



The farewell World Cup: 16 legends set for their final tournament

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World Cup

The 2026 World Cup will not just be another milestone in the history of the game; it could become the final chapter for some of the greatest stars who have left their mark on global football over the last two decades. While all eyes will be on the [race for the title](#) in the United States, Canada, and Mexico, the tournament will also be an exceptional occasion to bid farewell to an entire generation of legends who built glory for their national teams and cemented their names in the history books.

The average age of these stars is about 37, and most have already participated in more than one World Cup, giving the upcoming tournament an exceptional character as a final opportunity to add a new achievement to their international careers. This sentiment was addressed by FIFA in an [official report titled "The Last Dance"](#).

Messi and Ronaldo: Chasing the historic World Cup record

Leading the list of stars who might make their final World Cup appearance are Argentina's Lionel Messi (aged 39) and Portugal's Cristiano Ronaldo (aged 41). Both have participated in five previous editions: 2006, 2010, 2014, 2018, and 2022.

Should the duo participate in the 2026 World Cup, they will reach their sixth tournament appearance, a nearly unprecedented historical record in the competition. This same milestone could also be achieved by Mexican goalkeeper Guillermo Ochoa (aged 41), who has five previous appearances with his national team.

Close behind them is Croatia's Luka Modrić (aged 40), who is preparing for his fifth participation after featuring in the 2006, 2014, 2018, and 2022 editions. Similarly, Germany's Manuel Neuer (aged 40) will enter the tournament for the fifth time, having been one of the key stars in Germany's

2014 title victory.

While Messi successfully completed his journey to global glory by winning the World Cup in Qatar 2022, Ronaldo is still searching for a major World Cup achievement to add to his exceptional career, which lends an extra historical dimension to their potential participation.

A golden generation closes its final chapter

The 2026 World Cup holds special significance for several stars from Europe and South America who have formed the backbone of their national teams in recent years.

Prominent on this list is Belgium's Kevin De Bruyne (aged 35), who has played in three previous World Cup editions, and the Netherlands's Virgil van Dijk (aged 35), who appeared in the 2022 edition and is preparing for his second participation.

Brazil's Neymar (aged 34) will also enter the tournament after three previous appearances, and he is his national team's all-time top scorer. Meanwhile, his compatriots Casemiro (aged 34) and Alisson Becker (aged 34) are preparing for their third participation, having featured in the 2018 and 2022 editions.

The list also includes Switzerland's Granit Xhaka (aged 34) and South Korea's Son Heung-min (aged 34), both of whom have participated in three previous editions. In addition, Colombia's James Rodríguez (aged 35), the top scorer of the 2014 World Cup, is preparing for his third career appearance.

As for Bosnia's Edin Džeko (aged 40), his national team's all-time top scorer, he stands before a rare opportunity to appear in the World Cup again after his sole participation in 2014, marking one of the final major stops in his international career.

Salah and Mané: The last appearance for two African icons

On the African side, the upcoming tournament appears to be the last chance for two of the continent's most prominent modern-era stars: Egypt's Mohamed Salah (aged 34) and Senegal's Sadio Mané (aged 34).

Salah is preparing for his second World Cup appearance after his debut in Russia 2018, having become one of the most prominent Arab and African football stars on the global stage in recent years.

Mané, conversely, enters the tournament after two previous appearances with the Senegalese national team. He was one of the key members of the generation that led the "Lions of Teranga" to win the Africa Cup of Nations title for the first time in the country's history.

The participation of the duo lends a special dimension to the tournament, representing the continuation of an era that saw the rise of African football to the global forefront thanks to their achievements with their national teams and clubs.

With three players chasing a historic sixth appearance, two preparing for their fifth, and a large number of captains and top scorers who are past their mid-thirties or have reached forty, the 2026 edition is poised to be more than just a fight for the Golden Trophy. It is a tournament that may witness the curtain closing on the careers of an entire generation of stars who shaped the memory of modern football and left a legacy that will endure for many years.

Featured image via Luke Hales/Getty Images

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