



Soccer

Is Dallas Ready? An Inside Look at Where Planning Stands for the 2026 FIFA World Cup

North Texas will host nine World Cup matches. That's more than any other market in next year's tournament.

By Will Maddox | March 17, 2025 | 4:13 pm | Illustration by Shaw Nielsen; photography by Perry McIntyre/ISI
Photos/Getty Images and courtesy of Dallas Sports Commission;



Thirty-one years ago, on a scorching Saturday afternoon in July, a Brazilian soccer player named Bebeto found himself with the ball at his feet and no defenders in front of him. History awaited. As he opened his body to shoot the ball to the keeper's left, Bebeto feinted and deftly cut to his own left, leaving the Dutch keeper sprawled on the ground behind him. He corralled the ball again with nothing but a few feet of grass

between him and the goal, walking the ball into the net to put Brazil up 2-0 over the Netherlands in the 1994 World Cup quarterfinal.

It was a beautiful finish, but the aftermath was the story. As Bebeto raced toward the corner, he extended his arms, pressed them together, and rocked them side to side, mimicking the cradling of a baby. It was a tribute to his son, Mattheus, who was born two days prior. Brazil went on to win the game and the entire tournament to secure its fourth World Cup championship, crystallizing Bebeto's baby rocking as one of soccer's most

enduring celebrations. And it happened right here at the Cotton Bowl in front of 65,000 fans.



That iconic moment was the culmination of years of planning for what organizers hoped would be a transformative experience for soccer in the United States. They were right. Two years after the World Cup, Major League Soccer launched with 10 teams and included many stars who made their names during the tournament. Dallas was chosen as one of the league's founding markets. Naturally, the Dallas Burn settled on the Cotton Bowl as their home stadium.

Almost three decades later, MLS is set to celebrate its 29th season, with 30 teams competing in now one of the world's most lucrative soccer leagues. The 1994 World Cup isn't the only reason for all of the success. But it might be the most important.

Next year, Bebeto's son Mattheus, a pro soccer player, will turn 32 during the World Cup, one day before the Cotton Bowl's successor, AT&T Stadium, hosts a round-of-16 match. Although games may be moving to air-conditioned confines, a familiar hope returns: for DFW to host another transformative soccer moment.

Bittersweet Triumph

The Biggest World Cup

For the first time since 1998, the FIFA World Cup has changed its format. Forty-eight countries will duel it out between June 11 and July 19, 2026, up from the previous number of 32. With 12 four-team groups and 32 teams advancing to the knock-out rounds, the tournament will expand from 64 matches to 104 across 16 locations. The eventual champion will play in eight matches across 39 days rather than seven in 32 days. The new format means that AT&T Stadium will host more matches than any other venue in the tournament. Coupled with being named the host of the International Broadcast Center, the economic impact of the tournament will be unprecedented. Although critics say the new format will dilute the competition and result in less entertaining matches, it's hard to argue with more soccer at an event that comes around once every four years.

The World Cup is a complicated beast. It is the world's most-watched sporting event, culminating in a final that drew 1.5 billion viewers back in 2022. It's also among the most controversial. The 2022 World Cup in Qatar was marred by the death of hundreds of migrant workers tasked with building the stadiums, and Saudi Arabia was awarded the 2034 event after an uncontested bidding process. Ultimately, for all its warts, the Cup is the grandest celebration of the world's favorite sport.

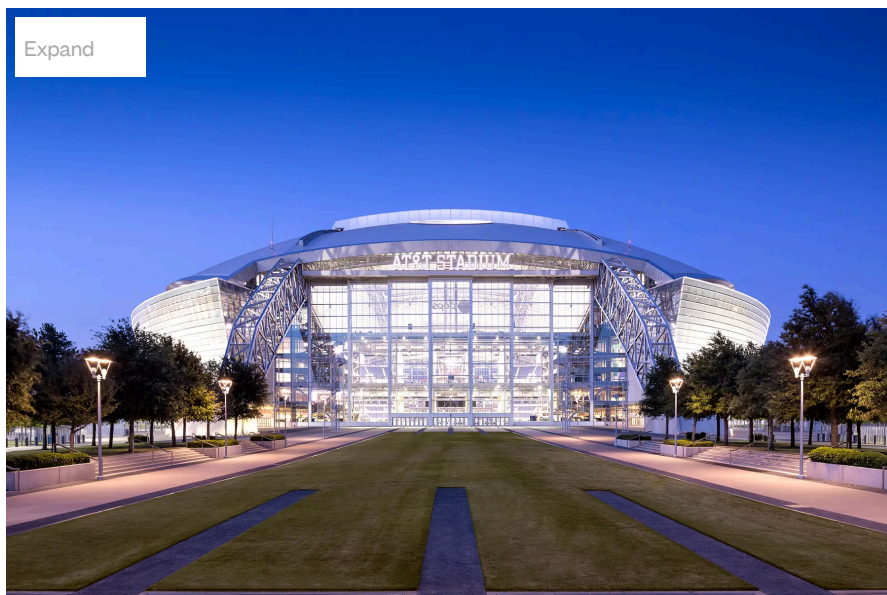
That's why the U.S., Mexico, and Canada banded together to host the 2026 event. And why Feb. 4, 2024—the date of the 2026 World Cup Final announcement—was so heartbreaking for North Texas.

A who's who of business, sports, media, and political luminaries crowded into AT&T Stadium to learn which city would land the tournament's crown jewel: the final. The Jones family was there. So, too, were the Hunts, the family that brought pro soccer here. Dallas Sports Commission Executive Director Monica Paul was the tip of the spear. Ask anyone connected to the business of sports in DFW, and they will tell you that Paul is a dynamo organizer, operator, and salesperson, as adept at hobnobbing with power brokers in town as she is pitching an international outfit like FIFA.

Optimism ran high inside the stadium, and for good reason. Weeks earlier, The Sun, a British tabloid, reported that Arlington would host the final, sending the region into a frenzy. Although further rumors swirled that FIFA leaked the news to get New York to up its bid for the final, that didn't

concern many in attendance. What better spectacle could be broadcast to the largest viewing audience on Earth than the final playing out at the home of America's Team, which doubles as the world's most valuable sports franchise?

Dallas sports legends Dirk Nowitzki and Emmitt Smith were scheduled to speak on a panel after the announcement, followed by a separate panel that included Mayor Eric Johnson, Jerry Jones, Dan Hunt, and Monica Paul. The live chat running alongside WFAA's three-hour World Cup Final announcement special was full of confident comments. When FIFA announced that North Texas would host more matches than any other region, WFAA's Mike Leslie came to what seemed like an obvious conclusion: "It wouldn't make a whole lot of sense for the site that hosts the most to not host the final."



Expand

To the chagrin of AT&T and Arlington, AT&T Stadium will be known as "Dallas Stadium" during the World Cup because FIFA doesn't allow sponsors in the stadium's names.

In truth, Paul and her team knew that North Texas had lost the final as soon as FIFA President Gianni Infantino confirmed that North Texas would host nine matches. She understood ahead of time that FIFA would spread the wealth, and it did. Los Angeles got the first game on U.S. soil; Dallas, the most matches; New York, the final.

ADVERTISEMENT

The party turned somber. Jones tried to brighten the mood by praising the effort of the bid team, but the attempt only went so far when one noticed the faces of Paul and Hunt, who sat on either side of him. It may have been the bright lights of the press conference, but Paul's eyes seemed to glisten with an extra bit of moisture.

"Was it heartbreaking? I'm not going to lie: yes, it was," Paul told *D CEO* at the time.

But soon, Paul and everyone else came to terms with how much there was to celebrate. North Texas was awarded a semifinal and nine matches overall—more than any other host city in the 2026 edition and certainly more than she had in her own projections. It was an extraordinary payoff for a decade-and-a-half of preparation.

On the Global Stage

Monica Paul came to Dallas as the director of sports marketing for the Dallas Convention and Visitors Bureau in 2008. The Caldwell native grew up on her family's farm before earning a chance to play volleyball at Mary Hardin-Baylor. Upon transferring to The University of Texas, Paul became the student manager of the Texas women's volleyball team, eventually impressing head coach Mick Haley so much that when he was appointed head coach of the U.S. national team, he brought Paul with him. So began a career that spans various administrative youth sports positions and a gig as associate director of events for USA Volleyball before coming to Dallas in 2008.

Less than a year into her time here, Paul helped put together a joint bid from the U.S., Mexico, and Canada to host either the 2018 or 2022 World Cups. Past Visit Dallas Chair Dave Brown wanted to prioritize major sporting events and believed Paul was the person for the job. "When we hired Monica, the region went from small-game hunters to big-game hunters," Brown says.

Paul's first attempt was unsuccessful, but it set her on a path to bolster the region's resume in hosting international soccer. Over the next several years, AT&T Stadium hosted games in the Mexican National soccer team's MexTour

and the Gold Cup, an international soccer tournament for North American nations. They were deliberate attempts at training and preparing for what Paul hoped would be another crack at a World Cup, whenever it may come.

That opportunity arrived in 2017 when Paul got a call from a member of the 2018 bid committee: Would North Texas be interested in being part of another joint bid for the 2026 FIFA World Cup?

“I’m like, ‘Of course we want to host,’” Paul says. “1994 was so impactful. Why wouldn’t we want to be on that stage?”

When FIFA awarded the 2026 World Cup to the joint North American bid, Dallas 2026 committee members Paul, Hunt, and Dallas Cowboys Executive Vice President Chad Estis were confident that North Texas would be a host region. Still, experience taught her the value of preparation. She began lining up the logistics: information about base camps, transportation plans, safety, medical needs, airports, volunteers, hospitals, and environmental sustainability, with the latter being an issue that American-based sports are typically less concerned with.

In 2018, FIFA announced that the North American bid edged out Morocco’s proposal. The World Cup was coming back to the United States. The announcement transformed the bid process from a united front to a competition. North Texas may be sharing the workload with the likes of New York, Mexico City, and Toronto to put on the event, but each had designs on securing the best matches for itself.

PARTNER CONTENT

Faces of Philanthropy

Communities Foundation of Texas

By **D Partner Studio**



Paul had no intention of being outdone. FIFA provided workshops for the cities to help guide their pitches, and in 2021, officials began making site visits to the different potential host regions. By then, Paul had her pitch set. She and others took the FIFA representatives to venues, hotels, and potential fan fest locations before winding down with a presentation at AT&T Stadium about just how big North Texas could make the world’s biggest sporting event.



Dallas Mayor Eric Johnson, Monica Paul, Jerry Jones, and Dan Hunt look on as FIFA announces the World Cup schedule. Paul describes losing out on the final as heartbreaking.

“We do everything bigger in Texas, but the FIFA representatives did not understand the scale,” says FC Dallas president Dan Hunt, who was a ball boy at the 1994 World Cup and an influential part of the 2026 bid team. “It was an education.”

Paul felt the magnitude. If they fail here, there may not be another chance. “This pitch was more nerve-wracking because the World Cup is once in a generation,” she says.

The North Texas contingent was confident, but they knew nothing for certain until June 2022, when they joined business leaders and soccer fans alike in the AT&T Discovery District to take in the selection show. A year and a half later, the match schedule was released, resulting in the mixed blessing of nine matches but no final. The total haul: Five group-stage games, two matches in the round of 32, a round-of-16 game, and the semifinal.

“This is going to be like having a Super Bowl game here nine times in five weeks,” says Peter Welpton, who hosts the soccer radio show “The Kick Around” on The Ticket radio station.

Now, North Texas must figure out how to stage it all.

North Texas' Big Score

When Monica Paul began working on the proposal for North Texas to host the World Cup, she estimated the region might land four to five matches, which would bring an estimated economic boon of around \$400 million. Instead, with AT&T Stadium hosting nine matches, she estimates the total economic impact will be between \$1.5 and \$2 billion—more than three times than what was generated the last time the stadium hosted the Super Bowl.

Those numbers will increase, Paul says, now that Dallas has been named to host the International Broadcast Center as it did in 1994. There's potential for the number to climb even further if any of the University of North Texas, University of Dallas, Dallas Baptist University, FC Dallas, and Texas Christian University are chosen as home base camps for international teams. (All have been named as potential sites.)

Making Sports History

Where to begin? For Paul and company, it was about answering the right questions. They started with safety and security, then turned to transportation. How will security and medical staff adapt to guests and fans who speak foreign languages? How might an international audience accustomed to accessing matches via public transport adapt to North Texas' car-centric culture? And how would North Texas navigate a FIFA mandate that host cities provide free transportation for ticket holders to the game, considering there's no public transportation that accesses AT&T Stadium?

Then there was the venue itself. Although AT&T Stadium has experience hosting international soccer, the World Cup requires a wider pitch than other tournaments. A grass pitch must be installed 15 feet above the football field, eliminating several of the first rows of seating. The raised pitch is part of \$295 million in stadium improvements that began last year, which also includes touching up its premium clubs and suites as well as new millwork and finishes.

North Texas has 16 more months to sort through all of it. For the time being, Paul says her group has made substantial progress in the areas of safety, security, human rights, and sustainability, with hundreds of stakeholders chipping away at meeting FIFA's requirements.

Advertisement



Mix It Up

We hit the streets, bellied up to more than our share of bars, raised a glass with the regulars, and bent the ear of every bartender we could find, all to give you an artisanal guide to drinking in our fair city.

[Grab a Drink](#)

The transportation plan is due to FIFA in March. Paul says the team has been working with the North Central Texas Council of Governments to solidify the proposal. She envisions Arlington leaning on the Trinity Railway Express commuter line, with the train dropping fans off at DFW Airport Station, where shuttle buses will take fans to and from the event.

“When we hired Monica [Paul], the region went from small-game hunters to big-game hunters.”

Dave Brown, Former Chairman | Visit Dallas

In December, the World Cup draw will inform host cities which teams will play where, allowing Paul and her team to cater the region's setup to the various international populations coming to town.

Other elements are already in place. In a nod to 1994, Fair Park will play a role, hosting the FIFA Fan Festival, where games can be viewed publicly during the 39 days of the World Cup alongside plenty of food, drink, concerts, and other activities. The City of Dallas is also readying to host the International Broadcast Center, budgeting \$15 million in improvements to the Kay Bailey Hutchinson Convention Center in prep for Dallas to be the hub for global sports media.

As the checklist dwindles and the tournament approaches, Hunt starts to see the beast of the World Cup turn into a boon to the community. “I have big hopes for the World Cup. I hope it inspires world-class athletes to pick soccer to lift both national team programs,” he says. “And once FIFA sees what a wonderful job we did, I hope they will award the 2031 Women's World Cup to the United States and Mexico, and I hope the final comes to Dallas.”

It's another lofty idea from a region that's known its share of them in the world's game. Not that it's a bad thing, considering its history. It's one thing to have high hopes. Next summer, just like 31 years ago, DFW will show what can happen when those hopes are realized.