

# CROATIANS CAN FLOURISH WITH LINE-UP TWEAK

Mandzukic as lone frontman will aid Modric and Rakitic and free up space for wingers



Richard Jolly

Real Madrid, Barcelona, Atletico Madrid and Liverpool, Juventus, AC Milan, Inter Milan and Fiorentina. The case for Croatia has always involved the cast list's employers. Football has become one of the leading export industries for a country of just over four million people. Its finest products are displayed in the most prestigious locations.

And yet tipping Croatia is not simply a case of taking a cursory glance at the teamsheet and assuming players signed by the biggest clubs will excel together.

Those individuals have displayed chemistry and commitment. Croatia were arguably the outstanding side in the group stage; their rout of Argentina was perhaps the finest performance in the tournament's first two weeks.

It proved, too, that they are capable of performing under pressure. So, in a different way, did their elimination of the hosts, Russia. Croatia's skills as party poopers should have England wary.

So should their character. Zlatko Dalic's side have not hit the same heights with their performances in the knockout stages, yet it is significant that they conceded first to both Denmark and Russia, and responded swiftly on each occasion. They recovered from the setback of conceding a 115th-minute equaliser in the quarter-final to win the subsequent penalty shoot-out.

And while England achieved a cathartic spot-kick win over Colombia, Croatia have to be considered favourites if they cannot be separated in 120 minutes.

Ivan Rakitic has calmly converted the winning penalty in successive shoot-outs. Danijel Subasic has already saved four efforts from 12 yards. The Monaco goalkeeper is a specialist in such situations.

Not that it will necessarily go that far. While Gareth Southgate has displayed a determination to learn from England's past, Croatia could present the stiffest challenge. England have long struggled against intelligent passers in midfield, as their history with Italy's Andrea Pirlo shows. They have prevailed so far without a playmaker. Croatia have four: Mateo Kovacic, Marcelo Brozovic, Rakitic and, above all, Luka Modric.

# World-class Modric can lead his unfancied squad to glory

MOSCOW • Every time a Croatian player appears before the media at this World Cup, he knows a question about Luka Modric is coming, and every time the answer reflects the admiration there is in the squad for their captain.

"We keep hearing the same question and we give out the same answer," said midfielder Ivan Perisic. Modric has played defence-splitting passes, scored goals and dictated the rhythm of the game in the team's run to the semi-finals, picking up three Man-of-the-Match awards in the four games he has completed.

The 32-year-old is Croatia's top scorer in the tournament with two goals and twice netted in nail-biting penalty shoot-outs against Denmark and Russia.

After once again starring as Real Madrid won a fourth Champions League crown in five seasons by beating Liverpool in May, Modric

will be a strong contender to win the Ballon d'Or if he can lead Croatia to improbable World Cup glory.

"I've known Luka for a number of years, not only with the national team, but at club level as well," said striker Mario Mandzukic, who played with Modric at Dinamo Zagreb a decade ago.

"He deserves all the accolades he gets from the media and public. He is our captain, our leader, we follow him and if the team manages a great result and he gets the Ballon d'Or he will deserve it."

There is little prospect that a country like Croatia, with a population of a little over four million, would have come this far without Modric, who as a boy was forced to flee his village home after his grandfather was killed by Serbian forces in the Croatian independence war.

But his reputation took a battering at home before the tournament due to his implication in the multi-

million-euro corruption trial of former Dinamo Zagreb chief Zdravko Mamic.

Modric has been unfazed by off-field troubles. He was excellent against Russia, his influence growing in the second half after coach Zlatko Dalic introduced defensive midfielder Marcelo Brozovic.

Previously, Modric and Ivan Rakitic had played in the centre of a 4-2-3-1 formation. The switch meant that they were released further forward, either side of Brozovic, in a 4-3-3.

Modric has consistently looked better when he has played higher up the pitch and England's holding midfielder Jordan Henderson will be the main man in charge of trying to nullify him.

Just six weeks after Modric beat Liverpool and Henderson in Kiev, he has the chance to put his side in the media spotlight again.

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE, THE GUARDIAN

## Croatia v England



Key battle:	Dejan Lovren v Harry Kane
Leading the Golden Boot race with six goals, Kane is widely considered one of the best all-round centre-forwards in the game right now.	League clash against Tottenham after just 31 minutes. By then Kane had evaded Lovren twice, scoring the opener before creating the second.
Lovren knows how difficult it can be to mark Kane. On Oct 22, 2017, the Liverpool centre-back was substituted in the Premier	Lovren has a chance to show that he has learnt his lesson while Kane is looking to serve up another striking masterclass.

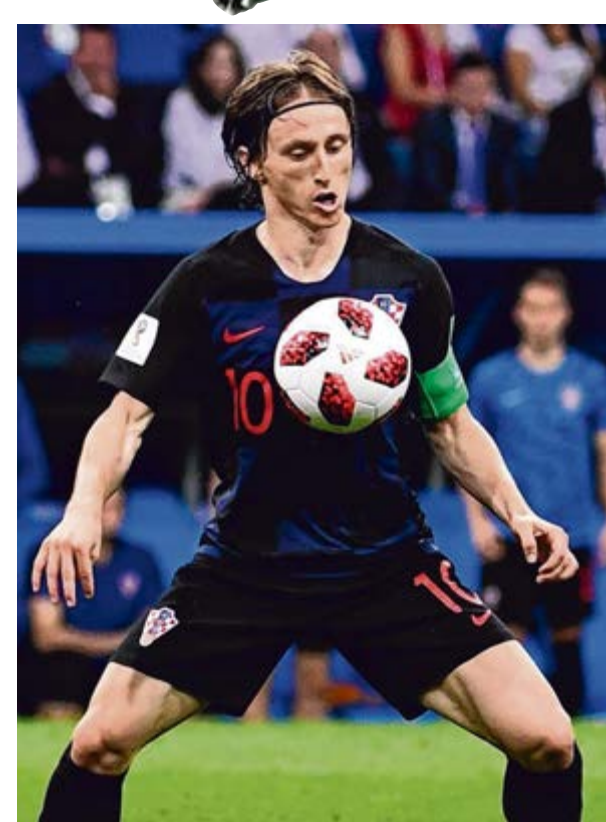
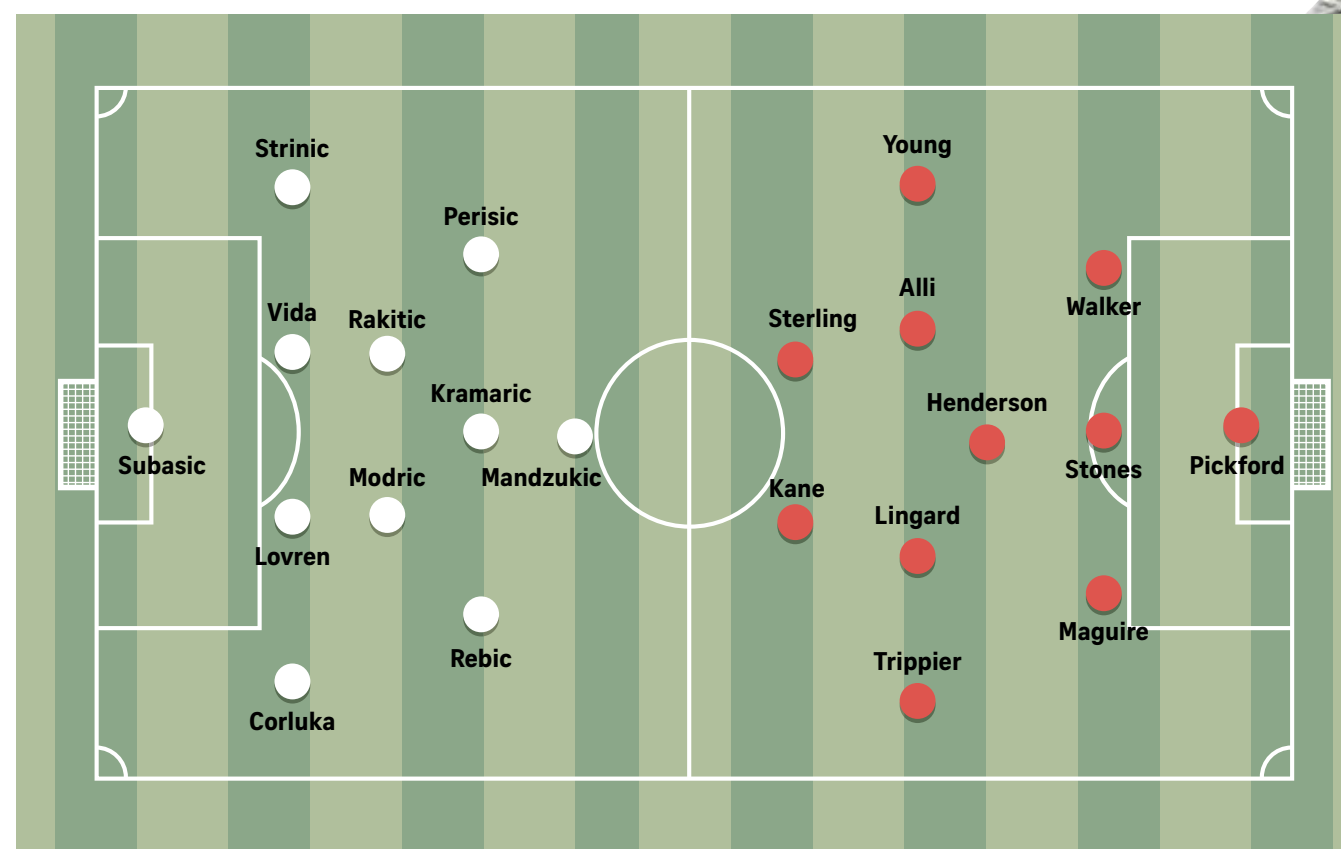
Key statistics		
29.5	Average age	26
1.85m	Average height	1.82m
10	Goals scored	11
78	Total attempts	70
19	Attempts on target	19
4	Goals conceded	4
2,736	Passes attempted	2,665
83%	Passing accuracy	87%
581km	Distance covered	565km

Head-to-head				
Last meeting	Played	Croatia wins	England wins	Draws
Fifa World Cup qualifier, September 2009; England 5 Croatia 1	7	2	4	1

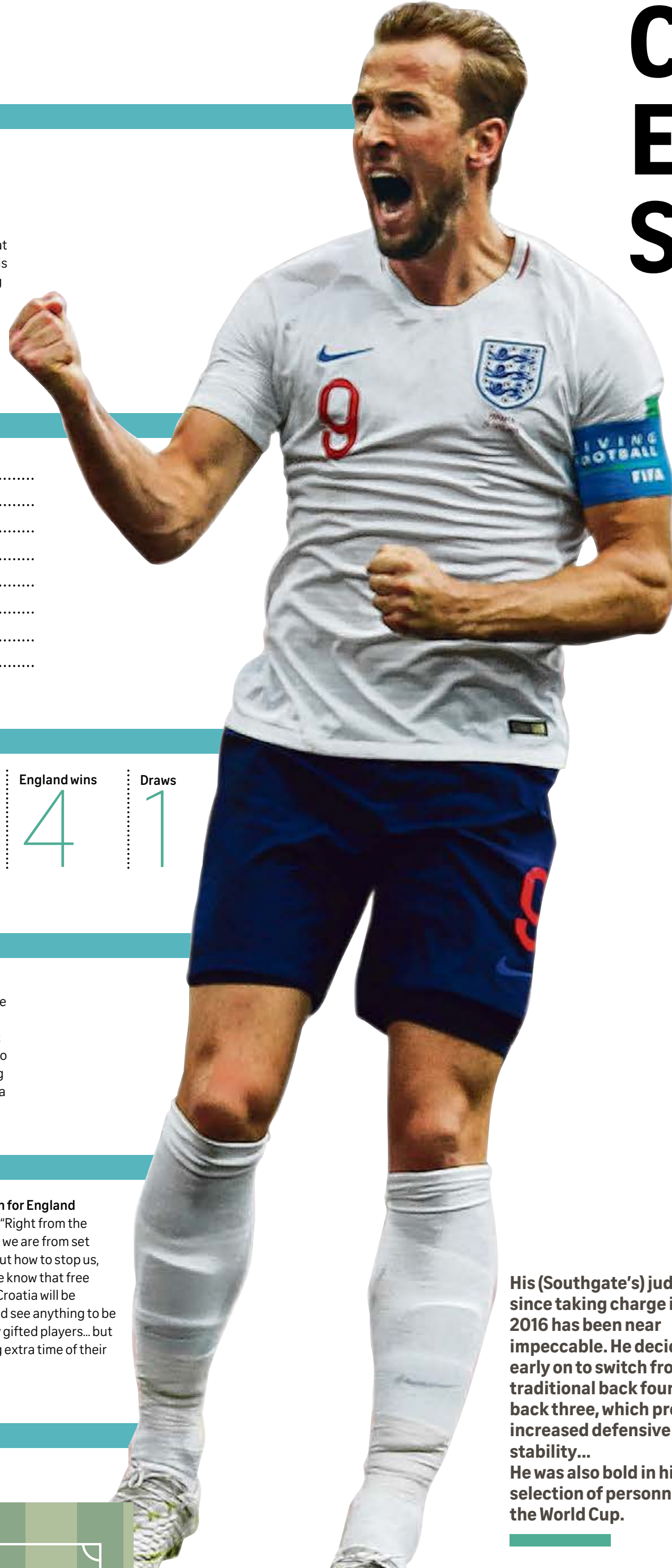
Team news	
<b>Croatia</b> Croatia are waiting on the fitness of first-choice right-back Sime Vrsaljko and goalkeeper Danijel Subasic, both of whom were injury concerns during the quarter-final win over Russia.	<b>England</b> Gareth Southgate is expected to have a full squad to choose from. Jamie Vardy, who strained his groin against Colombia and Jordan Henderson, who has recovered from a tight hamstring against Sweden, both came through a full training session.

Pundit's pick	
<b>Slaven Bilic: Match will be won or lost in midfield</b> Former Croatia and West Ham manager, an ITV pundit, told The Telegraph: "This is going to be the biggest test for (England) because of the quality we have all over the pitch and especially in midfield. England have not faced that. This is major. You are talking about one of the best midfield pairs in Europe and in the tournament with (Luka) Modric and (Ivan) Rakitic and we also have (Mateo) Kovacic and (Marcelo) Brozovic. Midfield is always the key area for the teams who are trying to play with the ball."	<b>Alan Shearer: Game, set, piece, match for England</b> Former England striker told the BBC: "Right from the start, we have shown how dangerous we are from set pieces and, far from teams working out how to stop us, the fear factor has built and built... We know that free kicks and corners are the big things Croatia will be worried about. I don't look at them and see anything to be afraid of. They have some technically gifted players... but they looked dead on their feet during extra time of their quarter-final against Russia."

Possible line-ups	
Croatia (4-2-3-1)	England (3-5-2)



Luka Modric has been an influential player for Croatia and, having won the Champions League with Real Madrid, he could be a Ballon d'Or contender if he wins the World Cup as well. PHOTO: REUTERS



His (Southgate's) judgment since taking charge in late 2016 has been near impeccable. He decided early on to switch from the traditional back four to a back three, which provides increased defensive stability through a compact centre and allows the wing-backs to push higher up the pitch to augment the attack.

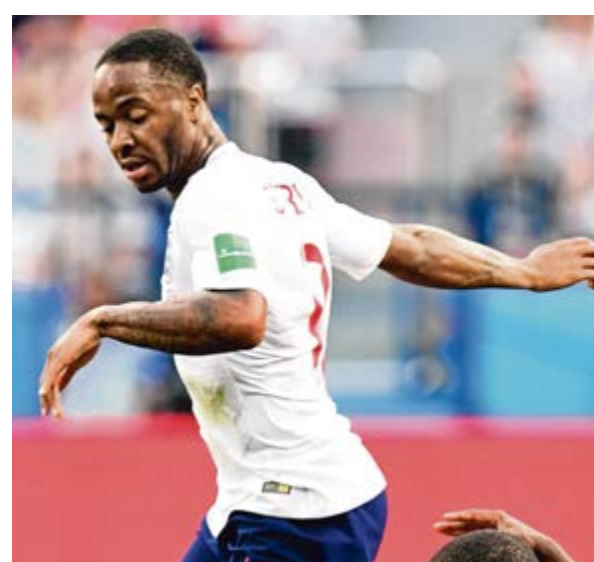
He was also bold in his selection of personnel for the World Cup. Goalkeeper Joe Hart was dropped while Southgate kept faith in Kyle Walker, Harry Maguire and John Stones as his first-choice backline despite question marks about their experience and form.

They have justified his faith and allowed England to play the way Southgate felt would be most effective in Russia.

The 47-year-old also showed he can be shrewd and street smart. Despite disapproval from some critics, he rested the bulk of his starting XI in the dead-rubber group-stage match against Belgium which his team lost but ended up in the easier bracket of the knockout stage.

Aside from his game management, Southgate's player management has also been spot on.

The players' families were invited to the team hotel in Saint Peters-



None of England's 11 goals so far in Russia have been scored by Raheem Sterling but his coach Gareth Southgate believes that the forward has been fundamental to the way the team have played. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

# Villain of the piece Sterling fits perfectly into the puzzle

chester City star. The BBC's interactive player ratings has given him the poorest score of any player in Gareth Southgate's side, while some pundits have called for Marcus Rashford to start against Croatia at Sterling's expense.

But for all his critics, Sterling has the support of the most important man - Southgate.

"I think Raheem has been fundamental to the way we have played - his movement, the positions he takes up, his pressing of the ball, his work rate for the team, the winning of free kicks, the winning of corners, his speed to stretch teams," the England manager told the ITV World Cup podcast.

"He was a constant threat to Sweden (in the quarter-finals). Of course he hasn't scored the goals we would have liked to score but for myself and the players he has been

# SOUTHGATE COULD BE ENGLAND'S SALVATION

Effective game and player management skills have boosted his credentials to lead the team



David Lee

In Moscow

For the first time at this World Cup, England manager Gareth Southgate looked slightly unsure. An hour after his team had beaten Sweden 2-0 in Saturday's quarter-finals, he returned to the pitch to thank the 1,000 fans of the Three Lions who had stayed behind in the Cosmos Arena to celebrate.

Looking sheepish as they serenaded him, Southgate played along in good nature and waved his hands like a conductor to the delight of the crowd before disappearing down the tunnel.

Even under awkward circumstances, Southgate barely puts a foot wrong, and chances are, he will make the correct decisions in tonight's semi-final clash against Croatia at the Luzhniki Stadium in Moscow.

His judgment since taking charge in late 2016 has been near impeccable.

He decided early on to switch from the traditional back four to a back three, which provides increased defensive stability through a compact centre and allows the wing-backs to push higher up the pitch to augment the attack.

He was also bold in his selection of personnel for the World Cup. Goalkeeper Joe Hart was dropped while Southgate kept faith in Kyle Walker, Harry Maguire and John Stones as his first-choice backline despite question marks about their experience and form.

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Aside from his game management, Southgate's player management has also been spot on.

The players' families were invited to the team hotel in Saint Peters-

burg on Sunday, while his back-room staff were also involved in creating a playlist in which they were asked to select two songs each - savvy moves to foster team spirit and earn implicit trust from those around him.

Former Ireland international Ray Houghton, who played with Southgate at Crystal Palace briefly in 1995, told The Straits Times he was not surprised with the strong display of football IQ and EQ.

He said: "I always thought he (Southgate) would go on and be a manager as he is a bright man."

"He is also a genuine and humble man who learnt how to talk to the media, went to numerous countries to look at different sports and how coaches dealt with their players so he could get a better understanding of management."

"He has come on very well as a manager, and it has helped that many of the players are young and have bought into his ideas. He has gone with a very exciting, quick and athletic team and it has worked because he has let them play with a freedom."

Southgate's attention to detail is evidenced by England's set-piece prowess. They have scored eight of their 11 goals from set plays, which sets them up nicely against a Croatian side that has conceded three out of four this way.

At the other end, the choice of Jordan Pickford as No. 1 has been inspired, said former English Premier League custodian and ex-Singapore goalkeeping coach John Burridge.

He added Pickford will be key against the more formidable Croatian frontline of Mario Mandzukic, Ante Rebic, Andrej Kramaric and Ivan Perisic - who have all opened their accounts - in their 4-2-3-1.

Burridge said: "Jordan is not big and tall. He is 1.85m, which is perfect for getting to both the low and high shots. I love that he also has a brutal part to his game when he screams at his defenders, and I think you need that from a goalkeeper to keep the defenders alert."

Southgate yesterday defended Raheem Sterling and said that the winger, who despite not having scored in 24 matches, was fundamental to the team's style and agenda to start against the favoured Croats.

With his pace, he could prove to be England's match-winner and another masterstroke by Southgate.

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