

World League Group 1 preview: Familiar stars and new faces for defending champions USA

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With the squads for the FIVB Volleyball World League 2015 now finalised, we take a closer look at some of the stars who could prove the difference between victory and defeat in Group 1 of this year's tournament.

[Squads announced as World League approaches](#)

USA begin the defence of their crown with a squad made up of talented rising stars, established big-name hitters, and some returning legends. The 25-man squad which the champions, like the other 31 teams in the competition, have announced one month prior to the start of the event, will be captained by the returning William 'Reid' Priddy. The three-time Olympian and 2008 gold medallist spent most of the 2014 international season recovering from a torn anterior cruciate ligament (ACL), which he suffered on the opening weekend of the 2014 World League.

Even with Priddy on the sidelines, the US emerged as the shock winners of the 25th edition of the tournament. The Americans defeated world number one Brazil 3-1 in the final to claim their second World League title in front of 9,000 fans at the Nelson Mandela Forum in Florence, Italy. Eleven of that squad have returned to defend their title, spearheaded by 2014 MVP Taylor Sander, and opposite Matt Anderson, fresh from winning the European Champions League with Russian outfit Zenit Kazan.



However, coach John Speraw has also included a number of young newcomers on the roster. Torey DeFalco is the youngest player of these at just 18 years of age. In 2014, he was named MVP and Best Spiker at the NORCECA Boys' U19 Continental Championship. But Speraw is a staunch believer that age is just a number.

"For me personally, age doesn't matter," he said. "It is the same this year as it has been in the past."

DeFalco is joined by a further three World League debutants. Coaches can select 14 players from the 25-man preliminary roster for each World League weekend. The US men, ranked number five in the world, begin their 2015 World League campaign against Iran on May 30 and 31 in Los Angeles.

Their opponents in an extremely strong Pool B are world champions Poland and Olympic champions Russia.

Poland find themselves in a transitional phase following their unforgettable triumph on home soil. World Championship MVP Mariusz Wlazly has called time on his career in the national team. They are also missing another high-profile player in the form of Michal Winiarski. French coach Stephane Antiga will official announce his new captain in Danzig on Friday. One thing that has been guaranteed is the return of outside hitter Bartosz Kurek who missed out on selection for the World Championship.



POLAND WELCOME BACK, KUREK

Bartosz Kurek missed out on selection for Poland at the FIVB Volleyball Men's World Championship 2014. However, he returns to the fold for the FIVB Volleyball World League 2015. The 29-year-old won gold at the 2012 edition and also claimed the MVP award in the same year.

Olympic champions Russia also look strong, with their squad captained by volleyball legend Sergey Tetyukhin. The 40-year-old from world club champions Belogorie Belgorod has not played for the national team since scooping gold at the London 2012 Olympic Games. The coming weeks will reveal whether or not he will actually play. "We have spoken with him. The final decision will be made by Sergey himself," said a spokesperson for Russia.



RUSSIA A LEGEND RETURNS

Veteran Russian star Sergey Tetyukhin has returned to the side for the first time since capturing gold at the London 2012 Olympic Games. He last tasted gold in the World League 13 years ago, picking up the 2002 title in Belo Horizonte.

Record winners Brazil, who have nine World League wins to their name, are already assured of a place in the final round of the 26th edition of the tournament. The team, built around stars Bruno Rezende, Murilo Endres, Ricardo Lucarelli, Wallace de Souza and Leandro Vissotto, will host the grand finale at the Maracanãzinho in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, from July 15 to 19. This final will serve as a test event for the volleyball competition at the Rio 2016 Olympic Games at the same venue.

After suffering two defeats in finals last year – against USA in the World League and Poland in the Men’s World Championship – the team is hungry for another title. Veteran libero Sergio Dutra Santos has been called up to the squad, with the 39-year-old looking to make a run at the Rio 2016 Olympic Games after initially retiring from international duty following London 2012.

As well as Brazil, Group A also features eight-time World League winners and 2014 bronze medallists, Italy, three-time silver medallists Serbia and rising nation Australia.

The big star in Italy’s squad is undoubtedly hitter Ivan Zaytsev. However coach Mauro Berrutto has also called up talented youngsters like Giacomo Raffaelli. “We are obviously already looking ahead to the 2016 Olympics,” said Berrutto.

Serbia’s squad will be led by the ‘point-scoring machine’ Aleksandar Atanasijevic and captain Dragan Stankovic.

Brazil will welcome five teams to the Group 1 Final, with the top two teams from Pool A and Pool B plus the winner of the Group 2 Final qualifying.

The 26th FIVB World League is set to be the biggest ever: it all began with just eight countries, who took part in the inaugural competition in 1990. In 1991 the number of teams had risen to 10, while 12 nations competed from 1992-2000 and 2004-05. The field featured 16 teams from 2001-2003 and 2006-2012. 2013 saw 18 different countries, rising to 28 teams in 2014 and the new record of 32 this year.
