


McClaren's retreat from Moscow was set up by tactical mistakes in Zagreb



McClaren



Rooney



The botched succession to Sven-Goran Eriksson led to a qualifying campaign doomed from the start.

By Kevin McCarra

Nobody can ever quite wait to compose an epitaph. The first drafts are being prepared for Steve McClaren's tenure even while there is still breath in England's bid to reach Euro 2008. Those who paid the airfare and hotel bills to be in the Luzhniki Stadium will not have had as their first reaction a burst of sympathy for the manager. There was too much held against him already. No one can ever have arrived in the England post as pre-beleaguered as he did. Any assistant promoted into a scorned predecessor's job is tarnished by the proximity to a person deemed unsatisfactory, but McClaren's predicament has been far worse than the norm.

When it comes to reaching the finals of major tournaments, Sven-Goran Eriksson was a hard act to follow and the Englishman has stumbled in his footsteps. After the loss in Moscow, McClaren has dropped 10 points in Group E. Eriksson qualified for three tournaments while letting 11 points slip over 24 games in all.

There is nothing so aston-

ishing in that, considering the latter's magisterial career in club football. McClaren's circumstances were wholly different. He was an Englishman who had won a trophy, the Carling Cup, but there was no lamentation on Teesside when he left Middlesbrough.

Those who do not denounce McClaren still recognise the uneven credentials. The burst to the Uefa Cup final ended with a clouting from Sevilla and, in any case, thrilling cliffhangers in previous rounds had come against sides of limited means. With all that in mind, McClaren was swathed in reservations when the FA announced that he was the anointed.

There will be time in future to deplore a recruitment process in which too many people had too great a say over too long a period before McClaren, after a change of heart by Luis Felipe Scolari, was appointed as the compromise candidate. It must be accepted that McClaren has been trying to turn himself into the high-class manager England sought while holding the job.

His discomfort is inevitable. The motivational slogans jar

and his habit of replying to many questions with the words "You're absolutely right" suggests that he was able to attend a media relations course for no more than the opening minutes. None of that would matter if results had been robust.

He has not demonstrated often enough that he has the authority to get the necessary reaction from his players. So it was that a barren draw at home to Macedonia could not be redressed by a win in Israel, despite the latent ability of the squad. Another goalless game was registered.

There has been a degree of progress, particularly in the crushing of Russia at Wembley, but it looks as if it will not suffice. The players, at best, have probably been suspending judgment. With fortunes flagging, they too will ponder the reinstatement of David Beckham last season, although there was a solid, pragmatic rationale to the recall.

The initial boldness of McClaren's intentions had been discarded because of the requirement to muddle through in a group whose assortment of teams did not pose the most severe task. If

one occasion is to go down as the embodiment of the anticipated failure it should be the loss in Zagreb rather than the reverse in Moscow.

Most people were stunned at the adoption of a back three against Croatia, supposedly at the behest of an assistant, Terry Venables. It was a heck of a place to have a bash at something new. McClaren surely suspected that he needed to change, but that was not the ground in which to try and reinvent himself as a tactical wizard.

Conservatism did resume and, despite the cavilling, he did little wrong yesterday, particularly by comparison with the footballers. If he is to be reproached it might be for neglecting to blood a successor to the woebegone Paul Robinson.

Now comes talk of Scolari, Fabio Capello, Jose Mourinho, Guus Hiddink and many others as a replacement for McClaren. The possibility of getting to Euro 2008 exists, but the matter is not under the control of the incumbent. As McClaren must suspect, that itself slashes what little faith is left in a manager who lacked trust from the very start.