

KNOW THE SCORE

Check out the players to watch and the teams to follow in the world's most popular sporting event

Text by KEITH GORDON



While the U.S. national team didn't make it to the 2018 World Cup, there are plenty of reasons to tune in. Here, *Maxim's* guide to the celebrated tournament, which takes place in Russia this year.

THE PLAYERS

№1 Cristiano Ronaldo: *Portugal* Arguably the best player on the planet, Ronaldo (pictured above) will try to repeat his team's stunning run to the 2016 European Championship. As the strongest member of the squad, the 33-year-old, five-time Ballon d'Or winner will have to perform at his absolute best to give his nation a shot.

№2 Lionel Messi: *Argentina* The other player with a claim to the title of world's best, Messi finally replicated his club form for his national team, leading Argentina to the final of the 2014 World Cup before losing to Germany. For Messi, this might be his last chance to match his idol and fellow Argentine soccer royalty, Diego Maradona, by bringing a World Cup back to Argentina.

№3 Neymar: *Brazil* The world's most expensive player, thanks to his \$263 million move from Barcelona to Paris Saint-Germain, Neymar will once again lead the Seleção, Brazil's national team. Whereas icons like Ronaldo and

Ronaldinho had a host of strong players alongside them, for Brazil, the hopes of the world's leading soccer nation will weigh heavily on Neymar's shoulders.

№4 Paul Pogba: *France* A polarizing figure in the soccer world, Pogba has the talent to be the prototypical midfielder for the modern game. Strong, quick, and technically gifted, Pogba will look to organize a French squad that could be the most talented group in the entire tournament.

№5 Mohamed Salah: *Egypt* The lightning-quick Egyptian attacker has owned this year's Premier League and Champions League with Liverpool, scoring goals at will. It should be interesting to see if this breakout star can reprise his victories for the Egyptian national team.

THE FAVORITES

№1 Germany: The current champions, Germany brings a different crew to this tournament than the team that was victorious at Brazil '14. But the Germans don't rebuild; they reload. With one of the most balanced squads in the competition, expect to see coach Joachim Löw's players back in the later rounds.

№2 Brazil: While they might not match the historically great teams, Brazil has more than enough talent to threaten any competitor they face. Neymar is joined by Gabriel Jesus, Thiago Silva, and Casemiro—not to mention Philippe Coutinho, his replacement on his former club team, who cost Barça roughly \$192 million—which means Brazil is a legitimate threat, and a favorite to bring the trophy home for the sixth time.

№3 France: From Pogba to Antoine Griezmann, N'Golo Kanté to Kylian Mbappé, France has more world-class players than it can fit into a starting XI. If the team can get all these pieces to work together, no one in the tournament will be able to stop the French, as even their bench is likely to feature global stars like Ousmane Dembélé and Olivier Giroud.

THE DARK HORSE

Belgium: With an attacking trio of Romelu Lukaku (Man Utd), Eden Hazard (Chelsea), and Kevin De Bruyne (Man City), Belgium has the firepower to match any opposition. Now Belgium's golden generation needs results that match its enormous potential after coming up short in recent international tournaments.