

GROUP F
By Jason La Canfora

FIRST-ROUND SCHEDULE

All times Eastern

MONDAY

Australia vs. Japan, 9 a.m. (ESPN2) in Kaiserslautern

TUESDAY

Brazil vs. Croatia, 3 p.m. (ESPN2) in Berlin ★

SUNDAY, JUNE 18

Japan vs. Croatia, 9 a.m. (ABC) in Nuremberg
Brazil vs. Australia, Noon (ABC) in Munich

THURSDAY, JUNE 22

Japan vs. Brazil, 3 p.m. (ESPN) in Dortmund
Croatia vs. Australia, 3 p.m. (ESPN2) in Stuttgart ★

★ KEY MATCHES

TEAMS AT-A-GLANCE



AUSTRALIA

Coach: Guus Hiddink.
Appearance: Second.
How Qualified: Won Oceania qualifying and beat Uruguay in playoff.



BRAZIL

Coach:

Carlos Alberto Parreira.
Appearance: 18th.
How Qualified: Finished first in South America.



1958 1962 1970



1994 2002



CROATIA

Coach: Zlatko Kranjcar.
Appearance: Third.
How Qualified: Finished first in Europe's Group 8.



JAPAN

Coach: Zico.
Appearance: Third.
How Qualified: Placed first in Asia's Group B.

STAR PLAYER » RONALDINHO | MF | BRAZIL

Brazil's Ronaldinho: Best in the World Keeps Getting Better

The childlike toothy grin and wavy black locks, harnessed in a tight ponytail, are ubiquitous worldwide. He is Ronaldinho, the brightest star of the best team in the biggest sporting event on the planet, and all signs point to this being his big year. He was voted the world's premier player — again — and was the engine that led Barcelona to another Spanish title as well as the Champions League title.

At times, Ronaldinho, whose nickname means "Little Ronaldo" in Portuguese to distinguish him from Real Madrid striker and Brazil teammate Ronaldo, can take over games with swashbuckling runs and can leave opponents dizzy with an ever-growing array of outlandish footwork. His joy on the field is obvious, and he is as adept at putting teammates into scoring position as he is at burying the ball himself. His free kicks are ever-dangerous. And he is only 26 years old. He might already be the greatest player his country has produced since Pele and, with another World Cup or two beyond this one, he could surpass that icon's status. Should he stand with the World Cup trophy hoisted over his head, and the Golden Boot (top scorer) and Golden Ball (most valuable player) awards tucked under the other arm, few would be surprised.

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Note for Nuts

Coach Guus Hiddink prefers a fluid style of play: Australia has used a 4-4-2, 3-5-2 and 4-2-3-1, all in the same game. The key is versatile MF Jason Culina; he plays for Hiddink at PSV Eindhoven.



Brazil's Ronaldinho led Barcelona to the Champions League title.

BY STUART FRANKLIN — GETTY IMAGES



AUSTRALIA OUTLOOK

The popularity of the sport has never been higher in Australia, with a prosperous, if nascent, domestic league and a core of the national team competing in the English Premier League. The midfield duo of **Harry Kewell** (Liverpool) and Tim Cahill (Everton) must lead the way, while Mark Viduka (Middlesbrough) has the size and guile to make something of nothing.

- » **Best-Case Scenario:** Sneaking by Croatia for second in the group and making the round of 16.
- » **Worst-Case Scenario:** Three lopsided first-round losses.



BRAZIL OUTLOOK

This is one country that likely could qualify for the World Cup using a team of players not selected for Parreira's squad. Brazil's depth, talent and overall flair are unparalleled, and anything short of another title will be seen by the soccer-crazed country as a failure. The attack will center around Fs Adriano and Ronaldo and MFs Kaka and Ronaldinho; age is a question mark for star defenders Roberto Carlos and Cafu; GK Dida was not up to his previous standards last season at AC Milan.

- » **Best-Case Scenario:** A sixth championship.
- » **Worst-Case Scenario:** A leaky defense leads to a loss — in the semifinals.

CROATIA OUTLOOK

Croatian players were once part of a world power in the former Yugoslavia, and they aim to restore such glory. They are particularly stout in defense and have no lack of distinguished players thriving in Europe's top leagues. That includes Dado Prso of Rangers, who once quit the professional game as a teenager and worked as a mechanic. The midfield should be powered by Darijo Srna on the right and Niko Kranjcar — the coach's son — in the playmaking role.

- » **Best-Case Scenario:** A repeat of 1998's run to the semifinals.
- » **Worst-Case Scenario:** A third-place group finish as age catches up with some key players.

JAPAN OUTLOOK

Played inspired soccer as co-hosts in 2002, but face a much steeper challenge now. Several poor outings in pre-Cup friendly matches were troublesome, and a lack of potent finishing could loom large. One strength: a midfield that includes Europe-based Hidetoshi Nakata (Bolton) and Shunsuke Nakamura (Celtic) and Shinji Ono, who played in the Netherlands before returning to the J-League. Coached by Brazilian legend Zico.

- » **Best-Case Scenario:** A first-round exit, but one that includes some play worthy of the coach's homeland.
- » **Worst-Case Scenario:** A brutal goal differential in three losses.