2015 AFRICA CUP OF NATIONS

AFRICAN FOOTBALL

Who will soar in the absence of the Super Eagles?
Fears, tears and cheers

In previous years, club versus country disputes have tended to dominate the headlines in the run-up to Africa Cup of Nations tournaments. The stories are typically of European clubs, unhappy about losing their African talent for two to three weeks in the middle of the season, pulling out all the stops in a bid to hold on to their players.

This time, however, the controversy centred on a much more serious issue: Ebola. Whether rightly or wrongly, the designated hosts Morocco were so concerned that they requested a postponement, then withdrew outright when the Confederation of African Football (CAF) turned down their request.

That is the reason Equatorial Guinea, who had been ruled out of the qualification play-offs for fielding an ineligible player, ended up with the hosting role. The central African country does not seem particularly worried about the possibilities of Ebola spreading, but it still has to contend with its historical infrastructural difficulties.

In 2012, Equatorial Guinea struggled when they co-hosted the tournament in Malabo and Bata, two of their biggest cities. But for this edition, Mongomo and Ebebiyín have been added, both of which could provide the organisers with a serious headache.

Mongomo is a small town deep in the jungle in eastern Equatorial Guinea, with a stadium that is barely expected to pass muster. A stadium inspection ahead of the draws in December hardly inspired confidence.

Ebebiyín might be even more troubling. It is even more remote than Mongomo, and does not seem to have an airport nearby. The venue meanwhile can hold just 5,000 spectators, a fraction of the 35,000 that the national stadium in Bata can accommodate.

Teams hoping to win the AFCON title will have to negotiate far more than just some transport problems. After all, although Nigeria and Egypt surprisingly failed to qualify, there is no shortage of dangerous-looking teams in the competition. The embarrassment of talent enjoyed by the likes of Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana and Algeria will fill their opponents with fear, while so many of the teams once considered Africa’s minnows have grown in stature and quality in recent years.

More and more players who were born, raised and trained in European academies are choosing to represent their African homelands, while more and more players who grew up on the continent are forging successful careers in Africa and across the world. Furthermore, with the level of domestic competition improving and cohesion among players growing, the so-called “lesser sides” are finding that their talent as a team can far outweigh the influence of even the biggest individual superstars.

In any case, there probably isn’t the same plethora of game-changing icons as in past tournaments, though that’s not to say AFCON 2015 won’t be all the more entertaining, dramatic and unpredictable for it.

Let the games begin!
GROUP A  EQUATORIAL GUINEA, BURKINA FASO, GABON, REPUBLIC OF CONGO

EQUATORIAL GUINEA

If not for Morocco’s late withdrawal as host over fears about Ebola, Equatorial Guinean would be nowhere near this tournament. But now that they are in as the new hosts, they will be hoping to repeat their heroics of three years ago when, buoyed by partisan home support, they made the quarter-finals after beating Senegal and Libya.

There is only so much the fans can do, however, and on the field, Spanish coach Andoni Goikoetxea will need his troops to go at full throttle.

In 2012, the Nzalang Nacional (‘National Thunder’) were significantly helped by a controversial policy whereby the government gave foreign players national citizenship in order to appear for the team. It could well do the same this time round too.

POSSIBLE LINE-UP: Felipe Ovono, Kily, Diosdado Mbele, Jimmy Bermúdez, Sipo, Juvenal, Viera Ellong, César Rivas, Dio, Mauricio Mina, Jônatas Obina.

BURKINA FASO
Best Finish: Runners-up, 2013.

Up until 1996, Burkina Faso had only made one appearance at the Finals, but it is testament to their growing quality that they have qualified on every occasion but two since then and came within 90 minutes of winning in 2013.

Inspired by the effervescent Jonathan Pitroipa and Aristide Bancé, Les Étalons (‘The Stallions’) will be hoping to go one better this time round, but in reality, they may do well to get out of the group stage. Burkina Faso lost recently to both Congo and Gabon, while Alain Traoré, whose 3 goals helped propel them to the final in 2013, has been plagued by injury this season and may be lacking in form.


GABON

Gabon was one of four countries, along with South Africa, Cameroon and Tunisia, who went through qualifying unbeaten, finishing top of their group. This was especially noteworthy given that they did so partly without the services of temperamental star striker Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang, who often was not made available by his club Borussia Dortmund. The squad’s showing without him demonstrated that they are much more than a one-man team under Portuguese coach Jorge Costa, who has been in the job less than a year.

When they were co-hosts with neighbouring Equatorial Guinea in 2012, Les Panthères (‘The Panthers’) got as far as the quarter-finals. On current form, they stand a great chance of equalising if not surpassing that record.

POSSIBLE LINE-UP: Didier Ovono, Henri Ndong, Johann Obiang, Randal Oto’o, Levy Clement, Lloyd Palun, Ibrahim N’dong, André Poko; Malick Evouna, Frédéric Bulot, Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang.

REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Not many people will remember that Congo’s Diables Rouges (‘Red Devils’) are past African champions, winning the title in 1972 at only their second appearance in the competition. But it has been mostly downhill since that moment of glory, with the country qualifying only every other tournament.

That was an imbalance that needed addressing and the national football association picked Frenchman Claude Leroy to do so. The experienced campaigner set about overhauling the squad, mixing players who ply their trade on the continent with those who play in Europe.

Spirits were boosted when they stunned defending champions Nigeria 3-2 away from home in qualifying, laying the foundations for their heroic return to AFCON in 15 long years.

POSSIBLE LINE-UP: Chancel Massa, Francis N’ganga, Arnold Motou, Dimitri Bissiki, Sagesse Babélé, Césaire Gandzé, Prince Oniangue, Boris Ngounga, Férébory Doré, Thievy Bifouna, Francis Litsingi.

Burkina Faso’s Alain Traoré (l) playing for his club Lorient in a French League 1 game against Ajaccio.
GROUP B ZAMBIA, TUNISIA, CAPE VERDE, DRCONGO

ZAMBIA


If Zambia is to match their performance in 2012, when they emerged as surprise winners, the Chipolopolo (“The Bullets”) will have to start better than they did in qualifying when their first three games garnered just two points and captain Chris Katongo was dropped from the team.

The are joined in the group by old foes Cape Verde, who bested them in qualifying, Tunisia, who coasted through qualifying without a loss, and the DRC, who posted one of the results of qualifying with a 4-3 win against Côte d’Ivoire. If Zambia are to progress from the group, nothing less than a flying start will do. This will require them to fix a slow defence and shaky midfield.

POSSIBLE LINE-UP
Kennedy Mweene, Nyambe Mulenga, Em - manuel Mbola, Stoppila Sunzu, Christopher Munthali, Nathan Sinkala, Rainford Kalaba, Bruce Musakanya, Given Singuluma, Emmanu - nel Mayuka, Ronald Kampambisa.

TUNISIA


It will perhaps come as a surprise that in 16 appearances at the Africa Cup of Nations Finals, Tunisia have only won the tournament once. The Carthage Eagles will be trying to address this shortcoming once again this year, and after failing to qualify for the 2014 World Cup, their impressive showing in AFCON qualifying suggests they have a good chance. Tunisia did not lose a single game and are considered by many as one of the strongest teams in the tournament.

Belgium’s Georges Leekens has built a side that is not only solid in defence, but has more than a healthy dose of creative talent in the likes of Yassine Chikhaoui, Youssef Msakni and Wahbi Khazri. Furthermore, the skills of Sami Allagui, Issam Jemaa and Fakhreddine Ben Youssef up front mean the Carthage Eagles have arguably the most balanced squad in the tournament.

POSSIBLE LINE-UP

CAPE VERDE


Over the last four years, Cape Verde, one of Africa’s smallest nations, have made stunning progress on the football pitch. Helped by the conscription of players from Europe, mostly from the Portuguese league, the country qualified for their first African Nations Cup in 2013 by shocking giants Cameroon 3-2 on aggregate. Then, at the tournament proper, draws with hosts South Africa and Morocco were followed by a 2-1 win over Angola, taking them to the quarter-finals, where they lost despite outplaying Ghana.

The Tubarões Azuis (“Blue Sharks”) also came within a hair’s breadth of reaching the play-offs to get into the 2014 World Cup Finals but lost out on a technicality after fielding an ineligible player. This disappointment did not slow them down for long, however, and they comfortably qualified for AFCON 2015 with a game to spare. They are certainly one to watch.

POSSIBLE LINE-UP
Vozinha, Nivaldo, Fernando Varela, Jeffrey Fortes, Josimar Lima, Calú, Babanco, Nuno Rocha, Hédion, Ryan Mendes, Kuca.

DRCONGO


The DRC, one of Africa’s most exciting sides in the 60s and 70s, have fallen from glory. A return to the golden days could yet be on the cards though as they boast a team with a cosmopolitan face led by the mercurial talent of Yannick Bolasie and the power of Youssouf Mulumbu.

The Leopards squeaked into the tournament as the best third-placed side and will have to justify their place among the continent’s best. In doing this, they would do well to try and recap - ture the spirit and confidence that helped them beat Côte d’Ivoire 4-3 in qualifying.

POSSIBLE LINE-UP
Robert Kidiaba, Gabby Zakuani, Jean Kasu - sula, Issama Mpeko, Chancel Mangulu, Cédric Mongongu, Youssouf Mulumbu, Yannick Bolasie, Jeremy Bokila, Neeskens Kebano, Junior Kalonji.
GROUP C GHANA, ALGERIA, SOUTH AFRICA, SENEGAL

2015 AFRICA CUP OF NATIONS

SOUTH AFRICA
Best Finish: Champions, 1996.

Since winning the title in 1996, Bafana Bafana (“Boys Boys”) have been more hype than substance, getting worse with each tournament. They finished second in 1998, third in 2000, reached the quarter-finals in 2000, and then failed to get out of the group stage in the next three edition. As if that was not bad enough, they did not qualify in 2010 and 2012 and only returned as hosts in 2013. But new coach Ephraim “Shakes” Mashaba seems to have breathed a new lease of life into Bafana Bafana, and the team did not lose a single game in qualifying. Mashaba has put his faith in a young team and so far they have delivered.

South Africa is still mourning the tragic death of goalkeeper Senzo Meyiwa in October 2014, and will be hoping they can dedicate success at the tournament to his memory.

POSSIBLE LINE-UP

GHANA

By the time AFCON 2015 kicks off, it will have been 33 years since Ghana last won the title, an embarrassing fact for one of Africa’s most gifted teams. Indeed, in recent years, it has not been glory but internal divisions that have characterised the Black Stars’ reputation. This was particularly evident during the 2014 World Cup, when Ghana’s campaign was blighted by a player strike, fisticuffs and the expulsion of two players, leading to a post-tournament inquiry.

Boasting the likes of Asamoah Gyan, André Ayew, Michael Essien, Emmanuel Agyemang-Badu and rising star Christian Atsu, talent is the least of Ghana’s worries. The question is, whether new coach Avram Grant can harness that potential. He will have little time to settle into that job in a group of death containing Senegal, South Africa and Algeria.

POSSIBLE LINE-UP

ALGERIA

It is rare that Algeria are looked as possible winners of the Africa Cup of Nations, so it is testimony to how this squad has come together in the last few years that they can be considered genuine contenders. Algeria’s turning point came in 2010 when they edged past Egypt in a feisty play-off to reach the World Cup Finals. The team has grown in stature since, and, along with Nigeria, who didn’t qualify for AFCON 2015, were Africa’s best-performers at the 2014 World Cup.

That success carried on in the AFCON qualifiers as they achieved 15 out of a possible 18 points. Their only dropped points came from a loss against Mali in their final group game, when qualification was already secured. Built around the talents of the BBC’s African Player of the Year, Yacine Brahimi, along with Islam Slimani and Medhi Lacen, Les Fennecs (“The Fennec Foxes”) should be odds-on to advance, even in this group of death.

POSSIBLE LINE-UP
Raïs M’Bolhi, Faouzi Ghoulam, Carl Medjani, Rafik Halliche, Aïssa Mandi, Riyad Mahrez, Medhi Lacen, Nabil Bentaleb, Sofiane Feghouli, Yacine Brahimi, Islam Slimani.

SENEGAL
BEST FINISH: Runners-up, 2002.

Although blessed with attacking talent, Senegal have not fulfilled their potential in the Africa Cup of Nations. After missing the first two qualifiers, forward Papiss Cissé was recalled by coach Alain Giresse and has proved a useful re-addition. He forms part of a formidable three-pronged strike force that includes West Ham’s in-form Diafra Sakho and Stoke’s Mame Biram Diouf. There is also Southampton’s tricky forward Sadio Mané to call upon. But it is not only in attack that the Lions of Teranga are strong – their back line conceded just once in six games.

POSSIBLE LINE-UP
Bouna Coundoul, Cheikhou Koyaté, Kara Mbayo, Papy Djilobodji, Cheikh Mbengue, Stéphane Badji, Salif Sane, Sadio Mané, Papakouli Diop, Papiss Cissé, Mame Biram Diouf.

Ghanaian winger Christian Atsu plying his trade for English Premiership side Everton
CÔTE D’IVOIRE


As has been the case over the last decade, Côte d’Ivoire travel to AFCON as one of the favourites for the title. However, given the retirement of captain Didier Drogba, the ageing legs of Kolo Touré, Siaka Tiéné and Didier Zokora, and the team’s habit of leaving fans disappointed, those expectations will be somewhat tempered. The form of Les Eléphants (“The Elephants”) in qualifying was also less than formidable. The squad may well have lost some of their fear factor, for instance, after losing at home to DR Congo.

Lowered expectations may prove to be a positive for the Ivorians, however, while they still possess a frightening array of talent in the likes of captain Yaya Touré, midfielder Cheick Tioté, and forwards Wilfried Bony, Seydou Doumbia and Gervinho.

POSSIBLE LINE-UP: Sylvain Gbohouo, Serge Aurier, Siaka Tiéné, Kolo Touré, Ousmane Viera, Serey Die, Max Gradel, Yaya Touré, Gervinho, Lacina Traoré, Salomon Kalou.

MALI

BEST FINISH: Runners-up, 1972.

Les Aigles (“The Eagles”) stormed to the final in their debut appearance at the Africa Cup of Nations in 1972, losing 2-3 to the Republic of Congo in the final, before failing to make it into the tournament for the next 22 years. In the last couple of decades, however, Mali have developed a consistency and have now qualified for the fifth time in a row.

Led by midfielder Seydou Keita, who has been around the block in his club career, the current squad made heavy work of qualifying, only just managing to stay ahead of Malawi in the table on the final day to get through. It is hard to see them emerging from their group.

POSSIBLE LINE-UP: Oumar Sissoko, Adama Tamboura, Fousseini Diawara, Idrissa Coulibaly, Ousmane Coulibaly, Bakary Sako, Sambou Yatabaré, Congo Doumbia, Yacouba Sylla, Abdoulay Diaby, Cheick Diabaté.

CAMEROON


Cameroon have endured a topsy-turvy few years with an inner turmoil that has ranged from the football federation to the government to the players. At one point, former star forward Samuel Eto’o reportedly brought his own meals from home when at camp, believing the federation was trying to poison him.

The results reflected the unrest, with the four-time champions failing to qualify for the previous two editions of AFCON, but Cameroon seem to be climbing their way out of this self-dug hole now and qualified in impressive style. Much credit must go to German Coach Volker Finke who has culled most of the team and rebuilt the Indomitable Lions from the ground up. With the likes of Eto’o, Jean Makoun and Alex Song out of the picture, a new and exciting team is emerging under the leadership of Stéphane Mbia and Nicolas N’Koulou, and with goals from youngsters Vincent Aboubakar and Clinton N’Jie.


GUINEA

BEST FINISH: Runners-up, 1976.

With two games left to play, Guinea looked out of the running for a place at the Nations Cup. The Syli Nationale (“National Elephants”) travelled to Togo knowing that only a win would be enough to revive any hopes of qualification. Fortunately for them, they got the win they needed, hammering their hosts 4-1 on the back of a Seydouba Soumah hat-trick, and completed the job a few days later with a 2-0 home win against Uganda.

Guinea reached the quarter-finals in 2004, 2006 and 2008 but have since faded as a force to be reckoned with, and they will need to continue the run of form that helped them scrape through qualifying if they are to have any hope of emerging from a very tough group.

POSSIBLE LINE-UP: Naby Yattara, Fodé Camara, Kamil Zayatte, Naby Keita, Boubacar Fofana, Ibrahima Conté, Kévin Constant, Seydouba Soumah, Alhassane Bangoura, Idrissa Sylla, Ismaël Bangoura.
Gervinho  
Côte d’Ivoire

After being a flop at Arsenal, Gervinho has rediscovered his electrifying pace and eye for goal at Roma. Under the guidance of manager Rudi Garcia, the 27-year-old forward has become a force to fear thanks to his dribbling skills. With Didier Drogba now retired from international football and Yaya Touré experiencing a dip in form on last season, Gervinho will be all the more important for Les Eléphants.

Yannick Bolasie  
DRCongo

Crystal Palace’s tricky winger could have represented France or England, but chose DRCongo in 2014. In qualifying, he scored two goals against Sierra Leone and inspired his team’s 4-3 victory against Côte d’Ivoire with three assists. The 25-year-old Bolasie enjoys taking on players, and if he can link up well with forward Trésor Mputu, their partnership will be formidable.

Jonathan Pitroipa  
Burkina Faso

Named the Player of the Tournament at AFCON 2013, Pitroipa has lost none of the verve that saw him torment defenders, scoring six goals in qualifying. Quick on the turn, skilled and mesmeric, Pitroipa is coming into his own as a winger and will carry the weight of Les Etalons’ expectations on his shoulders.

André Ayew  
Ghana

When he was dropped from Ghana’s squad for AFCON 2013 after a dispute with the country’s football association, his quality was sorely missed. His return to the team for the 2014 World Cup, where he scored twice, further highlighted his importance. The 24-year-old is quick, tricky and unpredictable. Asamoah Gyan, who top-scored for Ghana in the qualifiers, may well be the Black Star’s most prolific striker, but Ayew will likely be creating those chances.

Senegal are hardly lacking in the attacking department, but one man whose form may just carry them all the way is the 24-year-old forward Diafra Sakho. The West Ham striker did not feature in the qualifiers, but had hit 7 goals in 9 appearances for West Ham by December. If he makes it to Equatorial Guinea, his clinical eye for goal could provide a serious headache for his defensive opponents.

Yacine Brahimi  
Algeria

Like his Algerian team, the Porto midfielder has flown under the radar for much of his career. But after being voted the BBC’s African Player of the Year in 2014, he will very much be in the spotlight. Deployed in a free role, playing in the hole, the young attacking midfielder scored 3 goals in qualifying, the highest in the team, and will be counted upon to deliver even more in Equatorial Guinea.
## 2013 AFROCUP OF NATIONS

**Group A**
- Equatorial Guinea, Burkina Faso, Gabon, Congo

**Group B**
- Zambia, Tunisia, Cape Verde, DR Congo

**Group C**
- Ghana, Algeria, South Africa, Senegal

**Group D**
- Côte d’Ivoire, Mali, Cameroon, Guinea

### Schedule

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<td>Estadio de Bata 18:00</td>
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<td>Gabon v Burkina Faso</td>
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<td>Zambia v DR Congo</td>
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<td>Group A Winner v Group B Runner up</td>
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<td>Third Place Play-off</td>
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