

**Pacquiao: Mayweather rematch is a real deal**

— Page 7

**Ghana needs a general, not just a coach — NSA boss**

Page 5



• *Otto Addo — Fired*



• *Caleb Yirenkyi — One of Ghana's promising stars*

• *Mohammed Kudus — Top Gun*

# Essien tips Kudus to lead World Cup Charge

**M**ichael Essien has tipped Mohammed Kudus to lead Ghana's charge at the 2026 FIFA World Cup, describing the Tottenham Hotspur midfielder as "our star" and urging the Black Stars to protect and nurture their standout talent.

Ghana's squad is likely to carry a distinct FC

Nordsjaelland flavour when the team touches down in North America later this year. Since the Accra-based Right to Dream Academy acquired the Danish club in 2015, a clear pathway has emerged for Ghanaian talent to develop in Europe. Players such

• Continued on Page 7

## Voice of Graphic SPORTS

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# 10 teams, one continent: Time for Africa to make big mark at World Cup

**AFRICA has reached a historic milestone. For the first time in the history of the FIFA World Cup, the continent will be represented by a record 10 nations at the 2026 tournament in the United States, Canada, and Mexico. The inclusion of DR Congo, returning to the World Cup for the first time since 1974 after a dramatic 1-0 extra-time victory over Jamaica in the intercontinental play-offs, completes the continent's line-up, joining Senegal, Morocco, Egypt, Ghana, Algeria, Tunisia, Cote d'Ivoire, Cape Verde, and South Africa.**

**This unprecedented quota is more than a statistical milestone. It reflects the rapid**

**growth and rising competitiveness of African football on the global stage. African teams are no longer merely participants; they are genuine contenders. Morocco's historic run to the semi-finals in 2022, following quarter-final appearances by Cameroon (1990), Senegal (2002), and Ghana (2010), showcased a continent capable of challenging traditional football powers. The expansion to 48 teams under FIFA's new format acknowledges the depth of talent across Africa. More nations now have the opportunity to showcase their skills, while established sides such as Ghana, Senegal, Morocco, and Cote d'Ivoire carry the responsibility of demonstrating that Africa's presence is not just numerical but impactful. Meanwhile, debutants like Cape Verde and DR Congo will aim to make their mark, seizing the chance to compete and announce themselves on football's grandest stage. Beyond the pitch, the record representation signals a broader evolution of the African game. Investment in football development — from grassroots programmes to advanced coaching, structured leagues, and talent pathways — has strengthened national teams and produced players now among the most sought-after in the world's top leagues. This is a generation of African footballers with technical skill, tactical understanding,**

**and mental resilience. The 2026 World Cup is a stage for Africa to convert these long-term gains into tangible results.**

**CAF President Dr Patrice Motsepe underscored the significance of this moment, saying this is a recognition of the substantial growth and global competitiveness of African football. He expressed the confidence that Africa's representatives will make the continent proud and that an African nation can become a World Champion.**

**His statement is both a celebration and a challenge that African teams must rise to. With 10 representatives, Africa can no longer afford mere participation. Teams must harness their abundant talent, world-class preparation, and improved technical structures to leave a lasting mark. For the continent's heavyweights, it is an opportunity to reaffirm dominance. For Morocco, it is a chance to build on their 2022 breakthrough. For newcomers, it is a platform to signal arrival.**

**The stakes have never been higher, nor the possibilities greater. The 2026 World Cup offers Africa the chance not only to expand its footprint but to reshape global perceptions of African football. With preparation, discipline, and ambition, this is Africa's moment — 10 teams, one continent, and limitless potential to make history.**

# Igor Thiago's remarkable journey to maiden Brazil call-up

**“MY father passed away when I was 13. I started working at a street market carrying fruit. I also worked as a bricklayer. I had several jobs before becoming a professional footballer and getting the chance to play abroad.”**

Igor Thiago tells his story with the pride of someone who knows just how much he has had to overcome to get to where he is today. The 24-year-old Brentford forward, who was called up to the Brazilian national team for the first time, has faced significant adversity throughout his life, using each challenge as motivation to keep moving forward — even in the toughest of moments.

“It helped shape me as a man and as a person. I learned to appreciate both the smaller and the bigger things in life. Today, I can see how privileged I am to have what I have,” he said on the club's website.

This season has been nothing short of extraordinary for Igor Thiago. With 19 goals, he is already the highest-scoring Brazilian in a single Premier League campaign. In the 2025-26 goalscoring chart, he currently trails only Manchester City's Erling Haaland. But while football now shapes his entire life, just a decade ago it remained a distant dream. The sport first became part of Igor Thiago's world thanks to his brother, Maycon.

Fifteen years his senior, Maycon helped secure his younger brother a place in the youth set-up at Gremio Occidental in Goias. From there came an opportunity with Vere

in Parana — but everything changed when he caught the eye of scouts from Cruzeiro, who brought him to Belo Horizonte.

It was there, in the state of Minas Gerais, that Igor Thiago finally turned professional, fulfilling a childhood dream and transforming his family's life — especially that of his mother, Maria Diva.

“I'm incredibly proud of my mother. No matter how difficult things were, she always made sure we had not just the basics, but good things as well. She is the strongest woman in the world,” he said. “I'm proud to have helped my family and the next generation access things previous generations never had, because they had virtually nothing.”

He made his professional debut in January 2020 at the age of 18. At a time of financial and institutional instability at Cruzeiro, Igor Thiago struggled to fully establish himself but showed enough promise to earn himself a move to Bulgarian club Ludogorets.

“It was a huge cultural shift,” said Igor Thiago. “The football is more technical and faster. I had to learn a lot — a new culture, a new language. It was difficult, but really valuable.”

He scored 21 goals in 55 outings, helping the club win the Bulgarian league title and Super Cup in 2022. His performances soon attracted interest from Club Brugge, where his goalscoring instincts continued to flourish. He netted 29 times in 53



• Igor Thiago — Brazil's new kid on the block

appearances in his only season in Belgium, which would be the last stop before his move to West London. It has been a somewhat unconventional path, but one that has enabled him to become the player he is today.

“My life has directly influenced the way I play,” he said. “I'm extremely focused on

what I want to achieve. For example, as a teenager, I used to run ten to 15 kilometres every day. Now it feels easy because I'm used to it.”

Every time Thiago scores for Brentford, the Bees fans burst into a chant inspired by Spandau Ballet's Gold. The closing line of the verse echoes around the stadium: “Always believe in Thiago!”

It is a fitting tribute, not least because belief has been key to his journey. The start of his time at Brentford, however, was anything but straightforward. His first season was disrupted by injuries, limiting him to fewer than 180 minutes of pitch time and without registering a single goal.

That difficult start could have derailed many players, but Igor Thiago draws strength from something bigger than himself.

“Football has transformed my family and everything around me,” he said. “I've grown stronger because I have two children who see me as an inspiration and a role model. That pushes me to improve. It motivates me to keep going. It's made me a better son, a better husband and a better father.”

His response has been emphatic. With 22 goals across all competitions this season, Igor Thiago has established himself as one of Europe's most dangerous forwards — and has now earned his first Seleção call-up. With less than three months to go before the FIFA World Cup 2026™, the possibility of representing Brazil on football's biggest stage is no longer a pipe dream.

“It's my biggest dream,” he told TNT Sports.

“To wear my country's shirt, to represent my country at the World Cup, it would show me that everything I've achieved and everything I've become... it's because of God.” — FIFA