

YOUNG STARS IMPRESS FOR CONFIDENT ENGLAND

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If England beat Greece in Athens in Wednesday's World Cup qualifier, Sven Goran Eriksson will have made the best start of any England manager – five consecutive victories. His team's emphatic 4-0 defeat of Mexico in last week's friendly suggested not only that a good result in Greece is possible, but also that Eriksson has quickly succeeded in building an enterprising squad whose members are hungry to learn and eager to impress.

Such a positive state of affairs is in stark contrast to the mood pervading the England camp last Autumn. On a wet and miserable Saturday in October, England were beaten by Germany in the last match staged at Wembley Stadium, Kevin Keegan immediately resigned as national coach, and World Cup qualification was a forlorn and distant dream.

Seven months later, there is a sense of optimism and purpose about England, for which Eriksson takes great credit. His modest, dignified demeanour and obvious tactical awareness have transformed the national team from a dispirited, seemingly directionless bunch of individuals into a cohesive and motivated team in which each player understands and is comfortable with his role. There is still a long and difficult road to travel before England book their place at the World Cup 2002 Finals; but qualification is now at least a possibility. Whatever happens in the qualification campaign, Euro 2004 is beginning to look like a realistic target.

Eriksson's achievement so far has been to give several talented, promising youngsters responsibility at international level, and to balance their exuberance with one or two more experienced players. Wise heads such as Martin Keown, Teddy Sheringham and Gareth Southgate complement the exciting skills of their younger team-mates whose emergence suggests that English football could at last face a brighter future.

Among these emerging talents, superstars like Michael Owen and the new captain, David Beckham, are central. They both seem almost veterans of international football, yet Beckham has only just turned 26 and Owen is only 21. The Liverpool striker finished his club season in the best form of his career, back to his quickest and sharper than ever in front of goal. Beckham meanwhile has flourished with the responsibility that comes with

the England captaincy. His performances against Finland, Albania and especially Mexico were inspirational as he led by example, revelling in the freedom to come inside to a more central midfield position when the pattern of the play dictates, and chipping in with trademark spectacular goals.

Beckham's interplay with midfield partner Steven Gerrard was one of the highlights of the Mexico game. The Liverpool player whose role model is Arsenal and France midfielder Patrick Vieira could go on to become one of England's all-time greats, combining powerful tackling, heading, running and shooting with a determination to be the best. Persistently dogged by back problems, Gerrard now seems better equipped physically to cope with a demanding schedule.

Sensibly, Eriksson has included a solid nucleus of players from both Liverpool and Manchester United in his squad, important both for team bonding and for the understanding on the pitch that can gain a vital half-yard. As well as Owen and Gerrard, the Anfield contingent currently in La Manga (England's Spanish training camp), also includes Jamie Carragher, Robbie Fowler, Emile Heskey and Nick Barmby. With ex-Liverpool favourite Steve McManaman also joining the squad from Real Madrid, Eriksson has a core of Liverpool team-mates who have gained valuable European experience together.

From Manchester United, meanwhile, Beckham is accompanied by Paul Scholes, Gary and Phil Neville, Wes Brown, Andy Cole and Nicky Butt, as well as Footballer of the Year Teddy Sheringham, who has just left Old Trafford to rejoin Tottenham Hotspur.

The team-mates pattern is also repeated with Joe Cole, Michael Carrick and Frank Lampard, who all represent West Ham United. All three played a lot of club football with classy centre-back Rio Ferdinand, who left the Hammers for Leeds United last November and has added a new level of maturity and consistency to his game. From his new club Ferdinand has Nigel Martyn, Danny Mills and Alan Smith alongside him in the England squad.

For the Mexico game, after his first choice eleven had raced into a commanding 3-0 interval lead, Eriksson took the opportunity to introduce ten second-half substitutes, giving full international debuts to Cole, Carrick, Smith and Mills. The combative Smith should have become an instant hero by scoring a fifth for England, but despite squandering the chance gained valuable experience. Joe Cole also caught the eye with some nimble footwork and speed of thought on the ball.

His namesake Ashley, the Arsenal left-back, was another who advanced his growing reputation with an assured but adventurous display. Ashley's rise has been meteoric: he only made his Arsenal debut a year ago and has not yet notched up 20 Premiership appearances. Yet his impact has been huge, and he already seems to have made England's number 3 shirt his own.

By giving young players their chance at the top level, Eriksson is making the most of the solid foundations England have laid at Under-21 international level. Many of the players now making a name for themselves in the senior squad graduated together in the youth set-up. Victory over Greece on Wednesday is the immediate objective; but looking beyond that the current squad could soon be putting England back on the international football map.

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