

# ENGLAND - FINLAND

## MATCH PREVIEW

Örjans vall, Halmstad

Monday 15 June 2009 - 18.15CET (18.15 local time)

Group B - Matchday 1



### Finnish outsiders aim to steal spotlight

The Finland coach Markku Kanerva said "it suits us perfectly" for all the talk to be about England before the sides get the UEFA European Under-21 Championship under way at Örjans vall in Halmstad on Monday.

#### First finals

Drawn in Group B alongside the 2007 semi-finalists and their fellow heavyweights Germany and Spain, Finland are readying themselves for a daunting introduction to tournament football as they compete in their first major finals. "It's going to be a huge challenge for us, that's for sure," said Kanerva, "but we've prepared very well and are ready to meet that challenge. England are among the favourites and therefore have all the pressure on them – it's our goal to surprise them."

#### No underdogs

Stuart Pearce did not sound like a man preparing to be caught unawares, however, insisting his team's preparation had been thorough. "You can't underestimate anybody in international football; it's impossible now," said the England manager. "I've seen enough Finland games, six matches, to know they've got a resilience about them. I don't see underdogs here. Whoever you play, you need to be at your out-and-out best to be competitive, and if not you'll be beaten."

#### Mammoth shoot-out

England have twice won the competition and have been semi-finalists on five further occasions, including the last edition when they were eliminated after a mammoth shoot-out against hosts the Netherlands. "We had camaraderie in 2007 but that grew during the tournament," said Pearce. "Now I feel the closeness is there straight away. The players' attitude on the training camp and their focus off it has been fantastic, as good as I've ever known it. There's a lot of talent here."

#### Onuoha concern

The 47-year-old's primary injury concern is Nedum Onuoha's thigh problem. "We'll make a decision on him tomorrow," said Pearce, who could replace the Manchester City FC centre-half with club-mate Micah Richards – short of matches after a groin injury – or James Tomkins, short of experience having only made his debut on Monday. Craig Gardner may fill in at right-back having played an attacking role in that 7-0 friendly victory against Azerbaijan.

#### Options

Finland are at full strength, giving Kanerva decisions to make. Does he start with Juha Hakola on the left of midfield and Perparim Hetemaj behind the lone striker, likely to be Berat Sadik, in his favoured 4-2-3-1 formation? Or deploy Hetemaj on the left with Jarno Parikka playing the No10 role? There will certainly be an emphasis on strength, leading to a potential clash of styles. "We're quite a physical team like England were," continued the coach, "but nowadays they play more modern football with more emphasis on positions which makes things more difficult for us."

#### Pride

The softly-spoken former central defender, 45, knows nothing can take away the honour of his side becoming the first team from the country to reach such a level, but he acknowledged that "we can feel even prouder after the tournament by getting some good results". Three points on Monday would suit him perfectly.



### Gardner plants seeds for England success

As he sat in a room surrounded by trophies at the home of Tvååkers IF which England are using as their training base in Sweden, Craig Gardner could be forgiven for thinking he has a realistic chance of getting hold of some silverware of his own when the UEFA European Under-21 Championship concludes in a little over two weeks' time.

#### Talent

England arrived at the finals on the back of a run of only two defeats since November 2005, and having beaten Azerbaijan 7-0 in their last run-out before Monday's Group B opener against Finland. Gardner, who scored the third in that romp with a crisply taken half-volley, said "team spirit in the camp is massive" and believes England's unity as well as their undoubted talent could drive them on to glory in Sweden.

#### 'Spirits high'

"It's a massive tournament and the whole of England will be watching us," said the 22-year-old. "Of course we're excited but everybody is relaxed as well. The mood in the camp is excellent, confidence and spirits are high and all the lads are buzzing. Obviously we're not taking the game lightly, we know what [Finland] have got and what they can do so we're going to go out there and as soon as that whistle goes we'll be going for it."

#### 'Unbelievable' tempo

Gardner faces a nervous wait to see whether he will feature in Stuart Pearce's starting XI. He admitted himself that the tempo in training has been "unbelievably high" and that the manager "will have headaches picking the team", but is used to such concerns as a member of a talented Aston Villa FC squad which recently finished sixth in the Premier League and progressed to the UEFA Cup knockout rounds.

#### Utility man

A central midfielder by trade, he was used in various positions, including right-back, by Villa last season (appearing in 27 games) but started last Monday's friendly against Azerbaijan as the right-sided attacker in the three-pronged forward line favoured by Pearce. A lively presence going forward and solid defensively that night, he knows Finland in Halmstad represents a far sterner challenge: "As a group we know Finland really well as we've been watching videos of them. They finished top of their [qualifying] group and are a strong, hard-working team so we know it's going to be a tough game."

#### 'Great, great team'

Club-mates James Milner and Gabriel Agbonlahor – the latter, like Gardner, Birmingham-born and a Villa supporter – are among the star names in the England squad and Gardner says "it's been a massive encouragement" having them involved along with Theo Walcott, another with experience of the senior squad. "We're going to go out there and players like them are going to be on fire. The gaffer has a great, great team here ... so hopefully we can do well," he added. How well remains to be seen, but the fact England have been practising penalties daily shows they are readying themselves for challenges beyond the group stage.

### Finland captain awaits Walcott reunion

Finland captain Tim Sparv may be evasive when asked how he plans to deal with former Southampton FC club-mate Theo Walcott on Monday – "I tried for two years and couldn't" – but on the subject of his side's chances at their maiden UEFA European Under-21 Championship he is much more candid.

### English team-mate

The 22-year-old midfielder Sparv was a trainee at Southampton between 2003 and January 2007 and watched how Walcott, now 20, surged into the first team, earning a move to Arsenal FC in 2006. "Everyone in the academy team at Southampton knew he was a good player, so we're not that surprised that things have gone very well for him," he told uefa.com. "He was one of the best players during my time there and he progressed very fast from the youth setup to the first team – and now he is at Arsenal and in the England national team. We noticed early on that he had amazing pace and good technique. He's going to be a big star at Arsenal and hopefully also in the England team so I wish him all the best ... but not against us.

### Tired legs

"England have a lot of good players but he's one to look out for," Sparv continued, turning attention to Monday's meeting. "I'll be giving some hints to my team-mates but how can you stop him? I tried for two years at Southampton and couldn't and I'm not getting any quicker. We all have to help each other to prevent him scoring." Walcott, as Sparv knows only too well, is a class act, but he is not the only one in the England camp, with the likes of Gabriel Agbonlahor, Lee Cattermole and Mark Noble also boasting plenty of Premier League experience. Not that Sparv feels he has reason to be overawed. "Many of the bigger players have had a long season at their club teams, so maybe they will be a bit tired when they come here – we'll see," he said. "On paper they have the stronger team and when they see the list of the teams we play for they must be laughing. But when the game starts, it's eleven against eleven, so anything can happen."

### Home encounter

Against England, Sparv will have the added motivation of playing in front of his home crowd, since he joined Halmstads BK from Southampton. "It's definitely something I am looking forward to, it's special in many ways; it's my home ground, it's the opening game," he explained. "To be the captain and lead out the team will be something of a highlight too, absolutely. I haven't spoken to Walcott for a while now but I have been speaking to [another former Saints trainee] Martin Cranie. We all lived together for two years in Southampton so know each other very well. We've been giving each other grief. It will be fun meeting up with them and hopefully I'll be the one laughing at the end of it."