

Can The United States Team Make History as Hosts?

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The countdown to the 2026 FIFA World Cup, set to be hosted across the U.S., Canada and Mexico, has excited most football fans around the world.

Football isn't the main sport in the U.S.; it's not even within the top four most popular. American football, basketball, baseball and hockey dominate. Yet, there has been a rapid expansion within football's popularity, and the World Cup certainly will help expand it further.

So, what about American fans? What can they expect from the US Men's National Team (USMNT)?

For the first time since 1994, the USMNT will play a World Cup on home soil. The promise is not only to compete, but to prove, perhaps definitely, that American football has outgrown its reputation as a developing force and matured into a genuine contender.

The 2026 World Cup represents not only an opportunity, but a responsibility. For the first time in modern history, the U.S. expects to arrive at a World Cup not merely hoping to advance past the group stage, but to test the limits of what an American can achieve.

Bournemouth's Tyler Adams set the tone shortly after the draw placed the U.S. with Paraguay, Australia, and a yet-to-be-determined European playoff winner. The USMNT captain didn't hide behind clichés. The goal, he said, should be to go further than any American team before. In the modern era, that means a semifinal, but if you include the first WC in 1930, where the USMNT was third, that could mean a final.

The group stage draw was generous with the hosts. Paraguay and Australia are both strong opponents, but the USMNT has defeated them convincingly within the past two months. Even the potential knockout-stage crossover – with teams like Belgium, Egypt, Iran, or New Zealand – present manageable pathways for a team with ambitious goals.

The bar is really high. However, some believe that for the first time in years, the USMNT is starting to look like a team shaped by expectation rather than hope. All because of Mauricio Pochettino.

Recent form shows a group full of confidence and purpose. Their emphatic 5–1 win over Uruguay in November, following a 2–1 victory against Paraguay, revealed a team that is no longer just testing itself against the world but asserting dominance over it. Pochettino's high-intensity football was evident from the start. The team plays with ferocity and pride.

What stood out more than the scoreline was the identity on display. There was arrogance but the kind Pochettino encourages: conviction, self-belief, and unity. Players like Alex Freeman, Sebastian Berhalter, and Diego Luna, who were once seen as developmental prospects, played with the urgency of trying to justify their names into a World Cup squad. Veterans like Mark McKenzie and Tim Ream balanced that youthful drive with leadership and composure.

Pochettino has focused on building habits, and shaping a culture where hunger outlasts good performances.

In less than two years, he has dismantled any sense of hierarchy within the team. No player, not even European-based stars such as Yunus Musah or Johnny Cardoso, was guaranteed a call-up. Established figures like Christian Pulisic, Weston McKennie, and Sergiño Dest faced real competition from MLS talents who were playing not for reputation, but for opportunity.

When Pochettino arrived, many assumed his early call-ups for MLS role players were a reconnaissance mission. Give the stars a rest, take stock of the domestic pool, and gradually narrow down the core of the team. But that wasn't the reality. Instead, Pochettino tore up the pre-existing order and built a new one from scratch.

He didn't care about whether someone played in Europe or MLS; he cared about their willingness to compete. He didn't care about reputations; he cared about who would sprint the extra metre to win a ball that looked lost. He spoke openly about not seeing enough urgency in past U.S. squads, the feeling that friendlies were to be treated delicately, as if injury risk outweighed national pride.

He wanted to change all of that. And he has.

Sebastian Berhalter, Alex Freeman, Max Arfsten, or Diego Luna. All young domestic players, none considered ‘stars’, yet suddenly became emblematic of the new era. They were hungry, committed, and willing to do what Pochettino demanded: play with a hardened edge, the type he grew up with in Argentina, where a national team call-up is scary and no match is taken lightly.

Those who embraced the new standards stayed. Those who didn’t are out of the picture.

The cultural overhaul was evident in the last friendlies against Paraguay and Uruguay, where this new culture showed what is like at full speed: relentless work, aggressive pressing, and a refusal to treat a friendly as a formality.

At its core, Pochettino’s revolution is about competition. By creating genuine battles for roster spots, he reawakened purpose across the squad. It contrasts past cycles, when team ‘regulars’ often played without fear of losing their place. Now, depth has become the team’s greatest strength. MLS role players push European stars; youngsters force veterans to evolve; veterans set standards by leading by example. The mix has given the USMNT something long missing: internal competition matched by external respect.

In the Qatar WC 2022, the USMNT arrived talented but inexperienced. 25 of the 26 players had never been to a World Cup, and internally the message was straightforward: survive, learn, grow. They were ultimately outmatched by a ruthless Netherlands team in the round of 16.

Four years later, the squad is older, steadier, and deeper. Christian Pulisic, Weston McKennie, Folarin Balogun, Antonee Robinson, Gio Reyna or Brenden Aaronson have all been tested on some of the biggest stages in world football. They know what it feels like to carry a nation’s expectations, and crucially, they now will have a crowd supporting them at every game.

Pochettino often references Argentina’s 2022 WC triumph: not because of the star quality, but because of the cohesion, the willingness of every player – starter or substitute – to run themselves into the ground for a collective goal. That’s the mentality he wants to promote in the U.S.

The talent is there. The depth is now there. The tactical organisation is improving. The World Cup will be on home soil. And the pathway, at least on paper, is navigable.

But above all, this is a team that now believes its ceiling has not yet been set.

Like Adams said, the benchmark should be the furthest the USMNT has ever gone. For once, it doesn't feel improbable. It feels like a challenge this group is ready to embrace.