March 2022 preview

Well, it’s officially judgment day or more judgment week, eleven games down, three to go, and it’s anything but decided for the USMNT. For the first time, I’m going to do a window preview looking into each game and exploring how I expect this window to go. Given our position in the table, four points should be enough to finish third and earn a spot in Qatar. Ordinarily, four points from three games should be a cakewalk, but two of these matches are, historically, our two most difficult fixtures. So let’s dive in and see how this window is going to go.

The Players

Goal Keepers: Zack Steffen, Ethan Horvath, Sean Johnson

Defenders: Reggie Cannon, DeAndre Yedlin, Aaron Long, Erik Palmer-Brown, Miles Robinson, James Sands, Walker Zimmerman, Antonee Robinson, George Bello

Midfielders: Kellyn Acosta Tyler Adams, Gianluca Busio, Luca de la Torre, Yunus Musah, Christian Roldan

Forwards: Paul Arriola, Jesus Ferreira, Jordan Morris, Jordan Pefok, Ricardo Pepi, Christian Pulisic, Gio Reyna, Tim Weah

With Aaronson, Dest, Richards, and most painfully, Mckennie out injured the depth of the team is sure to be tested. It’s not all bad news though as Gio Reyna makes his long-awaited return and Pulisic seems to have regained his confidence which we might as well consider a return.

USMNT @ Mexico

The marquee matchup in Concacaf is a game that is often not decided with talent, but with a cool head and the good graces of the one holding the whistle. This matchup in Mexico has historically been a game the USMNT simply tries not to lose, where a point feels like a win. After winning three straight against Mexico in 2021, including picking up a couple of trophies at the expense of our southern neighbors, one might think this is finally the year we go to Mexico and put everything on the field to win, but I don’t think that will be the case.

So, what to expect vs Mexico?

Lineup:

It may be tempting to put out a first-choice team, but with Panama waiting in Orlando on Sunday, a game we must win, I expect a bit of rotation for this one. Pefok starts up top for his aerial ability and because he’s actually scoring goals (I know what a high bar), with Weah on one flank to make his patented runs in behind, which he killed Mexico with twice already, and Arriola to annoy the Mexican center backs in possession. Acosta gets the start because he is a world-class shithouser, which we will almost certainly need, as well as his set-piece delivery, and is partnered by Tyler Adams for his defensive bite. Along the backline, we have Zimmerman, Robinson, and Sands. Zimmerman and Miles provide much-needed set-piece targets and Sands will provide the flexibility to slide into midfield should a tactical adjustment be necessary. Finally, Yedlin and Antonee start at wingback since they are the only two fullbacks on the roster to see many minutes this cycle. In goal, Berhalter goes with the hot hands of Ethan Horvath as Steffen has only just returned from injury.

While I have long been opposed to a back three, given the injuries and the need to keep the stars fresh, I think a strong defensive team is the best way to go. I don’t think we can go down to the Azteca and dominate Mexico the way we did in Cincinnati without Weston, so a good old-fashioned bus parking to save energy and limit Mexico in transition, it is. Offensively it will be simple, find Weah in transition, and have Arriola press the Mexico center backs into a mistake. Pefok will probably struggle to find touches, but the hope is if Weah or Arriola can find him he will finish the job. Set pieces will likely decide this one and with Acosta’s deliveries coupled with Zimmerman and Miles prowling around the box, I believe we will win this battle, and hopefully, that is enough to win the game or at least get a draw.

Final score prediction: USA 2-2 Mexico

USMNT VS Panama

Panama gave the US their first loss of the Ocho back in October. In a game that featured a heavily rotated and weakened lineup, the US lacked energy and quality and paid the price. This is the must-win game of the window and Gregg will treat it as such. Assuming there are no injuries or suspensions from the Mexico game this will be when the big dogs see the field.

Pepi has made the team better when he plays and even though he has been in a rough patch of form he gets the nod up front with Pulisic and Weah on the wings. Reyna and Musah start as the 8s to provide quality ball progression and Adams will sit behind them to put out any fires. Walker Zimmerman and Miles Robinson will once again start together in the back with Cannon and Antonee the fullbacks. Steffen gets the nod this time as I expect the US to dominate possession so Steffen’s feet will be important. I expect the team to come out firing, knowing they can all but lock up a ticket to the World Cup with a big win.

Final score prediction: USMNT 3-0 Panama

USMNT @ Costa Rica

Today is the day. Costa Rica has won their first two games of the window and sits just three points back. The goal difference gap may seem large, but history has taught us not to take anything for granted, especially in Costa Rica. Our historically worst place to play, this will be anything but easy, so expect a lineup with the intention of going for it.

Ferreira starts as a false nine to try to move the center backs out of position, Pulisic starts again alongside Gio Reyna. The midfield is where it gets interesting, Tyler Adams has already played two games and picked up a soft yellow against Panama, so he is suspended. Acosta is the natural fit to fill in and starts at the 6. Musah again starts, this time alongside Luca de la Torre in a midfield that will hopefully be able to stand up physically. Antonee Robinson is rested after two high-intensity games and is replaced by Bello. Zimmerman again starts in central defense, but this time partnered by Aaron Long, who makes his return from injury. Finally, Yedlin and Horvath return to the lineup for some experience and swagger.

Despite a strong lineup the USMNT fall in Costa Rica after a weak penalty is awarded early in the second half. Pulisic would go on to level the score only for a late winner to slip past Horvath.

Final score prediction USMNT 1-2 Costa Rica

Final Ocho standings:

1. Canada 31pts +16gd
2. Mexico 28 pts +10gd
3. USA 25pts +11gd
4. Costa Rica 25pts +5gd
5. Panama 20pts -1

Despite the loss, we hold onto a goal difference lead and finish in the final automatic qualifying place. Pulisic gets his redemption from the night in Couva as this time a 1-2 loss is enough to send us through. After a stressful and unnecessarily close qualifying campaign, the fans can finally sleep easy, at least until the World Cup draw that is.

Pop the champagne! Let’s party!