

Beautiful game

The turn of 2024 marked the Africa Cup of Nations and the Asian Cup, with the European Championships and Copa América to look forward to later this year



Left: 25-year-old Kylian Mbappé is rated one of the best players in the world and is set to leave Paris St Germain this summer, with Real Madrid expected to be his new club

Faé was not the manager at the start of the tournament.

Believing they were eliminated and assuming failure, Jean-Louis Gasset was fired before Mozambique's last-minute equaliser against Ghana which paved the way through for Côte d'Ivoire. Rarely do coaches lose their jobs during international tournaments – and never before has a nation sacked its coach and gone on to lift the trophy during the same tournament.

ASIAN CUP

No such drama In the Asia Cup as 85,000 fans watched Akram Afif score a hat-trick of penalties in Lusail to secure back-to-back titles for Qatar in a 3-1 win over an ill-disciplined Jordan in the final. Qatar Stars winger Afif got The Maroons off to a winning start with two goals in a 3-0 victory over Lebanon, before adding the only score over Tajikistan, a penalty in the regulation-time win over Palestine, a penalty in

the shoot-out with Uzbekistan in the quarter-finals, and two against Iran in the semi-final, finishing top-scorer with eight.

China were surprise Group Stage casualties after failing to score in scoreless draws with Tajikistan and Lebanon, and a 1-0 loss to Qatar.

Global superstar and Tottenham Hotspur striker Heung-min Son couldn't steer his South Korea side all the way, crashing out to underdogs Jordan in the semi-finals after two draws in the Group Stage and promising wins over Saudi Arabia and Australia in the knockouts.

EURO 2024

Europe's quadrennial tournament returns to Germany for the third time, with the host nation desperate to rediscover the form that saw them win in 1972, 1980 and 1996 – more than any other nation except Spain who have also won three titles. With the exception of two friendly victories over The Netherlands and France in March, there has been increasing pressure on young coach Julian Nagelsman following Hansi Flick's dismissal in September and losses to Turkey and Austria in November. ▶



As the footballing world drew breath following Qatar 2022, the first ever FIFA World Cup to be played in the Northern Hemisphere winter, preparations were already underway for delayed continental tournaments in Côte d'Ivoire and Qatar (again), with the European Championships and Copa América in Germany and

the US respectively getting back on track after the pandemic-hit 2020 tournaments. And with major domestic leagues continuing, the eyes of the international football community fell upon Africa and Asia in January, with more than one million fans attending each tournament. For the first time since 1980 when Nigeria and

Kuwait lifted trophies, both host nations Côte d'Ivoire and Qatar won the African Cup of Nations (AFCON) and the Asian Cup.

AFCON

Nicknamed The Elephants, Côte d'Ivoire won their third title (1992, 2015, 2023) in the most astounding of circumstances. They scraped through Group A

– comprising surprise package Equatorial Guinea and three-time champions Nigeria – as the lowest of the third-placed teams to qualify and they only recorded one win in the tournament's opening games, a 2-0 victory over Guinea-Bassau. It then took an 86th-minute penalty to take their Round of 16 match into extra-time and

then penalties against defending champions Senegal, with English Premier League defender Moussa Niakhaté missing for the unbeaten Senegalese to allow Côte d'Ivoire through. Last-gasp goals in the 90th and 122nd-minute against Mali had the world starting to think something special could happen, with Emerse Faé's frail team starting to believe.

Borussia Dortmund striker Sebastian Haller then scored two winning goals in the semi-final win over DR Congo and the final against Nigeria, who had beaten Côte d'Ivoire 1-0 in Group A. From a bleak Group Stage that also included a 4-0 defeat against Equatorial Guinea to champions, this was a footballing miracle. Even more so, because Emerse

Nagelsman, however, would be happy to see the spotlight on tournament favourites France and England, after France lost to Argentina in the 2022 FIFA World Cup and England lost on penalties to Italy in the Euro 2020 final. France face Poland, Netherlands and Austria in Group D, while England were drawn alongside Slovenia, Denmark and Serbia. Germany face Scotland, Hungary and Switzerland, while Belgium start as favourites in Group E with Ukraine, and Portugal in Group G, with Cristiano Ronaldo hoping to at least make the squad for a record-breaking sixth tournament, aged 39. Group B is considered to be the Group of Death, with reigning champions Italy facing Spain, Croatia and Italy.

France and England captains Kylian Mbappé and Harry Kane are billed as the stars of the tournament, but both of the old adversaries have plenty of quality in depth, with Les Bleus' trio of midfielders Tchouameni, Greizmann and Camavinga more than a match for the Three Lions' Jude Bellingham, Phil Foden and Declan Rice. England fans will be hoping that Bellingham's form with Real Madrid and Kane's record goal tally in the Bundesliga with Bayern Munich will get them to the final in Berlin and over the line for a first European Championship title and a first trophy in 58 years.

COPA AMÉRICA

Starting a week later, but crowning a winner on the same day (14th July) is the 48th edition of the Copa América, won 15 times by Argentina, 15 times by Uruguay (but not since 2011) and nine times by Brazil.

Top: Messi's 2021 Copa América
Middle: South Korea's Heung Min Son
Bottom: Harry Kane



As was the case in the 2022 FIFA World Cup, all eyes are on Lionel Messi who will turn 37 the day before Argentina's key Group match against Chile.

Messi – who now plays for David Beckham's MLS franchise Inter Miami – will be hoping to add to his record-breaking 38 Copa América appearances, knowing

that another five goals could make him the all-time tournament record goalscorer. After inspiring his side to the 2021 title and then the 2022 World Cup, a significant contribution to the 2024 Copa América trophy would cement Messi as the greatest player of all time.

Argentina do, however, face a tough group, with Peru and Canada alongside 2015 and 2016 winners Chile. Hosts America will meet Uruguay, Panama and Bolivia in the group stages, Mexico, Ecuador, Jamaica and Venezuela are in together and Brazil were drawn against Columbia, Paraguay and Costa Rica in the last of four groups. Winners and runners-up only progress to the quarter finals in Houston, Arlington, Vegas and Glendale. The 2026 FIFA World Cup Final venue MetLife Stadium in New Jersey will host one semi-final, with Charlotte, North Carolina hosting the other and the Hard Rock Stadium in Miami hosting the final.

Brazil may not be in the best of form, but with Group A and Group D winners not able to meet until the final, don't be surprised to see one of football's oldest rivalries, Argentina v Brazil in the battle for the 2024 Copa America. ■

