TEAM AMERICA

In stadiums, corporate suites and state-of-the-art team headquarters, the US is preparing for the biggest and most unpredictable World Cup yet

By **OLIVER ROEDER**
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IN MARCH OF LAST YEAR,

shortly into his second term, US president Donald Trump issued executive order 14234, which established a World Cup task force housed within the Department of Homeland Security. Trump is its chair, vice-president JD Vance is vice-chair, and other members include a chunk of Trump's cabinet secretaries. Andrew Giuliani, son of the former mayor of New York, is its executive director. The group claims responsibility for the planning, organisation and execution of what it calls "the largest sporting event in the history of mankind", "an important event, taking place during the momentous occasion of the 250th anniversary of our country" and "an opportunity to showcase the nation's pride and hospitality".

Trump has apparently taken to football (soccer, that is) lately. He bobbed alongside Fifa president Gianni Infantino and Chelsea players when they lifted their Club World Cup trophy in New Jersey last summer. Infantino later awarded Trump, openly desirous of a Nobel Peace Prize, an invented "Fifa Peace Prize" at the World Cup draw in Washington DC in December. "Objectively, he deserves it," Infantino told Sky News.

And this February, in his State of the Union address, Trump proudly claimed credit for the US hosting both the World Cup and 2028's summer Olympics. "I was disappointed because I didn't think I'd be the president when this happened," he told the assembled legislators and dignitaries. "But strange things took place, and now I've got them."

In early March, Lionel Messi and the rest of a visibly bewildered Inter Miami side stood behind Trump in the East Room of the White House, ostensibly to celebrate their Major League Soccer Cup title. A week earlier, Trump and Israel had begun bombing Iran. The first day's bombing hit a girls' elementary school and killed some 110 children, according to Iranian officials. By way of explanation for the war, Trump described horrors to the footballers: "When you see somebody walking down the street without their legs, without the arms, whose face is so badly affected and hurt... Other presidents lived with it, I didn't live with it."

He mentioned countries that have been the actual or imagined targets of his military: Iran, Venezuela, Cuba. He described them as "all countries that love football-slash-soccer".

This summer's World Cup, which begins on June 11, will be an expanded, 48-team tournament in the US, Canada and Mexico, but mostly in the US. The large field will include the debutantes Cape Verde, Curaçao, Jordan and Uzbekistan. The American team will play in Group D, alongside Australia, Paraguay and Turkey. Iran is in Group G. Their participation has been uncertain. The Iranian team was feted in a send-off rally in Tehran in mid-May, though at the time its players were still waiting for visas. According to the Financial Times, in April, a top Trump envoy sought to replace Iran with Italy, which otherwise failed to qualify. "The Iran National Soccer Team is welcome to The World Cup," Trump had posted on social media, "but I really don't believe it is appropriate that they be there, for their own life and safety." After all, this was the country that Trump, winner of the Fifa Peace Prize, had also threatened, "A whole civilisation will die tonight, never to be brought back again. I don't want that to happen, but it probably will."

The morning after the State of the Union I spoke with JT Batson, the chief executive of the US Soccer Federation. He was excited that the US was becoming a mature footballing nation and that the federation was financially healthy. It was beginning to unite what had long been a fragmented, federalist system of football, improving its systems of scouting and player development. His mood, a few months before the tournament, was bright and decidedly apolitical. American success at the World Cup should, could, would shine on all Americans.

I asked what would qualify as success at the World Cup. "Does the team inspire belief?" Batson said. "Does it make you proud? Do you want to wear your jersey? Do you want to wear something with an American flag?"

IN LATE MARCH I TRAVELLED TO ATLANTA, GEORGIA, TO follow the US national team during their pre-Cup training. The federation had arranged two friendly games against tough European competition in Belgium and Portugal, to be played in the capacious Mercedes-Benz Stadium downtown, home of the NFL's Atlanta Falcons.

As I arrived, a sports business publication was hosting a Business of Soccer conference in "the Benz". The luxury suite in which it was held opened on to the field behind the players' benches. The empty cavern felt like air conditioning and smelled like grass. A Walmart representative and I enjoyed the view. Inside there was much talk of content strategies and growth opportunities and action plans. One company sought to "operationalise the full opportunity" of the World Cup while another was "still operationalising how we leverage associates" ahead of the tournament. It could be a crucial business opportunity. At the World Economic Forum in Davos, Infantino had cited a study claiming that the World Cup could generate more than $30bn in gross output in the US and $80bn globally.

Panellists took the stage to the introductions of an antic hypeman and blaring music, for example DJ Snake and Lil Jon's "Turn Down for What". *Fire up that loud, another round of shots!* Nevertheless, in the small crowd of attendees, at least one man was dozing off. One of the panellists, the head of global brands (refreshment categories) for a major international foods company, who oversees its candy and gum portfolio, discussed the challenges presented by "young chewers". The head of Walmart "brand experiences" explained that the company "did ethnographies, we sat in people's homes with them, we watched them watch soccer".

If anything troublesome outside this luxury suite was discussed, it was via corporatised reference to a "challenging geopolitical climate", a challenge that was always swiftly brushed aside. Victor Montagliani, the president of Concacaf, the North and Central American and Caribbean football confederation, assured the conferencegoers that "when the ball starts rolling, somehow everybody forgets about everything else". In Davos, Infantino had said, "In these particular times, we forget to be happy, to be joyful." Maybe football will help.

The corporations would like to do two contradictory things at once. On one hand, the football businesspeople saw an American World Cup as the perfect chance to "tell their stories" and "roll out their best creative" – "creative" being, in their

case, a collective noun. On the other, they refused to discuss the principal stories of the nation itself. I submitted a few questions about the erosion of American democracy and Trump's newfound warmaking to the conference's live app. I prefaced these questions with: "As businesspeople..." or "As brand experts...", thinking that they might like that, but the moderators never posed them.

Later that afternoon there was a panel featuring Landon Donovan, the former American player turned commentator, and Roger Bennett, the co-founder of Men in Blazers, a football media company. The topic was the transformation of football in the US between 1994 (when it last hosted the World Cup) and 2026.

In 1994, the US lost to a 10-man Brazil, the eventual champions, 0-1, in the round of 16 in Stanford, California. This was a relatively good result. Between 1950 and 1990, the US team qualified for zero World Cups (it qualified automatically for 1994 as the host nation). Since then, it has reached one quarterfinal, in 2002, and never otherwise passed the round of 16. The absence of modern US World Cup success, despite the size and wealth of the country and the increased popularity of the game among its youth, is a puzzle and perhaps the least favourite topic of discussion for the public relations arm of the US federation.

This absence of success is also despite a now long-lived sense of the ubiquity of soccer in the US. Perhaps the pendulum has swung too far; Donovan blamed the activities and structure. Good young players train many times a week and play multiple games at the weekend. "And oh, by the way, we're not producing better players," Donovan said. He became agitated. "It's only a matter of time? It's *been* a matter of time." Donovan took pride in the fact that he trained himself by kicking a ball alone in southern California, and that his teammate Clint Dempsey did much the same in Texas. If there was a naive hope of an American title in 1994, or 2002, or 2010, when Donovan scored three times and the US topped their group ahead of England, it has since burned off.

Bennett spoke of a cultural evolution that began, by his reckoning, more than 40 years ago, when the US Congress debated a resolution to support an American bid for the 1986 World Cup, a tournament that was ultimately hosted by Mexico.

"A distinction should be made that [American] football is democratic, capitalism, whereas soccer is European, socialist," said congressman Jack Kemp during a debate on the House floor in May 1983. Kemp was a former American football star and insisted that football was the one where you use your hands. Bennett placed a lot of weight upon these remarks, stark evidence he said of how far the US has come in its embrace, both politically and numerically, of football (the one where you use your feet). In fact Kemp was joking, and supported the resolution, which passed easily.

Perhaps more interesting was a statement made later in the same 1980s debate by Norman Lent, a congressman from New York. Responding to Kemp's socialism quip, Lent said, "Nothing could be further from the truth, because soccer is a sport which knows no politics. It is played all over the world. It is played in Europe. It is played in Asia. It is played in Africa and South America, as well as in North America, so certainly it knows no politics."

The notion that something knows no politics because it is widespread is hard to take seriously. Lent was speaking only a few years after the Argentine military dictatorship celebrated the country's home World Cup victory. Before an earlier cup, Mussolini had erected stadiums for the tournament in Italy. There have since been tournaments in Russia, Qatar and, in 2034, Saudi Arabia will host. Another, more reasonable conclusion to draw from Lent's undeniable factoids is that football can know *all* politics, including, now, Maga politics and anti-Maga politics.

Team USA made camp about 15 miles north-west of Atlanta, in a suburb called Marietta, at the training ground of the local MLS team. Its complex of pitches lies right alongside Interstate 75, one of the country's carotid arteries. I arrived on a sunny day that got hot in the afternoon. Pyramids of perfect, white footballs stood out on the grass. Defender dummies were stuck in the ground like scarecrows. As the players emerged from a garage-like building, surveillance drones buzzed into the sky above. The Americans warmed up with elaborate games of keep-away, while coaches counted the passes. Vigorous defending sent balls shooting into the ranks of the press corps, striking reporters and knocking television cameras.

This symphony was conducted by US head coach Mauricio Pochettino, the Argentine previously in charge of Chelsea, Paris Saint-Germain and Tottenham Hotspur. Pochettino and his staff sought shade in a large tent that had been erected between two pitches. Laptops sat on tables inside.

As for the matches that would follow that week, Pochettino said repeatedly that he preferred the modifier "not official" to "friendly". There was not going to be, he insisted, anything friendly about them. They were meant as a serious test, both internal and external, to prove that the team was ready and competitive, and that they should be taken seriously.

At the time of the training camp, the US federal government was partially shut down, the result of a partisan fight over Trump's violent immigration crackdown and the killing of two US citizens by federal immigration officers in Minneapolis. Employees of the Transportation Security Administration weren't being paid, and long security queues at airports were dominating American news and many Americans' experiences. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the armed and often masked federal law enforcement agency, was helping check travellers' identification. Queues may not be the only travel difficulty for the tournament's attendees and would-be attendees. Visitors from four countries that have qualified for the World Cup – Haiti, Iran, Ivory Coast and Senegal – face a full or partial Trump-issued travel ban, and more than a dozen other playing countries are subject to some sort of visa restrictions.

The US midfielder Weston McKennie, who plays in Italy for Juventus, was asked whether his teammates who played professionally abroad were curious or concerned about the airports or about the euphemistic "chaos in the streets".

"Um, honestly, not really," McKennie said. "I think most of the guys back in Europe want to know the cool spots to go and the cool spots to hang out in." These elite footballers, after all,

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would have "an escort service and top-level security and everything".

Centre-back Chris Richards was asked about his previous assertion that few things were more American than Chili's Triple Dipper – a casual-dining basket containing three appetisers and dipping sauces. "I can't really think of anything else," he said. "Um no, I think that the Chili's one, that's really high up there."

Pochettino was briefly, and confusingly, drawn on the question of American politics. He was proud of his colleagues being "the most democratic coaching staff, inclusive and diverse and everything". But he had to draw lines. He could go away and create his own party and "fight against the things that I don't believe are fair", but "I am not here because I am Mauricio Pochettino," he said. "It's because I am the head coach of the US men's national team." He added that he didn't like "the hypocrisy and the *populismo*" but celebrated that, "We are in a world today that everyone can say what they want."

The experience of workaday sports reporting is akin to animal husbandry. You are tagged and shepherded and penned. In the pen you are fed a slop diet of endless unpacking and repacking of the vaporous concepts of sport: intensity, pressure, leadership, confidence. To what extent is confidence felt? Is it truly possessed? Have the levels thereof been increasing or decreasing? Do you predict that the levels will increase or decrease in the future? *What would it be like to win the World Cup? It would be everything*.

So it is easy to appreciate Pochettino, a bit of a pressroom philosopher, an anti-bullshitter, a man who cares about concepts, a man who concretises the fluff, problematises it, theorises it, particularly when answering questions in his native Spanish, which I've translated where applicable.

On motivation and epistemology: "How do my words actually reach you? Do they come across as something I genuinely believe? Or merely as something I feel compelled to say just to reassure myself – to feel satisfied that I've *tried* to motivate you?"

On the mundanity of the postgame interview: "Do you really think that every player experiences the same sense of pleasure? Well, for many, almost certainly not."

On leadership (in English): "Leadership is a thing you cannot buy in the supermarket."

It was Belgium that the US played in their first World Cup game – indeed *the* first World Cup game – in 1930 at the Gran Parque Central, in Montevideo, Uruguay. The US won 3-0.

There were mass anti-Trump "No Kings" protests across the US on this Saturday, when they faced each other again, including in Atlanta. Some of the protesters also attended the match. One man stood with his family near Gate 1 in a "Fight Oligarchy" shirt. I asked him if, amid the challenging geopolitical climate, he supported the American team. "Of course," he said, spreading his arms widely as if the question were ridiculous.

And why not? There were Belgians in Yankees caps, Americans in Arsenal scarves, children of both nations in Messi shirts. Often thrown around at the conference had been the claim that a significant percentage of modern football fans support no team at all, but are simply fans of the game.

Pochettino, on Belgium: "Theirs is an agile brand of football, a style that evokes many positive emotions, not least for its aesthetic appeal."

Before the match, hip-hop music echoed through a mostly empty stadium. The American national anthem was strummed out of a begemmed electric guitar. One logistical aspect of football clearly needed work before the largest sporting event in history: both teams emerged in white shirts, looking comically similar in person and nearly indistinguishable on television. The players would complain about it later. "That was a bit strange," said Christian Pulisic, the star American striker.

Nevertheless, for a quarter of an hour, the Americans looked the stronger side against a loose and leaky Belgium. The US was adventurous on the wings, while the Belgians seemed allergic to the ball. Occasionally, Belgians Kevin De Bruyne and Jérémy Doku performed the spatially or kinetically improbable, respectively, but they caused no damage. McKennie flicked in a corner kick from Antonee Robinson, and the US led.

The equaliser was a fluke; Zeno Debast gathered the American goalie's punch and slammed it right back through about a dozen legs across two dozen yards. A second Belgian goal was lawn-bowled into the bottom corner by Amadou Onana. Darkness descended. A penalty for handball was clipped in by Belgium's Charles De Ketelaere. Dodi Lukébakio curled in a lovely left-footed strike. Then he did it exactly again, but more forcefully. The game ended with a period of gormless scampering by both sides, during which the US clawed a goal back after a defensive gaffe. The referee blew the whistle well before time expired. Final score: US 2, Belgium 5. It could've been worse.

We were herded into an elevator and down into the press conference room. A group of American fans whom I had seen partying earlier in the day had been invited in to observe, to witness the Argentine who marshalled their American dreams. It was meant to be a treat, but they looked bereft – their faces were now redder, their expressions more deeply drawn. Pochettino took the stage.

"It's a good reality check for us," he said. "To feel sometimes the pain is good." Otherwise, he continued, the team may be content to think, "We are so good, we are so handsome, we are so well-dressed – and we are Americans."

We were herded once more down vast, dark, Benz hallways. Cruelly, it was the American goalkeeper – Matt Turner, a surprise choice that night – who was subjected first to the strange postgame ritual known as a "mixed zone", a gauntlet of video and audio and print media conducted in a cold, linoleum dungeon somewhere in the bowels of the Benz. Men twice Turner's age, and Turner is not young, shoved tiny microphones towards his face and asked him what had gone wrong. I listened from behind the scrum. The optics weren't great, he admitted. But his explanation was as anodyne as it was artful and true: that football is random, and that is why we love football.

THE NEXT DAY I VISITED THE ARTHUR M BLANK US SOCCER National Training Center, an expansive work in progress nearly complete in Fayetteville, 20 miles south-west of Atlanta. Blank is a co-founder of The Home Depot, a large hardware-store chain, and owner of the Atlanta Falcons and Atlanta United. The centre is a glass and marble complex, its aesthetics reminiscent of a luxury airport lounge, and the new temple to or cathedral of American soccer, depending on who is describing it. The federation has never had a proper home, and this is meant to rectify that fact.

The temple was also an active construction zone, and in the driveway – which would be grand too, insisted the federation, reminiscent of Augusta National or the All England Club – I was made to sign a waiver. The US Soccer Federation is now fully and for ever indemnified against the claims of me and my heirs.

The temple is, of course, "state of the art" and "high-tech", and its facilities are expansive and diverse. It will host not only the US men's team but a couple dozen other national teams including the women's team – who have had great World Cup success – various levels of youth, futsal, beach soccer and powerchair. Blueprints were still taped to some walls. Some of its doors were labelled Film, Hydration, Hydrotherapy, Medicine, Sauna and Sleep. There will be a shake and smoothie zone. The locker rooms were meticulously designed after an extensive international tour of locker rooms. Mountains of boxes from luxury furniture brands Herman Miller and Knoll littered office space on the second floor, which looked out on to a flat green sea.

Out of the Nike-branded fitness room, large glass doors opened on to an enormous former cow pasture, now trimmed to a quarter-inch-deep green ocean of a patented strain of Bermuda grass. We bovine press corps were as interested in the grass as we had been in anything all week. We asked of its origin, its cultivation, its hydration, its metabolism. Thus far lineless, the green expanse might have hosted some ancient predecessor of football that stretched on for miles and months.

This place was built with aspiration in mind. Beneath the ancient expanse, a terraced series of pitches descends a long hill. The senior teams play on top and so on down to the youngest of juniors. The latter are meant to look up the incline and imagine what might be. Despite the luxury everywhere, it isn't designed for ease. Younger players will not, for example, be afforded the intra-temple golf-cart rides given to the full internationals. "It's not going to be paradise straight away," said Matt Crocker, the federation's sporting director. (Crocker left this post soon after my visit reportedly to take a similar job with the Saudi Arabian federation.)

These friendlies, these unofficial games, were international competition but also internal competition, with the players still competing for official World Cup roster spots. The US team will announce their line-up – the 26 men who will carry their nation's hopes for 90 minutes at a time – in a nationally televised event in New York City on Tuesday.

The splashy event is a continuation of the federation's ad campaign: Never Chase Reality™. Videos bearing the slogan were played on the Benz's Jumbotron before the matches. The team's first game awaits on June 12 versus Paraguay in a suburb of Los Angeles, when for a month two realities – the nation itself and its representation on the pitch – will overlap. The campaign encourages the US team and their fans not to feel constrained by the lack of past glory. Whatever implication it might

TRUMP WILL SURELY CELEBRATE THE TEAM IF IT IS TRIUMPHANT, GIVEN HIS PENCHANT FOR THINGS MADE OUT OF GOLD

have for the nation itself is ambiguous, and certainly depends on its reader's ideology.

Will Trump watch the games? He will surely celebrate the team if it is triumphant, given his penchant for "winners" and for things made out of gold. The title is unlikely, of course. The US is about a 60-to-1 underdog to win the World Cup, according to most bookmakers. Whether he can be proud of merely quality play or a good effort, as Batson had suggested, is less sure.

There is plenty of demand for the games in any case, with prices from $1,000 to see the first US game, and Fifa taking a 30 per cent fee on its official resale platform. "I did not know that number," Trump told the New York Post about the ticket prices recently. "I would certainly like to be there, but I wouldn't pay it either, to be honest with you." One imagines that Trump would not need a ticket. He added: "I would like to be able to have the people that voted for me to be able to go."

BY TUESDAY, PORTUGAL FANS HAD BEEN STREAMING INTO the downtown hotels for a couple of days, and Atlanta had become a bit edgier ahead of this match. That afternoon, I followed the parade through Centennial Olympic Park, draped in American flags, towards the stadium, which was ringed by heavily armed police.

"Ro-nal-do's o-ver-rat-ed," chanted a pudgy, unprovoked man in a polo shirt and chinos, over and over, as he walked sweatily down the sidewalk.

"*Tem colesterol alto*," came the retort from across the street.

Never mind that Portuguese superstar Cristiano Ronaldo wasn't here, out with an injury sustained playing for his club team in Riyadh. In his absence, in the park dozens of children engaged in a miniature holy war: armies of tiny Cristiano Ronaldos versus tiny Christian Pulisics.

A saxophonist played the national anthem before kick-off. In the stadium, I sat above an indefatigable Portuguese drum corps. So determined were its two directors to maintain its rhythm and volume that they rarely looked at the pitch. Visa gift cards were parachuted down from the rafters.

The US again looked strong as the match started – ambitious and exploratory. But they were soon overcome by the wizardry of Bruno Fernandes, the angry magician of Manchester United. Finding himself too deep in the American box and pointed in the wrong direction, Fernandes blindly backheeled the ball, which was gathered by Francisco Trincão who placed it in the lower-left corner of the net. Twenty minutes later, Fernandes flipped a loopy corner kick to João Félix at the top of the box, who took one touch and fired it through a crowd into the lower-left corner of the net.

US nil, Portugal 2. To feel sometimes the pain is good.

Team USA's principal press wrangler had warned us that the events of the evening would be rushed, as many members of the team had international flights to catch that night, back as they were on their way to professional duties abroad. The midfielder McKennie, comfy in his slippers, grabbed his suitcase, navigated through the reportorial scrum and ran away towards the airport. It would soon be summer and he would return and the games would be official. FT

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