

The 2023 Africa Cup of Nations reaches its climax on Sunday 11 February as Nigeria and Ivory Coast lock horns in a highly anticipated final at the Alassane Ouattara Stadium in Abidjan.

Both teams carry contrasting narratives and a wealth of talent, promising a thrilling encounter steeped in history and passionate rivalry.

Nigeria, the reigning champions, have been on a dominant run, showcasing attacking prowess and defensive solidity.

They topped their group, overcoming a resilient Egypt and Guinea-Bissau, before edging past Tunisia and South Africa in the knockout stages.

However, their path to the final wasn't without challenges. A goalless draw against South Africa in the semis required penalty heroics from Kelechi Iheanacho, highlighting their potential vulnerability under pressure.

Ivory Coast, seeking their first title since 2015, have defied expectations after a disastrous start. Sacking their manager after a 4-0 drubbing by Equatorial Guinea, they clawed their way back through the "best third-placed" route.

Stunning victories over Senegal and Mali showcased their resilience and adaptability, while Sebastien Haller's goalscoring form has provided a potent attacking threat. However, the weight of expectation on home soil could be a double-edged sword.

This final promises a tactical battle between contrasting styles. Nigeria's Augustine Eguavoen is expected to stick to his preferred 4-3-3, relying on pace and counter-attacks.

Patrice Beaumelle of Ivory Coast is likely to favor a fluid 4-2-3-1, utilizing Haller's presence and the creativity of Nicolas Pepe and Wilfried Zaha.

This final transcends mere sporting significance. Nigeria aims to become the first nation to win three consecutive AFCON titles since Egypt in 2006, 2008, and 2010. Meanwhile, Ivory Coast seeks to erase the disappointment of 2019, when they lost the final to Algeria, and bring long-awaited joy to their passionate home fans.

This is a close call. On paper, Nigeria's experience and defensive solidity might give them a slight edge. However, Ivory Coast's home advantage and attacking potential

cannot be ignored. Expect a tightly contested match that could go down to the wire.

Millions across Africa will be glued to their screens, waiting to witness who will be crowned continental champions. Will Nigeria soar to a historic fourth title, or will the Elephants finally end their home tournament jinx and lift the trophy on home soil? The stage is set for an unforgettable finale.