



MICHAEL REAVES TNS

United States star Christian Pulisic is expected to be back in the lineup for the national team’s pivotal games in September.

ANALYSIS

Pulisic returns to USMNT; there are questions with others

BY JONATHAN TANNENWALD  
The Philadelphia Inquirer

The U.S. men’s soccer team’s upcoming games in September have long been seen as a major milestone on the road to the World Cup.

How many big names who flopped at the Nations League final four in March would be cast off, and how many less-talented but harder-working players would overtake them on the depth chart?

This moment was supposed to be for answering that question. But when the roster was unveiled Tuesday, it turned out coach Mauricio Pochettino viewed it differently.

“(It) is a camp that I think is going to be the last camp to have the possibility for us to see new faces,” he said after announcing 22 of the 23 players to take part. The last one, U.S. Soccer said, wasn’t set yet because of “a late adjustment,” and Pochettino added it will be announced in the next few days.

Camp starts Monday in northern New Jersey ahead of a Sept. 6 friendly with South Korea in Harrison, N.J. The second game in the window will be a stern test against Japan in Columbus, Ohio, on Sept. 9.

Those words from Pochettino above set the overall tone. But the statuses of a lot of specific players raised questions that next month now won’t answer.

Let’s start with the easy part. Attacking stars Christian Pulisic, Josh Sargent, and Tim Weah are back, with Pochetino officially calling Pulisic’s taking the summer off “behind us.” Ricardo Pepi and Folarin Balogun, meanwhile, were allowed to stay with their clubs in Europe since they’ve recently returned from injuries.

Sargent hasn’t scored for the national team in six years, but he has four goals in four games to start the season for Norwich City of England’s second division. That form is impossible to ignore.

BIG QUESTIONS START IN MIDFIELD

It’s not too surprising that midfielders Brenden

and Paxten Aaronson didn’t get invited, even though the elder Aaronson has been a substitute in Leeds United’s first two games of the English Premier League season. But it is surprising that winger Alejandro Zendejas finally got his first call-up since last fall after a long run of good play for Mexico’s Club América.

Similarly, it’s not surprising that there’s no Gio Reyna, who just finally moved across Germany to Borussia Mönchengladbach after stalling for too long at Borussia Dortmund. But there’s also no Weston McKennie or Johnny Cardoso, even though the latter is off to a strong start at his new club, Spanish power Atlético Madrid.

Pochettino was particularly grilled on this unit, and he wasn’t surprised.

On McKennie, Pochettino cited his playing in the Club World Cup with Italy’s Juventus, and not getting a lot of rest before the next preseason started.

“I think we really know Weston - it’s not necessary to call him to now,” he said. “We wanted to give the possibility to be more settled in his club, and have the possibility to be in his best form.”

On Cardoso, Pochettino said “it gives time to him to adapt in a new environment.”

And on Reyna, Pochettino expressed hope that the 22-year-old’s move will reinvigorate his play.

“What we want is to see him happy,” the manager said. “If he’s happy, for sure he has the talent to perform. If he performs, I think it’s going to be good for the national team, and I think that is what we expect.”

UNSETTLED DEFENSE

Perhaps the most startling part of the roster is the goalkeepers. Just one of the presumed incumbents, Wayne native Matt Freese of New York City FC, got a call-up. The others invited are Roman Celentano of FC Cincinnati, one of MLS’s elite teams this year, and Jonathan Klinsmann of Italian second-division club Cesena.

Matt Turner, who moved from Europe back to MLS’s New England Revolution

to get the playing time he needs to regain Pochettino’s attention, didn’t make the cut. Nor did past regulars Patrick Schulte of Columbus and Downingtown’s Zack Steffen of Colorado.

“We want to see others players that we think deserve to be [here] and have the possibility to show themselves,” Pochettino said. “And then of course for Matt, it’s about to work, or for Schulte to perform, and of course for Zack. ... I think we work hard to be fair with everyone, and then to give them the possibility to show us, and to perform, and to see if they have the possibility to fight for a place.”

As for the back line, Pochettino dropped Europe-based centerbacks Cameron Carter-Vickers of Scotland’s Celtic, and Mark McKenzie of France’s Toulouse. Neither has played especially well with the national team in recent times, and Celtic crashed out of UEFA Champions League qualifying a few hours after Pochettino spoke.

But McKenzie has helped Toulouse earn back-to-back shutouts to start the Ligue 1 season. That was one of many reasons to ask Pochettino for his message to players who didn’t make this squad.

“What they need to do, the players that are not in the roster, is to perform, is to keep pushing,” he said. “It’s not because we are happy or not happy, or they do something wrong or not. I think sometimes it’s about our tests, about the combinations in the squad - and in that case, I think for us it’s the last opportunity to bring some new faces that we didn’t have the possibility to bring in the past.”

There are two new faces among the centerbacks, 18-year-old prospect Noahkai Banks of Germany’s Augsburg, and Vancouver’s Tristan Blackmon. They join incumbents Chris Richards of England’s Crystal Palace and 37-year-old Tim Ream of Charlotte FC, who are the presumed starters.

The outside backs are headlined by Sergiño Dest, who returns to the national team for the first time since suffering an ACL tear in April of last year. The rest are from MLS: the Union’s Nathan Harriel, Columbus’ Max Arfsten and Orlando’s highly-regarded 21-year-old Alex Freeman.

Whatever happens in these games, Pochettino made it clear he doesn’t want any of his players to feel complacent.

“If we want to be a team [that is] really competitive, we cannot nominate, OK, 13, 14, 16 players - these guys for sure they’re going to arrive to the World Cup,” he said. “That is not the real sport that for me I call futbol, but, now I start to call soccer because I work for the USA. ... Players need to feel the threat from your teammates, and they need to defend their place in every single possibility that you show in the national team, but also when you perform in your [club] team.”

USMNT ROSTER FOR SEPTEMBER GAMES

- Goalkeepers (3): Roman Celentano (FC Cincinnati), Matt Freese (New

York City FC), Jonathan Klinsmann (Cesena, Italy)  
- Defenders (8): Max Arfsten (Columbus Crew), Noahkai Banks (Augsburg, Germany), Tristan Blackmon (Vancouver Whitecaps), Sergiño Dest (PSV Eindhoven, Netherlands), Alex Freeman (Orlando City), Nathan Harriel (Union), Tim Ream (Charlotte FC), Chris Richards (Crystal Palace, England)  
- Midfielders (6): Tyler Adams (Bournemouth, England), Sebastian Berhalter (Vancouver Whitecaps), Luca de la Torre (San Diego FC), Diego Luna (Real Salt Lake), Jack McGlynn (Houston Dyna-

mo), Sean Zawadzki (Columbus Crew)  
- Forwards (5): Damion Downs (Southampton, England), Christian Pulisic (AC Milan, Italy), Josh Sargent (Norwich City, England), Tim Weah (Marseille, France), Alex Zendejas (Club América, Mexico)

USMNT SCHEDULE

- Sept. 6: vs. South Korea in Harrison, N.J., 5 p.m. (TNT, Telemundo, Universo, Max, Peacock)  
- Sept. 9: vs. Japan in Columbus, Ohio, 7:30 p.m. (TNT, Telemundo, Universo, Max, Peacock)  
- Oct. 10: vs. Ecuador in Austin, Texas, 8:30 p.m.

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- Oct. 14: vs. Australia in Commerce City, Colo. (TNT, Universo, HBO Max, Peacock)

After that, the U.S. will have four games left before the World Cup team is picked, two in November and two next March.

One of the November games will reportedly be against Uruguay in Tampa, Fla., on the 18th. The first game of that window is set for the 15th, with the opponent and venue still to be determined.

The March games will be set some time down the road.

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Reports: Rangers SS Seager set for appendectomy

Field Level Media

Texas Rangers shortstop Corey Seager was scheduled to undergo an appendectomy, multiple outlets reported Thursday, and is expected to miss multiple weeks, putting the remainder of his regular season in jeopardy.

Seager, 31, hit a home run among his two hits against the Los Angeles

Angels on Wednesday night and has home runs in each of the past two games. The five-time All-Star reportedly had been dealing with abdominal discomfort for multiple days.

The Rangers entered Thursday’s play in third place in the American League West, 6 1/2 games behind the first-place Houston Astros. They were also 4 1/2 games out

of the final wild-card spot in the AL.

Seager is batting .271 with 21 home runs and 50 RBIs in 102 games this season after dealing with calf soreness in spring training and going on the injured list twice with a hamstring strain during the regular season. His 2024 season ended in early September because of a sports hernia.

In 11 seasons with the Los Angeles Dodgers (2015-21) and Rangers, Seager is a career .289 hitter with 221 home runs and 667 RBIs in 1,131 career games.