

FIFA approves 2026 World Cup format with record 104 matches



● MARTIN MEISSNER/AP

The 2026 World Cup will have 104 matches instead of the traditional 64 games due to the expanded format with 48 teams taking part, global soccer governing body FIFA said on Tuesday ahead of its Congress in Kigali, Rwanda. The 2026 edition, which will be co-hosted by the United States, Canada and Mexico, will be the first edition of the quadrennial tournament where 48 teams are taking part. The final will be held on July 19, Reuters reported. The new format will also stick to drawing four teams in a group after a proposal for 16 groups of three was shot down over

fears of collusion in the final group game. However, the number of groups will increase from eight to 12. The original plan for the 2026 edition had a total of 80 matches but the decision to increase the number of games to 104 was approved by FIFA's council at a meeting on Tuesday. Traditionally the top two teams from each group advance to the last 16 but the 2026 edition will also have the eight best third-placed teams moving into the knockout round of 32. "The FIFA Council unanimously approved the proposed amendment to the FIFA World Cup 2026 competition format" FIFA said.

"The revised format mitigates the risk of collusion and ensures that all the teams play a minimum of three matches, while providing balanced rest time between competing teams." The 32-team World Cup in Qatar last year had a total of 64 matches completed in 29 days. The last time Mexico (1986) and the United States (1994) hosted a World Cup, there were only 24 teams. The tournament has had 32 teams since the 1998 edition, with eight groups of four and the finalists playing seven games each. But teams reaching the summit clash in 2026 will now play

eight matches in total.

Club competitions

FIFA said a 32-team Club World Cup will be played every four years from June 2025, confirming the announcement made by its president Gianni Infantino in Qatar last year. Confederation champions from 2021-2024 will be eligible to play in the new Club World Cup, which means Chelsea and Real Madrid have already qualified. Should either club win the Champions League again, a club ranking calculation based on sporting criteria will be used to determine which other team will

qualify.

The current version of the FIFA Club World Cup – an annual competition with seven teams – will be discontinued after 2023, with a new yearly club competition approved from 2024. "This competition will feature the champions of the premier club competitions of all confederations and conclude with a final to be played at a neutral venue, between the winner of the UEFA Champions League and the winner of intercontinental play-offs between the other confederations," FIFA said. FIFA said clubs will have to release players for the World Cup from May 25,

2026 unless they are in a major final – such as the Champions League showpiece – for which clubs will have until May 30 to allow players to join their national teams.

"With 56 days, the total combined number of rest, release and tournament days remain identical to the 2010, 2014 and 2018 FIFA World Cup editions," FIFA added.

A newly structured international calendar was also approved with nine-day windows in March and June for two games each, a 16-day window for four matches in September-October followed by another nine-day two-match window in November.

'Fatigue and burnout'

The Professional Footballers' Association (PFA) said they were worried about "physical fatigue and mental burnout" due to the congested schedule with its CEO Maheta Molango saying the football calendar needs a "complete reset". "The expanded World Cup format being announced for 2026 means that, yet again, more games are being forced into an already overcrowded schedule," he said. The PFA said they were encouraged to see FIFA had prioritised concerns such as the need for a "minimum of 72 hours between games, a mandatory day off each week and an annual rest period". "However, it's very difficult to see how that aligns with the constant expansion of the domestic and international calendar," Molango added. "We know that the current workload players face is having an ongoing impact on their wellbeing... We can't simply push them until they break."

Haaland displays 'super-strength' in five-goal showing against Leipzig



Erling Haaland celebrates scoring Manchester City's fifth goal in a 7-0 victory over RB Leipzig in the Champions League in Etihad Stadium, Manchester, Britain, on March 14, 2023.

● CARL RECINE/REUTERS

Erling Haaland said "my super-strength is scoring" after the centre-forward hit five goals to set a club single-season record of 39 as Manchester City defeated Leipzig 7-0 to move into the Champions League quarter-finals.

City beat the Bundesliga side 8-1 on aggregate and Haaland became only the third player to score five in the Champions League, following Luiz Adriano in 2014 and Lionel Messi in 2012, and the 10th since the European Cup's inception, the Guardian reported.

Haaland now has 33 Champions League strikes in 25 appearances – the youngest player, at 22 years and 236 days, to reach 30. He eclipsed Tommy Johnson's 38 City goals in 1928-29, his quintet coming across 35 minutes, while the victory, in which Ilkay Gundogan and Kevin De Bruyne also scored, equalled the club's best in the competition.

"My super strength? After scoring five goals I have to say scoring goals," Haaland said. "It's a big night – five goals, to win 7-0 at home, I'm so happy – I'm a bit blurry in my head so I don't remember the goals. I was so tired after the celebrations. In my opinion, we should do this more – [score] a lot of goals."

"I didn't think – I was just trying to get the ball in the back of the net. A lot of it is being quick in the mind and trying to do the right thing. A little bit of it is quality but a lot is in the head."

Haaland joked that he did not want to be replaced in the second half. "I told Pep when I went off that I would like to score a double hat-trick, but what can you do?" Guardiola said: "It was a really good performance from minute one until the end from everyone. Erling was amazing but everyone was exceptional. It's five in 60 minutes [before replaced] – if he was to do 90 minutes, I don't know. He is an incredible guy with huge talent, power and mentality, he is a serial winner. Having a weapon like Erling in this competition is important." There was praise for De Bruyne, who the manager criticised before the match for overcomplicating his play. "Kevin is extraordinary," Guardiola said. "The rhythm he played today, his movement – is the Kevin we know and we haven't seen that so much this season [like this] he is unstoppable."

Congested schedule awaiting Iranian volleyball



Amirhadi Arsalanpour
Staff writer

EXCLUSIVE

An action-packed schedule will see Iran's volleyball national team take part in four major tournaments in the space of four months. Head coach Behrouz Ataei this week named a list of 31 players who will have to report for a new training camp in Tehran on April 16. Overseas players and those involved in May's Asian Club Championship in Bahrain will join up with the rest of the squad after the conclusion of their club commitments. The international season will begin for Iran with a visit to Japan, where Ataei's men will kick off their Volleyball Nations League (VNL) campaign against the host in Nagoya on June 6 before

taking on Poland, China, and Slovenia in Week 1 as the Asian powerhouse looks to build on the impressive run at the event last year which finished in a quarterfinal setback against the Poles. The second week, beginning June 20 in the Dutch city of Rotterdam, will feature four games against Germany, Italy, USA, and the Netherlands and then Iran will head to Anaheim in the United States to face defending champion France, Bulgaria, and Argentina before capping off the preliminary round against Cuba on July 9. Should Iran finish in the top half of the 16-team table, Ataei's side will part of the VNL Finals, beginning July 19 in Gdansk, Poland. Iran will fancy its chances to retain the crown on home soil, when hosting the Asian Men's Volleyball



● volleyball.ir

Championship in Tehran from August 18-26. Fixtures will come thick and fast for Iran as Ataei will take his team to Hangzhou, China, with a third successive gold at the Asian

Games on their sight. Finally, Iran will be among the 24 teams which will battle it out for six berths at the 2024 Paris Olympics across three qualification tournaments in Brazil, Chi-

na, and Japan from Sept. 30-Oct. 8, with the top two in each event booking a place in the French capital. There was a couple of surprises in Ataei's list as veteran duo Mohammad

Mousavi and Amir Ghafour both received a call-up and will be in line for a first international outing since the Tokyo Olympics two years ago. This is the second time that Mousavi is called into action by Ataei though he withdrew from the team on the eve of the World Championship in August last year. However, a one-year ban for young middle blocker Amirhossein Toukhteh due to a positive doping test convinced the head coach to pick the 35-year-old again. Ghafour, meanwhile, was rewarded with a place in the squad after playing an integral part to Shahdab Yazd's title-winning run at the Iranian Pro League earlier this month, though he will face tough competition from Amin Esmailnejad and Bardia Sa'adat for the opposite spiker role.