



مجموعة سلامة الفكرية للسياسات والأعمال

SALAMA Policy & Business Intellectual Group

AI Winning The FIFA World Cup 26'

From the Pitch to the Machine

July 2026



I still remember FIFA World Cup Mexico 1986 and Italia 1990, not first for the goals, but for the stickers. The ritual of opening a fresh players' stickers pack, the small thrill of a shiny foil badge, the trading in the schoolyard for that one player you were missing, and the quiet satisfaction of pressing the last sticker into its slot to complete the album. That was the technology for an entire generation: paper, memory, and patience. The data came one sticker at a time, and the joy was in the hunt.



Four decades later, the album fills itself. The same World Cup that once arrived through a cardboard packet now arrives through sensors, servers, and algorithms. Every player is scanned into a 3D model, every movement tracked many times per second, every highlight cut and delivered to you personally before the celebration ends. Every World Cup has been a debut stage for technology, color television in 1970, goal-line technology in 2014, video assistant referees in 2018, but 2026 will be remembered as something different: the moment artificial intelligence stopped standing on the touchline as a tool and stepped onto the field as a participant.

Spanning three countries, 16 host cities, 48 teams, and 104 matches, each, in FIFA's framing, the equivalent of a Super Bowl, this is the largest tournament in the competition's history. 7 million fans will fill the stadiums and ~6 billion will watch in media channels and the 1st in which AI is woven into nearly every operational layer: tactical analysis, broadcasting, security, and fan engagement. This Flash maps that shift across five arenas, from the players, to their bodies, to the referees, to the fans, to the rules that will govern them all.

The Human Spark Effect

For all the avatars, sensors, and predictive analytics, this World Cup's defining moments have arrived after the 80th minute, when structure breaks down and human instinct takes over, the phase no algorithm can script and no model would have predicted.

- **92' Stephen Eustáquio, Canada vs South Africa:** With extra time looming, the co-hosts' captain unleashed a stunning mid-range volley to send Canada through to their first-ever knockout victory.
- **90+ Gabriel Martinelli, Brazil vs Japan:** A substitute conjured a winner deep in stoppage time, just as the tie looked destined for extra time, pure individual flair over system.
- **94' Gonçalo Ramos, Portugal vs Croatia:** On for Ronaldo, Ramos rose at the far post to head home a fourth-minute-of-stoppage-time winner, delivering the clutch moment the superstar couldn't.
- **90+ Neymar, Brazil vs Norway:** Even in defeat, the last word was human; a stoppage-time penalty in Brazil's final, desperate minutes.
- **79' & 90' Erling Haaland, Norway vs Brazil:** The two strikes that dumped out the five-time champions both landed in the closing stretch; a towering header, then a low drive at the death.

It is not machine versus human, but machine with human.

Football, like much of life: AI sharpens the decision, the human spark decides the final minutes.



The World Cup is no longer just the world's biggest sporting event. It is the world's largest live stress-test of applied AI, and the standards set here will not stay on the pitch.

Media Release

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FIFA and Lenovo unveil multiple AI-powered innovations ahead of FIFA World Cup 2026™



1. The Democratization of the Game

Tactical intelligence, once a privilege, is now available to all 48 teams.

For decades, deep tactical analysis required investments, large analytics departments and proprietary data that gave rich federations a structural edge. AI is being deployed to deliberately erase that gap.

- **A common brain for every squad:** Unveiled by FIFA President Gianni Infantino and Lenovo's CEO at CES 2026, Football AI Pro is a generative AI assistant built on FIFA's "Football Language Model" and handed to all 48 nations, the goal is to level the playing field, with identical, elite-level access. Infantino's stated aim: to "democratize access to data" for every competing team.
- **Intelligence at scale:** The system processes hundreds of millions of FIFA data points across more than 2,000 performance metrics to generate validated insights as text, video, graphs, and 3D visualizations, with multilingual prompts and consistent intelligence tournament-wide.
- **Guardrails by design:** The tool is used before and after matches for analysis, but not during live play, a deliberate line drawn between augmenting human coaching and replacing in-match judgment.

When the same intelligence is handed to every competitor, advantage shifts from who owns the data to who governs and applies it best, the same logic reshaping national economies.



2. The Connected Athlete

The player's body has become a dataset, scanned, tracked, and rendered as an avatar.

The most intimate frontier of the AI World Cup is the athlete themselves. Performance, recovery now run on data drawn directly from the human body.

- **The one-second scan:** All 1,248 players were digitally scanned to create highly accurate 3D avatars, each scan taking roughly one second and capturing precise body-part dimensions to track players through fast or obstructed movement.
- **From wearables to load management:** GPS tracking, biometric monitoring, and AI-driven analysis of movement and physical load feed real-time performance and injury-prevention decisions for team staff.
- **The biometric privacy question:** The avatar models are reportedly so accurate that they require secure distribution methods to protect players' biometric privacy.

A body rendered as data is a body that can be copied, leaked, or monetized. Biometric ownership and consent are no longer ethics-panel abstractions, they are match day infrastructure.



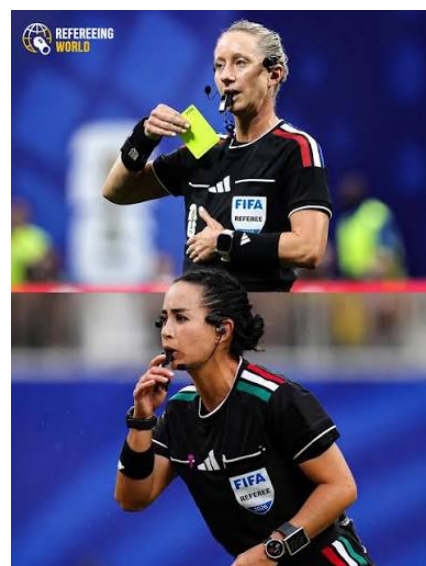
3. The Machine Referee

AI now speaks directly to the officials, raising the core question in tech world: who is actually deciding?

The 2026 tournament marks a step-change in how much the machine is trusted to act.

- **Faster, more direct calls:** Semi-automated offside technology takes a leap in 2026, instead of reaching only the VAR room, in clear cases the system can send an alert directly to on-field referees, shrinking the gap between offences and flag.
- **The sensing field:** The system combines optical tracking cameras with data from a sensor inside the match ball to locate every player and the ball many times per second.
- **Engineering transparency:** A new AI-stabilized “Referee View” smooths the referee's first-person body-camera footage in real time, cutting motion distortion by up to 50% to give audiences a clearer on-field perspective.
- **The human still holds the whistle:** FIFA stresses the system does not replace referees in complex cases involving influence on play, it is designed to speed clear decisions, not adjudicate subjective ones.

The design choice is the governance choice: the machine is granted speed on the objective, and the human retains authority on the subjective. Trust is what's being engineered.



4. The Creator Economy Kicks Off

Generative AI has turned every match into infinite content, and every fan into a feed.

Beyond the stadium, AI is reshaping how billions experience the game. The tournament is as much a content event as a sporting one, and the content is increasingly synthetic.

- **Personalized by default:** Generative systems now produce highlight reels tailored to individual fans, specific players, moments, or play styles, rather than a single shared recap.
- **Borderless localization:** Automated editing, AI translation, subtitling, dubbing, and voiceovers let content teams reach global audiences quickly and economically, a force multiplier for smaller media operations.
- **The AI Ads wars:** Major sponsors leaned heavily on generative AI for their World Cup campaigns; Lenovo's "Maximum David" campaign with David Beckham uses AI to amplify his reach and broadcast itself is now an AI showcase, with ITV's UK coverage sponsored by Google's Gemini, putting the AI battle in public view as much as behind the scenes.
- **Fans Algorithms:** The same personalization that deepens engagement can narrow it, feeds optimized to past behavior make it harder for fans to discover women's football or emerging leagues, subtly shaping perception.

When the highlight you see is generated for you alone, the line between personalization and manipulation becomes a policy question, not a product feature.



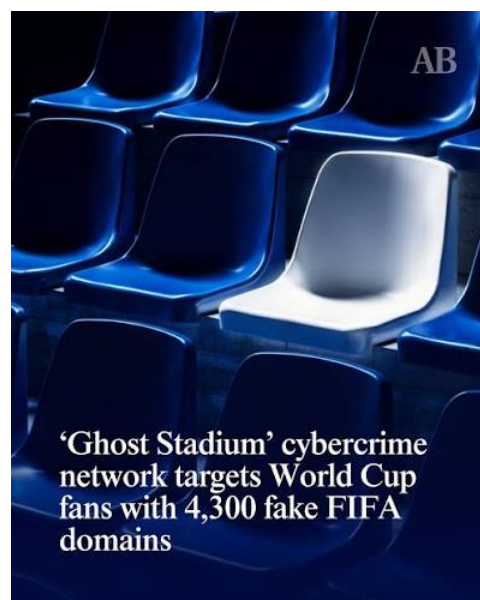
5. The Governance Whistle

The most advanced tournament in history is also its largest unregulated experiment.

Every capability above carries a corresponding risk. A clear-eyed reading of the AI World Cup has to name them, and then prescribe.

- **Dynamic pricing backlash:** AI-driven dynamic ticket pricing, adjusting cost to demand, drew criticism for risking pricing out fans already facing heavy travel and match day costs.
- **A vast attack surface:** A tournament managed almost entirely through digital layers across three countries creates a perfect target, fake sites, ticket scams, phishing, and ransomware all flagged as a multinational cybersecurity test.
- **AI as shield:** FIFA expanded an AI service that filters and hides abusive comments aimed at players within seconds across major social platforms, protection that also raises questions of automated speech moderation at scale.
- **The accountability vacuum:** Biometric data rights, synthetic-content disclosure, and liability for automated decisions remain largely ungoverned, the same legal gap that follows AI into every sector, now playing out before billions of viewers.

The whistle that matters most in 2026 will not be on the pitch. It will be the governance signal sent to every sport, league, and nation watching what they can get away with.



Policy Highlights

- 1. Mandate biometric data rights.** Treat player body-scans and avatars as personal data with explicit consent, ownership, secure distribution, and defined retention, not as broadcast assets by default.
- 2. Require synthetic-content transparency.** Label AI-generated highlights, voices, and advertising so audiences can distinguish authentic footage from synthetic media, protecting information integrity around the game.
- 3. Keep the human in the loop, by rule.** Codify the boundary between AI-accelerated objective calls and human-owned subjective judgment, so automation augments officiating without quietly replacing accountability.
- 4. Build trust as competitive infrastructure.** As with national AI strategies, the federations, broadcasters, and host nations that govern transparently will attract investment, talent, and credibility, turning ethical constraint into competitive advantage.

A Regional Lens

For MENA, this is not a distant spectacle but a familiar stage. The region has already proven it can deliver a global tournament of the highest order, world-class stadiums, seamless digital operations, and a fan experience admired worldwide, and in 2026 it watches the AI World Cup not as a newcomer, but as a seasoned host studying the next frontier. When the World Cup arrives in Saudi Arabia in 2034, it will meet a nation purpose-built for exactly this moment.

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 has spent a decade laying the foundations: a national AI strategy with global ambitions, sovereign compute and cloud capacity, smart-city flagships, and a digital-government transformation already deploying AI across healthcare, large-scale logistics, and public services. The Kingdom enters the AI era of sport not to adopt others' defaults, but to architect its own, trustworthy, sovereign, Arabic-first, and ethics-embedded by design. The body-scanning, real-time analytics, autonomous officiating, and generative broadcasting on display in 2026 are precisely the capabilities Saudi Arabia is already building at national scale.

The opportunity for the region is therefore not to catch up, but to lead, to take the standards being stress-tested in 2026 and elevate them, setting the benchmark for how the most intelligent World Cup in history should be governed and delivered. The Gulf is already exporting a posture of confident, responsible digital governance. In 2034, it can put that posture on the world's biggest stage.

GEORGE SALAMA

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Senior technology strategist and executive advisor operating at the intersection of tech industrial innovation, public policy, and sovereign digital strategy. As Executive President of SALAMA Group, Co-Founder of the AI Universal Council and Senior Advisor to the Blue Owl Group in Washington DC, George leads a portfolio of initiatives focused on responsible AI adoption, regulatory intelligence, and digital transformation across emerging markets. He is regularly engaged by governments, multilateral institutions, and global technology firms on AI governance design, digital diplomacy, and sovereign technology strategy.

Previously, George served as the Regional Director of Public Policy for X (formerly Twitter) in MENA, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran from 2016 to 2022. As a founding member of the platform's regional leadership, he navigated complex geopolitical landscapes to establish Twitter's institutional presence in the Middle East. George led high-stakes engagement with governments, regulators, and civil society, shaping frameworks for platform safety, digital rights, and crisis response. He also served as an official spokesperson and architect of the region's "Twitter for Good" social impact initiatives.

Earlier, George led public policy at the SAMENA Telecommunications Council and focused on Internet governance at Egypt's National Telecom Regulatory Authority (NTRA). His career spans regulatory bodies and global tech giants, offering deep expertise in digital diplomacy.

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