

Gold Cup contenders banking on youth

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The 2017 CONCACAF Gold Cup is all set to begin, with 12 teams vying for regional glory in the United States over the next three weeks.

The tournament looks set to uncover some new talent, with most sides opting to pack their squads with youngsters, while some of the region's lesser lights have the opportunity to pick up valuable experience at the highest level. **FIFA.com** previews the tournament, which starts on Friday 7 July and ends on 26 July.

**Group A:** Canada, Costa Rica, French Guiana, Honduras

**Group B:** USA, Martinique, Nicaragua, Panama

**Group C:** Mexico, El Salvador, Jamaica, Curacao

### **The format**

The top two from each section in the group phase will advance to the quarter-finals, along with the best two third-placed sides. The winners of the four last-eight ties will progress to the semis, with the tournament concluding on 26 July with the match for third place and the final.

### **Three things you need to know**

1 Mexico will be pitching up in the USA with a much-changed squad to the one that appeared at the recent FIFA Confederations Cup Russia 2017, not that anyone should be mistaken about their intentions. Featuring the country's most promising players, the *Tri* squad will not be short of pace and has the ability to trouble any defence. Led by Rodolfo Pizarro and Jesus Gallardo, the young *Aztecas* will be determined to acquit themselves well and take a big step forward in their careers.

2 Down on their luck lately, Costa Rica are anxious to return to prominence. Beaten quarter-finalists at the last three Gold Cups, *Los Ticos* are hungry for glory. Coach Oscar Ramirez has picked virtually a full-strength squad, though he will be without keeper Keylor Navas. Can they make up for the absence of the Real Madrid custodian?

3 Since taking charge of Nicaragua nearly three years ago, Costa Rican coach Henry Duarte has injected some belief into their cause. Narrowly beaten by Jamaica in the third round of qualifying for the 2018 FIFA World Cup Russia™, *Los Pinoleros* now have the perfect opportunity to continue their recent improvement, with their goal being to advance beyond the group phase for the very first time in their history.

### Players to watch

**Rodolfo Pizarro (MEX):** A mainstay with Mexican champions Guadalajara, the 23-year-midfielder is in the form of his life and has his sights set on a dream move to Europe. An intelligent, pacy player with an eye for goal, Pizarro will be the cornerstone of this *Tri* side. His ability to dictate the play will be crucial in channelling the energy of his young team-mates.

**Ismael Diaz (PAN):** Though only 20, Diaz has picked up plenty of experience already, having represented his country on the FIFA U-17 and U-20 World Cup stages. With seasoned campaigners Blas Perez and Luis Tejada both absent, Diaz will be one of the men Panama will be looking to for goals.

**Romell Quioto (HON):** Spearheading Honduras' new breed, the 25-year-old attacking midfielder is sure to be one of their trump cards in Group A, having formed part of the side that finished fourth at the Men's Olympic Football Tournament Rio 2016.

### Did you know?

- Panama have conceded no more than one goal in 15 of their last 16 Gold Cup matches. The man charged with maintaining that record in the USA is Jose Calderon, who takes over goalkeeping duties from Jaime Penedo, a veteran of six Gold Cups but absent from this tournament.

