

Five issues England must resolve to deliver on expectation at Euro 2024

AFP

Booed by their own fans and heavily criticised by the media back home, England's Euro 2024 campaign is off to a stuttering start despite picking up four points from their opening two games.

An underwhelming 1-0 win over Serbia was followed by a disjointed display in a 1-1 draw with Denmark.

Gareth Southgate's men are still almost certain to make the knockout stages and can win Group C with victory over Slovenia in Cologne on Tuesday.

However, Southgate has several fires to fight if the Three Lions are to deliver on the expectation to become European champions for the very first time.

– Problems with the press –

In response to questioning over why England have sat back after going in front early in both their opening games, Southgate has conceded his players are not at the physical level needed to press for 90 minutes.

"We are not pressing well enough, with enough intensity," said the England manager. "We have limitations in how we can do that with the physical condition."

A gruelling club season for a number of England stars is little excuse as the likes of Germany, Spain and Portugal have made flying starts with a similar workload also weighing on the legs of their squads.

Indeed, Southgate has hinted the opposite is the case as many of his squad had not played a competitive 90 minutes for nearly a month before facing Serbia and finds himself left hoping they will regain match sharpness as the tournament progresses.

– No natural left-back –

Southgate's gamble on bringing Luke Shaw as his only natural left-back in a 26-man squad already looks misjudged.

Shaw has not played a minute for club or country since February and has still not been fit enough to join in team training in Germany.

With the Manchester United defender set to miss the Slovenia clash, Southgate must now decide if he can risk throwing him straight back into competitive action during the knockout stages even if the 28-year-old does prove his fitness in time.

Kieran Trippier has deputised ably at left-back but his tendency to come inside is exacerbated by Phil Foden also wanting to drift infield from a wide left position.

– Who completes the midfield? –

Jude Bellingham and Declan Rice remain pivotal to England's hopes despite failing to impress against Denmark, but who plays alongside them in midfield is up for debate.

Southgate's experiment of shunting Liverpool right-back Trent Alexander-Arnold into midfield has so far failed to pay off.

Alexander-Arnold has been replaced by Chelsea's Conor Gallagher in both the opening two matches.

Southgate drew opprobrium for saying England lack a natural successor to Calvin Phillips, who has struggled at club level since playing a starring role at Euro 2020.

Youngsters Kobbie Mainoo and Adam Wharton are the other options but neither has started a competitive international before.

– Dealing with expectation –

Rarely have England ever begun a major tournament with greater expectation.

The quartet of Foden, Bellingham, Bukayo Saka and Harry Kane should be the envy of Europe after they combined for 114 goals in club football in the 2023/24 season.

Yet, Rice has admitted the Three Lions are putting so much pressure on themselves to deliver it is having a negative effect.

“We are all so desperate to do the country proud,” said the Arsenal midfielder.

“We are all so desperate to win, to be leaders, to go out there and give people memories for lifetimes.”

Southgate has urged his players to “walk towards the expectations” rather than be frightened by the challenge.

But the time has now come for England to do their talking on the field.

– Can Kane kick on? –

Kane was unusually the target for some of the fiercest criticism despite scoring his 64th international goal against Denmark.

The England captain was replaced with over 20 minutes to go in Frankfurt and even faced calls to be dropped if his performance does not improve against Slovenia.

However, Kane has been here before and is by a distance England’s most reliable source of goals.

He failed to score in the group stage at both the last Euros and World Cup, before scoring six times in six knockout games at those tournaments.

“I know when major tournament football is on it’s always going to be heightened, performance is going to be scrutinised,” said Kane.

“If I’m honest with myself, have I played the best that I know I can? No. But I didn’t score in the group stage at the World Cup, I didn’t score in the group stage at the Euros. So from my point of view, it’s a bonus to be one goal ahead.”