

# SERBIA - SWEDEN

## MATCH PREVIEW

Malmö New Stadium, Malmö

Tuesday 23 June 2009 - 20.45CET (20.45 local time)

Group A - Matchday 3



Sweden go into their final Group A game against Serbia at the Malmö New Stadium aiming to secure a semi-final berth and, with it, exorcise a ghost that has been haunting them for more than two and a half years.

### 'Revenge'

The team from the Balkans crushed the Swedes 5-0 when the two last met in competitive action in October 2006 in a qualifying play-off for the 2007 Under-21 finals. That Serbian win in Trollhättan was a shattering response to Sweden's 3-0 first-leg success and the Scandinavians' joint-coach Jörgen Lennartsson admitted the "opportunity for revenge" might provide his charges with extra motivation. "If it matters at all, it's as a form of inspiration. But the teams this time are completely different, both Serbia and Sweden," added Lennartsson, perhaps mindful that only four players – Sweden's Johan Dahlin, Pontus Wernbloom and Marcus Berg and Serbia's Milan Smiljanić – featured in that match.

### Krčmarević optimistic

The 'Little Eagles' have enjoyed the better of the sides' meetings before and since – winning on penalties in the 2004 semi-finals and 1-0 in a friendly last September – and the home coach warned that Sweden's one-point lead over their rivals could count for little on Tuesday night. "Before the tournament began, we said Italy and Serbia were the group favourites and that hasn't changed." Third-placed Serbia must win to reach a fourth successive U21 semi-final, while Sweden, second behind Italy, need only avoid defeat for their first last-four placing since 2004. Even so, Serbia coach Slobodan Krčmarević is optimistic. "For us, tomorrow's game is a quarter-final," he said. "Even if we'd already lost both games, with victory against Sweden we would finish above them."

### Attacking dilemma

Krčmarević sounded unfazed by the forward power that has brought the Swedes six goals already, underlining instead the efforts of his unbreached back line. "The Sweden attackers are very good but don't forget we've already played against maybe better opposition in the Italian trio of [Sebastian] Giovinco, [Robert] Acquafresca and [Mario] Balotelli." Of greater concern is his team's ability to conjure a goal after stalemates against Italy and Belarus. Forward Miralem Sulejmani, seated beside his coach, spoke of the need for "someone in the centre-forward role", able to win aerial challenges and hold the ball. To this end Krčmarević may introduce Rade Veljović or Slavko Perović in place of Marko Milinković. "I have a dilemma," Krčmarević conceded.

### Atmosphere

The Sweden camp learned on Monday that Rasmus Elm's yellow card against Italy has been rescinded, yet their influential midfielder Wernbloom remains among the four Swedes and three Serbs one booking shy of a semi-final suspension. "I don't think Wernbloom will tackle any less against Serbia because of that," said Lennartsson of his most combative player. If the atmosphere hots up on the pitch, it should be fairly lively in the stands too, given the support Serbia enjoyed from several thousand fans in their last match against Belarus. "Sweden will have many more fans in the stadium than we do," said Krčmarević, "but I know that our supporters will give us strong backing and be our 12th man." Lennartsson also recognised the significant role both sets of fans could play. "We hope the Swedish spectators will show from the start who's playing at home. That will be important."



### Positive thinking eases Dahlin's pain

Johan Dahlin hardly needs reminding of the last time Sweden played Serbia in a competitive fixture. The 22-year-old was in goal when Serbia overturned a 3-0 first-leg deficit in their qualifying play-off by crushing Sweden 5-0 to reach the 2007 UEFA European Under-21 Championship finals.

### Painful memories

It was worse enough that the return match was played in Dahlin's home town of Trollhättan, but to add insult to misery, the goalkeeper was replaced at half-time after conceding three goals in 26 first-half minutes. "I do still think about that game," Dahlin told uefa.com. "It was a big match, a play-off for a final tournament, and we lost 5-0 at home in Trollhättan. That wasn't much fun."

### 'Move on'

Dahlin is not the only Sweden squad member to have played in that defeat. Pontus Wernbloom and Marcus Berg also featured, while Mikael Lustig, Mattias Bjärnsmyr and Ola Toivonen were unused substitutes. The result, though, hit the softly spoken, reflective Dahlin particularly hard. "It took me a long time to get over it," the FC Lyn Oslo custodian said. "A very long time. But you have to move on."

### 'Calmer'

Dahlin was speaking at Sweden's team hotel in Bastad on the eve of their final Group A fixture. Normally the press would gather around a star player, yet this time a lower-profile squad member occupies the centre of attention. But not too unsung: the No1 has established himself as first choice at Norwegian club Lyn this year and also won his first senior Sweden cap in a January friendly against the United States. "I'm calmer now. I don't make things more difficult than they need to be," he said.

### Philosophical

That calm will be invaluable when Sweden meet Serbia on Tuesday requiring a draw to advance to the semi-finals, and Dahlin is cool-headed when discussing the campaign so far. He may have been beaten three times, but it has taken exceptional strikes from Sergei Kislyak and Mario Balotelli and a pinpoint Robert Acquafresca header to get the ball past him. "It's a bit harsh – I've faced four genuine attempts on goal, and three have gone in. But they have been great strikes, so I can't dwell on them. It's not like I've made blunders. I've just focused on saving the next shot." Dahlin takes a similar tack when considering the reunion with Serbia. "I didn't give it a thought until after the Italy match, because it wasn't the next match." Chances are, though, that Sweden and Dahlin are thinking of nothing else now.

### **Smiljanić relishing high stakes**

If any Serbia player is daunted by his team's task going into their must-win final Group A fixture against Sweden, he should speak to captain Milan Smiljanić and his fears will soon be assuaged.

#### **Minor miracle**

After all, the last time Smiljanić lined up away to the Scandinavians, Serbia did not need so much a victory on Swedish soil as a minor miracle. It was 10 October 2006 and the Balkan team arrived trailing by three goals after the first leg of their qualifying play-off for the 2007 Under-21 finals. "In Serbia we lost 3-0 and everyone at home gave up on us," Smiljanić, now a senior international, recalled. "But then we won here 5-0 and everyone thought we could become European champions."

#### **Shell-shocked**

The RCD Espanyol midfielder is the only survivor of the team that stunned Sweden in Trollhättan en route to finishing runners-up in the Netherlands. The Serbs struck twice inside eleven minutes through Dragan Mrdja and Boško Janković and by half-time Stefan Babović had drawn them level on aggregate (and forced the removal of shell-shocked Sweden goalkeeper Johan Dahlin). To no avail as Babović and Miloš Krsić added two more goals in the second period.

#### **'A quarter-final'**

Unlike then, Smiljanić noted, "now we need only to win". He added: "I believe that with this team when we play to win, we do well. We have to treat it like a quarter-final." Slobodan Krčmarević's men find themselves in this predicament after the disappointing goalless draw with Belarus that followed an identical result (albeit with a more impressive display) against Italy. "If we had won against Belarus, we'd need only a point," said Smiljanić. "We played very well against Italy, we had chances but were unlucky. Against Belarus it was difficult, they played with ten men behind the ball and we couldn't get the final pass right."

#### **Optimistic**

For all the concerns over Serbia's lack of potency, Smiljanić is optimistic the goals will come in Malmö on Tuesday night. "I expect a lot of goals and a completely different game from the last two. This game will be open, Sweden are playing at home and cannot just sit back. Their fans want them to win and we have a chance. We have three or four players who can score at any moment." The fact Sweden will have the backing of the home crowd does not concern him either – and with some justification given the backing the Serbia team can expect to receive from their noisy band of followers. "It is a bit difficult with Sweden at home in front of their supporters but Serbia have a lot of fans here too."

#### **Second home**

Smiljanić was in relaxed mood when he spoke to uefa.com at the Örenas Slott hotel, Serbia's picturesque base hidden away among farmland near the village of Glumslov. It is not just the pitch-and-putt and table tennis that helps him feel at home – the 22-year-old was actually born here in Sweden. "I was born in a small town, Kalmar, because my father [Branko, now coach of Libya's U21 side] was playing football here. This is my second country so it's great for me to be here as captain of my first country and with a chance of winning the European championship. But before this we have to beat Sweden." A tough task maybe but as Smiljanić can vouch, no mission impossible.