Will Southgate stick or twist with Foden?

Gareth Southgate’s England squad selection for Euro 2024 received widespread approval for being bold and courageous – and yet he is still revisiting a debate stretching back two decades.

It is a conversation that returns to the era when England’s then-manager Sven-Goran Eriksson failed to cash in what looked like a golden ticket stamped with the names of Steven Gerrard, Frank Lampard and Paul Scholes.

Eriksson’s star-struck approach led him to pack his team with England’s best individuals rather than shape a fully-functioning balanced side, a forced and flawed strategy that left the so-called ‘Golden Generation’ unfulfilled at international level while sweeping up major prizes regularly with their clubs.

It ended with a disillusioned Scholes, wasted on the left flank at Euro 2004 in Portugal, calling time early on his international career, a world-class operator with Manchester United marginalised by England.

And now there are hints of old arguments being raked over once more as England continue their Euro 2024 campaign against Denmark in Frankfurt on Thursday.

Southgate is not at the Eriksson stage yet – indeed he may never reach it – but he will be aware of the growing volume of the discussion around Manchester City’s Phil Foden, England’s young superstar Jude Bellingham and the make-up of his midfield elsewhere.

All the indications backstage in Frankfurt suggested Southgate will keep faith with Foden in the mainly left flank role he

filled against Serbia, with Liverpool’s Trent Alexander-Arnold alongside Declan Rice in the centre.

It has not silenced the argument and the noise increased after Foden – the Footballer of the Year with 27 league goals as Manchester City secured a fourth successive title – cut a peripheral figure in England’s opening Euro 2024 win against Serbia in Gelsenkirchen, while Bellingham was the dominant personality in all aspects, scoring the decisive goal.

Southgate was playing his cards close to his chest when asked about his team selection for England’s second group game against the Danes.

Will he stick or twist? Will Southgate retain belief that Foden’s brilliance at club level will naturally translate into Euro 2024, or does he go for a smoother fit on the left flank? Would a change to Foden’s role be an early admission of defeat?

He also staked a lot on choosing Alexander-Arnold in midfield with Arsenal’s Rice, but that may yet be a horses for courses pick depending on the style and standard of opposition.

Southgate has a track record of not changing teams early in major tournaments so the smart money is on him retaining an unchanged side – but if and when he does, there will be firm focus on Foden and Alexander-Arnold to further back up the manager’s faith, or there may be changes ahead.

England’s manager would be courageous to change it. He will also be showing the courage of his convictions to keep it as it was. It is the balancing act of an England manager.

Southgate certainly gave a glowing reference to trusted old lieutenant Kieran Trippier, whose role at left-back on the side that failed to function against Serbia was highlighted alongside Foden’s display in front of him.

“Ask anyone who plays in front of Kieran,” said Southgate. “They will tell you the way he communicates and talks them through the game is an enormous help.”

How Southgate solves the Foden conundrum will fundamentally shape England’s campaign in Germany. It may leave him with the hardest choice of all as Euro 2024 moves on: whether to keep faith with Foden or look elsewhere within his squad.

Bellingham’s role as the focal point and driving force of England’s team has resulted in Foden being pushed into a wider role. When he moved into more central areas, he still failed to have any impact in the 1-0 victory against the Serbs.

Southgate will not be making any adjustments to the role of Bellingham, who received lavish praise from Denmark coach Kasper Hjulmand.



Phil Foden created one chance against Serbia on Sunday [Getty Images]

“You see how good he is at 20. I think he will be very, very good when he is 23,” Hjulmand said.

“You see the way he carries himself, how he plays, and you are

looking at a great player.”

Foden is convinced he can make it work with Bellingham and improve as Euro 2024 progresses. Now he must hope his manager feels the same, with Newcastle United’s impressive Anthony Gordon pushing his claims and looking a more natural fit with his pace and smooth, direct approach down the left.

For Foden to make his case more compelling, he has to impose himself on proceedings in a manner he has done all too rarely for England – and do it against Denmark on Thursday.

Ian Wright and Cesc Fabregas both believe the initiative lies with Foden.

“Do you want it enough to make a difference and hold the ball for your team? Do you want to make things happen? Do you enjoy getting the ball under pressure?” said Fabregas.

“You need to take this responsibility to grow. I think players like Foden, they need to step up.”

Foden hardly seems the type to be intimidated or shrink in the the presence of a colleague, but there is no doubt the player seen at Manchester City has not presented himself too often for England.

Time is short at major tournaments. Margins for error can be very small.

Denmark did not entirely convince with constant denials that they still feel a major sense of injustice about the manner of their defeat by England in the Euro 2020 semi-final at Wembley – when Harry Kane scoring the deciding goal in a 2-1 win from a rebound following a highly contentious penalty awarded for a challenge on Raheem Sterling.

Under their excellent coach Hjulmand, they present stubborn and dangerous opposition – making it even more important Southgate gets the key choices right.

Source: BBC