

CANADA'S SOCCER MEN POISED FOR SUCCESS

Thirty-six years ago, the Canadian men's soccer team hit its peak by qualifying for the 1986 World Cup in Mexico City. Alas, the team under coach Tony Walters failed to score a single goal in its three games — losing by scores of 2-0, 2-0 and 1-0 — and has since been unable to qualify for the world's most prestigious sports tournament.

But in 2022, the soccer world has tilted and Canada is almost assured of getting back to the big stage when the World Cup is held in Qatar from Nov. 21 to Dec. 18.

The long and winding road to the World Cup began last September and stretches until March. If the Canadian team, which will be without ailing world-class superstar Alphonso Davies of Edmonton, can continue its impressive run, a major celebration across the country will happen in late March. And that's just for qualifying.

Given the national team's history, a number of stepping stones are on the road to success: Qualifying for the tournament would be No. 1; scoring at least one goal in a World Cup game would be No. 2; winning at least one game would be No. 3; making the playoffs would be No. 4; winning the World Cup? That's an Everestian peak almost too high for even the most optimistic Canadian to consider.

Coach John Herdman's Canadian team is currently halfway through an eight-team tournament (home and away games against the other seven countries) which will determine three qualifying countries for the World Cup. Thanks to a pair of wins in November in Edmonton over Costa Rica and Mexico, Canada stands alone on top with a near-perfect 4-0-4 record. Its next three games in this CONCACAF event will be played in Hamilton: Jan. 27 against Honduras; Jan. 30 against arch rival U.S.A.; and Feb. 2 against El Salvador. Canada then wraps up the tournament in March with games against Costa Rica, Jamaica and Panama (combined record to date: 7 wins; 8 losses; 9 draws).

The world rankings would suggest Canada has a tough road ahead. But while the maple leaf boys are ranked 40th in the world by FIFA, the U.S. and Mexico, already victimized in this World Cup qualifying event by the Canadians, are ranked 12th and 14th respectively. What does that say? This Canadian squad is either overachieving, or is becoming an actual contender on the world stage.

Davies, recovering from a case of myocarditis that will prevent him from playing in Hamilton, is already a household name among Canadian sports fans, but the likes of Cyle Larin and Jonathan David may soon be as familiar as McDavid and Crosby.

The country's sports fans will be glued to their TVs Jan. 27 for the next episode of this exciting run to Qatar.

- **RJ Currie** of sportsdeke.com: "Rumour has it **Tim Tebow** has been trying to become a ventriloquist. Unfortunately, whenever he throws his voice it goes way over everyone's head."
- **Scott Ostler** of the San Francisco Chronicle, on MLB's need for robotic umpires to call balls and strikes: "Human umps were fine in the old days. So were phone booths and stage coaches."
- **Patti Dawn Swansson**, on Oilers' GM Ken Holland saying he believes in 'second chances' while musing about signing troubled forward **Evander Kane**: "Fine, except Kane goes through second chances like **Liz Taylor** went through wedding rings."
- **Greg Cote** of the Miami Herald, on the firing of Dolphins' coach **Brian Flores** after two winning seasons: "Team owner Stephen Ross might as well have bought a billboard alongside Interstate 95 that depicts him wearing a big red Bozo nose and the word 'INCOMPETENT' stamped across his forehead."
- Blast from the past (courtesy **Don Pottinger** and **Dan Sutherland**): **Harry Neale**, professional hockey coach: "Last year we couldn't win at home and we were losing on the road. My failure as a coach was that I couldn't think of anyplace else to play."
- Late comedian **Phyllis Diller**: "The reason women don't play football is because 11 of them would never wear the same outfit in public."
- Another blast from the past: "Arkansas coach **Lou Holtz**, when his team was pelted with oranges after winning a trip to the 1978 Orange Bowl: "I'm glad we're not going to the Gator Bowl."
- **Dwight Perry** of the Seattle Times: "A fan has filed a \$6 billion lawsuit against the Jets and Giants for deceptive practices, on the grounds that they: a) call themselves New York but play in New Jersey; b) claim to play professional football."
- **RJ Currie** of sportsdeke.com: "At the Australian Open it's been serve, volley, serve, volley, serve and volley. And that was just the **Novak Djokovic** COVID deportation case."
- Comedy writer **Torben Rolfsen** of Vancouver, via Twitter, with a sure sign too many NHL games have been lost to

COVID: "I've forgotten the words to 'O Canada.'" '
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