

# ENGLAND MAKE A POSITIVE START UNDER ERIKSSON

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David Beckham, who captained England to victory against Spain in Sven Goran Eriksson's first game as coach.

Courtesy Empics

After all the arguments, hype, so-called advice and speculation that have surrounded Sven Goran Eriksson since he was appointed as England's new coach, the studious Swede could hardly have wished for a more positive start to his regime on the pitch. His players responded admirably to their first test in the new era – a friendly against Spain at Villa Park – and deservedly won by three goals to nil.

The fact that the game was a non-competitive friendly – and that several of the Spanish squad may have been more preoccupied with the forthcoming clash between Real Madrid and Barcelona than with England – should not detract from the satisfaction of seeing the English senior team achieve its first victory in five attempts.

After all, you can only ever beat the opposition that is front of you, and Eriksson's England did just that with confidence and flair. And Spain were certainly not poor opposition. They enjoyed much of the possession in the first half-an-hour of the match, passing the ball with style and precision. Players like Josep Guardiola, Ivan Helguera, Raul and Gaizka Mendieta underlined their class with intelligent, penetrative play; but England did not allow themselves to become overawed.

The contrast with the last few displays of the Kevin Keegan era was a sharp one. The 18 players deployed by Eriksson showed belief in both themselves and the system they had been asked to play. All over the pitch players in white shirts looked comfortable and assured. They played with an obvious appetite for the game, and occasionally expressed it with great panache.

The new coach proved not only that he could organise and motivate his squad, but also that he is very much his own man. His team selection and 4-4-1-1 formation were not chosen to satisfy the pundits in the press gallery, but to provide a framework in which each player knew what was expected of him.

Among Eriksson's bolder decisions was to give a first cap to left-back Chris Powell. The 31 year-old, who became the first Charlton Athletic player to represent England since 1965, took his chance well, producing an accomplished performance until a calf strain forced him to leave the action at half-time. A succession of previous England coaches had failed even to consider Powell when selecting their squads. Eriksson also showed a willingness to take risks by naming Phil Neville – a reserve at Old Trafford and heavily criticised for conceding the late penalty against Romania that ended England's Euro 2000 involvement – in his starting line-up, at right-back.

And he chose to use Michael Owen in a linking role – between the midfield quartet and Andy Cole – rather than in his accustomed front-runner's position.

The coach, who made seven second-half substitutions without the team losing its rhythm or momentum, was rewarded by a string of encouraging performances. Nick Barmby, who scored the crucial opening goal, was a constant thorn in Spain's side, while Cole produced possibly his most confident display for England. Rio Ferdinand looked accomplished at centre-back alongside the resolute Sol Campbell, and when Ugo Ehiogu was given a second-half opportunity in the same position he capped it with the

third goal.

Even when Ehiogu conceded a late penalty, Nigel Martyn underlined his international credentials by saving Javier Moreno's spot-kick.

After the game, Eriksson was full of praise for all his players (even those not used on the night) as well as coaches, Peter Taylor, Steve McClaren and Tord Grip. He was pleased with the result and the performance, but warned against getting carried away by one good win. There are much sterner tests ahead, including the imminent World Cup qualifiers against Finland and Albania.

As if to underline the fact that one swallow does not make a summer, four of Eriksson's predecessors – Graham Taylor, Terry Venables, Glenn Hoddle and Kevin Keegan – also began with wins. Their reigns ultimately promised more than they delivered. To avoid a similar fate, Eriksson will need to build immediately on the Spanish win and improve England's perilous position in their World Cup qualifying group. At least he has got off to a good start.

Venables was among many who were impressed by what they saw, praising the coach and saying that every player did well. Gary Neville spoke for the players themselves, stating his conviction that England could be successful under Eriksson and expressing the hope that the coach would be given enough time to build stability and continuity. Even Germany, rivals at the head of England's group, said they admired the manner of Spain's defeat and felt England must now be considered a bigger threat. After the disarray of the recent past, these are welcome signs indeed.

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