

CROATIA - TURKEY

MATCH PREVIEW

Ernst Happel, Vienna

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Matchday 14 - Quarter-finals,



"There is no but," says Slaven Bilić, adamant that his Croatia team will confound doubters and maintain their excellent forward momentum in Friday's UEFA EURO 2008™ quarter-final showdown with Turkey.

Positive pressure

Consecutive wins over Austria, Germany and Poland not only gave the Croatians first place in Group B, they also sparked theories that Bilić and his charges might become victims of their own success. Traditionally more comfortable when cast as underdogs, Croatia head into the match at the Ernst-Happel-Stadion with many expecting them to prevail. "We're not complacent and we won't stop," said Bilić. "It's our intention to go as far as possible. Of course we're under pressure and the pressure's rising, but it's a positive pressure. We welcome it. It can only motivate us more and make us play better."

Turkish comebacks

The 39-year-old was a player when the teams first met at EURO '96™, a match that marked both their tournament debuts. Croatia emerged 1-0 winners thanks to a late Goran Vlaović strike, but it is Turkey who have been registering the last-gasp goals recently. Remarkable comeback victories over Switzerland and the Czech Republic booked their passage to the knockout phase from Group A, and Bilić is wary of their never-say-die spirit. "That shows how strong they are," he said. "We must be fully concentrated until the final whistle. They have good morale and they don't give up. It's praiseworthy but it also shows their weakness. Nobody wants to trail in a match and have to come back."

Injury problems

The Croatians are yet to go behind in this tournament and are expected to field the same lineup that overcame Germany 2-1, with Ivan Rakitić and Darijo Srna both back in training again after picking up slight knocks. Croatia cannot boast a totally clean bill of health as fringe players Igor Budan and Dario Knežević will miss the rest of the competition with knee injuries, but compared with Turkey they are positively fighting fit. Emre Güngör (calf), Servet Çetin (hip and knee), Emre Belözoğlu and Tümer Metin (both groin) are all unavailable to Fatih Terim due to health reasons, while goalkeeper Volkan Demirel and defensive midfielder Mehmet Aurélio are suspended. On the plus side, Emre Aşık (head) and Gökhan Zan (knee) appear to have recovered and will pair up in central defence.

'No excuses'

"We have no excuses," said Terim, who was also coach when Turkey succumbed to Bilić and Co in 1996. "It doesn't matter who plays at the back, in midfield or up front. What's important is how the players perform, not their names. All our injured players are important to us, but their replacements can do a good job." The 54-year-old nonetheless expressed his support for stand-in goalkeeper Reçber Rüşütü: "We believe in him. He has lots of big tournament experience." Unsurprisingly enough, however, the priority for Terim will be to avoid the need for yet another stunning comeback. "For once, we hope we can start the game well, but we're ready for 90 minutes, 120 minutes or penalties and we've lost none of our bravery."



Kovač bidding to bow out in style

At 36 years of age, Croatia captain Niko Kovač knows his time on the international stage is limited. The evergreen midfielder is expected to withdraw from national team duties after UEFA EURO 2008™ – but there is no room in his plans for quarter-final opponents Turkey to send him into premature retirement on Friday.

'Last big tournament'

The two sides meet at Vienna's Ernst-Happel-Stadion knowing they lie just three games from glory, and it is sure to be a charged occasion for Kovač as he contemplates the end of his career. "It is a particular joy for me, because I think this is my last big tournament," he told euro2008.com. "I enjoy every single day, not just the matches. There is a special atmosphere in the national team; we feel like we are all brothers, and I already feel sad because I know I will have to retire, but that's life. We have to give more of an opportunity to the younger players, and I'm sure they will continue in the same way."

Turkish luck

Having made his Croatia debut in 1996, the FC Salzburg veteran knows more than most how far the current team can go, starting here in Austria and Switzerland. Three straight wins in Group B have earned Slaven Bilić's side the status of favourites against Turkey, and Kovač would not disagree. "We have beaten England twice, Germany, Italy and Argentina [in the last two years], and that means we are a very good team," he said, contrasting those wins with the match that propelled Turkey into the last eight. "Against the Czechs, they were losing 2-0 and managed to turn the game around, so that means they are capable of beating anyone. They were also lucky and if Petr Čech hadn't made that mistake, things would probably have been different. I'm sure that would never happen again. So we know what we will face and, like them, we are self-confident."

Squad unity

Much of that confidence springs from the incredible bonds of friendship that bind the Croatia squad together, as evidenced by the reaction to Ivan Klasnić's winner against Poland on Monday, the Werder Bremen striker's first international goal since undergoing two kidney transplants last year. "We are a team which breathes as one person," said Kovač. "There's no big difference between the first and second team – we're just a team. You saw that after Klasnić scored. We all jumped up from the bench and celebrated his success. Some of us even cried after he scored. We're united as a team and as a country. All the Croatian people are with us and they give us a lot of strength and energy."

Brotherly love

As captain, Kovač knows that he too has an important role to play in maintaining the positive mood. An irrepressibly charismatic individual, it is a role he revels in. "I'm the oldest person in this team, and I am the leader on as well as off the pitch," he explained. "We have many players lacking international experience. Sometimes, I have to boost them or calm them down." In turn, the German-born midfield dynamo draws comfort from the presence of his own brother Robert in central defence. "It's a big thing playing with your brother," he said. "We've played together in club football and he means a lot to me, because I always feel more secure and confident when he's behind me; I know that nothing can happen." Both men will be hoping the fraternal link-up can continue well into next week.

Nihat the miracle-maker

After putting two goals past Petr Čech in the last four minutes of their final group game to lead Turkey to the UEFA EURO 2008™ quarter-finals, Nihat Kahveci is understandably on something of a high at the moment. Little wonder he can look ahead with confidence to Friday's showdown with Croatia and declare: "If we qualify for the semi-finals, it might seem like a miracle for the rest of the world. But not for us."

National dream

Even now, though, the 28-year-old Villarreal CF striker admits it is hard to take in what happened in the match against the Czech Republic in Geneva on Sunday. "It is very difficult to sum up this happiness with only one sentence," Nihat, skipping Turkey due to Emre Belözoğlu's absence through injury, told euro2008.com. "After we went 2-0 down, nobody was expecting such a victory from us. But after our first goal, we saw that they felt worried. After the goal, we talked to each other and said, 'Let's give it everything. If we lose, it's not a problem, but we should give our best'. I cannot express my feelings when I first saw the ball in the net. I think that moment was a crucial moment for the whole country. I can say that, those two goals were the best two goals that I have ever scored."

Comeback kings

It was the second time in as many games that Turkey had come from behind to secure a last-gasp win at these finals, after the 2-1 defeat of Switzerland. But Nihat longs for a more comfortable victory, saying: "I prefer scoring the first goal. We are the only team that concedes the first goal and then goes on to win. We feel very happy about that and can worry our opponents with this weapon. But, to repeat, I prefer scoring the first goal. I think we proved to everybody that the game is 90 minutes long and the Turkish national team doesn't give up before the final whistle."

Croatia encounter

Turkey have now moved from their first-round base in Nyon in western Switzerland to Krems in north-western Austria, as they prepare to take on Croatia in Vienna. "We respect Croatia," Nihat said, looking ahead to the quarter-final against Slaven Bilić's side. "They were in a tough group and collected nine points from three games. But we are in the last eight and we have enough self-confidence. We have only 90 minutes. After 90 minutes, you can play in the semi-finals and then maybe the final. Of course, mistakes will be punished at this stage. In football, little details decide results. I hope on Friday, these small details will be with us."