

ENGLAND PREPARE FOR THEIR GERMAN TEST

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Preparations for what has been billed as England's most important game since the penalty shoot-out defeat against Argentina at France '98 received a boost with the news that captain David Beckham and midfield dynamo Steven Gerrard had both overcome injuries and would be fit to meet Germany in Munich.

Both players are regarded as crucial to England's prospects of qualifying for next summer's World Cup finals, although irrespective of the Munich result, the play-offs remain the most likely route for Sven-Goran Eriksson's team to Japan and Korea 2002.

Clashes with the Germans occupy a special place in English football folklore. England beat West Germany 4-2 after extra-time at Wembley in 1966 to win the World Cup, but four years later (Mexico 1970) lost to the same opponents in the quarter-finals at Leon. England had led 2-0 but finished up 3-2 losers as Gerd Muller's goals broke English hearts.

In 1972, inspired by midfielder Gunther Netzer, the Germans imperiously swept England aside in the European Championships, and they won a tense penalty shoot-out in the semi-final of Italia '90 before winning the World Cup final against Argentina. Euro '96 saw the two meet again also in the semi-finals. The venue was again Wembley and once more the Germans triumphed in a penalty shoot-out.

England at last gained a measure of revenge when they won a Euro 2000 clash 1-0, although neither country progressed beyond the group stages of that tournament. Then last October Germany were the visitors when England staged the last competitive match at a rain-soaked Wembley Stadium. Liverpool's Dietmar Hamann scored the only goal from a free-kick in the European Group 9 qualifier for the 2002 World Cup, and coach Kevin Keegan immediately resigned.

Keegan's decision paved the way for Eriksson to take charge, and Saturday's clash in Munich represents the studious Swede's biggest test so far.

While his bright start as coach (five wins out of six) has brought fresh hopes of a change in fortunes against an old enemy, England dare not

underestimate their opponents. The Germans have improved dramatically under the guidance of coach Rudi Voeller, and re-discovered the winning mentality that has seen them lose just once in 60 World Cup qualifying games.

Nevertheless, the English camp is confident, particularly with the hugely influential Beckham and Gerrard available for selection. Eriksson's starting line-up is likely to be based on players from just four clubs – the four best in the Premiership. Manchester United will supply three, Liverpool four, Arsenal three and Leeds United one player in Eriksson's first-choice eleven:

David Seaman; Gary Neville, Sol Campbell, Rio Ferdinand, Ashley Cole; David Beckham (captain), Steven Gerrard, Paul Scholes, Nick Barmby; Michael Owen and Emile Heskey.

To secure automatic qualification for Japan and Korea next summer. England will need to win Group 9, which the Germans currently lead by six points. The runners-up (probably England) will face either Belarus or Ukraine in the World Cup play-offs.

The seniors were given a timely boost ahead of their showdown with Voeller's team at the Olympic Stadium when England's Under-21 team defeated Germany's by two goals to one on Friday evening. Watched by a crowd of 21,400 – a German Under-21 record – David Platt's young team took the lead after an hour with a goal from West Ham United midfielder Joe Cole. The Germans, though, were the stronger team for much of the match, and only the superb Stuart Taylor – the Arsenal goalkeeper – kept England in the game with a string of first-rate saves.

Even Taylor's resistance was finally broken in the 90th minute, however, when right-back Christoph Metzelder headed in at the far-post from a deep cross by Daniel Bieroska. But the Germans barely had time to reflect that justice had been done before Arsenal's Francis Jeffers snatched a stoppage-time winner that leaves England two points behind joint group leaders Germany and Greece in the European Under-21 Championship qualifiers.

The England team was:

Taylor (Arsenal); Stephen Wright (Liverpool), Ledley King (Tottenham Hotspur), Gareth Barry (Aston Villa), Wayne Bridge (Southampton); Jonathan Greening (Middlesbrough), Sean Davis (Fulham), Dave Prutton (Nottingham Forest), Luke Chadwick (Manchester United); Darius Vassell (Aston Villa), Cole (West Ham United).

Substitutes: Jeffers (Arsenal) for Vassell, 57th minute; Scott Parker (Charlton Athletic) for Cole, 75th; Jermain Defoe (West Ham) for Chadwick, 70th.

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