



2009 UEFA EUROPEAN WOMEN'S CHAMPIONSHIP

MATCH PREVIEW



Finland



England

Turku Stadium, Turku

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Matchday 4 - Quarter-finals

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Committed to the future of European football

Finland unfazed by England hoodoo

Finland coach Michael Kåld has stoked up the atmosphere before the quarter-final in Turku by calling on his team to break the hoodoo that England has over them. No Finland team, women or men, has ever managed to beat these opponents in a senior international.

Group winners

The home nation finished first in Group A whereas England advanced as one of the two best third-placed teams from Group C. But history suggests otherwise, nine fixtures between the teams producing five England wins and four draws.

Great game

The Finland coach believes it is time to draw a line under that particular statistic. "We have never won against England and now's the time to do it," said Kåld. The teams fought out a thrilling group-stage encounter at UEFA WOMEN'S EURO 2005™ when England, having led 2-0, then required a last-minute winner from Karen Carney to pull through. However, it was Finland who progressed from the group whereas England's hopes of winning their own tournament ended after two defeats.

'Hard training'

In February the teams played two friendlies in Cyprus, a 2-2 draw followed by a 4-1 win for England. "That came after some hard training for our players whereas the competition in England was in full swing so they were very fit," added Kåld, who may be without Sanna Valkonen due to a foot injury.

'Big expectations'

Kåld knows expectations are growing in Finland with a possible place in the final only two games away but denies that it could prove a burden for his players. "Of course there are big expectations and the crowd will be supporting us," he added. "They will want us to go to Tampere for the semi-final and the team wants it as well, but first we have to do our jobs. When the referee blows his whistle we shall see what happens."

Fan boost

England manager Hope Powell, who could still be without central defender Anita Asante due to a knee injury and has right-back Alex Scott doubtful with a groin problem, is hoping that if her players carry out their instructions correctly then the sell-out crowd might just apply pressure on the home side. "We experienced it in France [in the decisive 2007 FIFA Women's World Cup qualifier] when we were on top and the crowd turned on their own team," she said. "If it happens it could work in our favour. The whole occasion and atmosphere warrants a big crowd and I think our players will enjoy the occasion.

'One chance'

"It's been really tough for us so far, losing the first game to Italy and then getting round a difficult situation against Russia when we were 2-0 down. The players are well aware of what we have been through to get where we are and they are determined to stay in the tournament. We only have one chance now and we must make sure we are fully focused."

Vaelma comes home for big occasion

Finland travelled to Turku on Tuesday for their UEFA WOMEN'S EURO 2009™ quarter-final against England – a homecoming for defender Petra Vaelma.

Homecoming

The 27-year-old hails from the south-western port city, and is relishing Thursday's sell-out encounter after having helped the hosts win Group A with three matches at Helsinki's Olympic Stadium. "It is simply marvellous to play in front of friends in Turku," Vaelma told uefa.com. "There has been some good-natured joking in the team about playing in Turku, but honestly I think this is a good thing for everyone. I think new surroundings for a change will do us good."

Elusive goal

Last month Vaelma celebrated the tenth anniversary of her senior Finland debut but the Norwegian-based Klepp IL right-back, who filled a central defensive slot in the last group game against Ukraine, is still waiting for her first international goal after 86 appearances. She came mighty close in the 2-1 win against the Netherlands last Wednesday that sealed progress, hitting the crossbar from distance, having earlier provided the cross for Laura Österberg Kalmari's opening goal. "That was close then, and thought I might score against Ukraine after that," she said. "It was not to be, but it would be great to score in Turku."

England threat

However, Vaelma knows she will have her hands full at the other end against England. "They have got better as the tournament has progressed," Vaelma said. "England have really good wingers and of course Kelly Smith is the player to watch especially."

Pressure

Then again, unlike England, Finland topped their group. "We have played well and the home crowd is a big advantage to us," she said. "Certainly there is pressure, now it is all about winning or we are out of the finals. I think the pressure is only a positive thing. We tend to play not so well when there is nothing riding on the game. Now the stakes are really high and I am sure that will get the best out of us."

Making amends

There may also be some unfinished business on Vaelma's mind; she was involved when her side were beaten 3-2 by a last-gasp Karen Carney goal in a dramatic UEFA WOMEN'S EURO 2005™ opener in Manchester, when England were the hosts. "Certainly we remember that and it is payback time now," Vaelma said. "One thing is certain, both teams are better now than four years ago."

Aluko all out for England victory

She has a first-class law degree and once scored the only goal in a FA Women's Cup final but Eniola Aluko still gets excited when big things happen to her – and Thursday's quarter-final against Finland definitely comes into that category.

Warm memories

The teams faced each other in their opening fixture of the UEFA European Women's Championship that England hosted four years ago and Aluko still has warm memories of the occasion. She hopes the game in Turku will recapture the euphoria she felt when England edged a thrilling encounter with a last-minute winner.

'Ecstatic' feeling

"It's a great memory for me as there were 30,000 people in the stadium and it was a very tough game," Aluko recalled. "We went 2-0 up before Finland came back and then Karen Carney scored a great winning goal. I was ecstatic, as if I had scored the goal myself, and I hope to have the same feelings tomorrow. It's exciting to be in the quarter-final against the host nation and it's going to be a great occasion. I'm sure every player will give 100 per cent because it's one of the biggest games of our careers."

'Great confidence'

Aluko, who scored the equaliser against Russia in a Group C game that England went on to win 3-2, says her experience of playing in the United States for Saint Louis Athletica has helped her in this tournament. "I see myself as a girl from Birmingham who is fortunate to play in a great league and to play alongside someone like Marta gives me great confidence," she added. "I've scored some important goals through the season and it was a great honour to be voted into the Women's Professional Soccer All-Star XI."

'No fear'

"I've improved in every way and have become a stronger player. Every game there is a big occasion and playing in a tournament like this is no longer a fear for me." She scored the winner for Charlton Athletic WFC in the 2005 FA Women's Cup final against Everton LFC and naturally would like to add to her tally in another high-profile fixture. "Of course the object for every striker is to score goals but the main thing is that the team wins. If we win and I score then that's even better."