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The Black Stars and Africa's World Cup dream

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**By Steven E. HENDRIX**

As Ghana returns to the World Cup, the Black Stars carry more than football hopes. They carry a history of independence, Pan-African pride and a country's search for renewed confidence.



I have lived in Nigeria and Ghana. In both countries, I learnt quickly that football is not a pastime. It is argument, memory, pride, grief, comedy, politics and prayer.

On match day, a national team can do what politicians often cannot. It can make people stop, watch, hope and speak in one voice.

That is why Africa's presence at the 2026 World Cup matters. It is not only about who advances from the group stage. It is about how countries see themselves, how the world sees Africa and how football has become one of the continent's most powerful forms of soft power.

For the first time, [Africa will have ten teams at the World Cup](#): Morocco, Senegal, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Cabo Verde, South Africa and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Nine qualified directly. Congo DR then joined them through the intercontinental playoff. That alone makes 2026 different.

The expanded 48-team format gives Africa more room, but it also places a greater burden on African teams: to show that expansion did not merely create more places. It created more contenders.

The strongest African team on paper is Morocco. That is not a sentimental judgment. Morocco is the highest-ranked African team in the current FIFA rankings, sitting eighth in the world. Senegal is next among African teams at 14th. Nigeria, despite missing the

tournament, is 26th. Algeria is 28th, Egypt 29th, Côte d'Ivoire 34th, Tunisia 44th, and Congo DR 46th. Ghana sits far lower, at 74th. [The latest FIFA rankings capture both the promise and the imbalance within African football.](#)

Morocco carries the heaviest expectations because Morocco has already broken the ceiling. In Qatar in 2022, it became [the first African team to reach a World Cup semi-final.](#) That changed the psychology of African football. Before Morocco, the question was whether an African team could reach the last four. Now the question is whether one can go further.

That is a very different burden. Morocco no longer arrives as a charming outsider. It arrives as a serious football power, with global respect, tactical discipline and a diaspora-linked talent base that reflects the modern African experience. Morocco's World Cup group is difficult but fascinating: [Brazil, Morocco, Haiti and Scotland.](#) Brazil gives the group glamour. Haiti gives it emotion. Scotland gives it European intensity. Morocco gives it the possibility of another African breakthrough.

Senegal may be Africa's other true contender. Its ranking is strong. Its talent is real. Its football identity is mature.

Senegal has spent the past decade building the kind of consistency that African football too often lacked in earlier generations. It no longer feels like a team hoping for a moment. It feels like a programme.

Senegal's group is brutal: [France, Senegal, Iraq and Norway.](#) France is an obvious heavyweight. Norway brings danger. Iraq cannot be dismissed. But if Senegal advances from that group, no one will want to face it.

The best Senegal teams are physically strong, tactically organised and emotionally difficult to shake. That is a combination built for tournament football.

Côte d'Ivoire brings a different kind of confidence. It is the reigning African champion. Côte d'Ivoire [won the 2023 Africa Cup of Nations after coming from behind to beat Nigeria 2-1 in Abidjan.](#)

That victory mattered because it was not a smooth coronation. It was chaotic, improbable and deeply African in the best sense: a team nearly written off finding belief when belief seemed irrational.

That is why Côte d'Ivoire should not be underestimated. The Elephants know what it means to survive a tournament. They know how quickly a team can look dead and then come alive. At the World Cup, they face [Germany, Curaçao and Ecuador.](#) Germany will be favoured.

Ecuador is organised and dangerous. Curaçao is a historic newcomer. But Côte d'Ivoire has enough quality and enough resilience to turn that group into a fight.

Algeria is another serious team, though harder to read. Its best players can change games. Its football culture is intense, proud and demanding. But Algeria has often swung between brilliance and frustration. That volatility is part of its appeal and part of its risk.

In 2026, Algeria faces [Argentina, Austria and Jordan](#). Argentina is the defending champion. Austria is dangerous. Jordan is one of the tournament's debutants. Algeria's path is not easy, but it is not impossible.

Egypt is the old giant with a modern question. It has history, a massive football culture and Mohamed Salah, one of the defining African players of his generation. But World Cup is unforgiving to teams that rely too heavily on one symbol.

Egypt's group includes [Belgium, Iran and New Zealand](#). That gives Egypt a plausible path. It also gives Egypt no excuse. If the team is organised and Salah is decisive, Egypt can advance. If not, it may again leave the world wondering why one of Africa's great football nations so rarely converts continental prestige into World Cup success.

### **Then there is Ghana.**

For readers in Accra, Kumasi, Tamale, Takoradi, Cape Coast, Sunyani, Ho, Bolgatanga and across the Ghanaian diaspora, this is not an abstract question. The Black Stars are back.

Ghana [secured its place at the 2026 World Cup after beating Comoros 1-0 and topping Group I](#). The contrast was sharp. Ghana had failed to qualify for the 2025 Africa Cup of Nations, its first absence from the continental finals since 2004. The Black Stars did not simply qualify. They recovered from humiliation.

That matters in Ghana because football has never been only football. Ghana's modern national story and its football story have been linked from the beginning.

Ghana became independent on March 6, 1957, as the first sub-Saharan African country to gain independence from a European colonial power. Kwame Nkrumah understood that Ghana's independence was not only a constitutional event. It was a continental message. His declaration that [Ghana's independence was meaningless unless linked to the total liberation of Africa](#) was not rhetoric alone. It became a political programme.

The black star at the centre of Ghana's flag carried that message visually. It was not simply a national emblem. It connected Ghana to a wider Pan-African imagination.

Ghana's mission to the United Nations explains that [the black star was adopted from Marcus Garvey's Black Star Line](#), the shipping line created in 1919 as part of Garvey's dream of linking Africa and people of African descent across the Atlantic.

The symbol, therefore, reached beyond Accra. It pointed toward Harlem, the Caribbean, the American South and the larger Black world.

Nkrumah understood the world from both sides of the Atlantic. He studied in the United States, first at Lincoln University and then at the University of Pennsylvania. The University of Pennsylvania archives note that [Nkrumah arrived in Philadelphia in 1935, completed his Lincoln studies, and then enrolled at the University of Pennsylvania](#).

During those years, he absorbed the politics of the Black diaspora, anti-colonial thought and the intellectual atmosphere of African American struggle.

That connection was visible at independence. Martin Luther King Jr. travelled to Ghana for the 1957 independence celebrations at Nkrumah's invitation. King's [trip to Ghana for the independence ceremonies](#), and later his preaching of "The Birth of a New Nation," used Ghana's independence to teach Americans about freedom, colonialism and the moral logic of liberation.

Ghana's independence and America's civil rights struggle were not separate stories. They were part of the same mid-century argument over race, empire, dignity and human freedom.

### **Football fits that programme.**

Nkrumah saw the Black Stars as more than a national team. He saw them as a symbol of the new Ghana and of Africa's capacity to stand confidently before the world. Nkrumah drew on football as [a rallying point for nation-building and Pan-African unity](#). The Black Stars were not just playing matches. They were carrying a vision.

That history still matters. The team's name carries the same symbol that sits at the centre of the national flag. Every Black Stars match, therefore, carries an echo of independence: Ghana's claim that it could lead, inspire and represent more than itself.

In 2026, that symbolism will travel again, not only to the World Cup, but to stadia and screens across Africa, Europe and the Americas, where Ghana's diaspora will watch as part of a global black public.

This is why Ghana's 2026 World Cup return feels bigger than a sports story. Ghana is again trying to find itself. The country has gone through its worst economic crisis in a generation. Ghana and the International Monetary Fund have now [reached an agreement on the final](#)

[review of a US\\$3billion support programme](#), a milestone in the country's attempt to emerge from debt distress, inflation, currency pressure and lost confidence.

Ghana has also been through a political reset. John Dramani Mahama [won the 2024 Presidential Elections with 56.55 percent of the votes](#), and Mahamudu Bawumia conceded before the final declaration to reduce tensions. That peaceful concession reinforced Ghana's democratic reputation at a difficult moment for the region.

So, Ghana enters the World Cup at a revealing moment. The economy is stabilising, but many households still feel the pain of inflation, debt adjustment and lost confidence. Democracy has endured, but citizens want results. The country's international reputation remains strong, but its self-confidence has been tested.

A good Black Stars performance will not fix the economy. It will not lower prices, create jobs, end corruption or restore trust in public institutions. But national pride matters. Countries recover not only through budgets and reforms, but also through confidence.

A team that plays with discipline, unity and courage can remind citizens of something politics often obscures: Ghana has led before and it can lead again.

The 2026 draw did Ghana no favours. Ghana is in [Group L with England, Croatia and Panama](#). England brings global scrutiny. Croatia brings tournament experience. Panama brings Central American energy and discipline.

Ghana will not be favoured to win the group. But Ghana does not need to win the group to make a statement. It needs to recover the belief that made the Black Stars one of the world's most admired teams in 2010.

That memory remains powerful. Ghana reached the quarter-finals in South Africa in 2010 and came heartbreakingly close to becoming the first African semi-finalist.

The Uruguay match remains [one of the most unforgettable quarter-finals in World Cup history](#). For Ghana, 2026 is, therefore, a return to unfinished business.

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The timing is delicate. Ghana [appointed Carlos Queiroz after parting company with Otto Addo 72 days before the World Cup kick-off](#). Queiroz then began World Cup preparations after weeks of travel, study and player review, with Ghana preparing from a base in Wales before heading to North America. Ghana's [preparations under Queiroz show how urgently the country is trying to turn talent into structure](#).

For Ghana, the deeper question is institutional. Talent has never been the problem. Ghana produces footballers with skill, intelligence and courage. The issue is whether the system around them can match the players' ambition.

That means coaching, preparation, federation management, youth development, accountability and the ability to build a national team culture that survives disappointment.

Football success is never only about eleven players. It is about whether a country can organise excellence. That was Nkrumah's insight. The Black Stars were not simply a team. They were a national project. In 2026, Ghana has a chance to make them feel like one again.

South Africa carries another kind of burden. It is the continent's largest economy at the tournament and the only African country that has hosted a World Cup. But Bafana Bafana has often struggled to convert domestic infrastructure and football passion into global consistency. In 2026, South Africa opens the tournament against Mexico in Mexico City. The group also includes [South Korea and Czechia](#). That is difficult, but not hopeless.

South Africa's presence matters because it reminds us that football development is not automatic. Stadia help. Professional clubs help. Money helps. But none of those things guarantees national team success. South Africa has the resources to be a larger football power. The question is whether it can turn structure into performance.

Tunisia may be the least fashionable African team in the field, but it belongs in this conversation. Tunisia is rarely romanticised. It is often organised, stubborn and hard to beat. In tournament football, that matters.

Tunisia faces [the Netherlands, Japan and Sweden](#), one of the most technically demanding groups in the tournament. It will need discipline, patience and set-piece efficiency. But those are precisely the tools Tunisia often brings.

Congo DR may have the most dramatic return. Congo DR [qualified for its first World Cup since 1974 after Axel Tuanzebe scored an extra-time winner against Jamaica](#). The Leopards now face [Portugal, Uzbekistan and Colombia](#).

Congo DR also brings the article back to state capacity and fragility. The team had to [cancel World Cup build-up events in Kinshasa because of an Ebola outbreak and related travel restrictions](#). That is more than a logistical note. It is a reminder that African teams often carry burdens far beyond football.

They prepare not only against opponents, but against infrastructure gaps, governance problems, health emergencies, insecurity and global systems that do not always treat African mobility as normal.

Cabo Verde may be the most beautiful story in the tournament. FIFA describes Cabo Verde as [an archipelago of about half a million people and only 4,000 square kilometres of land](#). Its first World Cup qualification is, therefore, not just a sporting achievement.

It is a national and diaspora achievement. Cabo Verde's football project has been strengthened by descendants from diverse backgrounds joining the national effort.

That makes Cabo Verde one of the purest examples of modern African identity. The nation is small, but its people are global. Like many African countries, its football map is larger than its physical territory. Players, families and supporters live across borders. The national team becomes a way to gather a dispersed people around a flag.

Cabo Verde's group is unforgiving: [Spain, Cabo Verde, Saudi Arabia and Uruguay](#). Spain and Uruguay are elite football nations. Saudi Arabia will not be easy. But Cabo Verde has already won something by getting there. It has forced the world to learn its name.

### **And then there is Nigeria, absent and unavoidable.**

Nigeria did not qualify. FIFA's list of [qualified teams for the 2026 World Cup](#) includes ten African nations, but not Nigeria. That absence is one of the tournament's biggest African stories. It is especially striking because Nigeria remains highly ranked.

In the latest FIFA rankings, Nigeria is 26th in the world, ahead of Algeria, Egypt, Côte d'Ivoire, Tunisia, Congo DR, South Africa, Cabo Verde and Ghana. Yet all of those countries qualified; and Nigeria did not.

That is football's hard truth. Talent is not enough. Reputation is not enough. The population is not enough. Nigeria has stars, passion, money and one of the most powerful football cultures in the world. But qualification rewards consistency, not mythology.

For a country where football is so central to national identity, missing this World Cup will hurt. It should also force serious reflection.

I say that with affection. Nigeria is close to my heart. So is Ghana. In both countries, football reveals the best and worst of public life: brilliance, improvisation, impatience, politics, resilience and joy. When things work, African football feels limitless. When they do not, the gap between talent and organisation becomes painfully clear.

That is the real theme of Africa's World Cup. The continent does not lack players. It does not lack passion. It does not lack football intelligence. What it has often lacked is the full

ecosystem required to turn talent into sustained global power: federation governance, coaching depth, data analysis, sports medicine, youth pathways, player welfare, travel logistics and administrative competence.

This is where football and development meet. A national team is not only a sporting unit. It is an institution. Its performance reflects systems: schools, clubs, federations, ministries, sponsors, diasporas and media. The best teams are not always the countries with the most talent. They are often the countries that waste the least.

That is why Morocco matters. It shows what planning can do. That is why Senegal matters. It shows what continuity can do. That is why Ghana matters. It shows what recovery can look like after institutional disappointment.

That is why Cabo Verde matters. It shows what diaspora mobilisation can achieve. That is why Congo DR matters. It shows how football can carry a fragile state's hope onto a global stage.

The 2026 World Cup will not solve Africa's problems. It will not create jobs, fix governance, end conflict or stop young people from leaving home in search of opportunity. But it will show the world something important: Africa is not arriving as a guest. It is arriving as a football continent with depth, ambition and several teams capable of changing the tournament.

Morocco and Senegal look like the strongest contenders. Côte d'Ivoire, Algeria and Egypt can threaten anyone. Ghana has the history and talent to surprise. South Africa, Tunisia, Congo DR and Cabo Verde carry stories that reach beyond results.

For Ghana, the World Cup has an added meaning. The Black Stars once helped carry the confidence of a newly independent nation, a continent still fighting to be free, and a global Black freedom struggle that stretched from Accra to Harlem to Montgomery.

A strong performance in 2026 would not recreate that moment. History does not work that way. But it could remind Ghana of the spirit that made independence feel like more than a flag and an anthem. It could help a country in recovery remember that pride, discipline and national purpose still matter.

For Africa, the question is no longer whether one team can make a run. Morocco answered that in 2022. The question now is whether the continent can turn breakthrough into expectation.

In 2026, Africa will not whisper its case. It will bring ten teams, millions of supporters and a message the football world should already understand: the next great World Cup story may come from Africa.

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