

THE CONVERSATION

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Why 48 teams in the expanded FIFA World Cup could be a win for football

June 5, 2017 2.29pm BST



Best of 32 teams in 2014. PA

Author



Nicolas Scelles

Lecturer in Sport Economics, University of Stirling

Football is all about numbers. It's a game of two halves, 4-4-2 formations, 11 players and as many goals scored as possible. It's also the most popular sport in the world, with 3.2 billion viewers tuning in to watch the last FIFA men's World Cup.

But how many teams should get to play in that competition? When it first kicked off in 1930, 13 teams took part. The number increased to 16 in 1934, decreased to 15 in 1938 and went back to 13 in 1950. Four years later, 16 teams were involved, and this remained the same until 1982, when 24 teams competed. It went up to 32 in 1998, and in 2026 will jump to 48.

According to Germany coach Joachim Low, increasing the number of teams to this amount will simply dilute the quality of the tournament. FIFA President Gianni Infantino argued that the quality of football is improving around the world. So who is right?

One way of answering this question is to look at the impact of the changes in the number of teams on "competitive balance" in the World Cup since 1930. Competitive balance is a measure of the sporting parity between teams. More specifically, we can examine the intra-game competitive balance which refers to the percentage of time during a match in which there is a difference of no more than one goal between the two teams. The higher the percentage, the better the competitive balance.

Balancing skills

Competitive balance was better (at 75%) in 1934 and 1938, when there were 16 and 15 teams, and the entire World Cup was a knockout tournament. In 1930 and 1950, when there were 13 teams and a pre-knockout group stage, the competitive balance was less than 70%.

This suggests that a knockout tournament generates more competitive balance, most likely because every single game is decisive. This seems to be confirmed by a low competitive balance in 1954 with 16 teams and a group stage (66.7%). Yet in subsequent tournaments with the same number of teams and format, until 1978, competitive balance was high – at above or just under 80%.

The high rate of competitive balance has remained stable (over 80%) since then, suggesting that even the increase to 32 teams did not have a negative effect on the quality of football. This is consistent with the general view that there has been an increase in the level of football over time.

The question now is whether or not 48 teams will maintain this level of competitive balance in 2026 given the likely different levels of football development in the various continents. The proposed breakdown would comprise Europe having 16 teams (up from 13), Africa 9.5 (up from 5), Asia 8.5 (4.5) and South America 6.5 (4.5). From “Concacaf” (North and Central America and the Caribbean) there would be 6.5 (up from 3.5), Oceania (New Zealand, Fiji, Tonga and other Pacific countries) 1.5 (0.5). (The “half” team allowances come from an intercontinental play-off tournament involving six teams to decide the last two FIFA World Cup places.)

This generous allowance of places might allow countries like China and Canada to finally qualify. From an economic point of view, reaching such countries is clearly interesting for FIFA. But a model I helped build to measure team performances from 2011 to 2013 showed that China and Canada were just not up to scratch. They were simply not as good as the worst teams of the 2014 FIFA men’s World Cup (Honduras and Cameroon).

Moneyball

But the format of competition decided by UEFA, which will be 16 groups of three, followed by a knockout round of 32, may severely limit the number of matches played by the lowest teams. As a result, their negative impact on competitive balance would also be limited. The larger knockout stage in the round of 32 would, probably, have a positive impact.

As a whole then, the new format should be beneficial from an economic point of view without being too detrimental to competitive balance. It might even generate an incentive for teams to play their best in more matches during the qualification phase, which might contribute to a general improvement in the level of football. Quantity should not be detrimental to the quality of football played at FIFA men’s World Cup in the long term.



Making the tournament bigger. PA

What is less certain is whether this will be true in 2026. It might be the case that some countries will improve their level of football during qualification, but still be short of the expected level for the final phase. They may then continue to improve during the qualification phase for the 2030 tournament. So Low may be right to be pessimistic for the 2026 FIFA men's World Cup, but Infantino's optimism may well be justified for the tournaments that follow. Perhaps, fittingly, a conclusion of two halves.

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