

Russia Eyes Victory in World Cup Match Against South Korea

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Minus creative midfielder Roman Shirokov due to injury, Russia are unlikely to play an expansive, attack-minded game against South Korea in their World Cup Group H opener on Wednesday, focusing instead on rigid discipline.

Just the way conservative coach Fabio Capello likes it.

Russia, who since the breakup of the Soviet Union have failed to progress to the knockout rounds of the World Cup, are in fine fettle after an impressive 2014 qualifying campaign in which they pipped Portugal to top their group.

Winners of four of their last five games, conceding just two goals, the Russians are making their first appearance at the World Cup since 2002 when the finals were co-hosted by South Korea and Japan.

Alexander Kerzhakov, the only member of the 2002 squad playing in Brazil, told FIFA's official website that while the squad were comprised of domestic-based players with no big stars, Russia still had high hopes at the tournament.

"We are bidding to win this tournament," he said. "All of our players have been thriving in Russia, but people outside the country do not know us. What's important, though, is that our coach, Fabio Capello, knows us and our strengths.

"We know what we're capable of and if everyone plays to the best of their abilities, we will succeed."

While Russia have enjoyed a seamless buildup to the opening match at the Arena Pantanal in Cuiaba at 2 a.m. Wednesday, it would be no stretch to say the Koreans are in disarray.

Losers of four of their last five, including a 4-0 hammering by Ghana in their final warm-up on Monday, South Korea can only cast envious glances at their opponent's defensive solidity having shipped 11 goals during the horror run.

Coach Hong Myung-bo, who skippered the Koreans on their magical run to the semi-finals on home soil 12 years ago, has his work cut out to rebuild their shattered confidence before Tuesday, but there is no doubt the team have been playing well within themselves.

Former international Park Ji-sung said in Seoul on Friday that the players were struggling to cope with the pressure of a World Cup but that if they controlled the mental side of their game they would beat the Russians.

"It's a 'must-win' match against Russia," he said. "And I think Korea will win. But I'm Korean, how can I say Russia will win?"

With powerful Belgium expected to top the group and Algeria being tipped to finish bottom, Russia and South Korea realize getting all three points on Tuesday will give them one foot in the knockout stages.

In the only previous meeting between the sides, Russia beat the Koreans 2-1 in a friendly in Dubai last November shortly before the draw for the World Cup finals was made.

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