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THE INSIDER

Decision time: 2026 World Cup

The 2026 World Cup in Canada, Mexico and the United States might just be one of those flagship events that beams a signal far beyond the realms of sport, media and marketing.

Mass vaccination roll-outs notwithstanding, COVID-19 and its consequential fall-out will be a factor in daily life around the globe for many months and almost certainly years to come.

No one dare be caught guessing when stadia will return to full capacity. FIFA president Gianni Infantino has envisioned such a blue sky dream for next year's World Cup in Qatar but, whatever his legal qualifications, his bona fides as soothsayer or virologist are limited.

By the time society is infected by a sense of security, rather than coronavirus, the expanded 2026 World Cup is more likely to be the all-encompassing international spectacle to parade a "new normal."

This paints an extra gloss on the United States' own internal contest among the 17 cities chasing ten hosting slots for the first finals to feature 48 teams and 80 matches. FIFA's governing council decides late this year.

Mexico's three cities will almost certainly be Mexico City, Guadalajara and Monterrey. Canada will present Edmonton and Toronto but Montreal is now doubtful after the Quebec government caught fright at the cost

already pulled out on cost grounds.

This might just open up an 11th slot for the US of course given that Seattle, up in the far north-west, is only 100 miles from the border and might be an eager geographical substitute. That would be rather embarrassing for Victor Montagliani since the president of host confederation CONCACAF is himself Canadian.

The venues lottery might already have been sorted had it not been for the icy grip of the pandemic, which froze the city selection process. Online workshops were wrapped up last July but COVID controls prevented FIFA following up with on-site inspections.

Thus, April brings more focused talks with the candidate cities ahead of site visits starting in July, health controls permitting. Incidentally FIFA's inspection team now comprises organisation, logistics and security specialists. No role any longer for the greedy fat cats of the old exco, who profited so richly from the power of ballot-box patronage.

The three-way bid was handed hosting rights by FIFA Congress in Moscow in 2018. Victory was achieved with a decisive 134-65 first round knockout over perennial bidders Morocco. It was probably the easiest World Cup award congress has ever had to make.

A few critics hovered over the

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Montreal, thinking back to the financially disastrous 1976 Olympics, does have painful history. Tourism minister Caroline Proulx said the government "would have been happy and ready to support the hosting of the FIFA World Cup in Montreal [until] the estimated costs doubled from \$50 to \$103 million." Vancouver, which hosted the 2015 Women's World Cup final, has

distances involved in a tournament straddling Latin and North America. But the mileage is no greater than Brazil in 2014 or Russia in 2018 and, happily, the transport options are in a totally different class.

As selection overseer Dan Flynn said: "One of the many strengths of our unified bid was the wealth of world-class cities and venues that would make spectacular hosts.



ABOVE TOP: Montreal Olympic Stadium...during the 2015 Women's World Cup

MIDDLE: Rose Bowl...host of the 1994 World Cup final

BOTTOM: Azteca Stadium...Mexico's biggest ground

That is especially true here in the US with 17 cities that offer everything you'd want and need for the first 48-nation FIFA World Cup in history.

So roll on the internal US bidding battle. The hopeful 17 include seven which played host in 1994 when the US flew solo: Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York, Dallas, Orlando, Boston and Washington DC. Out of the reckoning this time around are Chicago and Pontiac. Hoping to jump aboard are Seattle, Denver, Kansas City, Cincinnati, Houston, Nashville, Atlanta, Miami, Philadelphia and Baltimore.

FIFA, for reasons not only of cost but to appease the green lobby, is expected to return to the once-derided clusters concept. France scrapped this in 1998 because Michel Platini, then the local organising president, believed it unfair that only one or two cities should host superstar teams in the group stage; hence the carousel system which kept everyone giddily (and expensively) on the move.

This was the same Platini whose eco-defying, fan-unfriendly brainstorm saddled his UEFA successors with the 12-nation nightmare of Euro 2020.

A glance at the map of US hopefuls offers up several obvious regional head-to-heads. That means Dallas or Houston in Texas and Miami or Orlando in Florida. The Florida winner would be a tidy cluster partner for Atlanta, one of the most prosperous of US cities with the country's busiest airport and a successful MLS team (though the latter is not an essential prerequisite). That



Edmonton Commonwealth Stadium

Seattle Lumen Field

San Francisco Bay Area Levi's Stadium

Los Angeles Rose Bowl

UNITED STATES

Denver Empower Field at Mile High

Kansas City Arrowhead Stadium

Cincinnati Paul Brown Stadium

Nashville Nissan Stadium

Dallas AT&T Stadium

Atlanta Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Houston NRG Stadium

Monterrey Estadio BBVA

Orlando Camping World Stadium

Miami Hard Rock Stadium

MEXICO

Guadalajara Estadio Akron

Mexico City Estadio Azteca

CANADA

Montreal Olympic Stadium

Toronto BMO Field

Boston Gillette Stadium

New York/New Jersey MetLife Stadium

Philadelphia Lincoln Financial Field

Baltimore M&T Bank Stadium

Washington, D.C. FedExField

POTENTIAL VENUES

would likely rule out Nashville.

Los Angeles and San Francisco must be certainties in the west and possibly Seattle to extend the spread of the World Cup gospel. Altitude concerns could weigh against Denver while Kansas City in the Midwest and Cincinnati must both work imaginatively to stake a case. Heading east, Boston and Philadelphia are both strong contenders with Baltimore-Maryland a self-styled underdog.

Ultimately the decisions are not about accidents of geography. Think infrastructure, services, commercial potential, legacy, sustainability, diversity, human rights, etc.

Infrastructure is demonstrably no problem in Orlando, for example. Both MLS and the NBA staged their return-to-action tournaments at Disney's Wide World of Sports facility. As bid leader Jason Siegel says: "We have a great story; we are the number one tourist destination in the US and we have sport in our DNA. We tick all the FIFA boxes."

Orlando may have everything in place but legacy is always an important factor for FIFA. This is a factor pushed by Baltimore-Maryland in creating its own venue identity beyond the shadow of Washington DC some 40 miles away.

Terrance Hasseltine, president of Baltimore-Maryland 2026, says: "We're set up as an ideal city for FIFA. We have a great soccer culture but we also know that the legacy of hosting the World Cup will have an impact on our city like no other event. I think US Soccer and

FIFA see Baltimore as a hidden gem. They could make an impact for soccer here like no other city among the 17.

"We're here to compete at the highest level and create strategies that are not only good for soccer but for city and the state. We want to make sure the platforms we establish today live well beyond the World Cup soccer games."

The label soccer was of English or Scottish provenance and drawn from "association" to distinguish the game from "rugger", either by Charles Alcock or Lord Kinnaird back in the days when the Football Association was all there was.

Snoopy traditionalists abroad still look down their nose at the US' soccer heritage. But the game's popularity at grassroots level is phenomenal and it also provides a novel and rare opportunity for a sports-loving public to root for a US national team. That is impossible with American football or basketball. That excitement of an international team identity helps explain why US TV bankrolls the Olympics.

In Russia three years ago, the highest number of foreign tickets was sold in the US (88,825). The 1994 World Cup still holds the record for gross and average attendances (3.57m and 68,626) even though it "only" featured 24 teams. Those records will be surpassed easily in 2026.

How ironic if, after the weird winter World Cup in Qatar in the hopefully receding shadow of COVID, it is up to America to make the World Cup great again.