

SWEDEN - BELARUS

MATCH PREVIEW

Malmö New Stadium, Malmö

Tuesday 16 June 2009 - 18.15CET (18.15 local time)

Group A - Matchday 2



Sweden joint-coach Jörgen Lennartsson believes "the fans can help us to victory" as the hosts prepare to kick off their UEFA European Under-21 Championship campaign against Belarus in Group A at the Malmö New Stadium on Tuesday.

'Great'

It is nearly three years since Sweden were selected to stage the competition and also since the U21s last played a competitive match. Finally, though, the wait is over and Lennartsson, after watching the Netherlands sweep to victory on a wave of orange support on home soil in 2007, is relishing the prospect of giving local fans something to savour again. "It's going to be great – we've been looking forward to this for a long time," he said. "We're ready for it. We will have 20,000 fans behind us and we want to give them attractive football. Playing at home doesn't put us under extra pressure. The fans can help us to victory."

Rising expectations

Sweden reached the last four in their most recent finals appearance in 2004 and expectations have been quietly rising that Lennartsson and Tommy Söderberg's side can match that achievement here. They are hitting form at the right time, having drawn against Italy and Spain in the spring as well as beating Poland and Estonia earlier this month. The return of senior internationals Marcus Berg and Rasmus Elm to the U21 ranks means further cause for optimism, though Lennartsson is quick to underline the size of the task.

'Quality'

"Most of the players will have to raise their game a notch or two," he said, "because this championship is on a higher level than what they are used to." Starting with Belarus, who have impressed Lennartsson even if cast as underdogs in a section also including Serbia and Italy. "Belarussian football has developed enormously," he said. "Look at this team, look at BATE Borisov in the Champions League, they play modern football – fast, technical and with good quality passing."

Kurnenin suspended

Belarus coach Yuri Kurnenin will hope his side display precisely those qualities on Tuesday, though he himself will watch from the stands after being sent off in the second leg of the play-off victory against Turkey in October. In their only previous final tournament outing in 2004, Belarus surprisingly defeated eventual champions Italy in their opening game and are prepared to spoil Sweden's party here.

Key game

"We've studied them in depth," Kurnenin said. "We know their best players, we know how they attack, how they defend and what they do at set-pieces. We will definitely not be caught by surprise." A capacity, partisan crowd is anticipated at the Malmö New Stadium, where Kurnenin insists Belarus will rise to the occasion. "Obviously the players will be nervous and the key thing will be to stay calm and show our quality and potential. We have to get something as the losing team loses all hope of qualifying. That's why our match against Sweden is the most important."

Both coaches reported fully-fit squads, although Lennartsson conceded that he and Söderberg face selection dilemmas, notably in central midfield where Labinot Harbuzi's fine showings and sensational last-minute winner against Poland on 5 June have forced him into the reckoning.



Afanasiev intent on spoiling Sweden's party

Belarus Under-21 captain Mikhail Afanasiev insists his side must play to win against the hosts in Tuesday's Group A opener – because "a bad result against Sweden would leave us with little chance to fight on".

'Real leader'

Shrugging off suggestions that Belarus kick off as underdogs in the section, the FC Amkar Perm right-winger believes "our commitment and unity can help us against any opponent". Sweden will do well to heed those words. Having got this far, Belarus are intent on making their mark, with Afanasiev likely to prove their chief threat. Described by coach Yuri Kurnenin as "a real leader, a strong person who is able to unite his team", the No11 will be making a national record 39th appearance at this level in Malmö and is relishing the opportunity to show off his talents on the European stage.

'Great chance'

"For me personally, this tournament is a great chance to shine in front of a large number of scouts from leading clubs," the 22-year-old said. "It is a chance for the whole team and it could be very important for our careers. If I play well I will be noticed. If our team qualifies from the group, not many players will stay in the shadows."

No pressure

The squad were relaxed in training on Monday and, with all eyes on Sweden, the pressure will be on the hosts. Still, Afanasiev would not let an observation that Belarus are perhaps too careless in possession go unchallenged. "I totally disagree with this statement," he replied to reporters. "We led our qualifying group for a long time [before being overhauled by Serbia]. We were always able to take the initiative in our matches, except maybe in the 3-1 defeat by Serbia. We then had two good matches against Turkey in the play-off and controlled those games. How can you say we are careless with the ball?"

'Clear goals'

The former FC BATE Borisov and FC MTZ-RIPO Minsk midfielder will be eager to prove his point at the Malmö New Stadium. "Set-pieces will hardly help us against such a physical team," he went on. "We will try to keep the ball to feet because we won't be able to beat the Swedes in the air." Ultimately, whichever side best deals with the situation will be halfway to victory, and Afanasiev has confidence in his team. "I don't know how Sweden will cope with the pressure, but we will go out there with clear goals. We will play for our country and for the people who support us back in Belarus and then everything should be fine. Our coach will find the key to victory."