

Roman Shirokov's Absence Set to Hit Russia Hard at World Cup

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Russian football team members stretching during training Tuesday.

France and Colombia aren't the only teams without their best player at the World Cup.

Joining Franck Ribery and Radamel Falcao on the list of key performers missing this summer's extravaganza in Brazil is Roman Shirokov — Russia's captain, driving force and a reliable source of goals from midfield.

Shirokov was ruled out days before the start of the World Cup with a lingering back injury, news which caused a big fuss back home and sparked a general sense of resignation that Russia is unlikely now to be springing a surprise in Brazil.

In Shirokov's absence, coach Fabio Capello spent the pre-tournament friendlies changing the emphasis of attack from center of the pitch to the flanks — hardly an ideal shift of tactics at such a late stage and a sign of the importance attached to Shirokov.

"Of course, he is a big loss for us," said Vasily Beruzutsky, who was named Monday as

Shirokov's replacement as captain for Russia's opening match of the World Cup against South Korea on Tuesday.

"However this Russia team is strong as a team, it's a collective effort. We shouldn't be fixated that his absence will affect us too much."

Even with Shirokov, the Russians would be unlikely to play a big part in Brazil, with coach Fabio Capello using the tournament as preparation for the 2018 World Cup — hosted by Russia. Getting out of their group would be an achievement but a repeat of the 2008 European Championships — when Guus Hiddink led the team to the semifinals — is highly unlikely.

In Capello, Russia has one of world football's most famous coaches who won a slew of league titles at club level with AC Milan, Real Madrid and Juventus but didn't fare so well in his first spell in international management.

He qualified England for the 2010 World Cup but the team flopped in South Africa, scrambling out of a weak group and then getting easily beaten 4-1 by Germany in the last 16.

Yet Capello went on the defensive Monday, saying the Germany match would have been different had officials not ruled out a clear Frank Lampard goal when the score was 2-1. It was in part because of that officiating error that goal-line technology was introduced to football and is being used in Brazil.

"You saw the result yesterday," Capello said, referring to a France's second goal against Honduras on Sunday that was awarded using goal-line technology. "England was just penalized. Everyone knows, from 2-0 to 2-2, what difference that is. But anyway, this helped the case for technology.

"We paid the price for technology that is now out there."

England's struggles in South Africa were a stain on Capello's otherwise superb resume.

"Of course, our biggest star is the coach," Beruzutsky said through a translator. "He is a very respected coach. He won (titles) in Spain and Italy. He is a Champions League winner. We don't have players in our squad with such a respected reputation."

Capello, who has banned his players from using social media in Brazil because of the "nuisance" it causes, has undertaken pre-tournament practice sessions in Moscow, where the temperatures have touched 32 degrees Celsius (90 F).

Denis Glushakov and Viktor Faizulin appear to be battling to replace Shirokov in midfield, while Beruzutsky declared himself fit despite training alone in recent days because of a foot injury.

Capello said Beruzutsky was chosen as captain ahead of midfielder Igor Denisov because "he speaks English and communication with the referee is very important."

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