

Group E

Overview: The second toughest group, with most teams playing defensive styles.

Picks: Italy, Czech Republic.



Italy – With a compact defense and Filippo Inzaghi and Alessandro Del Piero up front, they look to succeed.



Ghana – This team, coached by football legend Ratomir Dujkovic, has a strong defense and could surprise many.



USA – Always the outsider, they are looking to improve their quarterfinal performance from 2002.



Czech Republic – The Czechs hope to improve with star forward Pavel Nedved leading their fluid style of play.

Group F

Overview: Brazil is the continuous favorite with Japan and Australia looking to make little impact.

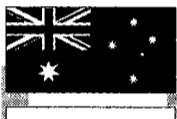
Picks: Brazil, Croatia.



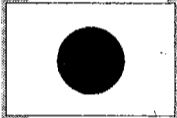
Brazil – A team full of soccer superstars, this team is again poised to win it all.



Croatia – In their third World Cup, the team is led by a lightning offensive and smart defense.



Australia – After a 32-year absence, the Aussies hope to still have a little luck left over from qualifying.



Japan – This squad has a strong midfield. But their ineffective offense must increase their scoring chances.

Group G

Overview: Korea and France look to dominate over the inconsistent Swiss and inexperienced Togo.

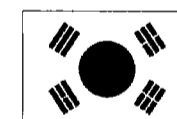
Picks: France, Korea Republic.



France – With Zinedine Zidane's final performance, Les Bleus look to advance past the group stage.



Switzerland – Barely qualifying for their first World Cup since 1994, the Swiss will need more effort to advance.



Korea Republic – Their trip to the semifinals in 2002 made them an Asian soccer power.



Togo – This West African nation makes its first appearance and may need luck to make it past the group stage.

Group H

Overview: This group is a tactical test between possession football and fast-paced attacking.

Picks: Ukraine, Tunisia.



Spain – A talented team of individuals; however, they lack cohesion and could stumble early.



Ukraine – A tactical, patient offense and smart defensive could win them the group.



Tunisia – The champions of Africa will look to make their mark in the World Cup with a talented squad.



Saudi Arabia – They come in with an unbalanced squad and could end up dwelling at the bottom of this group.

Soccer's status in Seattle

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Soccer's underachievement in the United States has always been a bit of a mystery. While it is the largest spectator sport in the world and has captured the hearts and minds of people across the globe, the sport is only now beginning to make a foothold within the United States.

Soccer is also attempting to gain a place alongside long-standing American sports such as baseball and football.

"We are working hard at carving out our own niche," says Scott Jenkins, spokesperson for the Seattle Sounders. "It's tough because there are so many teams competing for the same dollar."

The popularity of soccer has ebbed and flowed over time in this country. The sport once claimed a large audience in the 1970s with the North American Soccer League (NASL).

Besides their championships and playoff runs, a major feature of their season is their annual exhibition game against a European club. This year they face Cardiff City, a Welsh club. While these matches do not pit the Sounders against the top teams in Europe, it is good experience for both squads as the Sounders play teams within their skill level and the European squads get exposure in the American market.

"These games definitely have high attendance," says Jenkins. "There were close to 10,000 people for the Sunderland match [last year]."

However, most of the regular season games still average lower attendance, around 4,000. While attendance is improving, the Sounders still find it hard to attract large crowds, especially given the major sports franchises such as the Seahawks and Mariners.

The SU men's program also recently established a higher profile, moving from the NAIA to the NCAA Division II. This switch exposed the program to stiffer competition,



Jered Carter/The Spectator

A recent exhibition match between the Seattle Sounders and the SU men's soccer team at French Field in Kent.

The NASL's annual championship game, the Soccer Bowl, was modeled after the Super Bowl, but the NASL soon folded in the mid-1980s. The sport then languished until the World Cup was held in the United States in 1994. The formation of the Major Soccer League later in the decade helped to reignite interest.

Fortunately for local fans, Seattle is home to many talented soccer teams, including the men's and women's programs at Seattle University and the Seattle Sounders, who play in the United Soccer League. These teams prove that soccer is a sport that captivates audiences and can compete with other major sports in town.

"The pace of the game makes it fun to watch and rally behind," says Eric Guerra, assistant athletic director at SU. "Soccer has a huge appeal to a large audience."

The Sounders and the SU men's and women's programs have all enjoyed recent success. The Sounders won the USL championship last year and in 2004, and the SU men's soccer team won the NCAA Division II title.

The Sounders hope to capitalize on their success and look forward to starting another season in the USL. While not the top league in the United States, the USL provides the Sounders with the opportunity to play quality opponents.

Many do not realize the Seattle Sounders franchise, which was founded in 1994, actually takes its name from the original Seattle Sounders, who played in the NASL from 1974-1983. That team won the Western Division in 1980 and 1982.

"There has always been some continuity between the two teams," says Jenkins.

Continuing with the success of the previous franchise, the "new" Sounders became an instant success in both the A-League and the USL. Their honors include being A-League champions in 1995 and 1996, the USL runners-up in 2004 and the USL champions in 2005.

but ultimately has led to a more disciplined and talented team.

Both the men's and women's soccer programs are widely popular sports at SU. The programs pack fans into the stadium in both the fall and spring seasons. And each program also has had a large measure of support over the years.

"The [men's] program has an awesome foundation that Fewing has set up," says Guerra. "It receives tremendous support from alumni."

Guerra only sees progress. The completion of Championship Field for next season as well as the new head soccer coach, Brad Agoos, should excite fans and continue the success of recent years.

The men's program has its share of successes to build upon. Besides the recent Division II title in 2004, the men's program won the NAIA title in 1997 and played two good tournament runs in 1998 and 2000.

The women's program has been making waves as well, especially with the recent season in which they went 13-5-2.

"The women's program is young, but talented," says Guerra.

With many of the players returning for next season, the women's program hopes to continue their success into next season.

"Both programs have such an opportunity to be featured at SU," says Guerra.

Without a football program at SU, soccer has space to grow and cultivate its own following. While soccer may still seem like an outsider sport to many, the sport is quickly becoming part of the mainstream. At SU, the soccer programs spark interest among the student body while the Sounders provide a professional team that is always in the championship hunt.

With over 11,000 playing in Seattle Youth Soccer Association, soccer's status will continue to rise, both as a spectator sport and a community activity.

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