

ROMANIA - FRANCE

MATCH PREVIEW

Letzigrund, Zurich

Monday 9 June 2008 - 18.00CET (18.00 local time)

Group C - Matchday 3



The task facing Romania over the next fortnight is perhaps the most daunting of all the UEFA EURO 2008™ finalists', yet coach Victor Pițurcă remains convinced his emerging side have enough quality to hold their own in arguably the toughest group of all.

Fine campaign

Romania have been rewarded for their fine qualification campaign with a place in Group C alongside traditional giants France, Italy and the Netherlands. Competing in their first finals for eight years, the Tricolorii have been labelled by many as outsiders to reach the quarter-finals, but Pițurcă hopes to change that view by springing a surprise against Les Bleus in Zurich. "When you look at the four teams it's understandable that people say we're underdogs," the 52-year-old said. "Our aim is to start changing those opinions."

Almighty challenge

The former FC Steaua București striker is enjoying his second spell at the Romania helm, having guided his country through a successful UEFA EURO 2000™ qualifying attempt only to miss out on the finals, and he accepts his men have an almighty challenge. "I don't know if it's the hardest group there's ever been but when you're pooled with the two [FIFA] World Cup finalists and the Netherlands, you know it won't be easy." Of Monday's opponents, Pițurcă added: "France are a great team – the best in the world along with Brazil, Argentina and Italy. But Romania also have pedigree and we'll have our say in the group."

Goian boost

Romania's chances of claiming their first victory over France for 36 years, and a fourth in eleven encounters, were boosted by the news that Dorin Goian is fit to take his place alongside Gabriel Tamaș in central defence, meaning a midfield role for Cristian Chivu. VfB Stuttgart's Ciprian Marica should get the nod to partner Adrian Mutu in attack, although Pițurcă is "still considering one or two different options".

Toulalan role

France coach Raymond Domenech also has selection puzzles to solve, with captain Patrick Vieira struggling with a thigh strain and Thierry Henry carrying a minor injury. The former Under-21 coach refuses to give anything away, although it is understood Olympique Lyonnais midfielder Jérémy Toulalan will take Vieira's place, while Henry could cede his striking position to Nicolas Anelka despite training at the Letzigrund Stadion on Sunday for the first time in four days. "At this moment the state of health of all 23 players is as good as I could have hoped for on the eve of a major tournament," Domenech said.

Domenech nerves

After four years in the France dugout, the 56-year-old has acquired considerable experience, yet he admits to suffering pre-tournament nerves. "I'm worried about everything," Domenech said. "As a coach you wonder if you've done everything possible to prepare your team, and even if you have, you don't know what will happen. We'll be up against three good teams who all want to eliminate us so there's always a worry that you might get swept aside." The ex-Lyon defender is not underestimating Romania, highlighting the point by comparing them to the world champions: "Of the sides we've played recently, Romania's style is closest to Italy's. They combine individual talent with organisation and discipline. I'm expecting a very hard match."



I still get nervous, says Thuram

Few players in the history of the game can claim to have enjoyed as long and as successful a career as Lilian Thuram, but for all his experience, the France defender admits he is likely to have a sleepless night ahead of his team's opening UEFA EURO 2008™ match against Romania.

'Apprehension'

Having already played 140 times for his country, winning the 1998 FIFA World Cup and the UEFA European Championship two years later, few would have expected the 36-year-old to be suffering from nerves on the eve of his seventh major finals. Yet the FC Barcelona defender, who will captain France against Romania if Patrick Vieira misses out, says he will remain on edge until the game kicks off in Zurich on Monday. "When you start out in such a tough competition, it's only natural to feel some apprehension," he explained. "I have some doubts. But when you're up against a top team like Romania it's only natural to be a little bit worried."

Record-breaker

Thuram has enjoyed mixed fortunes with Les Bleus, contributing greatly to the highs of 1998 and 2000, but also experiencing the lows of 2002 and 2004, when they failed to meet expectations. He is well placed, therefore, to gauge the prospects of the current team. "I feel we're ready," said Thuram, who is poised to become the first man to make 15 appearances in EURO finals. "The team is in the right state of mind and the doubt that's present is a good sign because you perform better when you play with a bit of fear. There's no magic formula but if we stay focused we've got a good chance."

Mutu praised

The former AS Monaco FC player is France's only survivor from EURO '96™, when Aimé Jacquet's team defeated Romania 1-0 in their opening fixture before progressing to the semi-finals, but admits he has forgotten everything about that game. Thuram was more interested in discussing the present Romania side, saying: "They're very strong. In qualifying, they beat the Netherlands and drew with them, so perhaps they're the side we should fear most." One of Thuram's biggest concerns is the presence of his former Juventus team-mate Adrian Mutu. "In his position, he's one of the best in the world. He's been showing his talent in Italy for several years already and can provide inspiration at any moment," he said.

'Solid base'

Mutu might need to be at his best if Romania are to break down a French rearguard that has emerged as one of the meanest in international football, conceding just five times in 12 qualifiers. Since Thuram was talked out of international retirement in 2005, he has forged a formidable partnership with William Gallas in central defence and is hoping to keep things tight again this summer. "It's very important for the team to have a solid defensive base. A draw could be a good result in the first game because the most important thing is that we don't lose."

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Chivu ready to take centre stage

Cristian Chivu is looking forward to one of the biggest nights of his career, when he will lead Romania into their opening Group C fixture against France.

Great honour

The FC Internazionale Milano defender was a callow youth making his way in the national team when Romania last reached the finals of a major tournament, UEFA EURO 2000™. Eight years later Chivu the man cannot hide his excitement at the prospect of helping his country back into the limelight. "It's always a great honour to captain your country but to lead your country into the finals of a tournament like this is something else," Chivu told euro2008.com. "It's been a long time coming for Romania but finally we have made it and we look forward to these games against France, Italy and the Netherlands. I was younger when we last played in the [UEFA] European Championship and there's more expectation on me and the other survivors of that team, but it's a challenge I'm looking forward to."

United front

Chivu is expected to start in an unaccustomed midfield role and not his favoured centre-back berth, but wherever he plays the 27-year-old anticipates a tough match against the 2006 FIFA World Cup runners-up. "I've said before that centre-half is my preferred position but I have been playing this role for my country for a while and my manager [Victor Pițurcă] thinks I do a good job for the team," said Chivu. "The eleven players who start the match will all have to defend and all have to attack. That's what we did in qualifying and why we were so successful. And we hope to continue that here and now."