

FC Barcelona - Chelsea FC

MATCH PREVIEW

Camp Nou, Barcelona

Tuesday 28 April 2009 - 20.45CET

Matchday 11 - Semi-finals, first leg



If FC Barcelona coach Josep Guardiola is feeling the pressure of a UEFA Champions League semi-final first leg against Chelsea FC and the need to overcome recent vulnerability against English clubs, then he is not showing it.

English hoodoo

Barcelona were eliminated by Manchester United FC in last season's semi-final and by Liverpool FC the previous year and have failed to win in their past four home ties against English sides. Guardiola also knows in the last six UEFA Champions League games between these two outfits, Barça have only won when the Blues have had a player sent off. But the Catalan club's coach believes he is in charge of an extraordinary team – one which is capable of imposing itself on Chelsea. "I'm as happy as a little boy with a new pair of shoes," grinned the 38-year-old. "I don't know if this moment can ever be repeated. The world will be watching, we are playing football which gives me joy and pride and I have 100 per cent faith in my squad. The tie will only be settled in London but we will try and play at our top level, with intensity and quick, decisive passing."

Free scoring

It is the style which has made Barça leading scorers in the UEFA Champions League this season, reaching their third semi-final in four years via aggregate 6-3 and 5-1 defeats of Olympique Lyonnais and FC Bayern München. Guardiola does not subscribe to the theory that the London club's style will present his charges with a unique challenge. "Chelsea might be a little more physical and a little more direct than most sides we've played, but teams regularly try to counterattack us with speed and power," he argued. "It will be crucial to keep our shape and attack in an ordered fashion."

'Moment of truth'

Barça have all their key players fit with both Rafael Márquez and Yaya Touré likely to return having been rested in Saturday's 2-2 draw with Valencia CF. "In any season when you are playing well you reach a decisive moment, the moment of truth. This is one and we are playing a legendary team – I know it will be very tough," Guardiola added.

Team defending

Chelsea arrive at the Camp Nou with first choice left-back Ashley Cole suspended, but their coach Guus Hiddink, who has revolutionised their season since arriving in February, believes that containing this Lionel Messi-inspired side is a job for the entire team, not just Cole's likely replacement José Bosingwa. "I have watched Barça for many years because I like their attacking philosophy," said the Dutchman who has coached Spanish sides Valencia, Real Madrid CF and Real Betis Balompie.

Chelsea injuries

"Of course I've seen and studied the way Barça destroyed the Bayern defence in the quarter-final first leg and overran Bayern all over the pitch. My team must start with total concentration because we can't and won't let Barça do that to us." Hiddink is also without Ricardo Carvalho, Deco and long-term absentees Joe Cole and Paulo Ferreira, though he does have Barcelona's winning goalscorer from the 2006 UEFA Champions League final, Juliano Belletti, at his disposal. "Maybe he knows a little secret which can give us a tiny advantage," said Hiddink, his last words before battle commences typifying his jaunty humour.



Hiddink raises the bar as Chelsea soar

Guus Hiddink admitted that a run of just one defeat in 15 games since taking the reins in February has prompted a revision of his initial targets for a tenure which is proving to be the stuff of dreams for both the Dutchman and the Chelsea FC faithful.

Catalyst

Appointed as a temporary replacement for Luiz Felipe Scolari following an uninspiring goalless home draw against Hull City AFC, the size of the task facing the 62-year-old was evident as Chelsea struggled for 75 minutes of their FA Cup tie against Watford FC in his first match in the stands. A quick-fire hat-trick from Nicolas Anelka then changed the course of both that tie and Chelsea's campaign, after which they have progressed to the last four of the UEFA Champions League, where they meet FC Barcelona on Tuesday, and the final of the FA Cup against Everton FC.

One loss

"When we took over in February, Chelsea were competing for fourth and fifth position [in the Premier League]," said Hiddink, who has experienced just one defeat since succeeding Scolari. "Our first aim was to get Chelsea into next year's Champions League. You can be satisfied with climbing up the league, but in top-level football when you get where you want to be you have to restructure your ambitions and not be happy with your initial targets.

'Next step'

"If the team is doing well you make the demands higher. We did that and we have an FA Cup final spot. When we started in February if we knew we'd have a semi-final [against Barcelona] we would have thought that was terrific, but you always have to take the next step when you're a big club with ambition." Chelsea's next step is a first leg against Barça at the Camp Nou, a tie which pits together the 29-goal top scorers in the competition and the team with the best defensive record in the English top flight, the Blues having conceded just 20 goals in 34 outings.

'Fantastic team'

"I've seen Barcelona, and not just in recent weeks, playing fantastically well," continued Hiddink, who suffered defeats on his four Liga trips to Catalonia during his spells managing Valencia CF and Real Madrid CF. "These two teams both have the style to attack when they can. Barça like to attack; Chelsea are not a team to sit back and wait for things to happen. It's more or less an open clash between two teams who like to go forward."

Hiddink dream

Hiddink revealed at the weekend that he had twice played out the game in his mind, but refused to be drawn on the outcome he had imagined when questioned on the eve of the first leg. "If I could see into the future I'd be in another job," he joked. "What I try to do is analyse what can happen. Then you have to see if it's in your power to prevent them playing well while we're dangerous at the same time. I cannot predict this. I said last week that I've never lost a game in preparation – more often the reality is more cruel."

Xavi willing to play waiting game

As far as Xavi Hernández is concerned, the template for FC Barcelona to overcome Chelsea FC and reach the UEFA Champions League final is to replicate the whirlwind first half the Catalan side produced in defeating FC Bayern München in the previous round.

Power play

On that day Lionel Messi, Samuel Eto'o and Thierry Henry mounted a four-goal onslaught in the opening 43 minutes of the first leg which, effectively, ensured Barça's presence in the last four. But even if that is the dream route to follow at the Camp Nou against Guus Hiddink's side, Xavi believes Chelsea are a much tougher prospect and that the decisive moments of the tie will come in London. "It would be a huge advantage, in fact it would be a bit of a dream, if we could hit four goals against Chelsea like we did that night," said the 29-year-old.

Cerebral approach

"What we can repeat, however, is the level of play and the intensity with which we attacked Bayern. My opinion remains that we are not likely to finish the tie in the first leg – the match at Stamford Bridge will be decisive. Look what happened when Chelsea won at Anfield. Despite that victory they had to fight to stay alive in the second leg and what I feel is important is that we now have enough experience to play this cleverly over the two legs of the tie."

Record defeat

Xavi is one of those players who carries experience of all eight UEFA Champions League matches between the two clubs. In fact he, Carles Puyol and coach Josep Guardiola all played some part in Barça's 6-4 victory in the 1999/00 quarter-final which included a 5-1 second-leg triumph – Chelsea's heaviest defeat in European competition. The lasting impression he has, nine years after first testing himself against the Blues, is of immense respect.

'Top-class players'

"Chelsea do have the tremendous physical power and competitive spirit which everyone talks about but they are also now managed by a fine Dutch coach and I think it's important to point out that they have top-class footballers in the side," Xavi said. "[Frank] Lampard and [Didier] Drogba stand out but there's also the experience of John Terry – he and [Michael] Essien are among the best in the world in their positions. I admire Terry and have a great deal of respect for him. In fact I well remember how his aerial ability knocked us out of the competition four years ago."

Technically stronger

That said, the Barça playmaker is uncomfortable with the idea that the power of the English Premier League is, de facto, too much for even the top sides in Spain. "I don't accept that the Premier League is the best in the world, in fact I'd say that in technical and tactical terms our league is superior. I know that a great deal was made of how Liverpool eliminated Real Madrid but one game doesn't prove anything conclusively. Barça are not in this semi-final by chance and we've defeated good sides like Bayern and Olympique Lyonnais to get here. We are ready for this test."

Malouda trusts in Blues' common purpose

Chelsea FC coach Guus Hiddink may have little option but to pit José Bosingwa against Lionel Messi in Tuesday's UEFA Champions League semi-final first leg, but winger Florent Malouda believes teamwork, and not the performance of the out-of-position Portuguese full-back, will be key to the Londoners getting a result away to FC Barcelona.

Leading scorer

With regular left-back Ashley Cole suspended, and potential deputy Ricardo Carvalho missing with a hamstring injury, Hiddink will deploy right-back Bosingwa on the opposite side of a four-man defence at the Camp Nou. The 26-year-old has played less than an hour of football – in his new position during Saturday's 1-0 defeat of West Ham United FC – in a month because of a hamstring strain of his own. He is likely to be in for a testing night as he squares off against Messi, the competition's eight-goal leading scorer.

Support

When asked whether he had trained specifically with Bosingwa for this European opener, left-winger Malouda said: "Since he's been back from injury we've spoken a lot, and will speak a lot more preparing for this game. But it's not just about José, it's about teamwork. Everybody is focused on José because he's facing Messi, but everybody in this team helps everyone else; he'll need us and we'll need him. Messi is really impressive, not many players can do what he does on the pitch, but hopefully tomorrow we won't see his qualities."

Upturn in fortunes

Unity has been a feature of this Chelsea side since Hiddink replaced Luiz Felipe Scolari on a temporary contract for the rest of the season in February, the Blues only losing once in 15 games following his appointment. Malouda has been integral to that upturn in fortunes, finally finding his feet after struggling to adapt under three previous managers after his €20m move from Olympique Lyonnais in summer 2007.

Fitness work

With this semi-final to come, as well as an FA Cup final against Everton FC on 30 May, the French international believes "now is the perfect time to be in form". He added: "It's always difficult [to play at your peak] if you have fitness problems, especially in the English league. I started the season well then had a few physical issues which needed addressing. I kept working every day and now you can see the results. I'm enjoying playing for Chelsea and it's great to be involved in a game like this."

'Ambition'

Turning his attention to the Spanish Liga leaders, the 28-year-old said: "Everybody enjoys the way Barcelona play their football. They have an attacking style and score a lot of goals. I respect that and hope we can show that we can match them. We're in the semi-finals because we won the right to be here. When you reach this stage everyone wants to go on and reach the final. We came here with an ambition to do something special." With Chelsea, and Malouda, in form, that might just be possible.