

ENGLAND - SWEDEN

MATCH PREVIEW

Gamla Ullevi, Gothenburg

Friday 26 June 2009 - 18.00CET (18.00 local time)

Matchday 4 - Semi-finals



Sweden's joint-coach Jörgen Lennartsson says the UEFA European Under-21 Championship hosts will not make a meal of England in the first semi-final of the 2009 competition in Gothenburg, explaining: "We're looking at this tournament as three courses".

Three-course meal

Emphatic wins against Belarus and Serbia, either side of a defeat by Italy, took Lennartsson and Tommy Söderberg's squad into the last four as Group A runners-up, and the coach was in expansive mood ahead of the meeting with England at the Gamla Ullevi. "We've had our appetiser and we are just about to finish our main course. Hopefully we will be able to enjoy the dessert too, along with a cappuccino and a brandy." Lennartsson swiftly became more serious, explaining: "Mentally we feel good. We'll work hard to reach the final but it will be a tough game against a very strong England team."

'Full of confidence'

Sweden are bidding to become the second successive nation to win the U21 title on home soil following the Netherlands' triumph two years ago, but their task has been made significantly harder by suspensions to midfielders Pontus Wernbloom and Emir Bajrami. "England have a really good team; most play Premier League football and that's the best league in the world," said Lennartsson, whose own side have conceded from dead-ball situations in their last two games. "Our players are full of confidence and we have more to give than we have shown so far. We've talked about set-pieces and we know we must do better. We talk a lot about being humble and keeping our feet on the ground. We know why we've been successful so far and what we need to do to keep being successful."

'Semi-final barrier'

Stuart Pearce's England side lost at this stage to the Netherlands two years ago, and the manager believes his squad – which includes four of that 2007 party, while five other players have been on losing sides in semi-finals at U17 or U19 level – have "learned a lesson" from that experience. "In my time in international football as player and coach we need to break through a semi-final barrier and go on and win something," Pearce added. "We have to use it as a spur and put down foundations for the seniors. I honestly believe we're getting better and better and they just have to reproduce their talent on the pitch."

'Bigger fish to fry'

With Gabriel Agbonlahor fit after calf and shin injuries Pearce – a devoted Stranglers fan who is missing out on the chance to see the band at Sweden's Peace & Love Festival on Friday as "we have bigger fish to fry" – has a full squad at his disposal, in sharp contrast to two years ago. "The importance of having 23 players fit and available is absolutely vital. The last two finalists, the Netherlands and Serbia, both rested players. The only thing any manager can ask going into a semi-final is to have everyone fighting to get into the team. Sweden have improved game by game and their ability to create chances is impressive. They're the top scorers and have the top scorer in competition. We're very respectful of their threat. We have to make sure we're good enough to counter it."



Onuoha ready to make the grade

His team may only have finished second in a quiz at England's hotel in Varberg on Wednesday but defender Nedum Onuoha has been swotting up for a different kind of test – Friday's UEFA European Under-21 Championship semi-final against Sweden.

'Good position'

Born in Nigeria but raised in Manchester, Onuoha went to grammar school in the city and emerged with three grade As at A-Level. His strengths are not only academic, however, as Marcus Berg and Ola Toivonen – the tournament's most prolific attacking partnership – will discover should the Manchester City FC centre-back reclaim his place at Gothenburg's Gamla Ullevi Stadium. "We've played three games and played well in all of them," Onuoha said. "It's a good position to be in going into the match and hopefully we can finish it off and get to the final."

Calm authority

The 22-year-old speaks with the calm authority that typifies his play and refused to be tripped up by a Swedish journalist questioning whether he knew anything about the hosts. "I know the strikers play for Groningen and PSV Eindhoven," he said of Berg and Toivonen. "I picked up their programme before the tournament so was having a good look at their team. They've made some teams look average, even the game they lost against Italy they could have won. They'll also have the support, so we all need to bring our A game to the match."

'Outstanding'

Onuoha was injured late in England's semi-final against the Netherlands at the 2007 finals, leaving his side a man down for extra time and a penalty shoot-out they lost 13-12. "I remember how close we were to getting to the final," he said. "They scored in the last minute and it was a massive blow. We played extra time with ten men as I had to go off. The team was outstanding, and very unlucky, but 2007 is a totally separate event. If you start thinking about the past then you'll never really make the most of the future."

'Hard work'

The defender was ever-present in the Netherlands but here in Sweden has appeared only in the 2-0 defeat of Spain as England topped Group B. Having missed the opening win against Finland because of a thigh strain, Onuoha was not selected for the draw with Germany as manager Stuart Pearce rested key men with qualification assured. "We've done a lot of hard work in training and the days are flying by," he said, quashing suggestions that he might be undercooked. "We've had time to think about the game and hopefully we'll go out all guns blazing."

'Better shape'

England have not won this competition since claiming a second U21 crown in 1984, and Onuoha is confident the current squad are better equipped to end that barren run than their peers were in 2007. "There's been continuous improvement since then," he added. "Everyone saw where we got to last time and knew where we had to improve. This time the preparation has been better, the way the team is organised is better, and generally we're in much better shape."

Elm aiming to cut down England

Rasmus Elm is relishing the opportunity to take on England in the UEFA European Under-21 Championship semi-finals, emphasising the "special" nature of the relationship Sweden has with English football.

'Special for Swedes'

The midfielder has been one of Sweden's key performers to date, setting up three of their nine goals including the third in the victory against Serbia that clinched second place in Group A. That result was greeted with jubilation across Sweden – not just because it assured progress, but also because it set up a meeting with Stuart Pearce's side in Gothenburg, as Elm explained. "It's special for Swedes to meet England," the 21-year-old told uefa.com. "Many of the players have been raised with English football; we like the English atmosphere. I watched a lot of it when I was a child, we always followed it on TV in my family. When I was growing up I was a fan of Leeds because of Tomas Brodin. It was a bit of an inspiration for me. I'm not the same kind of player but I always liked him so he was an influence on me."

'Great spirits'

Elm certainly comes from good footballing stock, playing alongside his elder brothers David and Viktor as Kalmar FF claimed the Swedish title for the first time in 2008. He made his senior international debut against the United States in January and scored his first goal in a 2-0 victory over Austria the following month but, although he now has six full caps to his name, he rates the game at the Gamla Ullevi as "one of my biggest". "There's a good harmony in the team, we're in great spirits and we're looking forward to meeting England," he added. "The tournament has been very good for us but we're not satisfied – we're looking forward to the semi-finals."

'Pressure'

To get to what would be their first U21 final since 1992 – and only second overall – Sweden must overcome an England side who made serene progress through the group phase, securing their place in the last four with a match to spare. "They're a great team and we'll have to play our best to have a chance but we're well prepared and we're going to give them a good game," said Elm, who believes Sweden – the finals' top scorers – must stick to their guns. "We have to keep going and do what we do best, which is pressure. We have to win the ball high up the field and keep scoring goals. We'll keep doing that and try to relax because that's when we play our best football."

'Great atmosphere'

Elm – who could move inside from his usual role on the right of midfield to replace the suspended Pontus Wernbloom in the centre – repeatedly used the word "fun" to describe the prospect of playing in the semi-final, and a key element in that will be the Swedish public. All three of the hosts' games have drawn crowds well in excess of 10,000 – 19,820 watched the defeat of Serbia – and Elm believes the yellow wave of supporters has been a key factor in Sweden's success. "We've been to Gothenburg before, it's a nice city, a nice ground and a great atmosphere," he said. "It's fun to come here. I hope the crowd will cheer and make plenty of noise. They were fantastic against Serbia and I hope they do the same again. It's great to see, so put on your yellow T-shirt and come and watch us."