



Dutch striker Ruud van Nistelrooy (L) and midfielder Phillip Cocu (2nd from L) jog with teammates prior to a training session in Freiburg on Thursday.

Postiga wants Van Basten autograph!

REUTERS, Marienfeld

Portuguese striker Helder Postiga said he wanted Dutch coach Marco van Basten's autograph after the two meet on Sunday, but he wanted to beat the Netherlands even more.

"Van Basten was my idol as a player," Postiga told a news conference on Thursday.

"Maybe I'll get his autograph after the game."

Using a favourite expression of coach Luiz Felipe Scolari, Postiga said the second round clash in Nuremberg would be a "do or die" game.

"The Netherlands are a big team and yesterday (against Argentina) they showed off their excellent players. The game is going to be very difficult for us."

Defender Paulo Ferreira, who if he plays will be up against Chelsea team mate Arjen Robben, said facing the Dutch winger would be no easy task.

"I've known Robben for two years, I work with him every day, he is a very complicated player and it will be difficult to mark him," said Ferreira, who came on as a substitute in the 2-1 win over Mexico on Wednesday.

"The Netherlands are a difficult team, a very good team. I have respect for him (Robben) and the team but we want to go through," he added.

In their nine previous meetings, Portugal have won five and drawn three matches, the last one being in the semi-final of Euro 2004 which Portugal won 2-1.

Asked about whether the Dutch win in 1991 would be the first and last time the Netherlands triumphed over the Portuguese, Ferreira said: "I hope so."

Unfamiliar foes on the biggest stage

INTERNET, undated

The jury is still out on whether the match between Argentina and Holland was a tactical masterclass, as Franz Beckenbauer claimed, or just a tedious affair between two understrength teams mainly interested in leaving the pitch unhurt.

Holland's game with Argentina on Wednesday proved little to the world.

Anyway: Holland now face Portugal on Sunday night in Nuremberg.

An important part of any preview is to drivel away over that long-forgotten handball in a previous match between the two sides or a ludicrous offside decision that could have changed the face of football during the World Cup of 1950.

However, never before have Portugal and Holland played at the same World Cup so there is not much mileage in this approach.

They did meet in the qualification group for 2002, which conjures memories about the Oranje team of yore.

When Portugal came to Rotterdam in October 2000, the inimitable Louis van Gaal was just in office as national coach. His dream was to win the World Cup, if not in 2002 than in 2006.

He started with a home draw against the Irish, leaving him with an uphill battle almost from the start. A win was desperately needed when the Portuguese came to town.

After ten minutes the Dutch stopped playing when Pauleta took the ball off Mario Melchiot, a surprise choice at right-back, while they heard a whistle from the stands.

The Portuguese did not think twice and scored. Just before half-time a horrendous backpass from surprise choice left-back Michael Reiziger handed the visitors a second goal.

Portugal could not believe their luck against hapless hosts with an unbelievable defensive set-up and leaned back for the rest of the game. While the players avoided the press, walking by the cameras with dark sunglasses, Louis van Gaal gave the Momy Python-esque gem after the horrible home performance: "We created enough chances, which the Portuguese never did today. They were handed two goals and created nothing for the rest of the game."

At that time the Dutch team was rapidly alienating itself from the crowd. Five months later they travelled to Porto for the return and the last chance to avoid an embarrassing early exit.

For the first time under Van Gaal the team played a blinder and were two-up in 50 minutes. What went on in his mind only Van Gaal knows, but with ten minutes to go Pierre van Hooijdonk joined Patrick Kluivert and Roy Makaay up front to replace Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink, who was then buried deep under high-fives and other wild celebrations with the technical staff and the reserves; a win in Porto would have put Holland back on top of the group.

The Portuguese looked dead and buried, while the Dutch succeeded in missing some clearcut chances. Others would have tried to control the game, but Van Gaal went for all-out attack.

After Edgar Davids had missed an open goal, the hosts immediately countered for Pauleta to score

and in the ensuing panic Frank de Boer floored Rui Costa. Figo converted the penalty for a last-minute equalizer. Johan Cruyff commented: "The arrogance came to haunt us. We have a great generation of players, but they lack something."

Louis van Gaal left not long after his team lost to ten-man Ireland in the autumn of 2001. In his farewell speech he explained the difference in ambition between him and the squad.

"I had the idea that I could still bring these players to a higher level. But then my captain Frank de Boer said in the papers, that I had the wrong impression and that he rather liked to see me as a sort of recreational therapist."

For the players of that team the meetings of the Dutch squad were like a reunion of friends, a relaxing break from the pressure cooker of club football in England, Spain or Italy. A time to sit back and enjoy life in a 5-star environment. They were not really interested in the ambitions of Louis the Schoolmaster.

Yes, going to World Cup was great, but they'd like to qualify with the least possible effort. For the creation of Total Football Mark II, the spring of 2002 was soon enough. The attitude was: "Let's do relaxing training now and let us take care of the game. Don't bother us with power runs and these intricate tactics."

Van Gaal was on a different tack, hoping to achieve what former Dutch coaches had never managed - becoming World Champions. His players were interested in a title as well, but not in doing it the hard way. The magic between Ajax's

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PORTUGAL V NETHERLANDS

Revenge on their mind

AFP, Nuremberg

The Netherlands are confident they can break a 15-year hex and avenge their Euro 2004 semi-final defeat by sending Portugal crashing out of the World Cup on Sunday.

The Dutch have not beaten Portugal since 1991 but Marco van Basten's remodelled team believes destiny is on their side ahead of the second-round clash.

"Portugal beat us two years ago, but the next game is something completely different. This is a new, young team, and we have new ideas," said Ruud van Nistelrooy.

Two years ago, goals from Cristiano Ronaldo and Maniche broke Dutch hearts on a frenetic night in Lisbon. Previously, Portugal wrecked the Netherlands' 2002 World Cup qualifying campaign with an away win and home draw.

Midfielder Phillip Cocu admits to still feeling the "trauma" of the Lisbon semi-final but says the new-look team must draw a line under the past.

"Now, up against Portugal, we have to forget about the trauma of

and Scolari's unmatched World Cup pedigree, Van Basten remains quietly confident.

"Now we're up against Portugal. We know they're excellent but we're also not bad," said the Dutchman.

"Preparations will not change. If we're lucky, we've got four finals to go, matches where you can make no errors because you cannot go back on them."

"We'll have to play on the basis of sound organisation and the implementation of everything we've done in previous games."

Van Basten can turn to Giovanni van Bronckhorst and Chelsea flyer Arjen Robben, who were rested for the Netherlands' clash with Argentina.

The former Dutch great also looks set to ditch van Nistelrooy and replace him with Feyenoord marksman Dirk Kuyt after some lacklustre performances by the Manchester United man.

"Ruud has not been good. He hasn't been on form in the first matches," van Basten said. "He has to give us a lot more."

Scolari meanwhile goes into the game on a record 10-match World Cup winning streak, including seven as he led his native Brazil to the title in 2002.

Wins against Angola, Iran and Mexico saw Portugal through Group D with maximum points and minimum fuss, with the Brazilian even able to rest five first-team players for the final match.

Lisbon scorers Ronaldo and Maniche were both on target in the

HEAD TO HEAD

Portugal v Netherlands head-to-head record (FIFA records)

Table with 2 columns: Year, Portugal Goals, Netherlands Goals. Rows include 1990, 1991, 1992, 1995, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2003, 2004.

Euro 2004," he said.

"Don't look at the past, but only think about playing a good match."

The Netherlands will be under no illusions about the size of the task, with World Cup-winning coach Scolari masterminding a Portuguese record of 17 matches unbeaten.

But despite Portugal's quality,

KEY QUOTES

Portugal defender Ricardo Carvalho: "We were happy with our performance against Holland in Euro 2004 (a 2-1 semi-final win). We know Netherlands very well, we play a similar game tactically and physically."

Defender Paulo Ferreira: "We have respect for the Netherlands but we are thinking to the next round. Are Portugal favourites? No way. The game will be difficult for both teams."

Dutch coach van Basten: "We might expect more from (Ruud) van Nistelrooy, he has to play a bigger role in our attack."



LEARN IT FROM RONALDO: Forward Cristiano Ronaldo (L) plays with the ball boys at the beginning of Portugal team's training session at the Klosterpforte hotel in Marienfeld on Friday.

RVN might be on the bench

REUTERS, Freiburg

Netherlands striker Ruud van Nistelrooy could be left out of the starting lineup for Sunday's second-round World Cup match against Portugal, coach Marco van Basten told reporters on Thursday.

"The central position up front is a point of discussion and the chance that Dirk (Kuyt) will start on Sunday has increased," Van Basten told reporters.

"Ruud will understand that if you play well you will not be substituted," Van Basten said.

Van Nistelrooy started the tournament as first choice but has scored only one goal, against Ivory Coast, and was taken off in all three Group C matches.

It was a remarkable move from the Dutch national coach to criticise his first-choice striker as he had backed him up when he was under fire at his club Manchester United.

United boss Alex Ferguson dropped Van Nistelrooy two months before the end of the season in favour of Frenchmen Louis Saha but Van Basten then declared his confidence in the striker.

"It is not nice for him when he is replaced but we did not speak about it," added Van Basten on Thursday.

"Ruud (van Nistelrooy) will understand that if you play well you will not be substituted."

"We might expect more from Ruud (van Nistelrooy), he has to play a bigger role in our attack."

Van Basten has considerable strength in depth in his squad and is happy to use the competition from within the group to improve standards.

Portugal have top marks...so far

AFP, Gelsenkirchen

England are through to the World Cup's last 16, but London football chiefs will be looking wistfully at Group D where their former target Luiz Felipe Scolari is giving Portugal the full benefit of his World Cup masterclass.

Just two months after snubbing England's advances, Scolari's Portugal have romped through the first round with maximum points, letting in only one goal in the process.

Wins against Angola, Iran and Mexico have put Portugal through for only the second time in their history -- and the first since Eusebio led them to the 1966 semis.

The World Cup-winning coach has notched up a record 10 consecutive wins in the tournament, including seven four years ago when he led his native Brazil to the title.

After reaching the Euro 2004 final, Scolari's team are now unbeaten in 17 matches stretching back to February 2005, the best streak in Portuguese history.

Scolari's 30 wins are also the highest number by any Portugal coach, surpassing Antonio Oliveira's record.

Statistics aside, Scolari gave a telling reminder of his coaching brilliance when Portugal beat Mexico 2-1 on Wednesday despite resting five first-team players.

"It's great not to have dropped any points. We have stacked up three good wins and now we must build on that. It wasn't all good today," Scolari said after the match.

"From now on it's knock-out matches and even the best teams

can play badly on one day," he added.

Portugal have avoided a tricky clash with Argentina but will face another tough opponent, the Netherlands, on Sunday.

But Scolari remains adamant that any team is beatable, and said he would stick by his method of taking tournaments one game at a time.

"It's only the second time Portugal has qualified for the second round in 40 years but we have to look at it game by game," he said.

"All the teams are very balanced and very even, they're in good condition. There are five or six teams which I believe are the best, they might be playing very well but one day they can have an off-day and be eliminated."

Blending youth with experience, Scolari has kept faith with remnants of Portugal's "golden generation" like Luis Figo while injecting the pace and energy of Cristiano Ronaldo and Miguel.

His introduction of the Brazilian-born Deco, controversial at the time, now seems like a masterstroke with the busy playmaker at the hub of most attacking moves.

With Maniche holding in midfield and Ricardo Carvalho marshalling a miserly defence, Portugal look sharp in attack, resourceful in midfield and solid at the back.

While they remain outsiders for the title, Portugal's game-by-game approach did the trick at Euro 2004 and contrasts sharply with England, who have been talking up their title chances for months.

The two are on course for a quarterfinal meeting here -- a worrying prospect for England, who have been dumped out of the last two major tournaments at the same stage by Scolari's Brazil and Portugal.

Maniche positive of victory

REUTERS, Marienfeld

Portugal's Maniche said he had no doubts that his side would reach the World Cup quarter-finals, even though Sunday's game against the Netherlands would be tough.

"I am absolutely certain that we are going to beat this great opponent Holland," the midfielder told a news conference.

"We have already passed through the first phase and the coach has said that he wants us to make the last eight. We are ready to stay longer," he added.

Portugal won all three group matches as they progressed to the second round.

The Portuguese hold the upper hand in head-to-head statistics, losing only once to the Dutch in nine meetings, but Maniche said they were not relying on past performances.

"The statistics tell you nothing. This is a totally different game. It is going to be very difficult. Holland have excellent players, but so do we," he said, adding: "It will be



CONTRASTING FANS: A combo photo shows a Ukrainian supporter (L) and a Tunisian fan watch their teams' final World Cup Group H match at Berlin on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP

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