

Napoli Under Benitez!

After a successful three year relationship with Mazzarri that brought a Coppa Italia and a respectable second to a dominate Juve side, is Napoli's era over?

Mazzarri and his 3-5-2 have gone off to Inter, to rebuild what was a shocking season for the Nerazzurri. Campagnaro has also joined Inter, De Scantis has gone to Roma, and as we all know Cavani got his big money move to PSG. Even after all this, most pundits believe that Napoli is better placed than ever to deliver the Scudetto to the South of Italy for the first time in 14 years.

Napoli were easily the most active of Italian clubs in the transfer market, cashed up from the Cavani sale, players such as Mertens, Higuain, Reina, Albiol and Callejon have all joined new Coach Benitez.

Pre-season results have been encouraging and it is clearly evident that Napoli's style of play will change. Benitez has implemented a 4-4-1-1 strategy with deep zonal play based around clogging midfield and breaking into space. Hamsik has been playing higher up almost as a second striker than an attacking midfielder. Expect less assists and more goals from the Slovakian this season, <http://www.football-italia.net/36771/hamsik-will-score-more-benitez>

Whilst this change in shape may bring out the best in Hamsik, does it bode well for the Azzurri. They certainly need more goals from other areas given Cavani's departure. Higuain will help with that - but one of Napoli's key strengths with Cavani, Hamsik and either Pandev or Lavezzi was their aggressive defending from the front.

Many of Napoli's goals under Mazzarri were scored by breaking up play high up the pitch; Hamsik was probably the one player in the last two years that has been able to break up Pirlo/Juventus's play from deep. Benitez will insist that his players sit deep and play the ball to speedy wingers; therefore counter attacks will start deeper under Benitez. Can Napoli play that way? It will mean more emphasis will revolve around Inler's distribution to the flanks, will players like Callejon and Mertens be decisive enough to score or create chances on the counter. Calcio Maestro isn't so sure.

Maggio, Armero and Zuniga are energetic wing backs that were perfect for the 3-5-2, as their late bursting runs gave Napoli width without compromising numbers at the back. Now under Benitez they will be expected to play as full backs with a wide attacking winger in front of them. A player like Maggio is fantastic in narrow formations where he can gallop forward into space but with a player in front of him he is expected to sit back and defend more, he has looked uncomfortable playing this way for Italy.

The other issue in defence is Napoli's lack of quality, Mazzari compensated by playing 3 in central defence, always ensuring a spare at the back, usually Cannavaro.

Cannavaro effectively playing as the sweeper could sit deep, play long balls with little pressure and could cover his defenders without worrying about an opponent who could beat him for pace.

This season he will likely be partnered by Albiol, it will be interesting to see how Cannavaro performs. Cannavaro won't get as much time on the ball, will be forced to play higher up, and will usually have an opponent trying to get into the space behind him.

Calcio Maestro believes we should be looking at Milan as the genuine contender against Juve, as this may be a season of transition for Napoli.