

## Meet the 'Egyptian King' of football, set to lead his team to glory in the Africa Cup of Nations

→ Liverpool forward Mohamed Salah is hoping to secure a win for Egypt on home soil in the continent's greatest football tournament, the Africa Cup of Nations, held in and around Cairo this month. The man dubbed the 'Egyptian Messi' is no stranger to pressure. Scoring a stunning 44 goals in his debut season at Anfield, he won Confederation of African Football and BBC African Footballer of the Year...

**How do you feel about representing Egypt in an Africa Cup of Nations at home?**  
It's very special. Egyptian football has had some lows. I hope the tournament unites the fans. I am proud to carry the weight of expectation and show our culture to the rest of the world. We have something to prove after the World Cup in Russia [Egypt lost all their games]. I injured my shoulder for Liverpool in the Champions League final and wasn't at my best. **What are Egypt's chances?**  
The goal is to win. Anything else would be failure. We reached the final in 2017 [losing to Cameroon] and we are expected to do the same again. I watched us win

the tournament in Egypt in 2006 and I pray we can lift the trophy. **How do you handle being such an icon in Egypt?**

I love inspiring others, but I'm quite shy. I feel pressure on the pitch, but that's where I'm most comfortable. The Egyptian people are really passionate and place a lot of hope in me. Seeing fans with my name on their shirt was amazing and it's so cool to see kids with my hair! I am happy to show Egyptians their dreams are possible.

**How does it feel to have a new museum about you opening in Cairo later this year?**

It's weird to think that people will come to Egypt to see not only the pyramids but my football boots. It's not only a museum about me. There will also be a sports centre. It's an idea from the Egyptian government to promote [grass roots] football, not just a tourist sight about me.

**What was it like playing football in Egypt as a child?**  
It wasn't easy. I grew up in Nagrig

[northwest of Cairo] in a community of less than 15,000 people. I played for Arab Contractors, but it took nine hours to get to training each day. I was rejected by [Egyptian club] Zamalek SC and could have given up football. But I realised succeeding at football would help me change the world.

**Where do you hang out in Egypt?**  
I still go back to Nagrig. I have a charity there and we have built a school, market and medical centre. When I return home, I see pictures of me on the walls of cafés or billboards and it's so special. I am humbled by it.

**Where should tourists go while at the Africa Cup of Nations?**

The pyramids, of course! There is a place in Nagrig called the Magic Café and a Chelsea sports bar. I hear they are trying to rename it after me or Liverpool. I also recommend trying local dish *koshari* [with rice, pasta, lentils, fried onions, spicy tomato and chickpeas]. I love it and it's the first thing I eat when I come home.

### Just the facts

#### Mohamed Salah

Age 28 Occupation Footballer who plays for Liverpool FC and Egypt Lives Cairo/Liverpool Fun fact When Salah married his girlfriend Magi in 2013 he invited his entire village to the ceremony.

WORDS BEN JACOBS PHOTO SHAHIL TANNA/FOURFURTWO/CONTOUR BY GETTY IMAGES

