

Men's Softball World Championship preview: Group A going to be a battle

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The image shows a graphic for the Group A Opening Round on June 14th, Day 2. On the left is the WBSC Men's Softball World Championship logo, featuring a baseball and crossed bats, with the text 'Men's Softball World Championship' and 'CZECH REPUBLIC JUNE 13, 2019 - JUNE 23, 2019'. The main schedule is as follows:

VISITOR		HOME	
13:30	PHILIPPINES No. 17	VS	No. 24 CUBA
16:30	ARGENTINA No. 5	VS	No. 13 BOTSWANA
19:30	MEXICO No. 9	VS	No. 3 JAPAN

Each match is listed with the venue 'Havlickuv Brod'. At the bottom, there are social media handles: @wbsc, #WBSCMensSoftball, and wbsc.org.

With eight teams expecting to make the playoffs again in the tournament, worldwide softball fans can expect intense competition in Group A of the XVI WBSC Men's Softball World Championship, starting on Thursday in Prague. World No. 1 New Zealand, Japan (3), Argentina (5), host Czech Republic (7), Mexico (9), Botswana (13), Philippines (17) and Cuba (24) have all playoff experience, and will arrive to Europe aiming to finish as one of the top four teams of the group and advance to the decisive stage of the tournament.

The group will open Thursday, with host Czech Republic facing the defending world champions New Zealand, in the only game of the day. The start of the contest is scheduled at 19:30, at Svoboda Park in Prague.

The other six teams will make their debut on Friday at Hippos Arena, in Havlickuv Brod. The Philippines will play Cuba, Argentina opens against Botswana, and Mexico will face Japan, in the last game of the day.

New Zealand is the most successful Men's National Team in history. Two years ago, in Whitehorse, the Black Sox clinched their seventh world championship with a come-from-behind victory over arch-rivals, Australia. Captain Nathan Nukunuku (playing his seventh world championship) will lead a roster with three natural pitchers (Nik Hayes, Daniel Chapman and Josh Pettett) and three newcomers (Reilly Makea, Daniel Chapman and Jackson Watt). New Zealand has played the last ten World Championship Finals, winning six of them, and have never finished below fifth place overall in this event. They'll try to keep the streak alive, playing

(and winning) the last game of the tournament on 23 June.

Japan will be one of the main contenders in Group A. Built on the success of the Junior Men's programme, the Japanese team comes to Czech Republic with high expectations, after winning in February the Challenge Cup in New Zealand, defeating the world champions by 3-1 in the final match. Reo Koyama will be the ace of the staff while two-way player Hikaru Matsuda will lead the offensive of the Asian Champions. The Japanese squad is trying to bring home their first-ever flagship world championship. Back in 2000 Japan lost their only World Championship final in East London, South Africa, against New Zealand. They have played in all the 15 previous World Championship.

The third top-ranked nation in Group A is Argentina (5). After back to back titles in the Junior World Championships 2012 and 2014, the South American nation will try to reach the podium for the first time ever in the senior event. Known for their always strong pitching staff, this time they will have the veteran right-hander Juan Potolicchio as their most experienced arm, while two-time junior world champions Huemul Mata and Roman Godoy will try to repeat their dominant performances at the junior level. Two years ago in Whitehorse, they matched their best performance ever, with a fourth-place finish. Now their goal is to claim the first medal in history for the white and blue team, in their tenth World Championship presence.

In their ninth consecutive World Championship participation, Czech Republic will host the most important Men's Softball event in the world for the first time in history. Coming from a ninth-place performance two years ago in Whitehorse, the host nation is eager to capitalize on the home advantage to make the playoffs for the third time (2004 and 2015). Veterans Jaroslav Brenik, Michal Holobradek and Jonas Mach, along with newcomer Marek Joska, will take the circle in front of the host crowd, and try to guide their team into the top five in the final standings for the first time ever.

Mexico hosted the first ever World Championship in 1966 and made the final in home soil, to lose against the United States. And then four years later they clinched the Bronze medal in Oklahoma City. They made the playoffs in four of the first five World Championships, but then only advanced once, in 1996. Their last World Championship appearance was in 2015 in Saskatoon, finishing at tenth place. In the 13th participation in the event, Mexico will battle to be back in the big party again. The pitching staff will be full of young arms, with all four hurlers making their first appearance in a flagship softball World Championship. If they can stop the opposite offensive, then the always powerful lineup can carry the team to the playoffs again.

Two years ago Botswana stunned the world making the playoffs for the first time in history. The key game of the round robin was a 1-0 win over Czech Republic with a complete-game stellar performance by Kagiso Mogale. The right-hander will lead one more time his team, trying to repeat the 2017 historic performance. It will be their seventh participation in the World Championship. They made their debut in 1992 in Manila, the Philippines, and then have participated in six of the last eight global tournaments. The African champions aim to make back to back playoffs.

The Philippines made their debut in the World Championship in 1968 and made the playoffs to finish fourth. After that, they never came back to the decisive stage of the tournament in their next eight participations. They only won one game in 2013 and 2015 combined and missed the last World Championship in 2017. They'll try to upset their rivals in this strong Group A, to advance again more than 50 years later.

The lowest ranked team in Group A is Cuba (24). However, they will be a dangerous squad to face. Last year they beat Venezuela to win the gold medal at the Central American and Caribbean Games Barranquilla 2018, and they also eliminated Canada from the Pan American Games in 2017. So in their second participation ever in the World Championship, Cuba will be in the mix for one of the top four spots in the group standings. The only Cuban participation was back in 1988 when they made the playoffs and finished fourth place. They rely on the experienced right-hander Alain Roman, a strong defence behind their pitchers and a dangerous lineup to make the playoffs again, 31 years later.
