



Everything you need to know about the new qualification system for the 2026 World Cup

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The 2026 World Cup is set to enter a radically different phase in its history, following the [decision to increase the number of participating teams](#) from 32 to 48. This expansion has not only increased the number of teams but has also completely reshaped the tournament's structure, from the group stage right through to the knockout rounds.

This change has led to an increase in the number of matches from 64 to 104, with the adoption of a completely new competition format, the biggest since the tournament's inception.

A completely new format: 12 groups and an expanded knockout stage

In the previous format, which ran from 1998 to 2022, the tournament was organised into eight groups of four teams each, with the top two teams [in each group qualifying directly](#) for the round of 16, whilst the remaining 16 teams were eliminated.

For the 2026 World Cup, however, the number of groups has increased to 12, with four teams in each group, making the format both broader and more complex.

Under the new system, the top two teams from each group qualify directly for the round of 32, a new stage introduced to accommodate the significant expansion, bringing the total number of direct qualifiers to 24 teams.

The most significant change is that the eight best third-placed teams are given the chance to continue in the tournament by qualifying for the round of 32, bringing the total number of qualifiers for the knockout stages to 32.

Conversely, 12 teams will be eliminated immediately, namely those finishing fourth in their groups.

Criteria for determining the best third-placed teams

In the event of a tie between teams finishing third, a series of progressive criteria will be applied to determine the outcome:

First: points scored in the group stage.

Second: goal difference. Third: number of goals scored.

Fourth: fair play record.

The fair play record is based on disciplinary points as follows:

- Yellow card: 1 point
- Sending off after two yellow cards: 3 points
- Straight red card: 4 points
- Yellow card followed by a straight red card: 5 points

If the tie persists, the FIFA World Ranking is used to determine the winner.

Draw for the Round of 32

Once the 32 qualifiers have been determined, the tournament bracket is reconfigured according to a specific draw:

- The 8 group winners face the 8 third-placed teams.
- Another 4 group winners face 4 runners-up.
- The 8 runners-up also face each other in a direct knockout stage.

Final qualification table

At the end of the group stage, the places are distributed as follows:

- 12 group winners
- 12 runners-up
- 8 best third-placed teams
- 12 teams will be eliminated in the first round

This brings the number of [teams qualifying for the knockout stages](#) from 16 in the old system to 32 in the 2026 edition, ushering in a new era for the tournament that is the largest and most extensive in

World Cup history.

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