

Two Americans, one Russian blast off for ISS

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Roscosmos cosmonaut Oleg Artemyev takes a last-minute snap, alongside NASA astronaut Richard Arnold, before they headed into space

Two astronauts, a cosmonaut and a ball set to be used in the forthcoming football World Cup in Russia blasted off Wednesday for a

two-day flight to the International Space Station.

NASA's Drew Feustel and Richard Arnold lifted off from the Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan for a five-month mission in a Soyuz MS-08 under the command of Russian colleague Oleg Artemyev at the expected time of 1744 GMT.

Roscosmos confirmed the craft had "launched successfully" in a Wednesday statement, with all stages of the launch "proceeding regularly".

All three crew members have been in space before although NASA duo Feustel, 52, and Arnold, 54, have never served on a long-duration spaceflight and have just 40 days in orbit between them.

Artemyev, who is commanding a Soyuz craft for the first time, spent 169 days at the International Space Station during his previous mission in 2014.

In the build up to the launch, Russian media coverage homed in on Artemyev taking to the orbital laboratory a football that is expected to kick off the 2018 World Cup the country is hosting this summer.

"We are taking a ball with us," Artemyev told a pre-flight news conference on Tuesday.

"Possibly the one that will be used in the first game," said the 47-year-old, who attended school in the steppe town right next to the cosmodrome in central Kazakhstan.

His colleague from the Russian space agency Anton Shkaplerov is expected to take the ball back down to earth less than two weeks before the national team take on Saudi Arabia in the tournament opener on June

14.

Feustel, a dual US and Canadian citizen admitted to having "a mild fear of heights" in a recent NASA promotional video, but says it does not affect him around 400 kilometres above the Earth's surface aboard ISS.

"Launch Day! Thank you EVERYBODY for your good wishes and encouragement! We are ready to go!" he wrote in an excited tweet ahead of his third journey into space and his first long-duration mission.

Former science teacher and high school basketball coach Richard Arnold, 54, is less experienced than Feustel, having logged just 12 days in space during a delivery mission to the orbital lab in 2009.

He said he would make use of the guitars already aboard the space station but focus on "(music) that is very simple" at the pre-launch press conference.

The three men will join Expedition 55 commander Shkaplerov NASA's Scott Tingle and Norishige Kanai of the Japanese space agency at the orbital lab on Friday.

Shkaplerov, who is the only Russian currently aboard the International Space Station, cast a ballot by proxy in the presidential election that President Vladimir Putin won by a landslide on Sunday.

The ISS laboratory, a rare example of American and Russian cooperation, has been orbiting Earth at about 28,000 kilometres per hour since 1998.

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