

Your Shortcut to... Football Fever and the Men's 2026 FIFA World Cup

"It's watched by billions of people...More than 200 national teams compete in qualifying... and when it's over, one team will be crowned the best on Earth.

This is your Squiz Kids Shortcut to Football Fever... and the 2026 FIFA Men's World Cup... The podcast where we explore the who, what, when, where, why, and how of the wonderful world around us. I'm Christie Kijurina."

And I'm Bryce Corbett.....Christie, before we get started today, I need to talk to you about next week.

That sounds serious.

It is serious.

Oh no. What's happened?

I think I might need to take a few sick days.

What? Are you alright?

Not really.

What's wrong?

I've got football fever.

Football fever? What are your symptoms?

Well, I have increased excitement. Difficulty concentrating. Constantly checking tournament schedules. Watching goal compilations at midnight, Randomly shouting "GOOOOOAAL!" when nobody's scored. And, suddenly believing Australia can beat absolutely anyone.

Bryce, that does sound serious, but I don't think that's a recognised medical condition.

Tell that to billions of football fans around the world.

Fair point!

Today, we're unwrapping what football is and where it came from, how the FIFA World Cup became the biggest sporting event on Earth, and why billions of people, including millions of Australians, are getting ready for the biggest World Cup ever. So grab your boots, your scarf and your lucky match-day snack, and let's kick off!

And listen carefully. There's a S'Quiz at the end...

WHAT

Bryce, if you jumped into a time machine and travelled back a few thousand years, you'd discover people have been kicking balls around for a very, very long time.

Humans really do seem to have an uncontrollable urge to kick things.

Apparently so. Ancient people in China played a game called Cuju [TSOO-joo], where players kicked a leather ball through an opening without using their hands. Ancient Romans played ball games too. And many cultures around the world developed their own versions... including Australia's own indigenous peoples.

Which means if you travelled around the ancient world carrying a football, you'd probably find somebody willing to have a kick.

Quite possibly. But while lots of cultures played ball games, the version of football we know today began taking shape in England during the 1800s.

Back when every school seemed to make up its own rules.

Exactly. Some schools allowed players to pick up the ball. Some allowed tackling. Some didn't. If two schools wanted to play each other, they first had to work out which game they were actually playing.

That sounds less fun and more like a meeting.

Which is why, in 1863, a group of clubs met in London and agreed on a common set of rules. That became the Football Association and helped create modern football.

So somewhere out there is the person who finally said, "Rightho lads. Stop arguing. These are the rules." And once everyone was playing the same game, football spread incredibly quickly. And railways played an important role.

They did. Teams could travel further. And before long, ships carried the sport around the world and football was being played in places like Argentina, Brazil and even Australia.

So Christie, with so many people playing the beautiful game around the world, it was only a matter of time before somebody said..."Bet our team can beat your team."

Ahhh humans... we love a competition...

Which is where the story gets really interesting... because how do you run a football tournament when half the world wants to play?

HOW

Bryce, the answer begins in Paris, France, in 1904, when representatives from seven countries got together and created an organisation called FIFA.

Which stands for Fédération Internationale de Football Association.

Very impressive.

Thank you. I practised that several times.

FIFA's job was to help organise international football. And before long, they had an ambitious idea.

Let me guess. A giant football tournament.

Exactly. A competition to find the best national football team in the world.

Humans really do love ranking things.

In 1930, FIFA held the first-ever Men's World Cup in Uruguay, a small country in South America, and just 13 teams showed up.

Only 13? Compare that to 2026, where forty-eight teams will compete and that's quite an expansion.

It is. Some teams travelling to that first World Cup spent weeks crossing the Atlantic Ocean by ship.

Can you imagine that team talk? "Alright everyone stay motivated... we'll play football in... three weeks, once we get there."

How hard would that be? On this occasion, the hosts, Uruguay, won the tournament, and the World Cup was born. And from there it just kept getting bigger.

Much bigger. Over the decades, the World Cup gave us some of football's most famous moments. Brazil became the most successful nation, winning five titles. Pelé became a global superstar. Diego Maradona scored one of football's most controversial goals. And in 2022, fans witnessed what many people consider the greatest World Cup Final ever played. Messi versus Mbappé.

That was incredible! Argentina versus France. Lionel Messi chasing the one trophy missing from his collection, and Kylian Mbappé scoring a hat-trick in the final.

Which sounds like it should have been enough for Mbappe's team France to win.

Normally it would be. But after a thrilling 3-3 draw, the match went to penalties, and it was Argentina that lifted the trophy.

No wonder billions of people were watching. But Christie, why did a game that started with people kicking a ball around, end up becoming one of the few events that can make almost the entire planet stop and watch?

WHY

One reason football became the world's game, Bryce, is because almost anyone can play it...anywhere! You don't need lots of expensive equipment. A ball, a patch of ground

and a few friends is often enough. Football is played in huge stadiums, but it's also played in parks, beaches, streets and school playgrounds all over the world

Which means lots of kids grow up dreaming about playing for their country one day.

Exactly. And that's the second reason people love the World Cup. It's not just clubs competing. It's entire countries.

For a few weeks every four years, people are suddenly painting their faces, waving flags and cheering for players they've never met.

And Australia has its own World Cup story. The Socceroos first qualified in 1974 which was very exciting, even though we didn't actually score a goal.

Well... not quite, Christie...Col Curran became the first Australian to score in a World Cup Finals match... unfortunately it was an own goal for East Germany.

Ooof Not exactly the way he'd planned to make history I'm sure

A great football trivia question though...

Lock that one in... Australia then had a wait of thirty-two years before returning to the World Cup in 2006, and the qualifying match is where one of the most famous moments in Australian football history happened.

John Aloisi's penalty against Uruguay. One kick. One goal. Thirty-two years of waiting over.

Australia reached the Round of 16 that year, and again in 2022 and football received another giant boost in Australia in 2023.

That would be The Matildas! Australia reached the semi-finals of the Women's World Cup that was held in Australia and New Zealand. Millions of Aussies tuned in and packed stadiums, and a whole new generation of kids fell in love with the game.

Which brings us to reason number three: football creates moments people never forget.

The kind of moments where complete strangers jump into each others' arms and celebrate together. Right now, Christie, billions of people are getting ready for the 2026 FIFA Men's World Cup. The biggest tournament in football history.

I can't wait...Forty-eight teams. One hundred and four matches. Sixteen cities spread across Canada, Mexico and the United States. And for the first time ever, three separate opening ceremonies welcoming the world to the tournament.

That is a lot of football.

It really is. The tournament begins with 48 teams split into 12 groups of four. Every team gets three matches to prove themselves.

And then comes the part where football fans stop sleeping properly. The knockout rounds. The top two teams from each group automatically go through, along with the eight best third-placed teams. That creates a Round of 32, where one bad game can send even the biggest football nation packing

So from that point on, it's basically survive and advance. And somewhere in there we'll get new heroes, shocking upsets and at least one result that leaves millions of fans staring silently at the television.

And, for the first time ever, the World Cup Final will feature a Super Bowl-style halftime show, with global music stars, including BTS, Madonna and Shakira. So whether you're tuning in for football, music, drama, goals, penalties or giant underdog stories ..the world's biggest sporting event is ready to kick off. And somewhere among those 104 matches, another unforgettable World Cup moment is just waiting to happen.

THE S'QUIZ

"This is the part of the podcast where you get to test how well you've been listening...

1. Ancient people in China played an early ball game that many historians see as a distant ancestor of football. What was it called?

Was it:

- a) Cuju [TSOO-joo]
- b) Kung Foot
- c) Dragonball

[a) Cuju]"

"2 True or false: The 2026 FIFA Men's World Cup will feature 48 teams and 104 matches, making it the biggest World Cup ever.

[True]"

"3 What is the name of the organisation that runs world football and organises the World Cup?

[FIFA and an extra 3 points if you said Fédération Internationale de Football Association.]"

I think you just wanted to say that again Bryce... after all that practice.

I couldn't let it go to waste, Christie!

"And for the big people if you'd like to learn more about the FIFA World Cup, The Squiz Today (our big sister podcast) have also done a podcast all about out and you can find it in their podcast feed today...

Well, that's all we have time for today. Thanks for joining us as we explored the who, what, how, where, when, and why of Football Fever... and the 2026 FIFA Men's World Cup"

Now get out there...and have a most excellent day!

Over and out.