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European Championship 2008 Qualifiers - Macedonia 0:1 England

By Steven Cronin

Steve McClaren's one hundred percent record as boss continued as England ground out a rather uninspiring victory in Macedonia.

The long legs of Peter Crouch were enough to send England home happy with all three points and top spot in Group E.

Until the breakthrough early in the second half, many of the two thousand England fans present in the stadium will have watched with apprehension as the team entrusted to bring a bright new post-Eriksson era failed to break down a stubborn Macedonian defence fresh from an opening day victory against Estonia.

The game started in scrappy fashion, the opening twenty minutes a succession of free kicks whistled by an over-fussy referee.

The fact neither team could string two passes together hardly helped the game as a spectacle.

England's patient build-up play was greeted by a chorus of boos and jeers from a partisan home crowd who burned the flag of St George and abused black players during England's previous visit.

England's main attacking threat came from Steven Gerrard.

The Liverpool skipper looks dangerous on the right hand side and has a much greater influence on a game than the ousted David Beckham.

But the biggest plus for England in recent games has been the emergence of Owen Hargreaves.

The defensive midfielder has been a revelation in his role just in front of the back four.

The young Bayern Munich players runs tirelessly, breaking up opposition attacks and setting up the next England play with a simple ball to one of the more creative players.

Unfortunately, Frank Lampard's influence on a game seems to diminish each time England play.

The Chelsea man seems to have lost his way a little recently and needs a dramatic return to form to prevent his place in the team coming under threat.

But England can look forward to the return from the top of a moderate group.

The McClaren era is well under way but the tougher tests are yet to come.

Steven Cronin writes the hottest English Premiership Football news, results and opinion at

http://www.sargas.co.uk/english_premiership_football

England's World Cup Dream Over

By Steven Cronin

Once again England's remarkable inability from spot kicks has cost them a place in the semi-finals of the World Cup.

The 3–1 shoot out defeat to Portugal was a repeat of the European Championship exit two years earlier when the Portuguese were on home soil.

Owen Hargreaves was the only Englishman to convert his penalty as the England curse continued.

England have now lost six of the seven penalty shootouts they have been involved in.

Contrast this to Germany, who since defeat to Czechoslovakia in the 1976 European Championships have won every shootout they have been involved in.

That record becomes even more incredible when you consider they have also scored every individual penalty within the shootout.

But England's demise could have been avoided had Sven–Goran Eriksson employed better use of the players at his disposal.

His decision to stick with David Beckham when the England captain is clearly past his best has caused frustration for many fans.

This was compounded by the performance of Aaron Lennon when he finally got his chance in place of Beckham during the second half of the quarterfinal.

His pace and dribbling caused panic in the Portuguese defence, something Beckham rarely achieved, and fans can only wonder how England would have fared had he been used earlier.

England's chances were further inhibited when their one genuine world class star Wayne Rooney was played out of his best position and employed as a lone front man.

Rooney is at his devastating best playing behind a main striker and running at defences from thirty yards out.

England's tactics of hitting him with long balls was a complete waste of his talents and a let off for the Portuguese defence.

But with Eriksson now departed, the reigns of the England manager's job are passed on to Steve McClaren, Eriksson's assistant for the past five years.

Fans can only hope McClaren introduces a new attacking brand of football to excite the supporters and break with more defensive instincts of Eriksson.

We await with baited breath.

Steven Cronin owns the City Breaks website featuring city break special offers from luxury hotels to budget accommodations. For more information please visit

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