

Exclusive interview with Emile Heskey: England should make the World Cup semis, but France and Spain look very strong, Iraola will have to get the players on side with Liverpool, or it will be hard for him & Jeremy Monga needs first team football rather than Arsenal or Man Utd move

Speaking at Grosvenor Casino in Reading ahead of the World Cup, former England striker Emile Heskey gave his view on the upcoming tournament, assessing the Three Lions' chances and who might be his dark horses for the competition.

The ex-Liverpool striker also gave his thoughts on Andoni Iraola's arrival at Liverpool and what he'll have to do differently from Arne Slot. Heskey also offered his advice to Leicester prospect Jeremy Monga, who is linked to Liverpool and Manchester United this summer.

What do you make of England's preparation and acclimatising to the Miami heat, and what do you think Thomas Tuchel makes of it?

It's never easy. Obviously, we're used to a certain weather here. When you go to Miami or go into Florida, it's hot, humid, and sticky. You can barely catch your breath, which is exactly why you go out there early.

I went to the 2002 tournament, and it was very clammy there as well. So it's an interesting one. People ask about our chances, and the very first thing I point to is the weather. We're so used to a certain climate here, and then to go over there and play in those conditions - I've played in Australia as well - is not easy. It takes a bit of time to acclimatise.

With friendlies against New Zealand and Costa Rica, how helpful is it to feature fringe players to manage minutes?

For someone who's probably on the periphery, it's their chance to show that they can break in. You look at the players they've got there and who could actually break into the squad.

You've got the likes of Morgan Rogers who could possibly break in and have a standout tournament. They'll probably be aiming to play in some of the most emotional friendlies anyway, but you never know what they're going to do.

It does also give the opportunity to rest some players, knowing that they're probably going to start the tournament and you don't really need to see them right now.

You mentioned Morgan Rogers. Thomas Tuchel prefers players in specific positions. Will Rogers compete directly with Jude Bellingham, or could he play on the left?

I don't see him off the left. You've got Gordon and you've got Rashford; I don't see him as the third option out there. But that's what football is. You're up against a teammate; you're up against someone who plays the same position as you.

This is why I say the friendlies can sometimes throw a little bit of a spanner in the works by putting doubts in the manager's mind over whether someone is the number one choice or a backup. So it'll be interesting to see how he goes with that.

Tuchel has built a squad with specialist skills like Djed Spence for his pace and one on one defending. What do you make of his vision?

Clearly, his vision is built for specific stages of the tournament. If you need a player who is really good at dribbling and you need someone to go man to man, he's already said Djed Spence is the guy.

And the funny thing with Djed Spence is I can't remember seeing any player really go past him back to back, so you can see exactly why he's done that. You need those specialist players who you can bring in. Look at what people say about Jordan Henderson; there is a distinct role to be played by senior players for leadership as well.

With 26 man squads there is room for players with different skill sets like Ivan Toney and Ollie Watkins. What do they bring to the team?

Well, Ollie Watkins obviously had a fantastic end to his season. If we look at the last tournament, he made a real difference when called upon to come onto the pitch. Ivan Toney is a little bit different.

I don't watch the Saudi league, and I don't know many fans who do, but the management would have been watching and looking closely at what he actually brings. If you want to see out a game and you need someone to hold the ball up, that's your man. He buys fouls. And if it goes into the latter stages and goes to penalties, that's absolutely your man. There are different things that these players bring.

How far do you think England can go in the tournament?

Look, like I said, the weather's going to be tough, but I'm confident that we can get to the semis. Very confident. Getting to the final is going to be tough because you always need a bit of luck along the way, but I believe we can make the semis. I just think France and Spain look very, very strong.

And you can't ever turn away from Brazil at the end of the day. It is Brazil. How many times have they won it? They know how to win it. And it's not just on South American turf; they win all over.

There are going to be dark horses too, like Ecuador, who will be in that region and will know the humidity and the climate. I'm from the Caribbean, so I'd love Curacao and Haiti to do well. It gives hope for the smaller nations that there's a genuine possibility of getting to a World Cup and entertaining on that stage.

Moving to Liverpool, they appointed Andoni Iraola this week. How much is Arne Slot to blame for the squad underperforming, and what can Iraola do to fix it?

I think at the end of the day, the manager will always be blamed. Regardless of what's said and done, the manager takes the fall when it comes to results. It is his job to try and get the players playing the way that he wants to play, to be entertaining for the fans, and to win games. So inevitably he'll be blamed for that.

With Iraola, we've seen at Bournemouth that he knows how to win games, he knows how to set up structurally, and he knows how to change it structurally if he needs to. The only thing is he hasn't done it at a club like Liverpool, where the pressure is immense. There's no win, lose, or draw; you just have to win.

Iraola didn't win his first ten games at Bournemouth, which wouldn't be accepted at Liverpool?

It's going to be very tough for Iraola. What I will say is that what I've heard him talk about sounds great. It's aggressive football. It's on the front foot. It's what Liverpool fans have been so used to over the years - rock and roll football.

He's spoken about that, but I'm hoping he can be tactical and get the players on his side. One thing you have to do is get the dressing room on your side. If you haven't got the players backing you, it's very tough, as we saw with Slot.

Slot was unfortunate with Alexander Isak being injured most of the season. Will a fully fit Isak be a massive weapon for Iraola?

It'll be great for them, and I think it'll be a success. Isak just needs a solid pre-season to get going, to get his fitness up, to build his confidence, and to know that he's got a full season ahead to really push on.

He's shown for Sweden that he's more than capable. The one thing I will say is that playing with space in behind you is very different to playing against teams that just sit deep and force you to break them down. That's a challenge not just for Iraola, but for Isak as well. How do you find those spaces for your forwards when there's no room to run into?

With Andy Robertson leaving, how do Liverpool replace these big characters and leaders in the squad?

You just hope that another player is ready to step into Robertson's place. I think Szoboszlai showed a little bit of that as a leader last season. You've still got Virgil there anyway, so you just hope that others can step up and really become those leaders. Mo has gone, Robbo has gone,

Milner went. All these players were huge characters and big leaders in the group who made sure they put pressure on the players to perform. And they didn't just do it on the pitch; they did it in training first, because you have to set the standard in training before you do it in a match.

James Milner retired this week. Should Liverpool bring former players like him back in a coaching role?

I think it would be good to get Milner back, but again, it's up to the management. You can't just throw ex-players in there simply because of who they are. There are definitely roles for ex-players within the system because they keep the current squad on their toes. Even if they are just in a coaching role, their presence alone demands respect and keeps standards high.

Jeremy Monga has impressed at Leicester who are now in League One. As someone who made your name there, is a move to Arsenal or Manchester United too big a step for him?

It's very tough for a young kid when clubs like that come calling. As a young player, you always think you're confident enough to deal with anything, but it's not easy.

He's 17 this summer, so that means he is going to be on a second year scholarship. Really, he should be concentrating on that and getting some actual football under his belt. There's a big conversation about him moving, but he hasn't really played loads of senior minutes yet. You want these young players to play continuous football.

If he goes to United, is he going straight into their first team? If he goes to Arsenal, is he going to play for sure? No. These kids honestly need first team football. He is a very, very

good player, but he needs to be pushed, he needs to be challenged, and he needs to experience the real pressures of going up against adult professionals week in, week out.

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