

Belgium determined

AFP | Sochi

Roberto Martinez can't wait to lead an outstanding Belgium side into the World Cup as they prepare to take on Panama in their opening game today.

A team who sit third in the FIFA rankings and who boast what is frequently labelled a golden generation featuring the likes of Eden Hazard and Kevin De Bruyne have come to Russia with a considerable weight of expectation on their shoulders.

They are strongly fancied to progress to the knockout phase as winners of Group G, despite being drawn alongside England, and so it would be a major upset if they slipped up in Sochi against a side making their World Cup debut.

Belgium's results under Martinez have been excellent, with last Monday's 4-1 friendly win over Costa Rica in Brussels meaning they are unbeaten in 19 matches going back almost two years, to the very start of the Spaniard's reign.

The prospect of facing England in Kaliningrad on June 28 is a mouthwatering one.

All going to plan for these sides, first place will be up for grabs. Then there are Martinez's past links to the Premier League and the presence of Thierry Henry and Englishman Graeme Jones on his coaching staff.

The majority of his squad either play or have played in England, but for now Martinez is only thinking about Panama.



Belgium

With Vincent Kompany out and Thomas Vermaelen a doubt for Belgium, Dedryck Boyata should start at the heart of the back three. Axel Witsel looks set to get the nod ahead of Mousa Dembele in the middle of the park alongside Kevin De Bruyne. In attack, Roberto Martinez should start a front three of Eden Hazard, Romelu Lukaku and Dries Mertens, while Michy Batshuayi is a fitness concern.

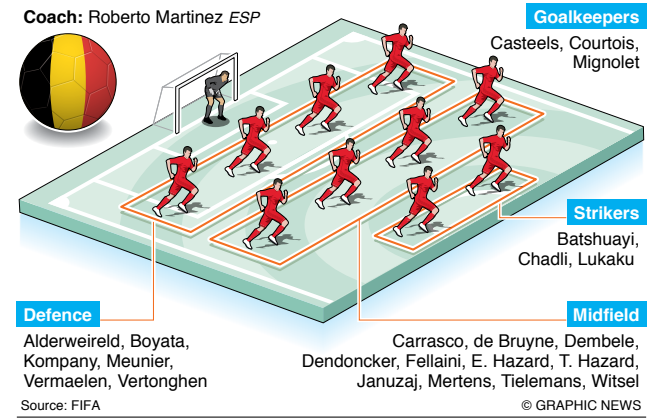
Strengths

The front three, Eden Hazard, Romelu Lukaku and Dries Mertens, are of the highest quality and they are backed up by Kevin De Bruyne in midfield.

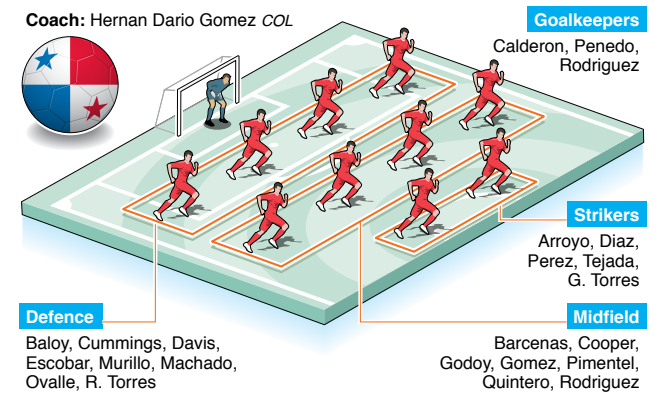
Weaknesses

There may be some tension in the squad if they do not hit the ground running, with De Bruyne having criticised Martinez's tactics after last November's wild 3-3 draw with Mexico.

Belgium World Cup squad



Panama World Cup squad



Panama

Roman Torres is carrying a slight knock coming into the meeting with Belgium, but should be fit to start here. Head coach Hernan Dario Gomez is expected to use a compact setup to try and frustrate Belgium.

Strengths

This team will not give up without a fight. They will work hard, sometimes on the limits of the rules, as they showed in a friendly against Denmark in March.

Weaknesses

Roman Torres, the forward who was arguably the star of the qualifiers, has been injured and will not travel to Russia in the best shape.

Match Facts

- Belgium have won 9 of their last 10 WC matches.
- There have been over 2.5 goals scored in 8 of Belgium's last 10 WC games.
- Belgium have scored at least 2 goals in 9 of their last 10 WC matches.
- There have been over 2.5 goals scored in Panama's last 3 WC games.

Belgium kick off their World Cup with a winnable meeting with Panama and they'll hope to lay down an early marker here. They've been in great form and will look to carry that into the competition.

Panama are hoping to spring an upset against Belgium, but will struggle against one of the fiercest attacks in the game.

They're World Cup preparation hasn't been ideal, with just one win in their last five, and they will be up against the ropes from the off when they face the Red Devils.

PREVIEW

Sweden

In the post-Zlatan Ibrahimovic era, Ola Toivonen and Marcus Berg are set to lead the attack for Sweden. Manchester United centre-back Victor Lindelof should partner Andreas Granqvist at the back. Head coach Janne Andersson has no injury issues here.

Match Facts

- There have been under 2.5 goals scored in Sweden's last 3 WC games.
- Much of this match is riding on the outcome of Germany-Mexico in the Group F opener on Sunday and both Sweden and South Korea will hope to secure a crucial three points.
- Sweden haven't won in five and haven't scored more than one goal in a match since an 8-0 win over Luxembourg last October, while South Korea have won only one of their last six matches, losing four of those.
- We could witness a low-scoring affair here, which Sweden could edge.

vs South Korea

South Korea head coach Shin Tae-yong could name a 4-2-3-1 setup with Son Heung-min behind Kim Shin-wook in the final third. Hwang Hee-chan may start out wide in this instance, though he too could feature up front. Shin Tae-yong has no pressing injury issues here.

Match Facts

- Some of the teams we played against were ranked top 15 in the world and they didn't allow us many chances to score from but neither did we allow them to get many chances

I think the history will help us in terms of understanding what we can improve upon and what we can do

GARETH SOUTHWATE
ENGLAND MANAGER

We always do this as a nation – expectations are low and as soon as we get to the World Cup. If a World Cup cannot inspire a nation, then I'm not sure what can

DAN ASHWORTH
ENGLISH FA TECHNICAL DIRECTOR

Tunisia

Saif-Eddine Khaoui started both of Tunisia's warm up matches and appears to have edged Wahbi Khazri in the pecking order. Naim Sliti will either start on the left flank or up front for Nabil Maaloul's side on Monday night.

Strengths

Wahbi Khazri has had an outstanding season on loan at Rennes from Sunderland and will lead the attack.

Weaknesses

Injury to the squad's most creative player, Youssef Msakni, has left a huge creative gap for Nabil Maaloul to fill in attacking midfield.

Match Facts

- England have kept a clean sheet in 9 of their last 11 WC matches.
- England have won 6 of their last 7 matches.
- Tunisia are undefeated in their last 8 matches.
- England have won with a 1 goal margin in their last 3 matches.

vs

England

Gareth Southgate has reportedly settled on Ashley Young, Harry Maguire and Jordan Henderson over Danny Rose, Gary Cahill and Eric Dier, respectively. Marcus Rashford is carrying a knock and will likely have to settle for a place on the bench at best on Monday. Raheem Sterling looks set to partner Harry Kane up front, while Jesse Lingard and Dele Alli are tipped to take up advanced midfield positions. Fabian Delph and Ruben Loftus-Cheek are other options in central midfield.

Strengths

Several players have picked up pleasing high-pressing habits from managers such as Jürgen Klopp and Mauricio Pochettino while Harry Kane is lethal up front.

Weaknesses

The three-man defence favoured by Southgate nowadays has not been tested in competitive games against the toughest opposition.

- Tunisia impressed during a 1-0 defeat to Spain in their final warm-up match and will offer England a close contest on Monday.
- There were positives to take from England's warm-up matches

but they still haven't put together a complete 90-minute performance. England have faltered at this stage of the World Cup before but Gareth Southgate will be aiming for four points at the very least before they face Belgium in their final group game.



We're not favourites but if we have a good day we can do something good

HERNAN GOMEZ
PANAMA COACH



I don't expect an easy game. The first game in the World cup is always difficult

DRIES MERTENS
BELGIAN STRIKER



What we lacked at the Euros, Martinez wants to get. We have more experience than four years ago

THOMAS MEUNIER
BELGIAN WINGER



Some of the teams we played against were ranked top 15 in the world and they didn't allow us many chances to score from but neither did we allow them to get many chances

ANDREAS GRANQVIST
SWEDEN CAPTAIN



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