

# BELARUS - ITALY

## MATCH PREVIEW

### Olympia, Helsingborg

#### Tuesday 23 June 2009 - 20.45CET (20.45 local time)

#### Group A - Matchday 3



Italy may need only one point against Belarus to secure progress to the semi-finals of the 2009 UEFA European Under-21 Championship, but coach Pierluigi Casiraghi says the match in Helsingborg could be the toughest of his side's three Group A ties.

#### **Casiraghi cautious**

The five-time champions lead the section after drawing with Serbia and beating hosts Sweden 2-1. Defeat, though, could see Belarus advance in their place after Yuri Kurnenin's team grasped a lifeline by following up their 5-1 loss to Sweden by holding Serbia. "We have a slight advantage but these kind of games are the most difficult to prepare for," Casiraghi said. "It just takes one mistake, one unlucky rebound or deflection, to spoil all the work we have put in."

#### **Balotelli suspended**

Midfielder Claudio Marchisio has recovered from the knock he sustained against Sweden so Italy will just be without striker Mario Balotelli, who is suspended after being sent off in that game. The 18-year-old's absence will force Casiraghi into a change of personnel but not formation, with the 40-year-old sticking to his preferred 4-3-3 lineup with right-winger Ignazio Abate favourite to come in for Balotelli. "You can't replace Balotelli for his quality, talent or ability to play different roles during a match," Casiraghi said. "We played very well in our first game against Serbia and well at first against Sweden before Balotelli was sent off. I don't see any reason to change system now. We have been working on it for several years."

#### **'Mature'**

Although Belarus must win – and by a three-goal margin if Sweden and Serbia draw – Casiraghi still expects them to take a cautious approach. "Against Sweden they played an attacking game and were punished by five goals. Against Serbia they were more cautious and played much better, so I anticipate something similar against us, for most of the game at least. They are very strong physically and we have seen in many matches at this tournament how important the physical aspect is. However, my players are mature enough to understand what kind of performance is needed."

#### **'Heroic act'**

Belarus coach Kurnenin, meanwhile, will be looking to history for inspiration. In 2004 Belarus were outsiders when they beat Italy, the eventual champions, in their first match at a U21 final tournament. Five years on another victory would come as an even greater surprise. "We all know our history," Kurnenin said. "I was at that game and I will certainly be telling my players about that small act of heroism by their predecessors."

#### **'Not lost hope'**

"Anything can happen in football. One team can be much stronger, but if you are lucky you can win. We have not lost hope. We have all our strength and energy and have a chance of getting a result. Italy remain favourites in both the group and the competition. They have everything, but sometimes concentration can decide a game like this. We have to be united and do our best to win." Kurnenin has no injury worries and is likely to keep faith with the players who shut out Serbia. As Casiraghi suggested, patience will be the key. "It's not the right moment to change tactics," Kurnenin said. "We have hardly played a match with two strikers. We will deploy the same 4-2-3-1 model."



### **Cannavaro shows Criscito the way**

Domenico Criscito was seven when his idol Fabio Cannavaro first helped Italy win the UEFA European Under-21 Championship in 1994 and nine when the centre-back repeated the feat two years later.

#### **'Cannavaro's footsteps'**

Having missed out on the chance to emulate Cannavaro in 2007 as a member of the Azzurrini team eliminated in the group stage, the left-back is determined to make his mark on the tournament this time round. "It would be great to follow in Cannavaro's footsteps and win the tournament here in Sweden," the defender told uefa.com.

#### **In demand**

Born in Naples like the Italy captain, Criscito has been on Juventus's books for the past five seasons, but it is unlikely he will be linking up with Cannavaro in Turin next term. He has spent the last 18 months on loan at Genoa CFC and the club have the option to buy him this summer. "I'm only focused on winning the European Championship," he said. "We will see where I will play next season." After watching his ruthless performances against Serbia and Sweden, both clubs will probably be doing everything they can to secure his services.

#### **'No easy games'**

Italy are top of Group A with four points, but are yet to secure a place in the semi-finals ahead of their game against Belarus on Tuesday. A draw would be enough for the Azzurrini, who could also progress if they lose by less than a three-goal margin and Sweden and Serbia draw the section's other match. "We will try to attack as we always do," Criscito said. "I think Belarus will try to close down the space as they did so well against Serbia. Both sides need a victory so I think we will see an entertaining game. I don't think at this level there are any easy teams to face. The eight teams here are more or less on the same level."

#### **Strong defence**

The 22-year-old is playing at left-back in a defensive line that has only conceded one late goal so far. "We played very well in defence in the first two games of the tournament," he said. "The whole team played well. We want to win to finish first in the group, not really because we have any kind of preference about who we would meet in the semi-finals – there is not much difference if you play England or Germany – but because we are here to win every game play."

#### **'Extra motivation'**

Criscito believes more Italian fans will turn their attention to the U21s now the senior team have been knocked out of the FIFA Confederations Cup, ensuring an added incentive for Casiraghi's side. "I'm sorry Italy were eliminated but we are here for a different tournament and we just have to focus on that," he said. "Probably we will have more eyes on us now the senior team are no longer playing but this just gives us extra motivation to do well."

### **Kovel measures size of Belarus task**

Belarus have it all to do against Italy in their final Group A fixture in Helsingborg and forward Leonid Kovel is under no illusions about the size of the task. "This will be our hardest game," he told uefa.com.

#### **The hard way**

The eastern Europeans need a victory over the Azzurrini and a win for either side in the section's other match between Serbia and Sweden to rise from bottom position to claim a semi-final berth. In the event of a Serbia-Sweden draw in Malmo, they will have to beat Italy by three clear goals. "We will do our best, but Italy only need a point," the 22-year-old said. "I think they will play in their usual way. It will be very difficult, I can feel it even now."

#### **Onus to attack**

The Belarus vice-captain sees similarities between Italy and the Serbia team they held 0-0 in their second group game on Friday. "We expect more of the same from the Italians. They are mobile too, they have good skill and technique." But this time Belarus will have to push forward in search of goals. "We had good moments against Serbia," he said, citing several of the counterattacking opportunities Yuri Kurnenin's men fashioned. "We have to use the ball more effectively in those situations. We have to be patient waiting for our chance."

#### **Match fitness**

Kovel is one of the most versatile players in the Belarus squad – a forward for the Under-21s who plays right-back for the senior side. Formerly with FC Dinamo Minsk and FC Karpaty Lviv, he is now at FC Saturn Moskovskaya Oblast in the Russian Premier-Liga. If he has figured in eleven of Saturn's 12 matches so far this season, other members of the Belarus party arrived in Sweden short on playing time. Hence, perhaps, Kovel's concern about their physical condition ahead of the Italy game. "We did not have much time to recover," he said, adding: "We will see how the Italians handle it too. However, we are ready to fight and I think we can expect a good game."

#### **'Use your head'**

Three of Italy's players have shaved their heads during this UEFA European U21 Championship yet Kovel cannot see the trend catching on in the Belarus camp. "We have our own habits," he said. "We always get together as a group before each match. We talk about the game, about tactics. I don't think having your head cropped can help. If you are lucky, you are lucky." Of course it is not just about luck – you have to be clever too, as Kovel notes. Described as "one of the fastest players at these finals" by Serbia coach Slobodan Krčmarević, the Belarus No9 said: "Running is not the main thing in football. You have to use your head on the football pitch." Shaved or otherwise.