

The Rafael Benitez Column: England would be best off playing a 4-2-3-1 formation

It's a short competition. It's not as if Rio Ferdinand would have been there for nine months

Rafael Benitez

Monday, 11 June 2012

England's moment is here and I am sensing a lot of pessimism in the country about their chances. Everybody is talking, saying England are not good enough. But I don't understand this. Are Sweden or Ukraine, the other two nations in the group, better than Roy Hodgson's side? No, they are not. And I think tonight's game against France in Donetsk is one that both teams can win. Yes, if England lose, everybody will be saying this and that about them but I do think England have a number of options tactically. The style and ideas they have adopted are not a problem and they are capable of winning their difficult opening game. It's not always just a question of which team is best. England seem to need confidence and if they do beat France it could be that they do not look back.

The talk has been about whether Rio Ferdinand should be with the squad. He is a very good player and with good players around you, you will always be better. He has experience and in tournaments like this experience becomes an even more important quality than ever. It is a short competition, too. It's not as if he would have been there for nine months. But England have Gary Neville to assist Roy Hodgson, which is a very positive thing, and he will have been able to offer his own knowledge on the situation. There's been a lot of public discussion but England's staff will have known better than anyone else whether it was the right thing to take Ferdinand.

That decision has been made now, though, and England can only look ahead. The absent player who matters much more than Ferdinand is Wayne Rooney because it is not easy to find a second striker like him, who is so mobile, making runs and doing so many unexpected things. If Andy Carroll is the target man then my idea is that Steven Gerrard would be the better second striker for now. This is partly because he knows Carroll from their work together at Liverpool but it is also because Gerrard will win the second balls around the box. Of all the players Hodgson might choose to play behind the striker, Gerrard has the greater strength to win those second balls.

Of course, if you play Steven there you will lose some of the quality and possession he would offer in the middle and England could be flat. To keep that quality, you would have him back in the centre of the park. If you play Danny Welbeck as the striker then you need more mobility behind him and Ashley Young will be good for that. So, go more direct and it should be Carroll and Gerrard. Play the ball on the floor and it should be Welbeck and Young.

For these first two games, when England are without Rooney, I think a 4-2-3-1 formation will be best and would give England more mobility. Roy Hodgson has had England playing a 4-4-1-1 formation but that can be just like a 4-2-3-1 if your wingers are offensive.

The 4-2-3-1 set-up has the advantage of giving you plenty of numbers in midfield to contain the French who are a fast, technically gifted side. England certainly need to be strong in the middle against Laurent Blanc's team. But I also believe that 4-2-3-1 will play to the strength England have in the wide areas.

I think Stewart Downing is an interesting player. I thought he was a good signing when Liverpool bought him last summer, because you are talking about a player who has pace, ability and quality. I know about his stats for Liverpool last season, with no goals or assists, but stats are not the answer to everything. They're an aid to the manager but don't always tell the full story. I think it may be a question of confidence with Downing. He can put in good deliveries and with good players around him he will be better.

When we analyse the various tactical options, you see how important a player like Steven Gerrard is to this England team. It will be very important for the two central England midfielders to stay close and be very aware of the threat of Samir Nasri, who is very dangerous with his very good movement between the lines. Positioning is very important. The holding midfielder – Scott Parker – needs to keep his position and provide an anchor and not be tempted to move everywhere. France have a lot of dangerous players who are difficult to track. Hatem Ben Arfa and Mathieu Valbuena are not even likely to be in the starting line-up but they will also need to be watched carefully. Of course, the same goes for Karim Benzema and I am also impressed by Olivier Giroud, the Montpellier striker, who I think could do very good things in this tournament.

So, there is a lot for England to think about but I do not believe they need to be fearful – even though when you play a short tournament and there are only three games, the first one is very important. Steven Gerrard said the other week that he had heard whispers about people saying this was the weakest group of players England have had for a long time and how this was a chance to prove those people wrong.

I think it was an interesting thing to say. When everybody is so negative, it can be good for the group. One good performance could fill this squad with confidence as they do prove people wrong.

Young Kelly is better than an understudy

It's interesting to see Martin Kelly make it into this England squad. When I first saw him at the Liverpool academy he was a centre-back and I wanted him moved to right-back straight away. It made an immediate difference because it played to his strengths. He went into the reserves and did very well.

He has had his problems with injuries but, physically, he is a very good player with great stamina. He is very quick, gets forward a lot and jumps a lot. His deliveries have improved too. He was 18 when he played for me in the Champions League at Eindhoven, a game we won 3-1. He also played very well against Lyons at Anfield.

We always knew he had potential. He is a good lad and a worker, like all the local lads I had at Liverpool were. I remember him colliding badly with a goalpost once. That was the effort you got from him. He'll be up to the challenge if he gets a chance.

Alba has ability to help Spain reign

I'll try to highlight some players to watch as we go through the tournament and one of them has to be Jordi Alba, the Spanish left-back from my old club, Valencia.

It looks like he might be moving to Barcelona, perhaps for something like €15m, as he only has a year left on his contract. He gets forward all the time and really knows what to do with the ball. There are few better full-backs at the championship.

Germany and Spain look like big contenders to win the competition but my dark horses are Denmark, in part because of their defensive quality. We've already seen that in action against the Dutch. My old player Daniel Agger combines fine defending with confidence on the ball and Simon Kjær is another very good line of defence.

I do believe Portugal can prosper too, despite their defeat to Germany. Much depends on the balance they can establish and whether they can sort out the politics which sometimes affects the camp, but that defence with Pepe and Bruno Alves looks very strong and they have some fine individual talents in attack.

Rafael Benitez's website, rafabenitez.com, provides more tactical analysis and insight into Euro 2012 and wider football issues