

Olympique Lyonnais - ACF Fiorentina

MATCH PREVIEW

Stade de Gerland, Lyon

Wednesday 17 September 2008 - 20.45CET

Group F - Matchday 1



On taking charge of Olympique Lyonnais this summer, Claude Puel was instructed by the club's ambitious president, Jean-Michel Aulas, that his long-term goal should be lifting the one piece of silverware that continues to elude France's double winners: the UEFA Champions League. As if to cut the former LOSC Lille Métropole coach a little slack, Aulas conceded that a semi-final berth this season would represent sound progress, although Puel himself is setting the bar even higher.

Lofty aspirations

"I would have preferred it if he [Aulas] said reaching the final is our objective," Puel declared ahead of Lyon's Group F opener against ACF Fiorentina. "When you start a competition you should always aim to go as far as possible." The 47-year-old's lofty aspirations are sure to please Aulas and may surprise some observers, yet Puel has never shied away from a challenge. Having won the league in his first full season in the dugout at AS Monaco FC in 1999/2000, he excelled over six years at Lille, twice guiding them into Europe's élite competition.

'Right mix'

Expectations are inevitably greater at Lyon, who are making their ninth consecutive UEFA Champions League attempt, but Puel insists his approach remains unchanged. "If you want to progress in this competition you can't only set out to defend," he explained. "You need to find the right balance between hard work, desire and skill. I had good players at Lille, that's why we beat Manchester United [FC] and AC Milan. I have good players at Lyon, too, but it's a question of finding the balance."

'Exceptional forwards'

Lyon have been eliminated by Italian opponents twice in the last three campaigns, and Puel is only too aware of the threat Fiorentina will pose. "Adrian Mutu and Alberto Gilardino are exceptional forwards, Mario Alberto Santana is also dangerous with the ball at his feet, and their midfield is hard-working and full of quality," said Puel, who could use John Mensah or Jean-Alain Boumsong as a makeshift left-back in the absence of injured pair François Clerc (knee) and Fabio Grosso (ribs).

Special occasion

While a 3-2 comeback win against OGC Nice took Lyon top of Ligue 1 on Saturday, their rivals arrived in France nursing wounds after a 2-1 reverse at SSC Napoli. However, Viola coach Cesare Prandelli is confident the special nature of the occasion will bring the best out in his men, with Fiorentina sampling the UEFA Champions League for only the second time following their 1999/2000 experience. "It was disappointing to lose to Napoli but that result has sharpened our focus," Prandelli said. "The important thing is that we learn from our mistakes."

Flowing football

The 51-year-old added: "This is an important moment for the club and I hope the players approach the game with great enthusiasm." Fiorentina's revival under Prandelli has been inspired by free-flowing football, although the coach acknowledges that they will need to show other qualities at Stade de Gerland. "You can only play attacking football when you have the ball and we know Lyon are very good at keeping possession," he said. "We'll have to work hard and make the most of our chances to attack."



Ambitious Frey hopes for happy return

ACF Fiorentina goalkeeper Sébastien Frey was in reflective mood on his return to France for the Group F encounter with Olympique Lyonnais. A decade has passed since he last visited Stade de Gerland, as a teenager with AS Cannes during his one season in Ligue 1 before a move to Italy. "Coming back has stirred up some nice memories," Frey said. "It's a pleasure to be here and to be playing in the [UEFA] Champions League with Fiorentina for the first time."

'A good career'

Paradoxically Frey, who grew up in Haute-Savoie near Lyon, is better known to followers of Serie A than to supporters in his native country. He crossed the Alps in 1998, enjoying spells at FC Internazionale Milano, Hellas Verona FC and Parma FC before joining Fiorentina in 2005. His stock may be higher on Italian soil, yet the 28-year-old dismisses suggestions that this game is an opportunity to impress his compatriots. "I don't have a lot to prove to people in France," said Frey, who has been capped twice by Les Bleus. "I left Ligue 1 at a young age but have had a good career in Italy and am appreciated there."

'Beautiful football'

Frey has tasted the UEFA Champions League with Inter and Parma, but the experience will be new for many of his team-mates as Fiorentina make their first appearance in the competition since 1999/2000. "This is a really big night for us. Helping my club get a good result is all that matters to me," said Frey, who expects a severe test from the seven-time French champions. "Lyon have played some of the most beautiful football in Europe in recent years. They have some very gifted players – as I can testify having played alongside some of them with France. They're used to these big nights. We're not as experienced but we're ambitious and gradually building our own tradition."

Toulalan warning

Meanwhile, one of Frey's colleagues in France's UEFA EURO 2008™ squad, Jérémy Toulalan, is urging Lyon to learn from mistakes made last term. The Rhone club may have progressed to the knockout stage for a fifth year running, yet they needed a dramatic rescue act after losing their opening two group matches. "We have to be quicker off the mark because it's hard to make up the lost points," the 25-year-old midfielder warned. "We feel better prepared than last year. We've conceded only two goals [in five Ligue 1 games] this season and we're playing with more discipline."

'Bayern favourites'

With FC Bayern München and FC Steaua București completing a strong section, Toulalan accepts there will be little margin for error, saying: "I see Bayern as the favourites to finish top, so it could be between Fiorentina, Steaua and ourselves for second. You always want to aim for top spot but we have to be realistic and our objective is simply to get out of the group. That's why it is so important to get a victory in the first game."