

# SPAIN - ENGLAND

## MATCH PREVIEW

### Gamla Ullevi, Gothenburg

#### Thursday 18 June 2009 - 20.45CET (20.45 local time)

#### Group B - Matchday 3



The UEFA European Under-21 Championship might still be in its first week but already England have the opportunity to land a decisive blow and secure a semi-final berth by beating fellow big hitters Spain in their second Group B game in Gothenburg.

#### 'Character in adversity'

Having overcome the first-half dismissal of Michael Mancienne to defeat Finland 2-1 on Monday, Stuart Pearce's side hold the early initiative in the section yet the England manager believes considerable improvement is required. "We didn't play anywhere near our full potential and it's very disappointing in that respect," he said. "Our passing wasn't good enough and we didn't hurt the opposition. The only time Finland hurt us was with basic straight balls over the top which caught us out, costing us a player, a penalty and a goal. Apart from that, I never felt we were really troubled. We showed character in adversity and I'm happy to have these boys in my corner every day. We have a strong will which always gives you a chance."

#### Spanish ties

Match-winner Micah Richards picked up a thigh injury against Finland while Nedum Onouha (groin), James Milner (thigh) and Adam Johnson (hip) have minor knocks, Pearce saying: "Fingers crossed for all of them but that's why we have a squad of 23." The England manager enjoyed one of the most iconic moments of his illustrious playing career when converting a penalty against Spain in EURO '96™ and first took charge of the U21 side in a 2-2 draw against the same opponents in February 2007 but describes this match as "my biggest test". "They're an extremely good side and play the same way through the age groups," he added. "There's a good interchange of movement up front. We're aware of their strengths and also aware of ours. We were disappointed with the way we played the other night but there'll be better to come. The players are determined to put in a performance."

#### 'Decisive match'

Spain are likely to have goalkeeper Sergio Asenjo and Diego Capel available despite ankle problems picked up in the goalless draw with Germany, and coach Juan Ramón López Caro is also anticipating an improved display. "We know this match could be decisive for both teams so we need to play well," he said. "England are a disciplined team, they have plenty of physical strength and are really quick. They're also good at switching play and dangerous on the counterattack. It will be a game played at high intensity but we'll definitely play with our own philosophy and try to impose our style."

#### Attacking intent

A statue of Gunnar Gren stands outside the Gamla Ullevi and Spain could certainly do with some of the former IFK Göteborg and AC Milan forward's predatory instincts as they go in search of their first goal in a U21 final tournament since 4 June 2000. López Caro, however, has faith his attacking players will come good, adding: "They're already really experienced and have shown plenty of maturity. Without doubt that will bear fruit in the future. It's up to me and the coaching staff to see if we need to make changes, but really we'll be looking to work on making little improvements."



### Spain's Pirata brings swashbuckle

With Spain being urged by their coach to "play to their limits", forward Esteban Granero is confident they can ignite their UEFA European Under-21 Championship campaign with a victory over England.

#### 'Final before a final'

The Getafe CF offensive midfielder, who won the first of his nine U21 caps in a 2-2 draw with England in Derby in February 2007, was one of Spain's livelier performers in a disjointed attacking display against Germany on Monday. He recognises that the whole front line must up their game if they are to build on that goalless draw by beating opponents who defeated Finland last time out. "I'm ready – we all are," Granero told the pre-match press conference in Gothenburg. "For us it's a bit like a final before a final. We're really concentrated and we'll really go for it and play a good game."

#### 'Impose our philosophy'

However, both Granero and his coach accept that more attacking endeavour will be required to unpick a strong England defence. "Every generation has some very talented individuals but I'm really happy with the collective strength shown by this team, and they now have to play to their limits," said Juan Ramón López Caro. The No11 echoed his coach's view that Spain will only thrive by sticking to their principles, adding: "We know England are very organised and very quick but we'll try to impose our own style, which we didn't manage to do in the first game. We'll really look to impose our philosophy."

#### Tournament triumphs

One of eight squad members to have lifted a European Championship trophy at U17 or U19 level, as part of the latter team's triumph in Poland three summers ago, the 21-year-old Granero is one of the younger Spain players in Sweden. He believes the learning curve is a steep one regardless of age, though. "Every player in our team has a reasonable amount of experience in the Liga, and with every game you play at these international tournaments you gain a lot more," said the player nicknamed 'El Pirata' (the pirate). "You discover that every mistake you make can be fatal and that you can't afford to make any errors in these games. You gain a lot of experience this way."

#### Perform under pressure

Granero contributed four assists and five goals as Getafe preserved their Liga status by the skin of their teeth, including two goals in a crucial win against CA Osasuna and, decisively, the equaliser against Real Racing Club on the season's final day. Well-versed in the art of performing under pressure, he is of the opinion that fortune favours the brave – which he spelled out when it was put to him that a draw might not necessarily be a bad result on Thursday. "I don't think that's what we're looking for," he said. "We should use our strengths on the pitch to win this game. That's the mentality you need when you start a game – you need to go into it convinced you can win."

### Gibbs ascent shows no sign of slowing

Kieran Gibbs is confident England "certainly have what it takes" to get the better of Spain on Thursday as the Arsenal FC player targets a third major semi-final appearance in two months.

#### Debut

The 19-year-old made his Premier League debut in the north London derby against Tottenham Hotspur FC in February and then took advantage of an injury to Gaël Clichy to feature in UEFA Champions League and FA Cup semi-finals – lost respectively to Manchester United FC and Chelsea FC – as well as cementing a place in Stuart Pearce's squad for the UEFA European Under-21 Championship having only previously played for the U19s.

#### 'Learning curve'

Pearce felt Gibbs gained "two years' worth of big-match experience rolled into two months" at the end of his breakthrough season, particularly as the teenager endured some testing moments in high-profile matches. "In all those games he showed a maturity way above his years which impressed me greatly," said Pearce. "There were times when he looked a bit shaky but he came through and that's the best learning curve he'll have."

#### 'More competitive'

Gibbs scored twice in England's 7-0 pre-tournament victory against Azerbaijan, operating from his preferred midfield role, following it up with an assured display at left-back in the opening Group B defeat of Finland. "It was a different game to what I was expecting," he said. "It was a lot quicker and a lot more competitive and I'm enjoying the experience. The performance wasn't too great but we got three points and are top of the group and it's important to remember that."

#### 'Ability'

Another victory in Gothenburg on Thursday would make England the first team to reach the last four, but what challenge will Spain pose? "The seniors are European champions and they'll be technically gifted," said Gibbs, who knows the Spanish have plenty more in their armoury than just Bojan Krkić. "It's important for us to watch all of their players as they'll all be at the top of their game. But looking at our team and the ability we've got, we've certainly got what it takes to match them."

#### 'Great honour'

Gibbs looks on these past few months "as a big success" but admits he had to "show mental strength" after an error against Manchester United in the semi-final second leg. On the eve of the Spain match, the Londoner was keen to put that behind him, saying: "It's been a bit of a rollercoaster but I've enjoyed playing at the top level. Hopefully I can keep at it and keep going. It's a great honour to be playing for your country."