



Senegal primed for World Cup after AFCON debacle

Description

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Senegal

Senegal enters the 2026 [World Cup finals](#) with a rare blend of ambition, experience and renewal, in an attempt to rewrite one of the most beautiful stories in African football on the world stage.

Although the "Lions of Teranga" were unable to go beyond the quarter-finals of the 2002 World Cup, the signs leading up to the current edition suggest that the West African side possesses the qualities to make it one of the leading contenders to play the role of "dark horse" in the tournament.

Senegal had made their way to the World Cup with remarkable consistency, topping their qualifying group with seven wins from ten matches, conceding just three goals – a statistic which [the Guardian](#) considered to reflect the enduring strength of the Senegalese school of football, which has long built its success on defensive solidity and tactical discipline.

A new generation from Senegal is knocking on the door

Since taking charge, coach Pape Thiaw has worked to reshape the national team's identity without completely breaking with the generation of stars that led Senegal to continental glory.

The squad set to feature in the United States, Canada and Mexico includes six players with only limited international experience, a fact to which [the Guardian](#) clearly pointed as indicative of the renewal process being led by the coaching staff. Thiaw has opted to rely on younger, faster players, giving the team a style based on possession and constant movement rather than simply relying on the physical strength associated with the national team in previous years.

This shift does not mean abandoning the pillars of experience, as captain Kalidou Koulibaly remains the defensive linchpin, whilst Idrissa Gueye and Edouard Mendy continue to play pivotal roles within the squad.

A balance between solidity and quick transitions

In [FIFA's report on the Senegal national team](#) which details information, statistics and analysis, it is stated that Senegal's technical approach relies on a clear blend of traditional defensive discipline and speed in attacking transitions, with an increasing tendency towards direct play when regaining possession. The team is characterised by a strong defensive unit led by Kalidou Koulibaly, which gives the side the ability to withstand high pressure, whilst Edouard Mendy provides a key anchor at the back.

In attack, Senegal tend to exploit the flanks through the pace of Ismaïla Sarr and Nicolas Jackson's ability to get behind the lines, relying on quick vertical passes rather than slow build-up play.

Lamine Camara also plays a role in linking the lines and setting the tempo in midfield, giving the team the flexibility to switch between quick transitions and positional play depending on the opposition.

This balance has made the team more adaptable in big games, but they still need to improve their effectiveness against teams that defend in deep blocks, which is their main challenge ahead of the World Cup.

The team has also reverted to a 4-3-3 formation following an unsuccessful experiment with a back three, which has given the side greater balance between defence and attack.

Mané and the final chapter

If every World Cup has a human story, Senegal's story begins and ends almost entirely with Sadio Mané.

The star, who missed the 2022 Qatar World Cup through injury, returns this time knowing that this may be his last chance to make a major mark at the World Cup. It is true that his pace is no longer what it was during his golden years at Liverpool, but his influence on and off the pitch remains decisive, whether through his attacking leadership or his symbolic status in the dressing room.

The 2026 edition looks set to be Mané's final attempt to lead his country to a global achievement that matches his status among the greatest African players of the modern era.

Despite the abundance of stars, all eyes are on the young talent Amara Diouf, who turned 18 just before the tournament kicked off.

The rising winger is regarded as Senegal's most promising footballing prospect at present, having established himself in the senior squad at a very young age, thanks to his speed, dribbling ability and knack for breaking down defensive blocks, as described by [the Guardian](#)

A group that tests ambition for Senegal

Senegal's task will not be an easy one in a group featuring France, Norway and Iraq, as their campaign begins with a historically significant clash against France, the very side Senegal knocked out in one of the biggest upsets of the 2002 World Cup.

But what sets this edition of the "Lions of Teranga" apart is that they do not rest on past glories. With the experience of Mané and Koulibaly, the dynamism of Jackson and Sar, and the daring of Diouf and Kamara, Senegal appear to be at a crossroads between a generation that made history and one trying to surpass it.

And perhaps for this very reason, many view the Senegalese national team as one of the sides most capable of defying the odds at the 2026 World Cup.

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By [Alaa Shamali](#)

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