

VfB Stuttgart - FC Barcelona

MATCH PREVIEW

Gottlieb-Daimler, Stuttgart

Tuesday 2 October 2007 - 20.45CET

Group E - Matchday 2



VfB Stuttgart coach Armin Veh may admit that facing FC Barcelona in the UEFA Champions League is the realisation of a long-held ambition, but with three Group E points at stake he is refusing to be dazzled by the luminaries in blue and maroon, even if Ronaldinho is among them.

Respect for Cruyff

"This is a dream come true," he said. "I used to watch Johan Cruyff's side and loved the way they played, so free-flowing, so attacking. Ever since I started coaching it has been a dream of mine to stand on the touchline against Barcelona." Veh could be forgiven for lamenting that his wish has not been granted at a different time. The German champions have endured a prosaic start to their title defence, their 2-1 weekend reverse at FC Hansa Rostock being a fourth defeat in eight Bundesliga outings. But the coach is undaunted, saying: "It's not time to talk of salvaging our season yet – there are only eight games gone."

Playing catch-up

There is also one gone in their group-stage campaign, but because Stuttgart lost it 2-1 at Rangers FC there is increased onus on them getting something from Tuesday's encounter. "Barcelona are obviously stronger than us and they will start as massive favourites, but we won't change our way of playing just because it is them," said Veh, who will wait as long as possible to assess the fitness of Yıldırım Baştürk after Thomas Hitzlsberger was ruled out with a broken toe. The visitors have problems of their own: Yaya Touré joined Gianluca Zambrotta and Samuel Eto'o on the sidelines when he damaged his thigh in Saturday's 4-1 victory at Levante UD, and Gabriel Milito is struggling with a hip injury.

Tale of the unexpected

Such concerns are a far cry from last week when Stuttgart played host to a Pumpkin Regatta, where grown men climbed into enormous fruits and paddled across a small stretch of water. It made for unusual viewing, and the consensus among many in the city is that the sight of VfB claiming three UEFA Champions League points against Barça would be no less unexpected.

High standard

Yet the Catalan outfit, and in particular their coach, are taking nothing for granted. "It's the Champions League and no game is easy," said Frank Rijkaard. "The standard is always very high, and we'll be playing a team with their crowd behind them. I understand why people would say we are favourites but you have to prove it on the pitch."

Ronaldinho back

Available after missing the 3-0 Matchday 1 victory against Olympique Lyonnais, Carles Puyol is hoping to return at the Gottlieb-Daimler-Stadion. It is a venue where, despite their problems, Stuttgart remain formidable opposition, and it is more than 12 months since Bundesliga opposition went away with three points; something not lost on Rijkaard: "Stuttgart are a good, strong team, especially at home, so we have to prepare well and work hard. I never underestimate our opponents before the fight." Nor, it seems, does Veh.



MATCH PREVIEW

Gómez has extra spur to beat Barça

VfB Stuttgart's half-Spanish striker Mario Gómez insists family pride will be at stake when the Bundesliga title-holders welcome the might of FC Barcelona to the Gottlieb-Daimler-Stadion in Group E on Tuesday.

Madrid links

The 22-year-old has made his mark in Germany over the last 12 months, helping Stuttgart end a 15-year wait for a Bundesliga title, marking his senior international debut in February with a goal, and beating a host of stellar names to claim the German Footballer of the Year award. Yet with the UEFA Champions League returning to the Swabian city for the first time in three and a half years, Gómez is hoping to make an impression even closer to home. "The Spanish side of my family are all Real Madrid [CF] supporters so they will have extra cause to cheer Stuttgart on," he said. "Hopefully I can satisfy them."

Romário idolatry

Gómez owes his Spanish blood and Latin name to his father, José, a man who played a big role in his early development and whose love of the game in his homeland has evidently rubbed off on his son. "I used to love watching Romário when I was a youngster," Gómez recalled. "He really was excellent and the memories of him are very special to me." These betray a grudging respect for Barcelona; one which extends to Frank Rijkaard's current charges although the youngster hopes a partisan home crowd can help unsettle the visitors, saying: "Barcelona are a very strong side but we're at home so we will have big support and that could be key. This is not simply a big game for me but a big game for the whole team."

Müller comparison

With four goals, Gómez is the only Stuttgart player with more than a solitary Bundesliga strike this season, eclipsing the likes of Ewerthon, Cacau and Ciprian Marica. He has some way to go before reaching the mark of 1,000 career goals Romário recently achieved, though it is to the great Gerd Müller that he has been compared. Standing at almost 1.90m the likeness is not immediately obvious but an international record of three goals in three games shows promise and a strike against Barcelona will help cement his reputation – and a place in family folklore.