

Salah set to fire



Mohamed Salah

AFP | Saint Petersburg

Mohamed Salah is a looming obstacle as Russia attempt to virtually secure their place in the knockout stages of the World Cup in Saint Petersburg today. Fears that poor performances

from the home side could dampen enthusiasm in the host nation were blown away by a 5-0 demolition of Saudi Arabia in the opening game.

The seven-time African champions will pose a much tougher task, but a lot will depend upon Salah's fitness.

Liverpool star Salah has not featured since leaving the field in tears early in the Champions League final just over three weeks ago after landing heavily on his left shoulder and had to watch from the bench

as Egypt lost 1-0 to Uruguay in their opening game.

Salah has been declared 100 per cent fit by Egypt's team doctor and his agent, leaving little doubt he will be thrown back into action in the Pharaohs' hour of need.

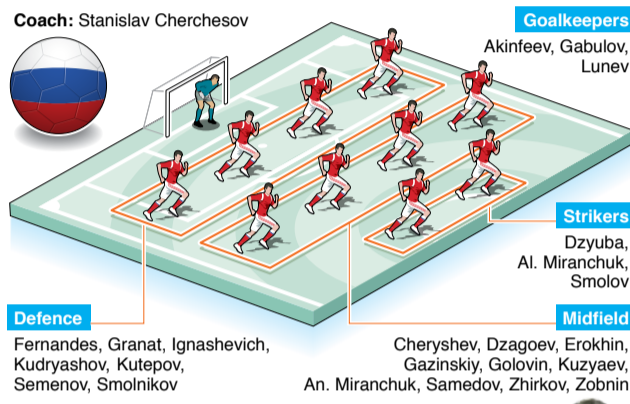
However, as he returned to training on Saturday, Salah was seen by AFP reporters at Egypt's training camp in Grozny needing help from teammates to lift a training top over his head.

Egypt coach Hector Cuper's decision not to risk Salah against Uruguay

may have been influenced by the fact his side held out for 89 minutes before conceding to Jose Gimenez, by which time the Argentine had made all three of his substitutions.

If fully fit, the sight of Salah, who scored 44 goals in a remarkable debut season at Liverpool, will strike fear into the Russians.

Concerns Russia could become just the second host nation to bow out of the World Cup at the group stage after a seven-game winless run ahead of the tournament have been alleviated by a perfect start.



Russia v Egypt
Group A, June 19
Saint Petersburg Stadium

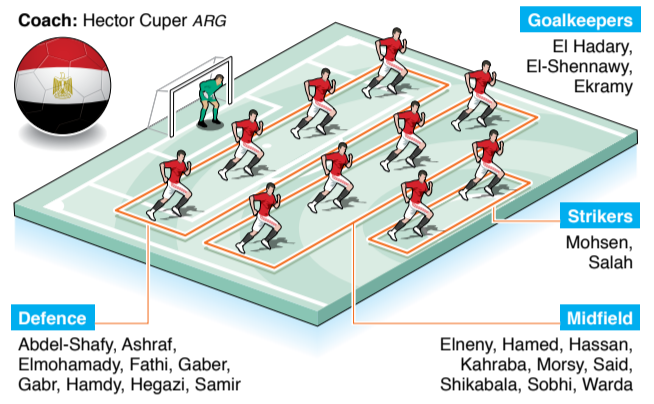
70 FIFA rank 45
RUS 5-0 KSA Match 1 EGY 0-1 URU

HEAD-TO-HEAD
First meeting

WORLD CUP RECORD

| | | |
|------|----------------|------|
| 18 | Wins | 0 |
| 8 | Draws | 2 |
| 15 | Losses | 3 |
| 1.73 | Goals for* | 0.60 |
| 1.15 | Goals against* | 1.40 |

*Per match © GRAPHIC NEWS



We're preparing ourselves, we're training according to a plan. We have done everything we planned to do. We are studying Egypt and we should be able to exploit their weaknesses

RUSSIAN COACH STANISLAV CHERCHESOV

It will be a very tough game of course, because we are meeting the hosts in a venue that could witness 60,000 spectators, but the team members are determined to win

EGYPT'S TEAM MANAGER IHAB LEHETA

Alan Dzagoev suffered a hamstring injury in Russia's opener and is not expected to recover in time to feature on Tuesday night.

Aleksandr Golovin was the star man in the first match and will move into a central position to cover for Dzagoev's absence. Denis Cheryshev will get a start as a reward for his fine showing off the bench against Saudi Arabia.

Russia



Igor Akinfeev Russia's captain has featured more than 100 times for his nation between the sticks, and has won six league titles with CSKA Moscow

Mohamed Salah was an unnamed substitute in Egypt's 1-0 defeat to Uruguay after failing to prove his fitness in time. It would be a shock if he doesn't start on Tuesday, though. Salah's return should be the only change to the starting XI.

Egypt

Strengths

Héctor Cuper, as always, builds his team on a solid defence and Egypt conceded only 20 goals in his first 35 games in charge.

Weaknesses

With Mohamed Salah in a race to get fit in time for the finals, Egypt may struggle to score with Marwan Mohsen often left isolated up front.

Match Facts

- There have been under 2.5 goals scored in 5 of Egypt's last 6 WC
- Russia opened up the 2018 World Cup with a stunning 5-0 win over Saudi Arabia.
- Egypt are on the back foot after falling to a 1-0 defeat in their group opener. They need a positive result on Tuesday.
- Mohamed Salah's return is a game changer for Egypt but is it enough to bring Russia back down to earth?
- We could witness a low-scoring affair here, which Sweden could edge.

PREVIEW

Colombia

Frank Fabra would have started at left-back for Colombia but was ruled out of the tournament earlier this month. Johan Mojica will start instead.

Jose Pekerman has to decide between the likes of Carlos Bacca, Luis Muriel and Mateus Uribe on the flanks.

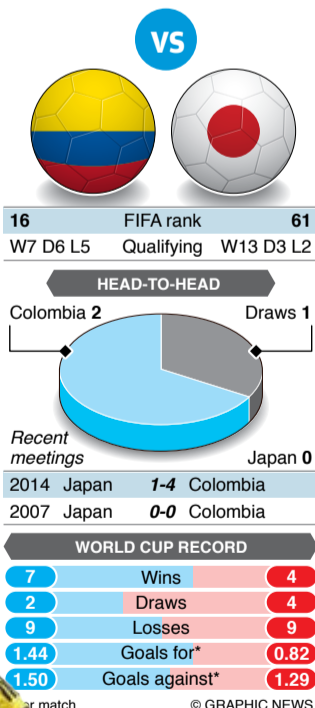
Wilmar Barrios, Carlos Sanchez and Abel Aguilar are in competition for a starting berth in central midfield.

Strengths

The country's two superstars, James Rodríguez and Radamel Falcao, have had good seasons at club level and arrive in Russia in good shape.

Weaknesses

David Ospina has suffered from not playing regularly at Arsenal and has made high-profile mistakes for the national team recently.



Match Facts

- There have been under 2.5 goals scored in 5 of Colombia's last 6 WC games. There have been under 2.5 goals scored in Japan's last 3 WC games.
- Colombia are unbeaten in four matches but drew both of their warm-up matches for the 2018 World Cup 0-0. They have won five of their last six World Cup matches.
- Japan ended a five-game winless streak with a 4-2 win over Paraguay in their final World Cup warm-up match. They are underdogs going into Tuesday's clash with Colombia.

Japan

Japan have a number of options in midfield in attack.

Hotaru Yamaguchi and Takashi Inui are both pushing for starts.

Strengths

The high-profile trio of Keisuke Honda, Shinji Kagawa and Shinji Okazaki are back after being sidelined by Halilhodzic and should lift the team on and off the pitch.

Weaknesses

Nishino has tried 3-4-2-1 - a formation used by some top clubs in the J-League - in a few friendlies but the team have struggled to adapt to the changes, recently.

Even if Japan play with Mourinho or Arsene Wenger, it would be so difficult for Japan to get to the last 16. If Poland was the first match it would be different

FORMER COACH OF JAPAN PHILIPPE TROUSSIER

We have three tough opponents. But they (Colombia) are not (defending champions) Germany, so we have a chance and we hope we can go further

JAPAN CAPTAIN MAKOTO HASEBE

Poland

Poland have experimented with a three-man defence and back four in the build up to the 2018 World Cup.

Kamil Glik's injury in the build up to the tournament may forced them into fielding a back four.

Strengths

Robert Lewandowski is one of the most lethal strikers in the world and should be ably backed up by Arkadiusz Milik, who is back from two serious knee injuries.

Weaknesses

Had the worst defence of all European group winners in qualifying and Adam Nawalka is considering using a back three instead of his favoured 4-2-3-1.

Match Facts

- There have been over 2.5 goals scored in Poland's last 10 WC games
- Poland have won 8 of their last 9 WC matches
- Poland have been winning at both half time and full time in 6 of their last 7 WC matches
- Senegal have scored at least 2 goals in 7 of their last 8 WC matches



Senegal

Kara and Salif Sane compete for a starting berth alongside Napoli ace Kalidou Koulibaly at the heart of Senegal's back four.

Senegal have a lot of attacking talent and Keita Balde may have to settle for a place on the bench.

Strengths

The team have an impressively strong spine with Kalidou Koulibaly in defence, Idrissa Gana Gueye and Badou Ndiaye in midfield and Sadio Mané up front.

Weaknesses

There is a feeling in Senegal that Cissé does not get the best out of the attacking talent at his disposal and the friendly draws against Uzbekistan and Bosnia-Herzegovina in March did nothing to change that. 4-2-3-1.