**Ireland**

Ireland will be hoping history is on their side as they head into the World Cup ranked as the world’s No 1 team. The Webb Ellis Cup has only been won by a team not occupying the top spot once, in 2007. In the five years under Joe Schmidt, they have won three Six Nations Championships, and got the monkey off their back by recording their first-ever wins over Schmidt’s home nation of New Zealand.

**New Zealand**

Perhaps no other team in any sport has lived with as much burden of expectation as New Zealand’s national rugby team. The All Blacks have sat on top of the world rankings for the last 10 years and despite recently relinquishing the top spot to Wales and then to Ireland, they will remain favourites with most pundits. Expect the All Blacks to go into this tournament convinced the World Cup is theirs to bring home for an unprecedented third time in a row.

**England**

England are desperate to make amends for becoming the first host nation to be dumped out of the tournament at the group stages in 2015. Question marks remain over England’s psychological frailty following a number of defeats where they squandered significant leads. However, emphatic home wins over Wales and Ireland should have England in buoyant mood. The challenge now is to repeat that form on the road.

**South Africa**

Before boycotts isolated apartheid-era South Africa, the Springboks had the measure of all their rivals and until the start of the professional era were the only team to have come out on top against the All Blacks, with 21 test wins to New Zealand's 18. Their aura might have dimmed since then but they are still a force to be reckoned with. Having won the 2019 Rugby Championship, they are well poised under Siya Kolisi, the nation’s first-ever black rugby captain to peak at the right time.

**Wales**

Wales had every reason to enter this World Cup brimming with confidence off the back of a national record of 14 consecutive victories and a Six Nations grand slam before knocking New Zealand from the top of the world rankings. But key injuries and defeats to England and Ireland during their warm-up games have betrayed concerns that Wales lack strength in depth.

**Australia**

The Wallabies experienced one of the worst runs in their history last year winning just four games from 13 tests. However, Australia have a habit of confounding form and peaking when it counts. Fans will be hoping the team that thumped New Zealand with a record win of 47-26 turns up rather than the one which followed that win a week later with a 36-0 loss.

**Japan**

Japan are the Pacific Nations Cup champions and seen as one of the top tier-two teams. With home advantage, the Brave Blossoms are hungry to add to their tier-one scalps after stunning South Africa in the 2015 World Cup. A top-eight finish is not an unreasonable goal for the home team.