

SWITZERLAND - CZECH REPUBLIC

MATCH PREVIEW

St. Jakob-Park, Basel

Saturday 7 June 2008 - 18.00CET (18.00 local time)

Group A - Matchday 1



Finally the waiting is over. Almost two years since Switzerland last played a competitive match, the co-hosts kick off UEFA EURO 2008™ against the Czech Republic determined to hit the ground running.

High hopes

Köbi Kuhn's side departed the 2006 FIFA World Cup with a whimper, failing to score a single penalty in their shoot-out defeat by Ukraine in the last 16. Now they need to begin with a bang. A positive result will galvanise a nation approaching the tournament more in hope than expectation. Kuhn said the supporters will act as a "12th man" in the tight confines of St. Jakob-Park and as he embarks on the final challenge of his coaching career, the 64-year-old is excited by the prospect of what lies ahead.

'Enthusiasm'

"In training we have played with great enthusiasm, commitment and desire," said Kuhn. "It's great fun to be with this squad, to prepare for the EURO and to get started. The first match is absolutely vital. It is going to be difficult, we're aware of that, but we'll try to play the best football we can and try to win every game." Kuhn's preparations have been overshadowed by serious illness to his wife Alice, but he has drawn strength from the support of those around him. "Everyone stands behind me and supports me wherever they can and that gives confidence."

Home truths

Switzerland's co-hosts Austria will be watching with interest to see how their neighbours fare. Of all the countries to have staged the tournament since 1984, only Belgium in 2000 have not reached the semi-finals. Home advantage, though, has its downsides too. Portugal froze as Greece crashed their opening party in Porto four years ago and the Czech Republic will be looking to do the same thing here.

Rosický missed

Coach Karel Brückner, though, has had to adjust his side following the withdrawal of captain Tomáš Rosický through injury last month, and he is still keeping his revised XI a closely guarded secret. "We have various alternatives but I'm not going to discuss that further," said Brückner, whose team were semi-finalists in 2004. "Our players are ready. We're well-prepared and have an experienced team." Brückner, who like Kuhn will step down at the end of the tournament, has a full squad to choose from with the exception of flu-victim Zdeněk Pospěch, and should start with Václav Svěrkoš and Stanislav Vlček either side of Jan Koller in a 4-3-3 formation.

Müller concern

Koller recently became the Czech Republic's all-time leading scorer, an achievement matched by Alexander Frei for Switzerland last week. Frei's availability after injury gives Switzerland a huge lift, as does the return of attacking midfielder Tranquillo Barnetta from an ankle problem. There is more concern over the side's third linchpin, Patrick Müller who is still not at full fitness having torn cruciate ligaments in December. Switzerland are a different team with the 31-year-old's steadying presence at centre-back and Kuhn will talk with him before deciding whether he plays. With Portugal and Turkey lying in wait in Group A, neither side can afford to fluff their lines on first night.



Frei feels tension as big day looms

It may not have been apparent from the outside but captain Alexander Frei admitted tension levels were rising in the Switzerland camp ahead of the co-hosts' UEFA EURO 2008™ opener against the Czech Republic.

'Getting more nervous'

Both during training at Basel's St. Jakob-Park and at the eve-of-game press conference that followed, Frei cut a relaxed figure. Yet the BV Borussia Dortmund striker admitted that he was not as calm as he might have appeared: "It's true – slowly but surely I am getting more nervous and tense now that the match has come near." At the same time, however, he described himself as being "full of joy and expectation" at the thought of Switzerland finally playing their first competitive match since they succumbed on penalties to Ukraine in the round of 16 of the 2006 FIFA World Cup. After two years of friendlies, Frei thinks "it is about time that the Swiss national team is unleashed. We will show the world that we are in form".

No predictions

Playing in front of an impassioned home crowd in the intimate St. Jakob-Park could have a positive effect. Unfancied host teams have gone far before – remember Korea Republic's run to the 2002 World Cup semi-finals – but Frei was unwilling to make any predictions. "So far, I feel great about playing at home but I can only really answer that question after the match. Should we lose 3-0, I will feel terrible about it. However, if you win 3-0 at home, it's fantastic, of course." It should help Swiss prospects that the 28-year-old appears to be hitting peak form just in time for the tournament. After suffering a serious hip injury in May 2007, he got back into his stride in the springtime, scoring six goals in the last eight Bundesliga games of the season, and he has continued to shine since, striking twice against Liechtenstein last Friday to become Switzerland's record scorer with 35 goals.

Ujfaluši sees grounds for Czech optimism

Czech Republic captain Tomáš Ujfaluši declared the St. Jakob-Park in Basel would be a "lucky stadium" for his side after having a first look around on the eve of the UEFA EURO 2008™ curtain-raiser against Group A rivals and co-hosts Switzerland.

Good fortune

The 30-year-old has already received a healthy dose of good fortune after recovering from a stomach muscle complaint, and he is confident there will be good reason for spirits to rise still further by full time on Saturday. "I have seen the pitch, this is going to be a lucky stadium for us," he said. "We're ready to fight. We're going to open the tournament and apart from one player we are in perfect health, confident and looking forward to playing the match."

Pospěch out

That one player is Zdeněk Pospěch who has been suffering from flu. Ujfaluši himself had provided some cause for concern, but he was quick to dispel any doubts over his fitness. "I have trained with the team and I have no health issues," he said. "I'm ready to start." That means coach Karel Brückner will be able to field the same defence that performed so impressively during qualifying – conceding just five goals – and Ujfaluši is confident his side can keep up their momentum. "In qualifying we managed to finish first [ahead of Germany in Group D] and I believe we will play very well in this championship as well," the centre-back said.

'Confident'

The pressure of playing the co-hosts in the opening game was no extra burden. "I don't think there is a big difference between the first game and other games," he said. "It just means we start earlier. We have prepared for this match like we would for any other. I'm confident we have done our best and that we will do our best again tomorrow." Ujfaluši replaced Tomáš Rosický as captain after the Arsenal FC midfielder pulled out of the tournament through injury, but he revealed the pair had been in close contact as kick-off nears. "Of course we're sad Tomáš cannot participate. He is among the biggest supporters of this team. We have had a few chances to talk and he is keeping his fingers crossed for us and of course we will do everything to fulfil his wishes."