

ENGLAND 90 MINUTES AWAY FROM JAPAN & KOREA 2002

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English football is smiling after a thoroughly satisfying week for the national team which saw Sven Goran Eriksson's team collect the maximum six points from two vital World Cup qualifying games and take control of European Group 9.

The stunning 5-1 victory over previous Group leaders Germany in Munich was followed by a more laboured but ultimately successful clash with Albania in Newcastle, completing a remarkable transformation that has seen England rise from the bottom of the Group to the top in the 27 weeks since Eriksson took over as coach.

With a significantly better goal difference than the Germans, England now just need to overcome Greece at Old Trafford on 6th October to book their place at the World Cup Finals in Japan and Korea next summer.

Eriksson's policy of giving younger players their chance has paid handsome dividends. His squad are bonding well together as a unit both on and off the field, generating self-belief and providing a platform on which to show their skill. Players such as David Beckham, Michael Owen, Steven Gerrard, Rio Ferdinand and Paul Scholes have underlined their world class credentials during the past eight days. Their mature displays, along with those of their team-mates, have made the gloom of last Autumn a distant memory. Germany's victory under leaden skies at a funereal Wembley brought about the end of Kevin Keegan's spell in charge of the national team, and an uninspired, leaderless 0-0 draw in Finland four days later left England's World Cup aspirations in tatters.

But Eriksson has led the team to five consecutive World Cup qualification wins and completely altered the national mood. His calm authority, man-management skills and tactical ability have proved decisive, but he has also been helped, ironically, by the demise of Wembley.

The famous old stadium frequently inspired visiting teams to raise their game and could also tend to inhibit the home side's fluency. Since it closed following the 1-0 defeat by the Germans last October, England's home games have been taken all around the country to places such as

Manchester, Birmingham, Liverpool and Newcastle. The level of support and passion generated in these provincial venues has been electrifying, reminiscent of the partisan atmosphere so typical of the biggest matches in the Premier League.

Ultimately, however, it is all about players; and England's stars are currently dazzling. None are shining more brightly than the Liverpool contingent. Benefiting from the experience of European club competition and the confidence of winning trophies, the boys from Anfield scored every one of the seven goals England clocked up against Germany Albania.

Superstar Michael Owen led the way with four, including a magnificent hat-trick in Munich. Steven Gerrard – with a thunderbolt from distance on the stroke of half-time that demoralised the Germans – Emile Heskey and Robbie Fowler chipped in with the other three.

Fowler's strike – England's crucial second against the Albanians – was a masterpiece of invention, technique and composure. On as a substitute, his solo effort confirmed an intuitive gift for goalscoring, reinforcing the belief that Liverpool would be crazy to allow their controversial star to leave Anfield.

In terms of goalscoring, however, no-one could steal Owen's thunder. He has now scored 14 goals in 32 internationals, and attributes his current hot streak for club and country to the faith Eriksson has shown in him since becoming England coach. His value on the transfer market (if Liverpool were ever to contemplate selling him) has soared into the stratosphere, and he is still only 21.

As for the captain, David Beckham, he has just played his two best games for England and is improving with every match. He clearly relishes the role of skipper, and his work-rate has been prodigious. He may be outrageously gifted in terms of ball control and passing ability, but he is tireless in his efforts the team. Beckham must have covered every blade of grass in both internationals, setting up attacks, creating goals and defending tenaciously. His level of performance has moved onto an even higher plane than before with the added responsibility of captaincy, and he is truly leading by example for his country.

Despite the euphoria surrounding the Germany game in particular, Eriksson will not be blind to the few problem areas that remain within the team. While the strikers and the midfield are becoming the envy of world football, the defence can look vulnerable and much work still needs to be done in that department. David Seaman in goal has reasserted his authority with

some crucial saves, and Gary Neville now looks comfortable at right-back, both defending and going forward. But the Rio Ferdinand-Sol Campbell partnership in the middle of the defence has appeared sloppy on occasion. The pair must improve their understanding of one another's positional play and raise their level of concentration.

Young Ashley Cole at left-back, for all his verve and invention going forward, has looked suspect defensively too. But they are almost certainly the best men for their respective jobs and Eriksson can use whatever time he has with his squad to work on these weaknesses so the defensive unit becomes tighter, more miserly and fully focused.

The challenge is essentially one of organisation, and Eriksson has already shown he is a master of that.

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