

Comparing potential Switzerland forwards, Cedric Itten has averaged the most number of touches inside the box among the Swiss forwards. The Young Boys' forward has also taken the second-most number of shots per game behind Seferovic. The latter records a high amount of touches inside the box too and is therefore only behind Itten.

Looking into the Embolo, whom we predicted would be a starter, he seems to be around the median mark for both touches as well as shots. This is obviously impacted by the league in which he plays, as Ligue 1 is relatively more competitive than the leagues in which the other Swiss forwards compete. Vargas is much less involved in taking shots and moving into the box, which is expected given that he is a winger.

Comparing their goal contributions, Seferovic seems to overperform his expected contributions by proving to be clinical. Itten seems to be amassing better-expected goal contributions than Seferovic while not being as clinical as the latter. Despite that, he performs better than

most of the other forwards and looks likely to book his ticket to the main tournament.

The likes of Embolo and Vargas seem to be behind the other players even when it comes to goal contributions, of course for the obvious aforementioned reasons. Despite that, Embolo will be the main attacker starting for Switzerland. This is due to his experience playing in a top-five league and also being quite young means that his pace and energy could be used effectively in correspondence with Seferovic's experience.

Overall, Switzerland have a decent attack with some exciting young talents and a couple of experienced campaigners. The only concern is that they do not have forwards in their definite peak period with all those mentioned options either entering their peak or just leaving it.

MIDFIELDERS

Among the midfielders, it is clear that Granit Xhaka is their key progressor of the ball and is probably one of the best in the business in that area. We will discuss his ability and importance to the team in detail later but for now, it's clear that Xhaka is key to Switzerland's ability to progress the ball from their defensive third to the final third.

Closely following him behind is Remo Freuler who has also seemed to be a good progressor for his club, Nottingham Forest. The two midfielders in our predicted lineup were Freuler and Xhaka. The reason for that is both are quite progressive on the ball while also complementing each other defensively. While Xhaka approaches in a much more composed manner, Freuler likes to be aggressive in pressing with intensity.

Zakaria, one of the most highly-rated defensive midfielders in world football, is not very progressive with possession. This is because of his style of play as he is much more inclined

towards defensive responsibilities than attacking and passing. With less playing time, he won't make it into the starting XI.

While Shaqiri, who pretty much plays as a wide forward, is taken into consideration here as a midfielder due to his role as a CAM. He does pretty well in finding teammates with progressive passes but does not record a lot of passes into the final third. This is because of his positioning higher up the pitch as his role is very much responsible for the creation of chances in the final third while the dirty work and linking up the attack and defence will be done by players like Xhaka.

Comparing the midfielders when it comes to goal contributions, Shaqiri easily comes out on top with both expected as well as actual goal contributions. Among the other midfielders, we see Freuler scoring high in terms of actual goal contributions. He is capable of playing as a box-to-box midfielder beside Xhaka, who ranks very low due to his deep positioning on the pitch and the responsibility of staying deep to protect against the opposition's counter-attacks.

Along with them, Djibril Sow will probably start. If they need another midfielder, who needs to do more defensive work against superior teams like Germany or France, then Zakaria would be a very good option to go with. The midfield department for Switzerland is probably their best and they would be very crucial to their nation's chances of making it into the knockout stages.

DEFENDERS

Among the potential starting centre-backs, Elvedi seems to be very good in the defensive metric by averaging around eight interceptions per game. Elvedi is not very progressive on the ball and attempts very few actions. But given that he plays in Bundesliga, his experience playing at a competitive level is why he should be a starter.

Akanji, on the other hand, is decent when it comes to making defensive actions as playing for a possession-dominant team (Manchester City). That means he doesn't have to make many defensive actions in a game but still is probably the best Swiss defender. His value to the team can be seen with respect to his ability on the ball by averaging more progressive passes than any other centre-back.

Ricardo Rodriguez can be seen as a versatile defender with his ability to play as both a centre-back as well as a left-back. Though he doesn't compare very well with other players statistically his versatility and experience playing at a top level for top teams like AC Milan will see him edge past defenders in the lineup.

Among the full-backs, Mbabu seems to be the best player both in offensive as well as defensive ability. Overall, Switzerland's defensive department is stacked with some experienced faces and they have a variety of options available apart from Akanji and Rodriguez who are expected to be sure starters.

KEY PLAYER

Despite having the likes of Embolo and Akanji in the squad, Granit Xhaka will be their key player and probably their best player going into the tournament. While Arsenal under Mikel Arteta had a turbulent 2021-22 season, the Swiss was one of the low-key best performers at the club. And again in 2022-23, Xhaka provides outstanding performances. We can see his importance as a player from the chart above which depicts his statistics in major attacking, passing and defensive metrics.

According to the chart, he ranks around the 56th percentile among the league midfielders when it comes to the total number of passes made into the final third per game and what's more

interesting is that his accuracy seems to be one of the best in the league despite such a volume of passes. This shows that he is consistently responsible for Arsenal's progression from their own third to the attacking third. His forward pass ratio, which measures the percentage of forward passes among the total passes, is also around the 56th percentile. So, when compared to the other midfielders present in the league, Xhaka has a fairly high tendency to attempt a forward pass instead of lateral ones as he ranks above average.

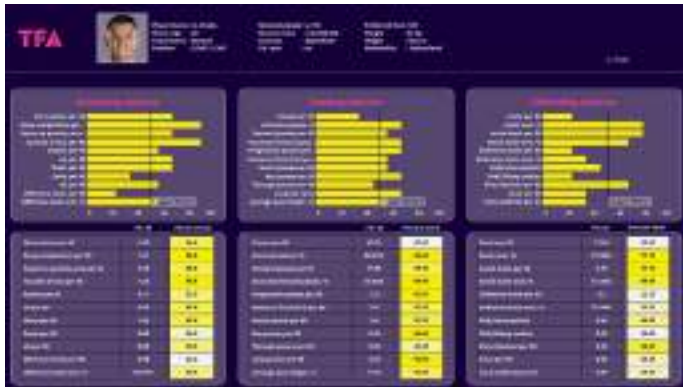
The general trend among the midfielders today shows that not being progressive does not mean they are good at being secure in possession and retaining the ball. But Xhaka's pass completion rate tells a different story as he is one of the best in terms of ball retention.

His ability to read the situation is one of the reasons why he can retain and progress the ball at the same time. He also has a knack for breaking lines and playing valuable passes to his teammates. This is shown by his high value when it comes to the number of key passes and progressive passes that he has attempted.

He also seems to contribute a lot in terms of goals as he takes a high quantity of shots per game — the reason behind his xG value being above average. Xhaka is a player who is about bringing out the ball to his teammate's feet. It will be very interesting to see his combinations with Shaqiri when the latter drops deep as their chemistry is very crucial to Switzerland's attack.

His contributions to the side do not stop there as his defensive abilities at the centre of the park are as valuable as his passing. We mentioned before that he is one of the cornerstones of this team's defence and the proof can be seen in the chart. He is very good, aerially, as he contests a high number of aerial duels and also wins most of them (percentile rank around 70).

His style of play mostly revolves around reading the play and positioning himself in the right place to intercept the ball. This is one of the reasons why he averages a decent number of interceptions per game while also contributing to the team's defensive compactness. This is why he doesn't look to contest in a lot of duels. At the same time, he seems to be above average whenever he contests.



Overall, his positives completely outweigh his certain negatives and the stats show why Xhaka is probably the best Swiss player going into the tournament. Switzerland would be expecting him to be at his best for them to qualify and make it into the knockout stages.

TOURNAMENT PREDICTION

With Brazil in their group, Switzerland would be the second favourite ahead of Cameroon and Serbia to qualify from their group into the next stage. Unlike last time, where they were knocked very early in the Round of 16, they would be hoping to reach the quarterfinals stage. It would be then very competitive and difficult for them in the quarter-finals as they will start facing favourites like France, Portugal, Germany, etc in these phases. So, with the team that they have a final 16-exit at best would be our predicted outcome.



GROUP H

PLAYERS TO WATCH

VENKATANARAYANAN VENKATESAN // @VenkyRedDevil

The first-ever winter world cup is almost here. It's time to look at which teams are the strongest and which players are the ones to watch out for specifically. In order to list down the players to look out for, we have specifically looked at the U23 category and players who play quite often for their respective clubs this season. It is to be noted that, these players might not start all the matches for their teams in the World Cup and could potentially miss out on getting called up altogether, but if and when they do represent their country in Qatar, they definitely have the potential to be game changers.

Group H consists of 2016 European Champions Portugal, Ghana, Uruguay and South Korea. The following visualisation shows the U23 players to watch out for from this group. All data is from this season.

Vitinha | PSG | Portugal | 22 years old

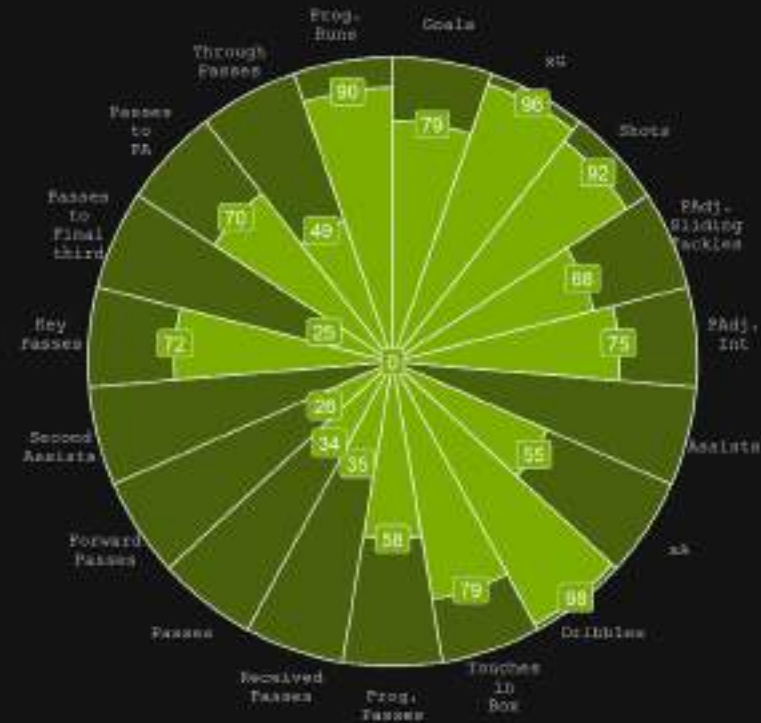
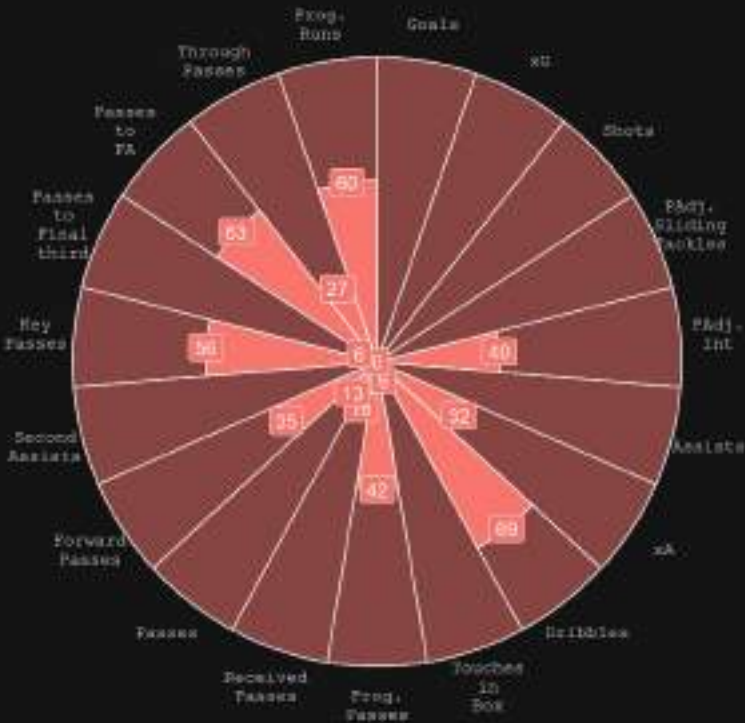
Portugal's squad is pretty much one of the oldest in the entire tournament and their manager, Fernando Santos, prefers to rely on experienced players usually but this doesn't mean that Portugal are short of fresh young talent. Vitinha, who secured his move to PSG recently and has pretty much started almost every game for the French Champions, will most likely play a key part in deciding how far Portugal progress in this World Cup. The 22-year-old midfielder's strengths are on the defensive side of the game as indicated by his percentile of tackles and interceptions in the visual above. Vitinha made his senior international debut only very recently (March 2022) but his domestic performances earned him a call-up to the national team in the recently concluded Nations League games. He is not expected to start all the games at Qatar, but if Portugal are looking for a game-changer from the bench, Vitinha should surely be one of their first options to come on and create an impact.

World Cup 2022 | Group H

Percentile ranks among players from respective positions in respective leagues | Min. 200 minutes played

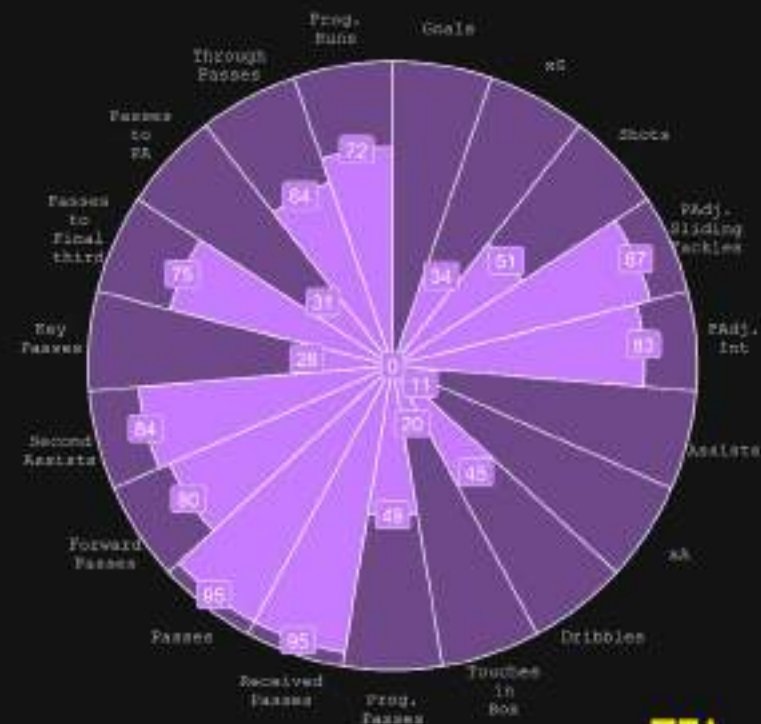
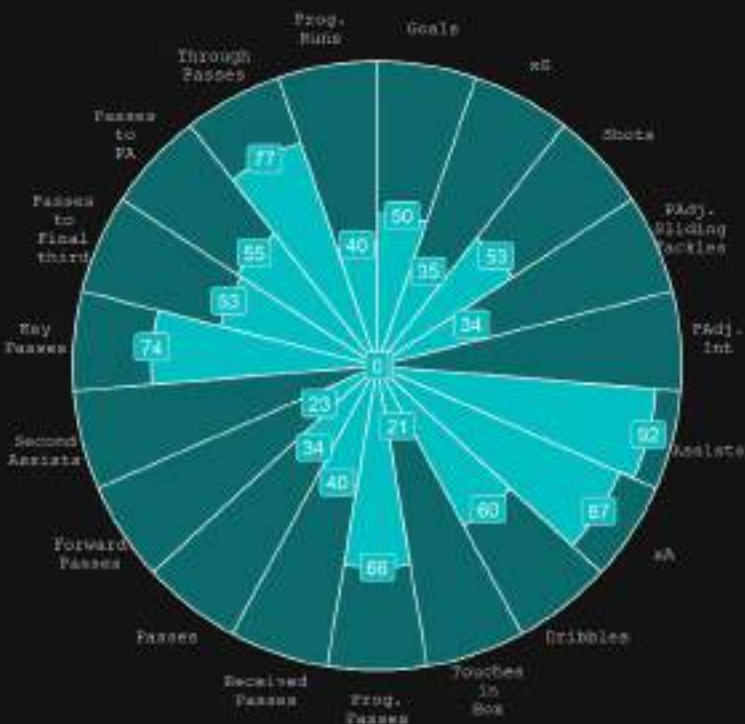
B. Ocampo | Cádiz | Uruguay

K. Sulemana | Rennes | Ghana



Kang-In Lee | Mallorca | South Korea

Vitinha | PSG | Portugal



Data: Wyscout | Visual by @VenkyDeddevil | All stats are 'per 90' unless mentioned otherwise
Data as on 14th Oct, 2022

Kamaldeen Sulemana | FC Rennes | Ghana | 20 years old

Kamaldeen Sulemana announced himself to Europe after his excellent 2020/21 season with FC Nordsjælland. The versatile forward then secured his move to Rennes of Ligue 1 in the summer of 2021. Having settled into life in France slowly, Sulemana, after a frustrating end to last season because of injury, is once again back as a regular at Rennes. He has started only two games so far but has made nine appearances for the Ligue 1 side so far. Sulemana's radar above shows his biggest strength to be his dribbling – ranking 98th percentile for Dribbles per 90 minutes. The attacking forward is capable of playing anywhere in the front three as well as an attacking midfielder but he has been most often used as a left-sided forward. He likes to take on opponents with his dribbling and creates chances as well for his teammates as seen in his percentile ranks for Expected Assists per 90 minutes and Key Passes per 90 minutes. Kamaldeen Sulemana came with big expectations on his shoulders when he secured his move to Rennes. Now he has the platform to showcase his talent on the world stage, it will be interesting to see how well he does that.

Lee Kang-in | RCD Mallorca | South Korea | 21 years old

21-year-old Mallorca attacker Lee Kang-in has already represented South Korea at the World Cup — in the 2019 U20 World cup, where he also won the Golden Ball award (Best player of the tournament). So, representation at the biggest stage should be familiar to Lee. However, Lee Kang-in has had a steady start to his senior international career with the attacker involved regularly in the squad but still not a regular in the starting 11. Lee has played the most minutes among attackers for Mallorca this season. His goalscoring output however isn't very good right now. He, however, has shown a lot of creative potential in the past during his youth career and his time at Valencia. Lee Kang-in has the ability to become one of the future stars for South Korea and he will definitely be expecting his chance at the 2022 World Cup.

Brian Ocampo | Cádiz | Uruguay | 23 years old

Brian Ocampo moved to Cádiz in the recently concluded summer transfer window. He is yet to get up to speed at his new club making only 6 appearances in the league so far. 23-year-old Ocampo can play on either side of the front three but has played most of his minutes on the left side this season. He made his senior Uruguay debut in the summer of 2021. Ocampo was part of the recently concluded friendlies but did not play. He will, however, be waiting for his chance to have his say in this World Cup.

GHANA



GROUP H

ALFIE PEARSON // @alfiepear

Despite being nine-time African Cup of Nations finalists, winning four, Ghana are relative newcomers to the FIFA World Cup. First qualifying for the prestigious tournament in 2006, the Black Stars then competed in two further World Cups in 2010 and 2014 before failing to qualify for the 2018 edition.

Bringing the youngest team at the 2006 tournament, Ghana progressed beyond the group stage but were beaten by Brazil in the round of 16. The 2010 World Cup was the first ever held in Africa and Ghana's inspiring performances in South Africa led to them becoming only the third African team to reach the World Cup quarter-finals.

In a heart-wrenchingly cruel quarter-final fixture against Uruguay, the Black Stars were knocked out in a penalty shootout following a controversial goal-preventing handball from Uruguay striker Luis Suárez. In 2014, Ghana registered just one point in a tough group with Germany, Portugal, and the United States.

Ghana's preparations for the 2022 World Cup in Qatar have been far from ideal. Milovan Rajevac, the manager that guided Ghana to their historic quarter-final in 2010, returned to manage the Black Stars in September 2021. However, the Serbian was sacked in January 2022 after a dreadful AFCON campaign. He was replaced by Otto Addo, who appeared as a player at Ghana's first-ever World Cup in 2006.

Rather unexpectedly, Addo's Ghana beat a strong Nigeria squad on away goals in the World Cup qualification play-offs to earn a spot in Qatar. The Black Stars' reward is the opportunity to get revenge on Uruguay, alongside facing Portugal's talents and Heung-min Son's South Korea in the group stage.

Another obstacle but overall positive for Ghana is the recent influx of dual nationals to the squad.

Improving the quality of players available for Addo to select, the new players lack experience and cohesion with the team and international football ahead of the World Cup.

The English-born duo of Brighton's Tariq Lamptey and Bristol City's Antoine Semenyo have joined the squad along with Club Brugge defender Denis Odoi. Hamburg attacker Ransford-Yeboah Königsdörffer and Karlsruhe centre-back Stephan Ambrosius were both Germany under-21 internationals prior to their recent Ghana call-ups.

Southampton centre-back Mohammed Salisu has finally joined the Black Stars after years of declining call-ups to focus on his club career. However, the most notable recent inclusion is Athletic Club's Iñaki Williams. Despite being capped by the Spanish national team, Iñaki declared to play for Ghana at the World Cup, unlike his younger brother Nico, who selected Spain.

This tactical preview will look at how Otto Addo will attempt to mould this new-look squad into a team capable of progressing out of their challenging World Cup group.

PREDICTED STARTING XI



Alongside the diversity and quantity of players, new and old, that Ghana have selected in recent months, Otto Addo's inconsistent team shapes have made predicting a starting XI more challenging. Addo has deployed the Black Stars in variations of a 4-3-3/4-2-3-1 as well as five at the back formations. Although Addo's plan is currently unclear ahead of the World Cup, we have tried to predict the starting XI in the image above.

Despite Lawrence Ati Zigi being the Ghanaian goalkeeper performing at the highest level, the St. Gallen #1 has been missing from recent national team squads. As a result, Charlton Athletic's Joe Wollacott appears to have beaten the more experienced Richard Ofori of Orlando Pirates to start between the sticks. Eupen's backup goalkeeper Abdul Manaf Nurudeen is

expected to be third choice, after beginning his career at the Senegalese Aspire Academy owned by World Cup hosts Qatar.

At right-back, Addo has a new dilemma of choosing between 22-year-old Tariq Lamptey and 34-year-old Denis Odoi. Lamptey has only picked up one cap for the Black Stars, whereas Odoi has collected four. Odoi's caps include the crucial two-legged tie against Nigeria's star-studded attacking variety, in which the former Belgium international seemed to have performed well enough to lock down a starting spot prior to Lamptey's recent call-up.

Although both players are keen to get forward, with Lamptey's creative ability a great asset, Odoi's defensive capabilities and maturity will likely see the Club Brugge man start against the likes of Rafael Leão, Heung-min Son, and Nicolás de la Cruz.

Despite their clubs' abysmal start to the season, Leicester City's Daniel Amartey and Strasbourg's Alexander Djiku are expected to start at the heart of the Ghana defence. Amartey's leadership qualities are essential to Otto Addo achieving defensive solidity, while Djiku offers valuable progressive passing and distribution against South Korea's press and Uruguay's relentless centre-forwards.

The most balanced pairing is probably Djiku and Southampton's Mohammed Salisu, with Salisu being Ghana's best centre-back. However, his singular cap and the minimal errors from the Amartey-Djiku partnership may leave him on the bench. Auxerre's Gideon Mensah, quite a well-rounded full-back and another good progressor, will start on the left of the defence.

Arsenal's Thomas Partey is a crucial element to Ghana's overall play with his ability in and out of possession. His experience will be vital to fulfil a more disciplined role next to Mohammed Kudus of Ajax.

Kudus' form at Ajax so far this season has been incredible, albeit as a centre-forward. With the attacking talent at Otto Addo's disposal, Kudus' versatility he has shown for Ghana and former club Nordsjælland in particular helps Addo's capacity to select the Ajax man in a deeper role in a more attack-minded XI. With a player of Kudus' quality, he must fit into the starting XI somewhere.

The forward line may consist of two players looking to reach milestone achievements in Ghanaian football. Jordan Ayew will be looking to surpass his legendary father Abedi Pele's goal tally by scoring in Qatar. Three appearances would also take the Crystal Palace attacker into Ghana's top five capped players of all time. His brother André Ayew, of Qatar Stars League side Al Sadd, needs one cap to become their most capped player ever.

Jordan Ayew would play a similar right winger role to his club side, displaying exceptional defensive work rate whilst also being a potential outlet. Otto Addo seems to be searching for a central role that André Ayew could fulfil. This looks to be behind the striker with the freedom to drift wide or into the Black Stars midfield.

Rennes' Kamaldeen Sulemana has struggled to make an impression in his appearances for Ghana so far. However, Sulemana's frightening pace and unpredictable dribbling for opponents will make him a certain threat at the World Cup. Recruit Iñaki Williams is the best striker option for the Black Stars. The Athletic Club attacker is developing into a multifaceted striker, capable of relentlessly gaining territory out of the box whilst always being dangerous inside the box.

The recent number of quality foreign-born and based additions to the Black Stars squad is improving the team but potentially limiting the opportunities available to local-based players. Following news of FIFA paying clubs \$10,000

per player each day for the number of days that player is at the World Cup, there are discussions in Ghana that local-based players should be selected in the 26-man squad. Some believe that giving these funds to Ghana Premier League clubs would effectively act as a silver bullet for the under-resourced domestic league.

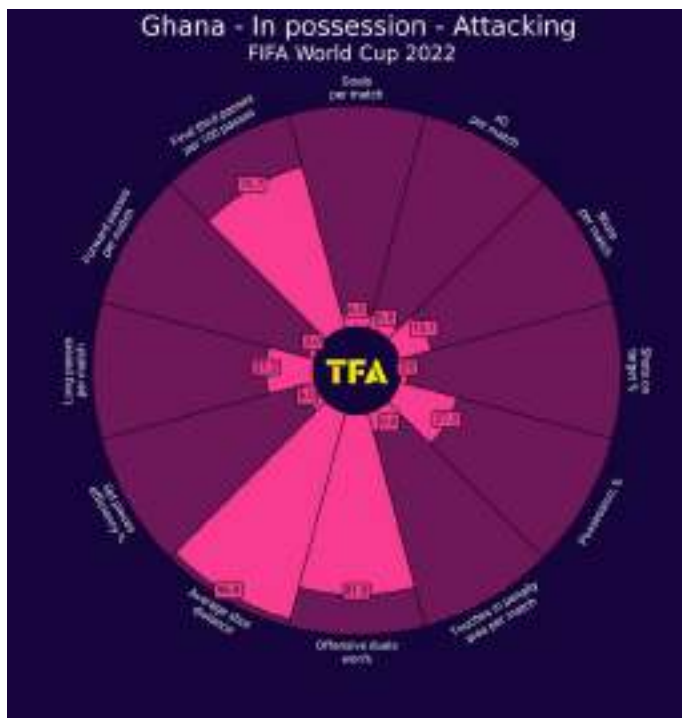
However, it is unlikely that the Ghana Premier League players would provide greater quality than regular starters in Europe. Asante Kotoko's 19-year-old goalkeeper Ibrahim Danlad is a good sweeper but naturally has issues claiming crosses standing at 5'10".

Hearts of Oak left-back Dennis Korsah may be called up to the squad if Reading's Abdul Rahman Baba is injured. Daniel Afriyie Barnieh has previously been called up, but the 21-year-old Hearts of Oak winger is unlikely to have a place at the World Cup. The Ghana Premier League does produce exciting young players though, with Asante Kotoko's Isaac Opong and Bechem United's Clinton Duodu being two attackers with the potential to feature for the Black Stars in the future.

The figure below displays the ages of players that could potentially be selected by Otto Addo for the World Cup, including Ghana FA targets of Bayer Leverkusen loanee Callum Hudson-Odoi and Crystal Palace's Jeffrey Schlupp.



ATTACKING PHASE



Ghana's build-up from their goalkeeper is often short, but the receiver depends on the number of centre-backs. With two centre-backs, the goalkeeper will split the centre-backs who will be positioned between the width of the six and eighteen-yard box. The centre-backs will receive, with one full-back in a more advanced position and the other more reserved. The holding midfielder will remain in the pivot space throughout, hoping to draw in an opponent to create space for the central midfielders to receive. However, Arsenal's Thomas Partey is efficient at dismarking and as a quality ball progressor, his role in build-up will be more than just creating space.

If the Black Stars line up with three centre-backs, the central centre-back will typically receive a short pass from the goalkeeper. Both wing-backs will still be positioned on the border of the defensive third, with a midfielder in the pivot space, looking to overload the build-up phase. This has also occurred in a four at the back, with the Ghana holding midfielder dropping between the centre-back pairing. Occasionally, the central centre-

back in the five will push up into the pivot space to provide an additional forward passing option, although this rarely happens unless the versatile Edmund Addo is selected in the back three.

Ghana's ability to progress the ball into midfield from the build-up phase looks better with a balanced centre-back pairing consisting of a right-footer and a left-footer. Southampton's left-footer Mohammed Salisu would be the ideal left-sided option, but Otto Addo may not want to break the partnership of Daniel Amartey and Alexander Djiku. Between the sticks, Joe Wollacott has decent distribution over long distances and could help to find outlets like Iñaki Williams to relieve pressure. Eupen's Abdul Manaf Nurudeen is a weak and loopy kicker which is favourable for opponents.



The image above is an example of Ghana's attacking shape against Brazil. After a tough first half, Otto Addo switched to more of 5-1-2-1-1 formation away from the 4-1-4-1/4-2-3-1 hybrid. Looking to advance into the final third, Ghana's shape has become a 3-1-6.

The two wide centre-backs are positioned in the half-spaces and can access the wide or central areas, whilst also being an option to recycle possession. Pivot player Iddrisu Baba remains deep, facilitating the wider centre-back positioning and assisting in rest defence against Brazil's front two in their 4-4-2. Both Ghana wing-backs, Abdul Rahman Baba and Denis Odoi, are holding maximum width to stretch the opposition horizontally and create as much space for the central players as possible.

With a four-at-the-back system, the Black Stars' shape can have more of a 2-1 base or a 2-4-4. The centre-backs will stay back with the holding midfielder's position depending on the opposition's forward line. If the opposition have all players behind the ball, the holding midfielder will step up. With the five at the back, both wing-backs will advance and hold width. However, the four at the back tends to employ more of an adaptive width approach.



An example of this adaptive width can be seen above against the Central African Republic. Left-back Gideon Mensah is the widest player on that flank with winger Joseph Paintsil inverting. However, on the right side, Ghana's wide players have adapted their width against the opponent's defensive structure. Winger Osman Bukari has taken up a more threatening position for off-the-ball movements, with the ability to dash in behind or drop to rotate with attack-minded midfielder Daniel-Kofi Kyereh.

The Red Star Belgrade winger can also utilise his physical and qualitative superiority regarding his SAQ and dribbling ability to get into wide areas ahead of the opposition full-back if needed. Right-back Andy Yiadom also has a narrow position, which is beneficial for rest defence and could be effective against Uruguay's inverting wide midfielders. This adaptive width can work well due to the proximity of the players to connect and combine, but the attacks can become congested with no static wide presence providing a switch of play.

The image above shows Ghana in more of a 2-4-4 shape, with a narrow front four occupying spaces ahead of Yiadom, Kyereh, Addo and Mensah. However, there will be instances where the shape becomes a 2-3-5 with a central midfielder joining the front line. Expecting Thomas Partey to be joined by attack-minded midfielders, likely Mohammed Kudus and/or Daniel-Kofi Kyereh, this shape could be seen more frequently with Partey as the pivot. In the example above, Kyereh has used dynamic superiority from midfield to supply depth beyond the front line. Receiving possession off Mensah, Addo turns and launches a pass over the defence towards Kyereh to win Ghana a corner. The image below shows adaptive width again from Ghana in a 4-2-4 looking to get forward quickly.



Overall, the Black Stars lack a consistent attacking identity from the build-up phase all the way through to the final third. They only control possession against significantly weaker opponents, which they won't face at the World Cup. In their recent fixtures, approximately 15% of Ghana's shots have an xG over 0.20. This indicates the Black Stars' struggles to produce high-quality chances alongside their tendency to attempt speculative shots from audacious angles. Their recent squad additions, particularly the all-around attacking play of Athletic Club striker Iñaki Williams, will be helpful at the World Cup as they try to fashion out better chances.

DEFENSIVE PHASE



The wingers' narrow positions ensure numerical superiority in central areas and would be effective against Portugal's João Cancelo with his tendency to invert from full-back. The 4-5-1 prevents direct access to the half-spaces, forcing play wide. The midfield players can also block threatening spaces with cover shadows, as shown by Sulemana with Neymar. The staggering of the midfield, with Baba deeper, can also assist in winning back possession through jumping or a more man-oriented approach with the pivot player filling in vacant spaces if a central midfielder presses.

However, the narrow winger positioning can be exploited by quick passes from the full-back into an attacker between the lines. Brazil began to utilise left-back Alex Telles to quickly access Neymar's brilliant off-the-ball movement into unmarked territory away from holding midfielder Iddrisu Baba before Ghana could shift across. This eventually prompted an in-game switch to the 5-1-2-1-1 shape from Otto Addo. Nevertheless, the compactness that the 4-5-1 can provide facilitates more aggression from the full-backs or centre-backs. This would suit the assertive, front-foot defensive styles of Mohammed Salisu and Alidu Seidu for example.



With their inconsistent setup under Otto Addo in recent international breaks, Ghana have defended in a 4-5-1 and a 5-1-2-1-1 shape with a diamond midfield. The Black Stars will likely line up with four defenders and deploy the 4-5-1 structure. Their 4-5-1 is a mid-block with attacking midfielder André Ayew dropping in alongside Mohammed Kudus ahead of pivot player Thomas Partey.

This structure does leave the striker isolated and is much better suited to a mid-block or a low-block rather than a high-pressing approach against opposition build-up. In deeper phases of opposition possession, the striker is mainly responsible for preventing access to the opposition pivot player.

The image below displays Ghana's 4-5-1 shape against Brazil. Striker Felix Afena-Gyan has been bypassed by Brazil's centre-backs combining but is recovering by supplying pressure from behind on the ball carrier. In this example, Mallorca's Iddrisu Baba is the pivot player with Kamaldeen Sulemana and Jordan Ayew narrowly positioned as the right and left winger respectively.

As mentioned above, the 4-5-1 can allow the full-backs to jump and aggressively press the ball carrier. In the example above against the Central African Republic, left-back Gideon Mensah has left the defensive line. Typically, in these situations, the Black Stars' ball-side winger and central midfielder will create a 3vs2 overload in the wide areas.

However, ball-side midfielder Daniel-Kofi Kyereh hasn't fully committed to defending, forcing winger Joseph Paintsil to follow the opposition's underlapping run. Genk's Ghanaian winger displays excellent defensive work rate to recover possession.

The 4-5-1 shape is easy for the full-back and winger to double up against an opposition wide player. The winger could also drop in to make a back five, the sort of scenario that benefits from fielding Tariq Lamptey as the right-winger, although Jordan Ayew's defensive work is commendable.

Paintsil's tracking back also allowed the centre-backs to remain inside the box rather than hesitating and then getting drawn towards the ball. In the five-at-the-back structure, the wide centre-backs will have additional numbers inside the box so are free to jump to press the underlap.

Pivot player Edmund Addo can also stay centrally and drop into the box instead of moving wide thanks to Paintsil's recovery run. This is useful as Ghana tend to prioritise intercepting crosses across the face of goal rather than cutbacks to the penalty spot, which the holding midfielder would now cover.



The image above displays the five at the back with a diamond midfield that Ghana deployed against Japan and in the second half against Brazil. The Black Stars still have a narrow midfield but less ability to overload the centre of midfield due to the additional player in the defensive line.

Three centre-backs provide more cover behind the full-backs who jump wide to press the opposition winger when the ball is played. The opposition full-backs are allowed the ball more so than the 4-5-1 before pressure is applied. However, the player at the tip of the diamond, André Ayew in the example above, is solely responsible for man-marking the opposition's pivot player.

This could be useful against Portugal's Rúben Neves and his ball progression quality, but the space conceded elsewhere could be punished by their other qualities.

The 5-1-2-1-1 seems a contingency plan for Otto Addo when he wants more defensive solidity, but more of a 5-4-1 shape would increase space occupation out of possession.

Ghana's ability to prevent vertical passes to break the midfield line could be effective against Uruguay and Portugal, who typically try to attack with a more direct approach rather than being possession-heavy which the Black Stars set-up could force upon them.

Contrastingly, South Korea are statistically one of the leading nations at the World Cup for ball retention so will have the patience to work the ball around despite the comparative drop in quality.

TRANSITIONS

In the last year, Ghana have averaged 1.36 counterattacks ending with shots per game.

21.3% of their overall counterattacks end with shots. In comparison, they allow the opposition to have 1.29 counterattacks ending with shots per game, but the opposition are able to unleash an effort on goal from 44.2% of their counterattacks.

In attacking transitions, the Black Stars are keen to progress the ball through ball-carrying. If the midfield area is congested, they will look to combine and find a forward pass to a teammate who can receive and drive forward in space.

When space is available after regaining possession, the ball carrier will drive forwards and dribble with supporting numbers and movement ahead of the ball. Upon entering the final third, Ghana will look to release the ball to a wide player before delivering a pass infield.



In the above example against Brazil, Ajax midfielder Mohammed Kudus has carried possession into the opposition's half. Striker Felix Afena-Gyan has remained ahead of the ball to occupy the centre-backs with wingers Jordan Ayew and Kamaldeen Sulemana staying wide. André Ayew is adding support in central areas and right-back Denis Odoi is powering forwards to overload the wide area.

Sulemana receives possession and begins to drive at the defence with Odoi providing an overlap. Drawing Casemiro out, Sulemana returns the ball to Kudus who spreads play to Jordan Ayew, but the Crystal Palace man dawdles and his cross is blocked.

When defending transitions, Ghana will always look for at least one player to provide pressure to the ball carrier. In central areas, a central midfielder will attempt to hound the opponent in possession. In wider areas, the full-back frequently jumps out to close down space the opponent attacker can receive in.

However, the full-back can have a dilemma against an opposition winger ahead of the ball. The full-back can be pinned by the winger's positioning and leave the ball carrier to a teammate, or they press the ball carrier and leave the winger free.

In the image below, Nicaragua created a triangle on the left with Ghana right-back Alidu Seidu getting drawn out of position to press the Nicaragua left-back. Nicaragua can play around Seidu, finding the central midfielder that is goal-side of Abdul Fatawu Issahaku to access the left winger in space. Ghana's centre-backs will remain back in rest defence with their holding midfielder generally also staying back.



ATTACKERS

The experienced brothers of Jordan and André Ayew will be joined in the Ghana squad by youngster Kamaldeen Sulemana and Spanish recruit Iñaki Williams. Sporting CP's 18-year-old wonderkid Abdul Fatawu Issahaku, arriving after success with Dreams FC in the Ghana Premier League, will be selected as Otto Addo's favoured left-footed right winger.

Cremonese centre-forward Felix Afena-Gyan is also expected to represent the Black Stars in Qatar.

Winger Joseph Paintsil has started the season in spectacular form for Belgian side KRC Genk and deserves to return to the squad. Osman Bukari of Red Star Belgrade (Crvena Zvezda) is another talented winger likely to be named in the 26-man squad.

German-born Ransford-Yeboah Königsdörffer and English-born Antoine Semenyo may battle to be named as Otto Addo's versatile attacker, despite only being chosen for one camp so far, after both scoring a few times already this season. Hearts of Oak winger Daniel Afriyie Barnieh looks unlikely to be called up, though he looks to be the strongest possible Ghana Premier League addition to the squad.

MIDFIELDERS

Arsenal's Thomas Partey and Ajax's Mohammed Kudus will be starters for Ghana at this World Cup as two standout stars. Freiburg's Daniel-Kofi Kyereh has started the season strongly after his summer transfer from FC St. Pauli. Kyereh offers some more attacking quality from midfield, similarly to Kudus, and prefers to operate behind the striker. Iddrisu Baba of Mallorca provides steel with his excellent defensive duelling.

The Belgium-based duo of Gent's Elisha Owusu and Eupen's Mubarak Wakaso offer different qualities to the Black Stars midfield. Owusu is more technically secure whereas Wakaso is more of an energetic ball-winner in midfield. However, only one player may go to Qatar with RC Lens midfielder Salis Abdul Samed reportedly receiving his first call-up ahead of the World Cup.

Salis Abdul Samed has settled in at Lens brilliantly with his ball retention in possession and dogged pressing to regain when out of possession. Edmund Addo of FC Sheriff Tiraspol is yet to appear for the Moldovan side this season after his transfer to Red Star Belgrade fell through.

Primarily a defensive midfielder, Addo has appeared all over the pitch from the forward line to the defensive line. His versatility is best utilised as a centre-back or right-back and could be a useful asset for the Black Stars.

DEFENDERS

Southampton's Mohammed Salisu, Leicester City's Daniel Amartey and Strasbourg's Alexander Djiku will be Otto Addo's three main centre-back choices. Amartey's leadership is unrivalled in the Ghana defence and has developed a strong partnership with Djiku. Salisu is the best centre-back, but his only recent decision to play for Ghana may have hindered his likelihood to start.

Celta Vigo's Joseph Aidoo has been a consistent performer for the Spanish club but has struggled for game time with the Black Stars. Aidoo has been ever-present for Celta Vigo this season but will be contesting for a spot at the World Cup with Rayo Vallecano's Abdul Mumin and Clermont Foot's Alidu Seidu. It wouldn't be a surprise to see Seidu in the 26-man squad, a defensively solid player capable of playing at right-back too.

At right-back, expect to see two recent additions in Brighton's Tariq Lamptey and Club Brugge's Denis Odoi. Reading captain Andy Yiadom may feel unlikely to have been replaced so close to the World Cup, but that ruthlessness is required to bring more quality to the World Cup squad.

Yiadam, like Lamptey and Odoi, is a strong ball carrier but cannot compete against Lamptey's end product and Odoi's defensive solidity. His Reading teammate Abdul Rahman Baba is a well-rounded option at left-back and will join Auxerre's Gideon Mensah as Otto Addo's two left-backs without injuries. However, Abdul Rahman Baba is very injury-prone, which could lead to the selection of Ghana Premier League player Dennis Korsah from Hearts of Oak.

goal is an additional goal-scoring threat from midfield for the Black Stars.

Meanwhile, his defensive work is also under-appreciated with his burst of speed rewarding his pressing intent to regain possession. Alongside Arsenal's Thomas Partey, Kudus has also displayed good passing range to access Ghana's wide players.

KEY PLAYER

TOURNAMENT PREDICTION



Mohammed Kudus (177cm/5'10", 70kg/154lbs) is a versatile left-footer playing his club football with Eredivisie reigning champions Ajax. The talented midfielder has actually started the season as a centre-forward and is on fire, scoring nine goals already.

Despite the exceptional goal-scoring form, it is clear through his questionable run-making and consistent offsides that he's a useful striker option but is still best used in a deeper role. Black Stars assistant coach Dramani Mas-Ud Didi also coached Kudus with the Right to Dream Academy and FC Nordsjælland, and said that Kudus has developed various aspects of his game by playing in different positions.

As a result, we will likely see the Ajax man operating in a deeper role for Ghana at the World Cup. Kudus is excellent at receiving possession in tight spaces before turning and driving forward, offering another route of ball progression. His new-found potency in front of

Facing a typically well-drilled South Korean side, an experienced yet vibrant Uruguayan team and a Portuguese squad littered with world-class talent, a group-stage exit is likely for Ghana. However, the Black Stars do have quality themselves that could win them games, especially with the new players in the squad.

Southampton's Mohammed Salisu enters the squad as the best centre-back, although he may not be selected as a starter. Tariq Lamptey and Denis Odoi have levelled up the right-back spot and provide different options. RC Lens' Salis Abdul Samed offers more steel in the midfield and could potentially form a solid double pivot alongside Arsenal's Thomas Partey. Finally, Spanish-born striker Iñaki Williams can create chaos in the final third and create a chance from nothing as a physically excellent outlet.

The Ghana squad that Otto Addo has available is more than capable of acquiring results at the World Cup, but maybe a few additional months with the new players to create a new, consistent style of play would have transformed this side into a team ready to rival the Black Stars heroes of 2010.

PORTUGAL



GROUP H

— BRYANT MARQUES // @bryantmt_ —

Having one of the best generations in their history, Portugal have qualified for the 2022 World Cup via the playoffs — after having been beaten by Serbia in the decisive match for the top spot of the group that guarantees qualification directly to the tournament. However, they would beat Macedonia days later in the playoff match and are once again at the most prestigious tournament in the world.

With bags of history on their backs, including names like Luís Figo, Rui Costa and the achievement at the 2006 World Cup where they finished in fourth place, Portugal are looking forward to shocking the football fans as they did back in the 2016 European Championship where they didn't play the most beautiful football, yet managed to be the most solid at the back, allowing them to celebrate their first major title. This time, they arrive with a younger and still very talented team.

Fernando Santos has developed a mentally strong squad with belief and the ability to win everything since his arrival in 2014. The team has been living through a tough present where ideas are not connecting in the best way, but the quality of the team is always there, and of course, the legendary Cristiano Ronaldo is still present.

PREDICTED STARTING XI

Portugal often play with a 4-2-3-1 with different types of wingers on each side, a single striker and, behind, a '10'. Deeper, they use a double-pivot with one of them as a box-to-box and a rough back-four that possess the technical ability to find attacking players in dangerous positions while locking down their own box, as well as pacey players to defend rapid transitions.



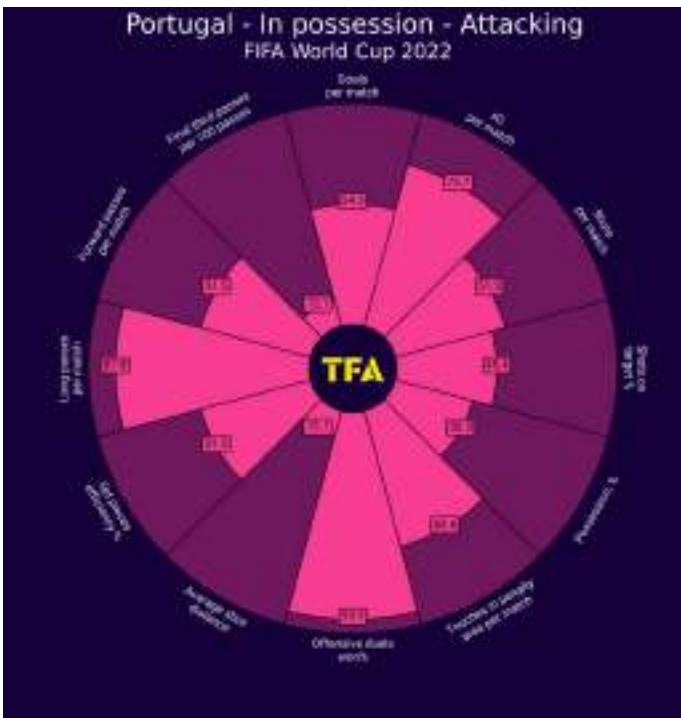
Diogo Costa, Porto's young goalkeeper, has earned his rightful spot in the national team lately, thanks to his incredible performances domestically and at international level. Pepe, at 38 years of age, is still one of the regular starters for Fernando Santos thanks to his defensive solidity as well as his underrated passing abilities, always accompanied by Rúben Dias.

Nuno Mendes and João Cancelo, without any doubt, are going to be Santos' full-backs, each offering a very different profile, similar to the wingers Rafael Leão and Bernardo Silva. Rúben Neves and William Carvalho have settled in perfectly, combining balance and intelligent roles on the ball, finishing with Bruno Fernandes as a '10' and Cristiano Ronaldo up front.



ATTACKING PHASE

Santos' Portugal varies from a direct team that likes to build up attacks from the back and arrive in the final third in three-to-five touches, to a pragmatic one that likes to sit in a solid and rigid mid-block that doesn't allow rivals to be effective with their ball-dominance throughout the match.



Players like Bernardo Silva and William Carvalho play pivotal functions inside the team system, thanks to their off-the-ball movements and approaches in the base of the plays, as Silva likes to accomplish.

Portugal like to serve the ball from Diogo Costa to the centre-backs with a great capacity to find

teammates between the lines. Normally, the right-back plays inverted and joins the back-three or the midfield to free up Carvalho (box-to-box) to move to more advanced areas and open space on the wing for Bernardo or Bruno to pin that zone. This is one of the first impressions the 'Lusos' give when on the ball.



In the first stage of the build-up, the movements of the box-to-box, usually William Carvalho, are vital to open spaces for Rúben Neves or centre-backs to break lines, as he tries to drag rival players to wide areas where inverted wingers or the '10' can receive.

This is one of the key functions, as Portugal likes to be very rapid from the back and not stay too long with the ball in their own third or between the back-four, as they want to create chaos in the opposition area. Carvalho, then, with his mobility, keeps helping the team to find spaces off the ball.



Another method used by Portugal to skip steps to get into an attacking phase is the great long distribution Diogo Costa possesses. This sees Portugal usually trying to strike long passes to the left side of the pitch where Cristiano Ronaldo and the left-winger can do several exchanges to confuse markers and then run in behind them.

Bernardo Silva's role is also a key part of the build-up in Portugal. Just as in his role with Manchester City, he likes to get very deep and play in the double-pivot, where he can retain the ball for long seconds to find the best passing option, through his great turns and dribbling ability.

In the middle third, rotations and overloads are seen commonly on the right side, where Bruno Fernandes and Bernardo Silva tend to change positions and channels constantly, as well as the arrival of the full-back through the middle — normally João Cancelo.

This is another example of how Portugal try to beat low blocks and pressures very quickly, creating overloads to execute one-two situations and arrive at the box. On the left side, Cristiano Ronaldo and his winger usually change positions, looking to free one of them between the middle or outside. In this example, we can see Bruno almost hugging the line, and Bernardo acting as the free man through the middle.



These overloads and exchanges of channels on the right are seen also in the final third, where the right-back makes himself vital with his runs to the box, thanks to the way Portugal pin the defensive line. The first goal was scored because of Bernardo getting deep and passing it to Dalot who can then carry the ball forward before playing to Bruno who crosses it immediately after receiving.



Fernando Santos' team tries to score goals in many ways — one of them being a reliance on the goalscoring ability of Cristiano Ronaldo inside the box, so crosses can be a constant way of breaking the deadlock, as they have players with great crossing technique such as Rafael Leão, Nuno Mendes or João Cancelo.

However, there is a method Portugal has implemented to find players arriving at the box and anticipating outswing crosses, either high or low. When they have settled in the final third of the pitch, normally Rúben Neves is the player that dictates the turn and changes the ball quickly to the weak side, where the '10', full-backs or winger immediately look to pass it to the box.

Movements off the ball are also very important in this goalscoring tactic, as sometimes the '10' is the one that goes in or Cristiano might leave his zone to make space for others. In the figure below, we can see Bruno is the one taking Ronaldo's spot to score a tap-in.



Portugal like to rely also on the long shooting ability that most of the players in the squad have. Players like Bernardo Silva, Bruno Fernandes, João Cancelo or Rúben Neves often try to score from outside the box.

DEFENSIVE PHASE

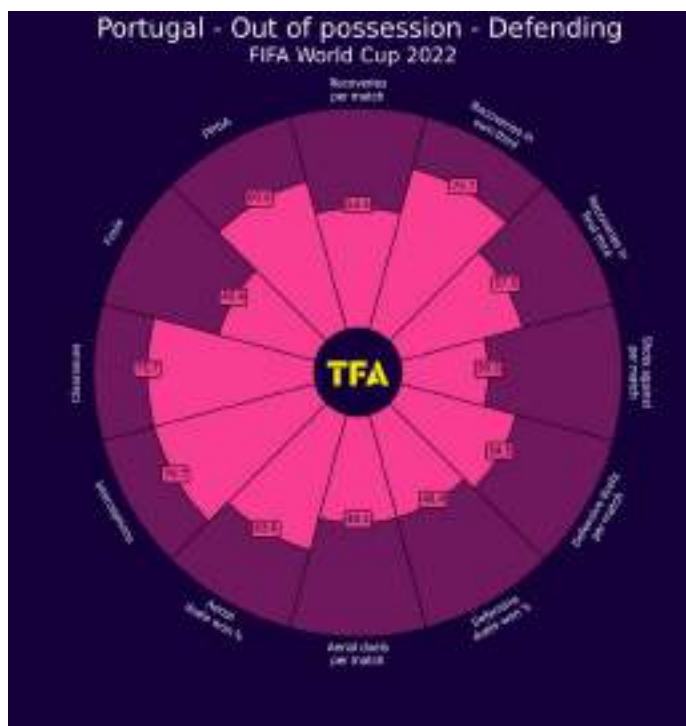


When they are attracted by the rival, Carvalho's defensive ability to suffocate players becomes crucial and the intensity from the players to try and rob the ball very high on the pitch gets faster second by second. Bruno Fernandes places himself through the middle, being the man that recognises triggers and communicates with everyone to make a great input for the pressing system.

As we can see in the figure below us, Portugal like to be very aggressive if the opponents try to stay for a long time with the ball in their own third, trying to attract them to then attack spaces. Left-winger, in this case, Diogo Jota, goes inside to mark the man on the ball, as well as Bernardo Silva to overload midfield and force them to play through wide zones, where they are very good at winning the ball back.



Another good example is this one against Spain, where goalkeeper Unai Simón has stayed a long time with the ball, and Cristiano Ronaldo goes to mark him tightly and even manages to earn a corner for his team. Again, we see that William Carvalho marks his rival very tightly, and even Rúben Neves gets very high up to engage in the first stage of the rival's build-up.



Fernando Santos' team like to sit in a rigid mid-block against highly possession-based sides, looking to frustrate them as they would dominate the ball but create very few chances. They also like to go a bit higher if the opposition is trying to attract them, where they aggressively go to tightly mark the player on the ball.

This mid-block is formed in a 4-1-4-1 where Rúben Neves stays behind the midfield line and in front of the back-four to avoid free players that like to float between these two lines. His role is to make the team more compact — not allowing a player to turn there is key.

Bruno Fernandes man-marks the rival '6' to close down that circuit of passes between centre-backs and pivot; William Carvalho occasionally jumps off his line and wingers mark zonally, leading to a pressing trap in the wide areas, where full-backs make themselves very important, especially Nuno Mendes and his big ball-winning attributes.



TRANSITIONS

Portugal like to put emphasis on attacking transitions, as players like Rafael Leão and Cristiano Ronaldo are very threatening players running into space, while they also have orchestrators such as Bernardo, Bruno or Rúben Neves.

This picture shows us how they usually like to execute transitions: A run on the left and a long pass through the middle, mainly struck by Neves or Bruno Fernandes. Cristiano Ronaldo or Diogo Jota (LW) are the predominant players who are targeted in these situations. This transition started on the left, and the winger is asked to carry the ball forward rapidly and directly.



In defensive transitions, Portugal make really good exchanges of blocks between the high and the mid-low ones, with the great work of Neves and Carvalho to protect the central areas, and the intense work rate the wingers bring to the team to help the full-backs. Normally, you don't see Santos' team wide open in transition, as players understand tactically where they have

to stay if it is a 3-2 or 2-3 with the right-back being part of those trios.

DEFENDERS

The goalkeeper position is fantastically covered as Diogo Costa will surely start but José Sá and experienced Rui Patrício could wait for their chance on the bench, as well as this, Patrício's mental character is going to help the team in many ways.

In the centre of the defence, Santos has difficult choices to make, as Pepe and José Fonte, at 39 and 38 years of age, respectively, are still good options, especially the Porto defender. However, young players such as Tiago Djaló or David Carmo deserve a chance to be there too alongside Rúben Dias. The full-backs are well covered with players like Diogo Dalot and Cancelo on the right, and Nuno Mendes on the left.

MIDFIELDERS

Portugal has developed some serious midfield talents over the years since their setbacks in major tournaments. In João Palhinha and the trusted Rúben Neves, they have two amazing players to play deep as a pivot but experienced William Carvalho or Vitinha and Matheus Nunes show up as the young starlets that could bring even more to the box-to-box role. Bruno Fernandes, João Mario and João Félix are three great names to play in the '10' role.

ATTACKERS

Besides the injury Diogo Jota has suffered that should keep him out of the 2022 World Cup, Portugal have marvellous options upfront to play in an attacking trio that looks incredible with

Cristiano Ronaldo alongside wingers Bernardo Silva, Ricardo Horta or Rafael Leão. They will surely be joined by Gonçalo Guedes or André Silva to replace Jota.

KEY PLAYER

In his last World Cup, Cristiano Ronaldo has a big mission to fulfil in his career: to try and win the most important trophy any player could have in his cabinet. He's not living his best moment at Manchester United right now, but in the National Team, all can change radically in a context in which he's the leader, captain and a vital player in the attacking phase, commanded by him with young gems at his back.

His weaknesses are well-documented, with Ronaldo offering his side very little without the ball. However, if Portugal can successfully set up plenty of goalscoring opportunities for the 37-year-old in high-value shooting positions, Ronaldo could still be an extremely valuable asset in Qatar.

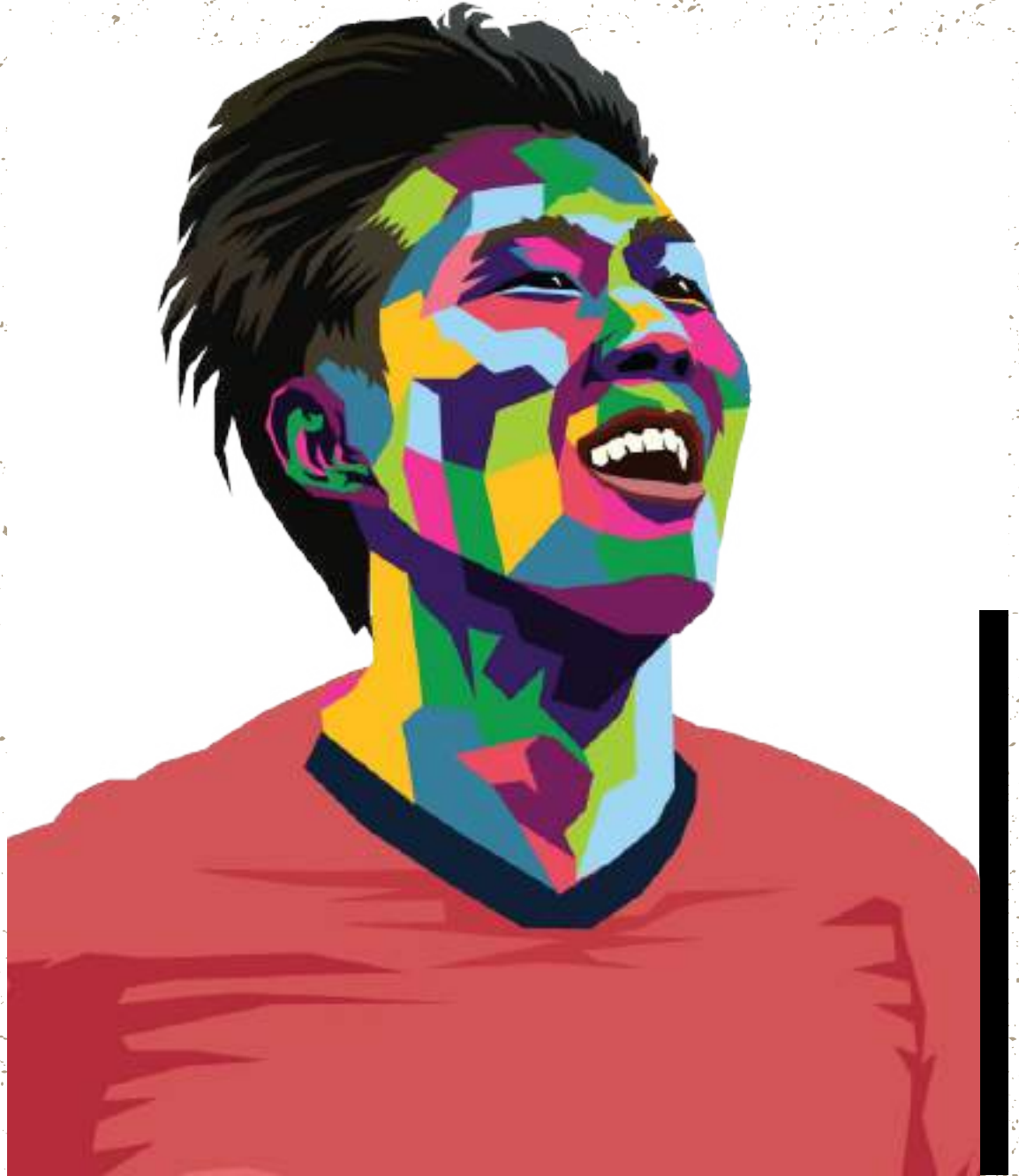
TOURNAMENT PREDICTION

Though not playing the most entertaining football, Portugal have a brilliant and talented squad all around the pitch. Teams like theirs often go under the radar because they have been lacking dynamic and intensity during the qualifiers or the Nations League.

However, the presence of great players in each line is always a boost for them and concerning for rivals, so Portugal can't be ruled out of going all the way in this tournament, though they'll undoubtedly need to up their recent performance levels both as a team and as individuals for their key players in order to stand a chance of competing with the best of the best this winter.



SOUTH KOREA



GROUP H

MAK PAKHEI // @MakPakhei

The Qatar World Cup will be South Korea's 10th consecutive appearance in the major competition. Led by Paulo Bento, former Portugal and Sporting CP head coach, the team had a strong squad that could surprise everyone if the conditions were met.

In the last World Cup, South Korea were unable to qualify from the group because of the "miracle of Kazan", they lost the first two games but managed to beat Germany in the third game, Mexico lost to Sweden and the team stayed at the third of the group. This year they are in Group H, where their opponents will be Ghana, Portugal, and Uruguay.

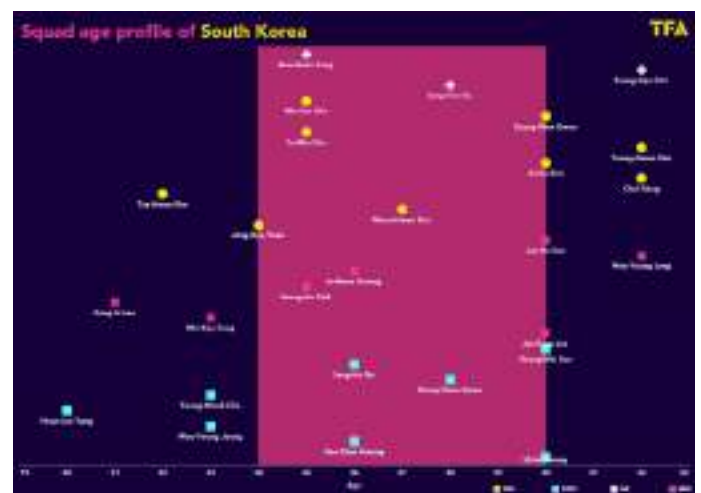
PREDICTED STARTING XI



Recently, South Korea have played with a 4-4-2 formation as well, but we believe they might go for a 4-2-3-1 considering the personnel

available. And because of the World Cup, Bento should be more reserved to get one more player in midfield, having more flexibility to switch between the two. But we do not completely rule out the chance they come with a back five if they feel Portugal and Uruguay are much stronger opponents — they could do that with a winger dropping deep to help the defenders.

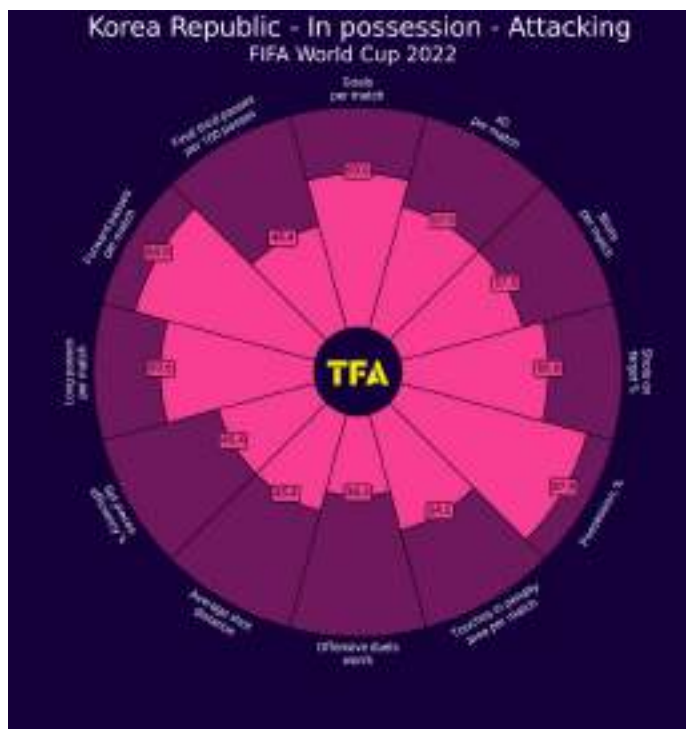
From the defence to the attack, South Korea have good players from top European leagues. Centrally in the last line, Min-jae Kim is highly-rated thanks to his performances at Napoli, where he has shown great ball-playing and defensive techniques. His performance will be crucial to the defence. In midfield, they have Olympiacos' In-beom Hwang available, but we should not overlook Jung Woo-young, playing for Al Saad and who's experienced the coaching of Xavi and Juanma Lillo as a holding midfielder. Jung Woo-Young should also have the experience to drive the team in different phases of play. South Korea have many good attacking players, including the Premier League duo Heung-min Son (Tottenham) and Hee-chan Hwang (Wolves), Mallorca attacker Kang-in Lee and Freiburg striker Ui-jo Hwang could also help the team when needed.



As easily noticed in the trend of South Korea's squad age profile, they have a very mature squad with most of the key players falling in the peak-age range, including the centre-back partnership between Min-jae Kim and Kyung-won Kwan. Star attacker Heung-min Son, at 30, will definitely be

motivated to achieve something for his country at this stage of his career.

ATTACKING PHASE



We can form a good picture of South Korea's playing style from this chart. Clearly, they try to play on the front foot with a strong mindset to breach the opposition lines, as their percentile rank of 84.8 in forward passes per match indicates. They are fairly direct and try to hit spaces behind the opponent if possible with a high long pass per match percentile at 69.6. They also have above-average xG and shots per match — both 57.5 — suggesting they're able to create plenty of chances.



With the ball, South Korea always construct with four deep players. They are consistently pushing the full-backs high and wide to occupy

the outside zones, and so they also have two 6 to support in front of the centre-backs. The shape can vary, apart from the 2-2 shape, the team also has a tendency to drop one midfielder out, forming a 3-1.

As shown in this image, on the left of Min-jae Kang and Young-gwon Kim, South Korea used the midfielder, Woo-yeong Jeong dropping out to receive, so they had a temporary back three with In-beom Hwang behind the opposition's first line. With this shape, they always create a +1 numerical advantage over the two-man first line such as Costa Rica's 5-3-2, allowing the wide centre-backs to carry the ball forward. because the opposition strikers could be pulled out of position and the forward space in front of centre-backs can end up being vacated.



South Korea are a very aggressive side, they always have players preparing for runs behind the last line to catch the defenders out. Direct passes over the top are made to trigger potential chances vs the goalkeeper centrally or 1v1 opportunities against the full-backs in outside space. These kinds of actions always engage defenders and keep their heads busy worrying about spaces behind, creating the foundations to exploit spaces between the lines when the defenders dropped off too early to handle the runners in advance.

Therefore, in the second phase, with an open shape, we also saw South Korea placing players in central spaces. With the high and wide full-backs, the wingers can roam infield to receive in central positions, receiving on the half-turn,

if possible. Here, we see their shape pinned down the Cameroon winger, causing confusion as Hee-chan Hwang came infield when Jin-su Kim went forward. It also created a temporary 2v1 overload on the right-back. The receiver would be very possible to turn if the right-back prepared himself to catch the release pass to Jin-su Kim.

Apart from structurally driving the team forward, Bento also allowed Heung-min Son some freedom as a wild card. The Tottenham Hotspur attacker could pick up the ball in the deeper area similar to Lionel Messi's role, to work on his stuff and also combine with teammates in close proximity to go into advanced areas.



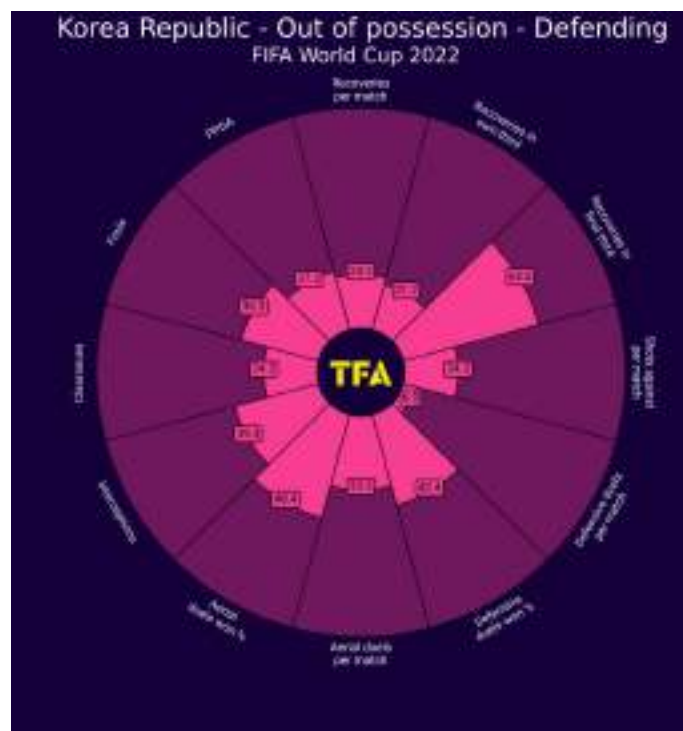
In the last third, so far, we have seen a South Korean team very willing to commit numbers into the penalty zone to create goalscoring opportunities. They benefit from the structure in which full-backs go high and wide to be the crossing outlets and allow the attacking players, such as Heung-min Son, to get into good positions.

In this image, you could see the winger released the left-back, and now Jin-su Kim is ready for a cross, at least South Korea would have both strikers (or a 10), plus the far-side winger in the box. Another very noticeable player was Hee-chan Hwang, who immediately dashed into a more central position after playing the pass from out wide, so he was closer to the opposition goal and had a better chance to score.

That means South Korea would love to have three to four players attacking the penalty zone

— at least. By getting lots of bodies in the box, they have a better chance to make first contact to score, and they've also scored some rebound opportunities previously as they had enough numbers in the box to get onto the end of the second balls.

DEFENSIVE PHASE



South Korea are an aggressive side without the ball, with promising numbers in terms of recovering area. They have some physicality in the air as their aerial duels per match percentile is at 33.3, and the aerial duels won %, at the 48.4 percentile, were average. In general, South Korea have good ability to win the ball back in both high areas and around their third, as their recoveries in the final third percentile is quite high 63.6. Their PPDA percentile at 27.2 also suggests they are such a high-pressing side who like to play with intensity without possession.



In the next image, we saw South Korea defending in the midfield areas, pressing out wide with the same concepts. Centrally, the pair of strikers – Heung-min Son and Ui-jo Hwang stayed tight to deny the opposition '6' space, so the opponents did not play easy passes to escape in the centre.

Then, the example also demonstrated how South Korea compressed wide spaces, making it difficult for the opponents. They were happy to commit the full-back (Jin-su Kim) and ball near '6' to support the winger, who always saw the pass to outside as a trigger and jumped. That was a three-man group to maintain a close unit, making sure that even if the opponent passed it forward vertically on the same side, the receiver could not get the turn to continue the attack easily.

Without possession, South Korea are consistently in a 4-1-3-2 when pressing high, although we believe they will drop off to a 4-4-2 more in a midblock against stronger opponents. But when they pushed, they gave good energy and did it with two strikers to pressure the ball, to guide the ball to the outside and close the opponents there.

In the first image, we saw Heung-min Son chasing the centre-backs, so he invited the pass to the outside and keep pushing there, where Hee-chan Hwang also prepared himself to confront the defender as it happened. In midfield, they always wanted to have a "pressing & cover" relationship between the holding midfielders, when one stepped up, the other often stayed behind the press shape to protect the second line or pick up the second balls.

Also, the far-side winger should come infield to maintain compactness, balancing the shape. In this image, Chang-hoon Kwon moved in as the team was pressing on the other side, so he would not be isolated and kept the three-man second line as a unit.



However, South Korea also had their weaknesses in their four-man last line. The outside defender often got himself isolated after the opponents spread the ball to the wide space. That pass very often invited the full-back to jump as Hong Chul did here.

However, when Hong Chul got closer to Raphinha, the left centre-back did not move with him and so Fred was totally free there. One reason for that defensive behaviour was Bento's side valued the proximity of the centre-backs more, so they did not want to concede any spaces to early crosses with the close positions of central defenders. But that also resulted in the full-backs getting exposed in 1v2 situations, it would be hard to defend the next pass, the underlaps, overlaps, and also the crosses.



Given the weaknesses explained in the system, it will be intriguing to see if the South Korea winger will drop deeper to protect wide spaces or if Bento will try a back five against stronger opponents in the World Cup.

TRANSITIONS

In offensive transitions, South Korea always look to hit behind the last line as soon as possible to use the quality of their attackers, with most of them playing in top leagues in Europe. For example, it would be very favourable if Heung-min Son is played into open spaces, charging towards the opponents as he does in the Premier League. So, Bento's side possesses counter-attacking threats.



When it comes to defensive transitions (TAD), South Korea also like to counter-press and recapture the ball as soon as possible if they had the shape and numbers ready when attacking. Because they attack from the flanks, they do not expose themselves centrally in TAD, so that was already a beneficial condition prematurely.

Then, you could see how they reacted against Cameroon once there was a turnover — central players who were behind the ball tried to push and close spaces, including the players in deep construction, so they should win every ball if the opponents played it short. They also applied pressure instantly; the responsibility falls to the player in closest proximity to the ball, regardless of his name. For example, Heung-min Son was also leading the counter-press in this image.

The two widest players outside of the counter-pressing shape were given different roles. Instead of rushing towards the ball, they were more covering the press to net any ball potentially going outside of the counter-pressing group. Apart from Moon-hwan Kim who came back to cover, another noticeable part was the striker's (Woo-yeong Jeong) effort. That player should always be ready to lurk and capture the backward passes to the goalkeeper if they happen.



In terms of rest defence, South Korea almost had a 3-1, based on how we explained their offensive organization earlier. But that would be a problem when the full-backs push too high to attack the flanks, as they are going to concede spaces behind in that scenario.

For example, UAE were able to develop a counter-attack from that weakness. Once the ball was regained, they moved it outside and supported it with runners forward. In that instance, Jae-sung Lee struggled in a 1v3 situation, confronting runners when dropping back. Their opponents in the World Cup would also be looking for similar conditions to attack South Korea in the transitions.

ATTACKERS

We all know Heung-min Son will be the most important player in the South Korean squad; the Tottenham Hotspur star has experienced some ups and downs in this campaign. Although he scored a hat-trick versus Leicester City, but that was his only Premier

League game with goals, despite his 4.2 xG. Whether Heung-min Son can get back to his best in time for the World Cup will be crucial for this team.

South Korea also have other attackers such as Hee-chan Hwang from Wolves, but the Wolves player has not started any Premier League game since August, and his form is in doubt. They also have Ui-jo Hwang from Olympiacos but the 30-year-old is yet to score any goal this season too, so similar to Heung-min Son, whether or not these players can pick up their game rhythm soon will be crucial.

MIDFIELDERS

In midfield, South Korea rely on the partnership of In-beom Hwang and Woo-yung Jung. Both have been important players in their respective teams – Olympiacos and Al Saad. The former has recorded a very high xA/90 as a midfielder so far at 0.22, and he has given 21.99 forward passes/90, showing that he is a player with the mindset to break lines and play the ball forward.

Juanma Lillo also trusted Woo-yung Jung in his midfield; he has decent ability to recover possession with 9.19 recoveries/90, and 4.21 interceptions/90. He also has a progressive mindset and similar forward passes/90 stats to his midfield partner, at 21.06/90. South Korea will rely on the duo to send the ball forward.

DEFENDERS

South Korea's defence is mainly formed by players in K-League 1 such as Hong Chul and Moon-hwan Kim, but this season Min-jae Kim impressed the whole of Europe with his sharp performances at Napoli. He has a very decent recoveries/90 stat at 12.96, is competitive in the air with 6.02 aerial duels/90 and a success rate

of 59.3%. Min-jae Kim is also comfortable on the ball with 25 forward passes/90, his involvement in the build-up will help South Korea to move the ball forward.

KEY PLAYER



It was without a doubt that we had to pick Heung-min Son as the one to watch in the South Korean team, regardless of who else makes the squad. The 30-year-old attacking player was the pride of Asia, when he won the Premier League Golden Boot last season alongside Mohamed Salah.

Individually, he is a very good player and plays an important role in Bento's side. We expect Heung-min to be the main source of threat, or even something more wonderful given what he showed us in the Premier League. His quality is something the team can rely on during the offensive transitions because Heung-min Son carries great capacity to take on and beat the defenders in open spaces.

Defensively, he will not be jogging and relaxing. Instead, as the team's captain, Heung-min Son will set himself as a good example to the rest by leading the press or executing defensive responsibilities. If he shines in key moments, South Korea will definitely have a better chance to qualify from the group stage, which would be the dream of their supporters.

TOURNAMENT PREDICTION

Although Uruguay and Portugal should be the favourites to qualify from the group stage, we should not overlook South Korea's chances either because they have a motivated and committed squad with good quality. They also have plenty of players in their prime with good experience in European football.

The last time they made it into the last 16 was in 2010, and in their last six World Cup matches, South Korea have only achieved one win. Nevertheless, we believe they should at least add another one to the tally in Qatar and if they managed to resist the favourites, there could be surprises.



URUGUAY



GROUP H

— OWEN BULLMAN // @BullmanOwen —

Uruguay have been drawn into Group H for the 2022 World Cup in Qatar. Making up Group H are Ghana, Portugal and South Korea. Portugal are the highest-ranked team in the group, according to FIFA's men's rankings, being placed 9th. Uruguay themselves are 14th, South Korea 28th and Ghana 61st. The group stage will by no means be a 'walk in the park' for Uruguay who will have to be at the top of their game to progress.

Having qualified for another World Cup, Uruguay will be looking to better their quarter-final run at the 2018 World Cup. Uruguay have a rich history with the World Cup and international football in general. They have the joint-most Copa América titles with 15 — their most recent success coming in 2011. Furthermore, Uruguay have four FIFA World Championships which include two World Cup victories and two gold medals at the Olympic football tournament.

The Uruguay squad contains a lot of talent and is seeded with a wealth of experience. Captain and record appearance holder Diego Godín with likely play in the heart of the defence. Top scorer Luis Suárez will lead the line and Edinson Cavani will play a role from the substitute bench. All players are well into their thirties and it is likely to be their last tournament representing their country. The truly mesmerising ability of all three players still shines through and will be something that head coach Diego Alonso hopes will take Uruguay to the latter stages of the tournament.

Uruguay qualified automatically after finishing 3rd in the group behind Brazil and Argentina. Their qualification was only secured by just two points and had no easy journey throughout the process. Uruguay lost all four games where they faced Argentina or Brazil, perhaps this shows their lack of ability against tough opposition.

Alonso was appointed head coach at the end of 2021 replacing Óscar Tabárez who had been

in charge for 15 years. The change in coach saw Uruguay win their first four games under Alonso which secured their qualification for the World Cup. It will be interesting to see how they perform in a few weeks.

PREDICTED STARTING XI



Diego Alonso has tried and tested many different formations during his time in charge. He has played a 4-3-3 on plenty of occasions however, I feel that a 4-4-2 is more suited to Uruguay's group of players and play style. The 4-4-2 formation has a heavy emphasis on the involvement of the strikers, an area in which Uruguay are blessed, with Suárez, Cavani and Núñez.

Fernando Muslera has been the first-choice keeper for over a decade and is expected to retain that position for the World Cup. Having

suffered a nasty injury at the end of 2021, the goalkeeper is back fit and playing for Galatasaray. At 36, he is experienced and like other players in the squad, is probably going to be appearing at his last international tournament.

The backline will likely consist of a lot of experience. Damián Suárez will line up at right-back and provide excellent defensive quality. The injury that Ronald Araújo sustained in September will keep him out of action, the Barcelona man has featured as right back and centreback for the national team. Due to this, the centreback pairing is expected to be made up of Diego Godín and José María Giménez. The pair played together regularly for Atlético Madrid and have a good understanding of each other. There is a lack of pace in this area which is something that could cause problems. The left-back is a highly contested spot with Mathías Oliviera and Matías Viña both being capable. Oliviera has played more regularly recently so I expect him to get the nod.

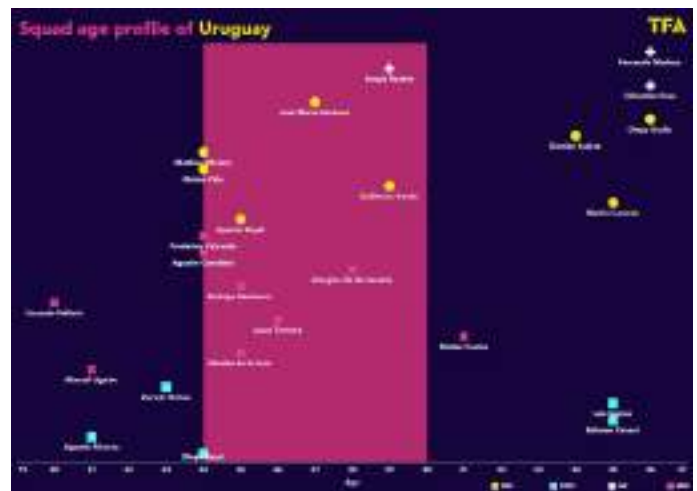
The midfield area is filled with some hard-working quality midfield players. The central area is likely to be covered by Rodrigo Bentancur and Real Madrid's Federico Valverde. Both players complement each other well and provide energy which allows Uruguay to play so aggressively.

The wide areas are a position that seems to change quite regularly. On the left, I have gone with Nicolás de la Cruz as he loves to drift into central areas which allows Núñez to drift wide into the space. On the right, I have predicted Facundo Pellistri who always seems to perform well for his country. He has not had regular game time this season which might hinder his chances and Alonso may choose Agustín Canobbio.

Onto the front line where it is expected to be made up of national heroes of the past and the future with Suárez and Núñez the likely partnership. The dynamic of the team flows well

with Suárez naturally dropping deeper to receive the ball, allowing Núñez to play on the last line of defence. Reinforcements in the attack will be the likes of Edinson Cavani, Agustín Álvarez and Diego Rossi. All three provide good attacking backup which Alonso can rely on.

When looking at the age of the squad, it is apparent that it is ageing, in football-related terms. Eight players are over the age of 30, five of which could potentially start. This is definitely something to be aware of as recovery may take longer for these players and in tournament football, where games come quick and fast, it is key that players remain fully fit.



Furthermore, there is a strong core of players in the peak-age category, the pink area. This area makes up the large majority of the squad and also the starting 11. For Uruguay, these players must be utilised well and given opportunities.

ATTACKING PHASE



To do this, good understanding and awareness from all players around the ball are needed. The example above shows how the right midfield player and right back are in completely different positions from each other and not interfering. To make their options even better the strikers play in a rotation style. One striker drops into the space, usually Suárez, and the other striker makes a run into the space.

The way in which Uruguay's wide midfield players set up is interesting. The style encourages them to play centrally when play is being built up which in turn encourages the full-backs high and wide, providing width. By doing this Uruguay can get their wide players on the ball in more central areas, where dribbling directly is more dangerous but perhaps less successful.

Furthermore, when Uruguay are looking to sustain possession in the middle of the pitch they create a diamond with their two centrebacks and two central midfield players. Doing this gives them a solid base to build upon and creates several passing angles.



This shape creates a central overload and allows Uruguay to keep possession easily. Their central



The data for Uruguay's attacking data shows how well-rounded they are in their attack. The good ranking for final third passes per 100 passes emphasises how they like to play high up the pitch and in the opponent's half.

Furthermore, their low rank for forward passes per match can be easily explained. When attacking Uruguay like to dribble with the ball, progressing play that way. Other teams may make two or three passes where Uruguay look to dribble the ball into space.

When building up and attacking, Uruguay are excellent at ensuring their defensive players have multiple options to pass the ball to. Playing in a 4-4-2 formation can, at times, make build-up difficult. Uruguay use their space well and instruct players to play on different lines and angles. This makes it easier for the man on the ball to find a pass. The example below shows how there are four available passes.

dominance means that they can progress play at their own discretion into wide channels or into their strikers. By operating in this way, Uruguay can keep possession and avoid the opposition's press.

Moving up the pitch, Uruguay like to use the width created by their full-backs. As mentioned above, wide midfield players are prone to playing more centrally. This tactic is used continuously throughout the attacking phase and the full-backs of Uruguay are often called into regular attacking action.



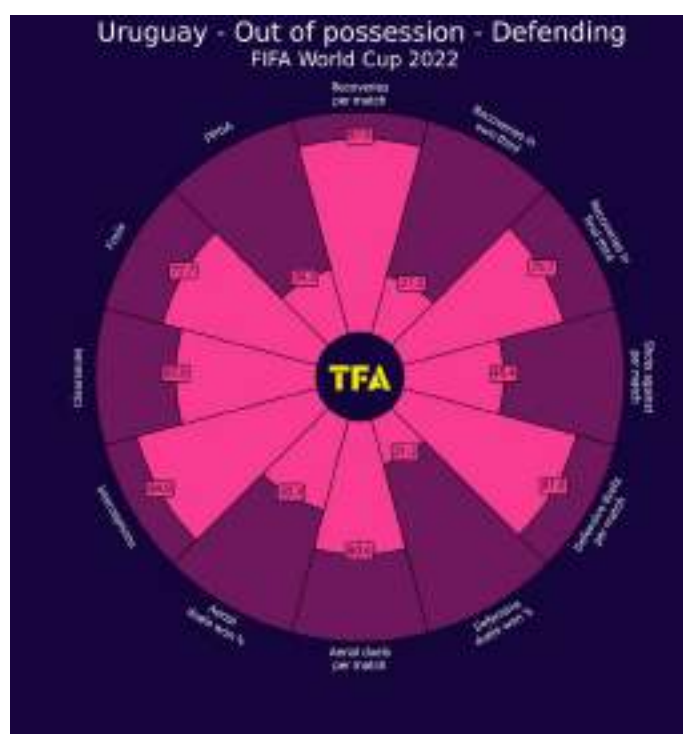
The above example shows how wide player, Pellistri, picks the ball up in a more central area than a traditional winger would and, due to his positioning, is able to exploit the space in the box before playing a drilled pass into the six-yard box. The Uruguayan attacking players look to offer support with both strikers always being alert in the penalty area as well as the opposite wide player.



The above image shows the full-back making a run into the space which has been created by the wide player positioning himself more centrally. The run is perfectly found by the man on the ball, this then leads to Uruguay attacking the box where they look to get numbers quickly into the penalty area.

Uruguay can get the ball into dangerous positions via the method seen above, or through more direct and aggressive attacking play. This involves the wide players being positive and dribbling with the ball at their feet. When looking to attack the box, the wide midfield players often pick the ball up in more central areas due to their positioning. This aids them massively as they can drive into the box and at the opposition's defence.

DEFENSIVE PHASE



The defensive data above is very telling about Uruguay without possession. Their high rank for interceptions shows how well they set up out of possession and how structured they are. Uruguay like to remain solid in the middle part of the pitch making it easy to intercept passes that are tried to be played through the lines.

Furthermore, Uruguay have a percentile rank of 75.7 for recoveries in the final third. Without the ball, Uruguay look to press their opponents when the opportunity is right. They are calculated and choose their moments to press. When they do press it is well structured making it difficult to play through, their high success is backed by the recoveries in the final third. To back this up further, a PPDA ranking of 30.3 means that Uruguay have a low score for PPDA which means they look to engage with their opponents quickly.

The image below shows the press that Uruguay implement. The nearby players are alert to anticipate a pass into the central player. They are quick to react and apply pressure on their opponent.



Two players are looking to directly apply pressure to the man receiving the ball with one man applying pressure to the next potential pass. This aggressive press wins possession back high up the pitch and a goalscoring opportunity is created from this turnover.

Once play has progressed deeper into their half, Uruguay look to get set into a solid defensive shape. In recent times, Uruguay have dropped back into a 5-3-2 formation. They have done this when Agustín Canobbio has played on the right of the midfield.



Highlighted in yellow, Canobbio drops deep to create a flat back five. Nicolás de la Cruz, playing wide left, tucks inside to create a narrow midfield three. This formation allows Uruguay to be more defensively solid in the back line. The narrow midfield stops the play through the central areas. This formation is utilised very well and makes it as difficult as possible for the opposition to break down.

Further down the pitch and defending deeper, Uruguay remain compact, making the pitch tight and congested in the middle of the pitch. Doing this stops the opposition from attacking centrally and getting shots off at goal. Working hard out of possession leads to Uruguay keeping short distances between each other as they shuffle across from side to side.



The Uruguayan defence play extremely narrow and encourages their opponents to play the ball out wide. This leads to the opponents often having time on the ball in the wide channels. The risk that this carries is that if some quality attack is displayed then they will be broken down.

TRANSITIONS

Upon regaining the ball, Uruguay look to play forward quickly with short intricate passing. Their style when breaking forwards is extremely entertaining as they break through the opposition so quickly, exploiting the space the opposition has left behind.



The example above involves three quick short passes before a longer one breaking the opposition's back line and creating a 1v1 chance with the goalkeeper. This method is risky as the passes could be inaccurate or intercepted which would lead to an overturn of possession.

Defensively, Uruguay transition quickly and aggressively, often pressing their opponents and forcing them backwards. Doing this reduces the chance of being caught out by a counterattack as the opposition would be forced backwards.



The image above shows how three players look to press the nearest player to them resulting in backwards passes from their opponents. This allows their teammates to regain shape and gain control of the situation. If a long ball is played over the press, then it could potentially become a threat.

ATTACKERS

Uruguay are blessed at the top end of the pitch; experienced and top-class strikers Edinson Cavani and Luis Suárez will bring their experience to the international stage, while up-and-coming star Darwin Núñez will have all eyes on him after his £72m move to EPL giants Liverpool in the summer. The likes of Agustín Álvarez and Diego Rossi will also provide good cover and will gain valuable experience from being a part of the squad.

MIDFIELDERS

Federico Valverde, Rodrigo Bentancur, Lucas Torreira and Matías Vecino provide the central midfield with lots of depth and quality. Valverde and Bentancur are likely the first-choice midfield partnership but all four are more than capable of playing throughout the duration of the tournament.

Out wide, Nicolás de la Cruz, Facundo Pellistri and Agustín Canobbio will provide the main support for Alonso. The diversity of the wide players helps Uruguay play multiple different systems depending on where the opponents are.

DEFENDERS

The defensive unit of Uruguay is vastly experienced with Fernando Muslera in the goal and the partnership of Diego Godín and José María Giménez in front. These three players bring experience and solid defensive ability that will help to ensure Uruguay succeed.

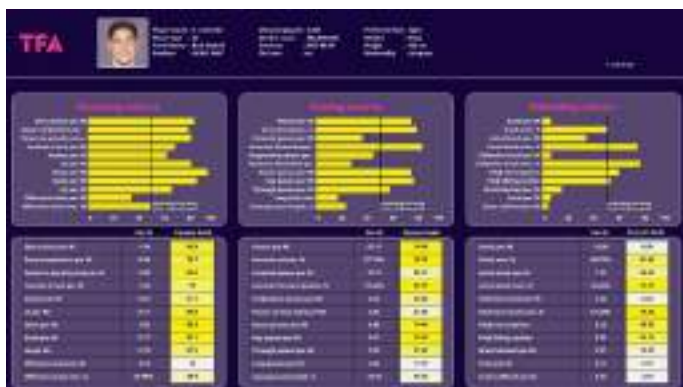
Furthermore, the full-back region is one of the areas that is expected to change. The left-back

spot could be taken by either Matías Viña or Mathías Oliviera. On the right, Damián Suárez could be challenged by Guillermo Varela. Both options provide good cover and the full-back area is strong in the squad.

team is too important to penalise him. His high rankings for aerial duels won and defensive duels won provides positive backing for the Uruguay midfield. Being paired with a midfield partner will provide that extra defensive steal.

KEY PLAYER

The heartbeat of Uruguay's team is midfielder general Federico Valverde. The midfielder is a regular for Real Madrid and is expected to be the main man in Uruguay's team.



The attacking data above is exceptional. The fact that Valverde ranks above average for all categories bar two proves just how dangerous going forward he is. His shots per 90 rank, at 93.6, shows how attack-minded the midfielder is. He is involved in the large majority of attacks and poses a real attacking threat.

To continue, his passing data reads just as impressively. Firstly, his high rank for accurate forward passes shows how well he looks after the ball. Not only this, he doesn't just keep the ball he is able to play it forwards. Not only this, his good placing for both smart passes per 90 and key passes per 90 shows just how effective he is in the attacking third. His progressive play and chance creation and help Uruguay to break opponents down.

Finally, the defensive data is an area of not as much strength as his others. Valverde ranks above average in just five of the categories in the defensive section. His importance to the

TOURNAMENT PREDICTION

Uruguay can be hopeful ahead of the World Cup. A good run of form in their recent fixtures bodes well for their chances. They have a good core of experience in the squad that will give them a good base to build on.

Uruguay should be looking for a good run in the tournament with a quarter-final expected. Their group of players will need to be managed due to the vast number of experienced players. If the minutes are managed well then there is no reason why Uruguay can't progress to the quarter-final at the minimum.

Editor-in-Chief // Chris Darwen
Lead Analyst // Lee Scott // @FMAnalysis
Magazine Design // Jamie Brackpool // @jamiebrackpool
Senior Editor // Fintan O'Reilly // @FintanFootball

CONTRIBUTORS

Analysis Pieces

Adam Scully // @ascully24
Alfie Pearson // @alfietpear
Brandon Liss // @brandthebeast
Bryant Marques // @bryantmt_
Caio Miguel // @osegundovolante
Chris Winter // @ChrisW_D
David Astill // @DavidPAstill21
Domagoj Kostanjšak // @DKostanjšak
Fintan O'Reilly // @FintanFootball
Jack Manship // @JManship19
Lorihanna Shushkova // @LorihannaSh
Luis Kircher // @luiskircher

Mak Pakhei // @MakPakhei
Marcel Seifeddine // @MarcelS_02
Scott Martin // @CoachScottCopy
Selim Ben Hmida // @mrziguen
Owen Bullman // @BullmanOwen

Players to Watch Data Viz

Venkatanarayanan Venkatesan // @VenkyReddevil

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