

Not so nearly men – An alternative England squad

After Fabio Capello selected his 23 men for the World Cup on Tuesday, [Sean Cole](#) presents an alternative England squad

Wednesday 2 June 2010



Michael Owen, with 89 England caps, brings experience to this alternative England squad.
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As Fabio Capello was busy informing seven hopefuls that their World Cup dreams were over, I was similarly engaged, telling Lee Cattermole that there just wasn't room for him in the England B team. No, I'm not referring to the Ireland squad, which has an insatiable appetite for our Clinton Morrison and Tony Cascarino shaped cast-offs, but rather my selection of 23 England contenders from those cruelly/understandably overlooked by the manager. The criteria was simple: the players needed to be eligible for selection (so no talented retirees like Paul Scholes or John Barnes), and to have been excluded from England's provisional 30 man squad (no last minute call-ups for Walcott then). So without further ado, here's the team:

Goalkeepers

Ben Foster (Birmingham, 4 caps), Paul Robinson (Blackburn, 41 caps), Chris Kirkland (Wigan, 1 cap)

Defenders

Micah Richards (Man City, 11 caps), Wes Brown (Man United, 23 caps), Phil Jagielka (Everton, 3 caps), Joleon Lescott (Man City, 9 caps), Gary Cahill (Bolton, 0 caps), Wayne Bridge (Man City, 36 caps), Paul Konchesky (Fulham, 2 caps)

Midfielders

David Bentley (Tottenham, 7 caps), Ashley Young (Aston Villa, 7 caps), Stewart Downing (Aston Villa, 23 caps), Matt Taylor (Bolton, 0 caps), Phil Neville (Everton, 59 caps), Owen Hargreaves (Man United, 42 caps), Jimmy Bullard (Hull, 0 caps), Danny Murphy (Fulham, 9 caps)

Strikers

Carlton Cole (West Ham, 7 caps), Kevin Davies (Bolton, 0 caps), Gabriel Agbonlahor (Aston Villa, 3 caps), Michael Owen (Man United, 89 caps), Bobby Zamora (Fulham, 0 caps)

Overall, I don't think this B team looks too bad, although there are some obvious limitations. The inclusions of Owen, Neville and Hargreaves may have bolstered the ranks but the team's lack of experience is underlined by the presence of five potential debutants. However, the goalkeepers have all proven themselves to be consistent performers in the Premiership and the defence is strong as well, with alternatives for each position given that either Richards or Brown could play centre back if necessary. When we start looking further up the pitch the squad begins to look a bit thin on quality. Inevitably, lacking the world class talents of Lampard and Gerrard has left my midfield struggling for some forward thrust, particularly through the centre.

With wide men like Downing or Taylor on the left, and Bentley or Young on the right, the team is fairly well stocked with creative players offering good delivery, but the central midfield slots leave a lot to be desired. If Hargreaves' knees could take the strain then he would be a definite starter and welcome bustling presence in midfield, but it's difficult to choose someone to line-up alongside him. Murphy has great composure and is a reliable passer of the ball, but he doesn't have the pace to drive through the middle, therefore Bullard's energy and willingness to shoot on sight give him the edge. However, the possibility of fielding two perennial crocks in the middle is an undoubted risk. In back-up to these players, Phil Neville offers all purpose cover for the defence and central midfield, fulfilling the same role as he previously did for the full England squad. I'm always surprised by the number of England caps he has amassed, but his versatility has made him popular among a succession of managers: if he's good enough for Kevin Keegan he'll do for me.

Selecting strikers was probably the easiest task, given the paucity of talent available there weren't many outstanding contenders for the position. In the end I have chosen five strikers as this team will need some help getting goals, and despite Owen's fantastic record for the national team he hasn't been on top form for many a year. However, the forwards included do at least possess a good variety of talents: imposing target men like Kevin Davies and Carlton Cole, the supreme pace of Agbonlahor, the craft of an on-form Zamora, and Owen's predatory instincts. We might be a Wayne Rooney short, but those available provide a wide range of options and could work in a number of different combinations. The best strike partnership of the lot would arguably be Zamora and Agbonlahor working in tandem.

It wouldn't be right to end without handing out honourable mentions to those carefully considered for selection but who ultimately didn't make the cut. Therefore, aside from Beckham and Woodgate who were ruled out through injury, here is an assortment of the unlucky few. I think the best trio of goalkeepers was selected, but Newcastle's Steve Harper and West Brom's Scott Carson were both considered given their sterling form in leading their teams to automatic promotion from the Championship. With regard to defenders, Roger Johnson had an excellent season as the defensive rock on which Birmingham's success was built but, like Shawcross, lacks the athleticism and top level experience of those chosen ahead of him. Moving onto the midfield, Matt Etherington suffered from the relative strength of the players in his position, including Ashley Young who routinely plays wide left for Villa, while Kevin Nolan's goals just weren't enough. And unfortunately for the two Jacks, Rodwell and Wilshere, this imaginary World Cup came just too soon for them, more experienced players were needed. After having scraped the bottom of the barrel for strikers, the youthful duo of Andy Carroll and Danny Sturridge were also the only viable alternatives that could be found.

So, how would this team get on in the real World Cup? I personally think for all the criticisms that could be made of these players, and the shortage of top class talent involved, they would have enough quality to get through England's group, possibly battling with the USA for top spot. Once in the second round they might be able to squeeze into the quarter-finals at the absolute best, but by this stage they would be outplayed by football's elite nations. Much like the real England team then. But, unlike their more glamorous counterparts, I would back this side to win on spot kicks as Murphy, Hargreaves, Taylor and

Bullard can all take a mean penalty. So when you're watching Lampard fluff another one towards the bottom left corner this summer, sit back and think of Bullard.



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