

GROUP A
A
By Camille Powell

TEAMS AT-A-GLANCE



COSTA RICA

Coach:

Alexandre Guimarães.
Appearances: Third.
How Qualified: Finished third in CONCACAF.



ECUADOR

Coach:

Luis Fernando Suarez.
Appearance: Second.
How Qualified: Finished third in South America.



GERMANY

Coach:

Juergen Klinsmann.
Appearance: 16th.
How Qualified: Host.



1954 1974 1990



POLAND

Coach: Pawel Janas.
Appearance: Seventh.
How Qualified: Finished second in Europe's Group 6, best point total among runners-up.

FIRST-ROUND SCHEDULE

All times Eastern

FRIDAY

Costa Rica vs. Germany, Noon (ESPN2) in Munich
Poland vs. Ecuador, 3 p.m. (ESPN2) in Gelsenkirchen ★

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 14

Poland vs. Germany, 3 p.m. (ESPN2) in Dortmund ★

THURSDAY, JUNE 15

Ecuador vs. Costa Rica, 9 a.m. (ESPN2) in Hamburg

TUESDAY, JUNE 20

Ecuador vs. Germany, 10 a.m. (ESPN) in Berlin
Costa Rica vs. Poland, 10 a.m. (ESPN2) in Hanover

★
KEY MATCHES



BY BEN RADFORD — GETTY IMAGES

Midfielder Michael Ballack, left, is Germany's one true world-class player. He scored several key goals in the 2002 World Cup.

GROUP A
Note For Novices

Poland F Maciej Zurawski earned the nickname "Magic" Zurawski from fans of his club team, Celtic FC, after he scored 20 goals in 30 appearances in leading the team to the Scottish League title this year. Celtic teammate Artur Boruc likely will be Poland's starting goalkeeper.

STAR PLAYER » MICHAEL BALLACK | MF | GERMANY

It's Hard to Miss Germany's Ballack

Michael Ballack is everywhere in Germany; his picture is plastered on banks, on hotels, on advertisements, all in preparation for the World Cup. He is the logical choice to be the face of the tournament: He is Germany's captain, its one true world-class player and one of the stars of the 2002 finals.

But Ballack — a versatile, attacking midfielder who is good in the air — also is preparing to leave Germany. After starring for three Bundesliga sides, Ballack recently signed a three-year contract with Chelsea in England.

He has been portrayed in the German media as cool and unapproachable, as well as arrogant and greedy. He was never fully embraced by Bayern Munich fans, even though he led them to three Bundesliga and three German Cup titles in his four

years. He was greeted with a mixture of boos and cheers during his final league game — a game in which he scored.

All that will change, however, if he leads Germany back to the championship game. In 2002, Ballack scored the decisive goals in knockout wins against the United States and South Korea, but he was forced to miss the final (a 2-0 loss to Brazil) after picking up his second yellow card of the tournament against South Korea.

"When our backs are against the wall, my reaction is to score decisive goals," Ballack said in an interview with Der Spiegel. "My father told me, when you are on edge, step up a gear, get yourself warmed up, then you will calm down. I want to get myself prepared as well as I possibly can so that I won't have to look back later and blame myself."

COSTA RICA OUTLOOK

The Ticos resemble the stylish, attacking side that delighted fans and narrowly missed out on a second round berth in 2002, but a rocky qualifying campaign and a 4-0 loss to Ukraine in late May don't bode well. Forward Paulo Wanchope, a 6-foot-4 former basketball player, is Costa Rica's all-time leading goal scorer and plans on retiring from international soccer after the World Cup.

- » **Best-Case Scenario:** Surprise Germany in the opener and sneak into the round of 16.
- » **Worst-Case Scenario:** A suspect defense leads to a first-round exit.

ECUADOR OUTLOOK

Ecuador's impressive run through qualifying comes with an asterisk: its eight victories (including wins over Brazil and Argentina) came at altitude. La Tri doesn't have much experience playing in Europe; they have played only a handful of matches there (most recently a 2-1 loss to Macedonia), and only two of their players currently play there professionally. Ecuador still relies on the two men who scored their goals in Japan/Korea: F Agustin Delgado, who is strong in the air, and MF Edison Mendez, who has a powerful shot.

- » **Best-Case Scenario:** Reaching the second round.
- » **Worst-Case Scenario:** No altitude, no wins.

GERMANY OUTLOOK

Eleven of the previous 18 host nations have reached the final four, and Germany will benefit from supportive crowds and a soft draw. But to get to their 11th semifinal, the Germans might have to face England, Argentina or the Netherlands — and they have not defeated a major soccer nation since 2000. Coach Juergen Klinsmann overhauled the team that lost in the 2002 final, surrounding captain Michael Ballack with young talent like midfielder Bastian Schweinsteiger (22 years old) and forward Lukas Podolski (21) and inserting Arsenal's Jens Lehmann in goal instead of 2002 hero Oliver Kahn.

- » **Best-Case Scenario:** Riding the home crowd to the semifinals.
- » **Worst-Case Scenario:** A loss in the round of 16.

POLAND OUTLOOK

Only three European teams scored more goals in qualifying than Poland, though the man who scored seven of them — forward Tomasz Frankowski — was shockingly left off the final roster (as was Liverpool goalkeeper and national hero Jerzy Dudek). Miroslaw Szymkowiak, a free kick specialist, is the midfield engine behind forwards **Maciej Zurawski** (seven goals in qualifying) and Ebi Smolarek, whose father, Wlodzimierz, was a striker on the 1982 side that finished third.

- » **Best-Case Scenario:** Earning a quarterfinal berth.
- » **Worst-Case Scenario:** Loss to Ecuador in the opener leads to a first-round exit.

