FIFA World Cup Tickets: New Zealand's Grit on Display Ahead of FIFA 2026

The New Zealand team, Auckland Urban, started the Club World Cup as the competition's little guy, losing 10 matches counter to the German winners, Bayern Munich. Though by the end of the group stage, the semi-professional outfit received deference by holding Boca Juniors to a draw. They did so with their twenty-year-old custodian, Nathan Garrow, who is a full-time student back home in New Zealand.

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And their goalmouth scorer, Christian Gray, an apprentice teacher who said his coursework supports his day job. It was a fanciful result and testimony to Auckland City's resilience, Andrew Pragnell, the paramount manager of New Zealand's football alliance, tells the media. We are extremely proud. We've got students, teachers, all sorts of people doing jobs back here in New Zealand.

Playing against a South American capital. It's what we love about football. It can be a great leveller. It has been described as a huge importance across New Zealand. Everyone was across the Bayern result. It would have been easy for your morale to be dashed, but it had the opposite effect on this team. They turned around and got tougher. This is a Kiwi trait. When times are tough, we dig deep.

FIFA World Cup Tickets: New Zealand Keeper Shines Bright Amid Global Giants

Bayern is a multi-billion-dollar cudgel, and we know the cost of those players, so some people would say this win was the expected result, but no one would have predicted the draw for an 'amateur. The team can hold their heads high, in lieu of the country. I'd hope that the keeper is on the scouting list for a few player agents who examined him in the last couple of games. He is a young lad and shows ample potential.

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While the Auckland City story twisted heads, they do not suggest a complete picture of the progress being made within football in New Zealand, or the broader ambitions for the nation over the coming decades. New Zealand will return to the World Cup for the first time in sixteen years after overcoming early nerves to beat New Caledonia and book a place in Canada, Mexico, and the USA.

The Kiwis were made to work in their Oceania playoff, held goalless in the first half and losing captain Chris Wood to a hip injury early in the second. But for an hour at Auckland's Eden Park, it was agony for the Kiwis. Led by Nottingham Forest striker Wood and with a generationally-talented squad, New Zealand thumped Fiji in their semi-final on Friday and are expected to be far too strong for New Caledonia.

FIFA World Cup Tickets: New Zealand Battles Past New Caledonia to Keep FIFA Hopes Alive

But early on, the All Whites played without intensity or fluency, unable to create strong chances. New Caledonia goalkeeper Rocky Nyikein was also in goal the last time Les Cagous beat New Zealand. In the early was in fine form, denying the Kiwis at set pieces and in general play. He kept out early efforts from Callum McCowatt. Despite his Premier League pedigree, Wood never looked on song, even missing a volleyed effort backwards.

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The All Whites looked flabbergasted at half-time as they walked off the pitch at 0-0, while New Caledonia's XI gathered in a circle, not quite celebrating, but their belief was building. Johan Sidaner's band of amateurs and semi-professionals, almost entirely made up of either locally-based players or those from the lower tiers of French football, had never been one match from the World Cup before.

Sydney FC's Jaushua Sotirio, an unused substitute in both their matches, was the sole pro, accepting a call-up to the nation of his parents' birth, given the carrot of World Cup qualification. Adding to their disadvantage, the New Caledonia Super League has been paused since last year owing to major civil unrest, which claimed more than a dozen lives and devastated the capital, Noumea.

FIFA World Cup Tickets: New Zealand's Old Guard Paves the Way to FIFA 2026

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Their stirring shift in Auckland had its first setback in the 61st minute, when substitute Frances de sent a cross to the back post for Boxall to head home. New Zealand's oldest player was joined on the scoresheet by the second-oldest, Barbarouses, five minutes later, effectively sealing the contest. The 35-year-old raced onto a through-ball and chipped over Nyikeine.

Then turned provider for Just to thrash home a third. New Zealand ran out of the match without their captain and vice-captain, with Wood off and Liberato Cacace needing a late substitution, though both were fit enough to revel after the final whistle. Wood and Tommy Smith are the only current Kiwis to have played at a World Cup.



While New Caledonia missed the direct qualification slot, they could still be the smallest and lowest-ranked nation to head to a World Cup. They will be Oceania's entrant in an interconfederation playoff next year, when they will reprise their underdog role as six nations compete for two places. New Caledonia provided stern resistance for an hour before Michael Boxall broke through.

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