

Why England should be more worried about injuries than who they get in the World Cup draw

By Mark Lawrenson

I think England should be more worried about injuries and playing at altitude than who they may get into today's World Cup draw.

I look at the teams in the pots and I don't see anyone England should fear.

England are very, very strong and in Fabio Capello they have a manager who will make sure they are properly prepared.

I know there is the chance that England could get France or Portugal, but that shouldn't bother them.

France are a team on the downward curve and I don't think Domenech, their manager, is very good.

They are a collection of individuals rather than a team and he seems to pick the team and then let them sort it out on the pitch.

With the so-called quality they have, they should have qualified easily. They just seem to have this attitude of just turn up and play and you can't have that in international football.

I wouldn't be scared of Portugal either. I know they've beaten England at Euro 2004 and the last World Cup, but take Ronaldo out of that team and you're not left with much.

As a team, you're only as strong as your weakest player and I don't feel Portugal are the force they were.

It's teams like the USA I'd want to avoid and if you get them early in the tournament, there's the chance that they will run their legs off against you. I'd much rather have a team like New Zealand.

In the later stages Spain are clearly a big danger and the problem England would have against them is how do you get the ball back off them?

Then there's Brazil, but I don't think they are that special anymore. They



used to have three or four players who could destroy you on their own, but if you look at Kaka, he's having an indifferent season.

They have got greater European knowledge and are more defensively solid, but I feel that has taken something away from them up front.

England shouldn't need to worry about either of them until the later rounds and if they win their group and Spain and Brazil win theirs, then they won't meet until the quarters at the earliest.

I look at Germany and Italy and I don't see too much for England to worry about either.

They are not the teams they used to be and Italy just don't have enough going forward for me.

People talk about Argentina and under Maradona, well he has made them the Wimbledon of international football. They are just launching it

and they've taken their best player in Messi out of the equation.

England shouldn't have too many problems qualifying from their group. It's not like the Euros, where the overall standard is higher and it can be more difficult. In the World Cup you can almost manipulate who you will get in the knock-out rounds.

The biggest problems England will have is if two or three key players get injured, playing at altitude and complacency. Although, knowing Capello, I can't imagine he will let anyone be complacent.

Injuries are a different matter and while England's strongest eleven can be a match for anyone, they are seriously weakened when you take out the likes of Wayne Rooney or Steven Gerrard.

Altitude is a big issue for any team playing in South Africa and we saw how the British Lions struggled with that in the summer.

The problem is England may have to switch from altitude to sea level for different games and that will affect their preparations.

We know the final will be in Joburg, but there are the quarter-finals and semi-finals.

Capello has got to factor that in when he decides where he wants his base to be and he may have to split camps depending on where England have to play their games.

Capello is the sort of manager who leaves nothing to chance and if England will be playing at 4 o'clock, he'll probably have them training at 4 o'clock so they are used to the conditions.

I really do feel this will be an open World Cup and England should fancy their chances - if they can stay injury free. -*The Mirror Sport*

Revealed: The truth about Sergio Aguero's proposed transfer to Chelsea



Sergio 'Kun' Aguero, the Atletico Madrid forward, continues to dominate the transfer headlines and in the last few days there have been conflicting reports coming out of both Spain and England regarding the player's future.

On Wednesday, the Atletico Madrid majority shareholder, Miguel Angel Gil, told a press conference that the Spanish club had turned down an offer from Chelsea in the summer, before adding "We have had another opportunity (to sell him) and again we have said no," - without naming the interested club." At the same time, Atletico sources were leaking that a new £48million bid from Stamford Bridge had been rejected in the last few days.

However, I can tell you that there has not yet been a recent bid from Chelsea. Instead, this was an attempt by Atletico Madrid to make public that a fee in the region of £55million would be enough to open discussions, without actually coming out and saying so: because to do so would trigger an extremely hostile response from an already disaffected Atletico fanbase.

The situation at Atletico is complex, and while some reports suggest that Spanish side's mounting debts will force them into a January sale (they owe the Spanish exchequer around £185million in taxes, £30million of which must be paid within 12 months) - the reality is that factions within this divided club believe they can meet those payments without being forced into selling Aguero. The feeling amongst those opposed to selling their star player now is that there at 21 years of age, he will be worth considerably more in a few years time - and they are eager to wait.

Furthermore, the political situation at Atletico and the relationship with the fans is so volatile that, with the club mired in a relegation battle, selling off Aguero at this time could be the spark that causes an explosion. It is because of this that the suggestion of a loan deal - mooted in several press reports - is simply out of the question for Atletico. The club knows they would face six months of turmoil surrounding the player, while Aguero and his advisors realise that it would be the most difficult six months of his life were he to agree a move to Chelsea while playing out the season at Atletico Madrid. A January move would present a whole host of problems for a player looking forward to a World Cup in the summer.

Aguero has the potential to be one of the top five players in the world, he is still only 21 and it is true that Chelsea have decided upon either Kun or Franck Ribery as transfer targets. The Frenchman, now at Bayern Munich, has set his heart on joining real Madrid -and could already have agreed to do so. That leaves Aguero, who is happy to move on, but not before the end of the season, as a priority for Ancelotti.

Chelsea's impending transfer ban - that should be in place in the summer - combined with the loss of Didier Drogba and Salomon Kalou to the African Cup of Nations, leaves Chelsea with some tough choices in the new year.

Has Martin O'Neill finally found the key player he's been looking for since he arrived at Aston Villa?

Aston Villa's last silverware was the League Cup in 1996 but now fans can finally dream of celebrating another trophy.

Villa supporters have long liked to consider their club as the biggest in the Midlands after helping found the Football League in 1888 and then winning the European Cup in 1982.

Yet the club's failure to win a trophy for so long has discredited Aston Villa's claims to being one of the top clubs in England.

And despite Martin O'Neill's admirable work in the Premier League with Villa, the manager still surprisingly has some critics locally.

Successive sixth place finishes in the top-flight have been a fine achievement by O'Neill.

But it is silverware which Villa fans crave and manager O'Neill appears to have finally grasped this.

Last season he was slaughtered by many Villa fans for fielding a severely-weakened team in the UEFA Cup last 32 at CSKA Moscow as Villa inevitably exited the competition.

O'Neill defended his actions by insisting the club's push for a top four spot and Champions League qualification was the priority.

But many supporters genuinely STILL grumble about O'Neill's controversial Moscow decision and hold it against him as he has refused to apologise.

Yet now Villa are one game from Wembley after beating Portsmouth in the Carling Cup quarter-finals to set-up a semi-final with Blackburn.

O'Neill has of course won the competition twice before with Leicester in 1997 and 2000.

And significantly this season for the first time since taking over at Villa in 2006, he has played an almost full-strength side in the Cup from the onset as he is clearly targeting the competition.

Should Villa triumph at Wembley this season it may well see many fans who still harbour doubts about O'Neill revise their judgements.

And perhaps his bold attacking line-up at Fratton Park will be a blueprint for the rest of the season.

O'Neill has often stressed to the



press of his desire to have an attacking midfielder capable of eight-10 goals a season.

Steve Sidwell, Fabian Delph, Nigel Reo-Coker and Craig Gardner have all failed to achieve this.

Yet at Fratton Park O'Neill deployed both Stewart Downing and Ashley Young in midfield like when Downing came off the bench at Burnley.

And the consequence was that both Downing and Young both got on the score-sheet as did James Milner.