

Champions League Team Preview Olympique Marseille vs Manchester United

On paper it may appear as just another Champions League fixture for Sir Alex, but in reality it's the first match of four away fixtures that could shape Manchester United's season.

With trips to Wigan, Chelsea and Liverpool all coming up before the 2nd leg in Manchester, Wednesday's match is a good place to start attesting that strong second-half finishes to the season are not just a worn-out cliché from the media.

United can combat the French side's impressive home form by boasting a pretty decent away record of their own, recording just two losses from the last 22 European away games; a feat highlighted by the fact that the 22 away games prior to that included 12 losses.

Sir Alex must attempt to register his 100th win in European Cup/ Champions League football whilst missing a host of first-team regulars: defenders Rio Ferdinand and Jonny Evans, midfielders Ryan Giggs, Anderson, and Ji-Sung Park, and veteran striker Michael Owen were all absent on the flight to France on Tuesday, less than 72 hours after many of Ferguson's reserve players were lambasted for making hard work of non-league Crawley in their FA Cup fixture.

One highlight from that game, and perhaps this season, is the progression of centre-back Chris Smalling, who is expected to partner Nemanja Vidić for the tie. With the constant injury problems suffered by Ferdinand coupled with Evans' lack of form, Smalling has found himself as United's most important summer acquisition, albeit initially as cover for a position that has been a headache for Ferguson for over two years now.

With the defence seemingly patched up, it's apt that another area of the pitch would start crumbling - the loss of Giggs and Park in particular may not worry a handful of United fans considering the names that can come in, but both men are key to a level of creative vision and industrious performances that are immeasurably important on away nights such as this.

Expect United to start in a 4-5-1 formation keeping the midfield tight with Berbatov as a lone-striker, supported by Rooney and Nani from wide. The alternative would be to have Rooney as a lone striker, however the role is much better suited to the Bulgarian's style of play, especially considering the absent players who would normally cover the left-sided role. Another option may be to push Evra out of defence and into the left-midfield slot, but his defensive duties would be better suited against Marseille's flair players.

A strong 1st leg performance should not only put them in good stead for a fifth successive quarter-final appearance, but also bode them well for the crucial run-in of fixtures ahead.

The reverse tie at Old Trafford, a few days after the next round of the FA Cup, would be a lot less tricky to approach should United grab an away goal tonight.

Predicted starting 11: van der Sar, Rafael, Smalling, Vidic, Evra, Nani, Scholes, Carrick, Fletcher, Rooney, Berbatov.