

Return of the vanquished

PRAGUE, July 2: Thousands of Czech soccer fans crowded Prague's 13th century old Town Square on Monday to welcome home their soccer team despite the 2-1 defeat against Germany in the European Championship final, reports Reuter.

The squad travelled from the airport to the city centre in a double-decker bus and then waded into the crowd, signing autographs and kicking soccer balls as the national anthem, "where is my home," rang out.

"Thanks for the support you have given us and thanks also to those fans who made the trip to England," said striker Pavel Kuka, who, like many team members, was visibly moved by the show of support.

The Czechs, who were expected to be little more than fodder for group rivals Germany and Italy in the preliminary round, captured the hearts of fans at home and abroad with a plucky effort throughout the tournament.

But a storybook ending was not to be had in Sunday's final when German striker Oliver Bierhoff scored his second goal of the game, a "golden goal", in the fifth minute of sudden-death extra time to give Germany a 2-1 win and the championship.

The Czech Republic was forced to rebuild its team from scratch following the country's split with former federation partner Slovakia in 1993.

Major views

LONDON, July 2: The British Prime Minister John Major praised the Euro '96 tournament in an article for the Daily Telegraph on Monday.

Major lauded both home nations, England and Scotland, and acknowledged the debt to coach Terry Venables.

Major has strong views on the tournament, and clearly spent time analysing the games. "I could not have been more proud of the team," Major wrote.

"With the likes of Jamie Redknapp, Steve McManaman, Philip and Gary Neville and Robbie Fowler at the beginning of their international careers, the future looks bright."

"And in Alan Shearer I believe we have the most complete centre-forward in the world."

As regards the way in which matches were decided, he writes: "... perhaps FIFA and UEFA should look again at a system which puts such pressure on each penalty-taker and brings such personal anguish to those who miss."

"Having said that, there are no easy solutions. A corner-kick comeback after extra-time is one idea that has been floated but it is not one I find particularly attractive. It is too mechanistic for the charm of football."

"Continuing extra time until a team score might be a better and would ensure that a game was decided by team success rather than individual failure."

Major goes on to congratulate Germany on their victory, and praise the way in which the tournament brought Britain together as a nation.

Frenchwoman faring well

WIMBLEDON, July 2: Mary Pierce is into the quarterfinals of a Grand Slam event for the first time since 1994, and in only her second appearance at Wimbledon — of all places, reports AP.

The past years, I wanted to play here, ... there were always incidents where I just couldn't," said Pierce, an oblique reference to her troubled life off the court.

After an unstable couple of years, marked by a recent falling out with her mother and a break with her volatile father who was banned from women's tour events, the 21-year-old Pierce has new mentor in Brad Gilbert and a spot in the final eight on grass — her weakest surface.

What Gilbert couldn't do for another star pupil, Andre Agassi — who stumbled in the first round — he seems to have done for Pierce.

"Brad is just really laid back and we talk a lot about a lot of different things," said Pierce, who split with her last coach, Nick Bollettieri, several months ago.

"Our training has been, you know, really intense but also just really laid back and at the same time it's a lot of fun," she added. "Just joking around, but really concentrating the time I'm on the court."

Pierce has been playing in the backwoods, from Centre Court, Court 1 or even Court 2. Monday she defeated Elena Likhovtseva of Kazakhstan in two sets in a rain-delayed match on Court 14, a minor show court.

"I don't mind. It is better off that way. I just come here to play tennis, not matter what court they put me on," said Pierce, who faces Kimiko Date in the quarterfinals. "But I guess now is where all the action starts."

In the recent French Open, Pierce wore a sexy, eye-catching black tennis dress but was eliminated early, leading to questions about the credibility of her victory in the 1995 Australian Open and her runner-up finish in the French two years ago.

The low-cut black dress has given way at Wimbledon to a traditional white dress — and a low profile — for the Canadian-born, Florida-based Frenchwoman.



MAN OF THE MOMENT: Oliver Bierhoff, who scored both the goals in Germany's 2-1 win over the Czech Republic in the final of the European Championship at Wembley on Sunday, holds the trophy in a boisterous and ticker-tape reception at the Frankfurt 'Roemer' Square on Monday.

— AFP/UNB photo

'Kings of Europe' back home



FRANKFURT, July 2: Europe's new soccer champions, Germany, returned home on Monday to a rapturous reception from thousands of flag-waving fans who packed Frankfurt's town centre to welcome their sporting heroes, reports Reuter.

Some 30,000 supporters filled the historic Roemerberg Square to see the players, who led the crowd in singing "We are the champions."

From the balcony of the town hall the exhausted-looking team members, showing signs of a hard night's celebrations, held aloft the Henri Delaunay Trophy to the roars of the delirious crowd. The players then performed a Mexican wave.

"It's coming home, football's coming home" sang striker Juergen Klinsmann, giving his own hoarse rendition of the tournament theme song in celebration of Germany's third European Championship.

Klinsmann, who came back from injury to captain the Germans to victory in Sunday's final, apologised for his poor tenor voice, which he said was feeling the strain from a night of celebration.

"I'm very proud of Germany, and I think we are going to win the World Cup next," said Christian Borschard, a 12-year-old from Hanau, near Frankfurt.

This is wonderful, the best atmosphere in Frankfurt since we won the World Cup in

1990," said Oswald Zoettlein, a municipal official.

"The reception is totally overwhelming," said match-winner Oliver Bierhoff, who

Rowdy fans

BONN, July 2: Drunken German fans ran amok and clashed with police following the national team's 2-1 win over the Czech Republic in Sunday's Euro '96 final, police said on Monday, reports Reuter.

About 30 people were detained in the western state of north Rhine-Westphalia after brawls broke out in Essen, Duesseldorf and other cities, police said.

In Herne, vandals smashed shop windows, plundered a sporting goods store and damaged parked cars. Drunken fans threw bottles and beer glasses at police, who responded in force to restore order. Several police cars were damaged.

The players were welcomed at the airport by the mayor of Frankfurt but supporters were encouraged to stay in the city centre for fear of chaos in the arrivals hall.

Many of the players, including libero Matthias Sammer and defender Dietrich Elts, had to limp down the gangway nursing the injuries which briefly threatened to leave the team without a full complement of players for the final.

Goalkeeper Andreas Koepke, whose penalty save took Germany through to the semifinal against England, carried the championship trophy off the aircraft together with his young daughter.

For part of the flight from London, the Lufthansa jet was escorted by a guard of honour of air force tornado fighter planes.

scored both German goals in their 2-1 win over the Czech Republic.

Andreas Moeller, who missed the final through suspension, said: "It was really fun. It is a great thing to be here in Frankfurt and to get a reception like this."

German manager Berti Vogts rendered himself to the crowd when he pushed 13-year-old Matthias Jakob in his wheelchair into the circle of team players to obtain autographs.

Every aspect of the team's arrival in Germany was broadcast live on television, including the 30-minute bus ride from Frankfurt airport to the town centre where supporters had been waiting before the plane had landed.

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Troublemakers also threw bottles at police in Berlin while in Mettmann police detained two men who shot fireworks into a crowd of people watching the match. No one was hurt.

Flag-waving supporters across the country danced in the streets after seeking their team clinch United Germany's first major championship.

Police said around 4,000 people had gathered on the Muersterdamm, Berlin's main street, to celebrate.

Mostly peaceful crowds thronged other major cities as well.

The shoppers' paradise



LONDON, July 1 (Reuters): While players and coaches were trying to win matches during Euro '96, club managers, agents and almost anyone else with a mobile phone and a sharp suit were busy trying to win transfer battles.

The European Championship, which ended on Sunday, with Germany as victors, catapulted unknown names into the limelight and many of the tournament's heroes are likely to sign lucrative new contracts in the next few weeks.

The transfer market is going into over-drive now and there will be plenty of players starting the new season with new clubs, British agent Paul Harrison said on Monday.

Deals are being done all over the place because Euro '96 was the ideal shop window for players who maybe weren't that well known to make a name for themselves but who are now."

The most spectacular transfer speculation during the past three weeks was that the tournament's top scorer Alan Shearer would be moving from Blackburn to Manchester United for a world record fee of 19.0 million pounds (29.5 million dollars).

While Blackburn were quick to deny the rumour, Shearer does have a clause in his contract which would enable him to consider moving if the price were right, the reports claimed. Shearer would earn 20,000 pounds (\$31,000 dollars) a week at Old Trafford.

But while Shearer's name was well known before the tournament started, some previously unfamiliar players have shot into the headlines — most notably Karel Poborsky of the Czech Republic.

The 24-year-old forward moved from Viktoria Zizkov to Slavia Prague last season and was a regular scorer as Slavia reached the UEFA Cup semifinals.

His superbly chipped goal against Portugal in the quarterfinals and the dynamism of his all-round play brought him to the attention of a wider audience. Slavia coach Frantisek Cipra has confirmed English Premier League Liverpool have made a 3.0 million pound (4.6 million dollars) bid for the player.

Another Czech to impress was Patrik Berger, despite being hampered by a viral infection.

But Berger, who moved from Slavia Prague to Borussia Dortmund at the start of last season, still did enough to catch the eye — especially with

his superb display in the final — and he could be on the move from Germany to Italy soon.

Almost half the French team were destined to move to new clubs even before Euro '96 began but there was one major surprise during the tournament when Chelsea's new Dutch boss Rudd Gullit signed defender Frank Leboeuf for 2.0 million pounds (3.1 million dollars).

Gullit has also expressed an interest in Italian Euro '96 player Roberto di Matteo but may be put off by his club side Lazio's asking price of 7.0 million pounds (10.8 million dollars).

With huge money now

pouring into English soccer, making it almost as attractive to the top stars as Italy's Serie A has been for last 15 years. Romania's Gheorghe Hagi and Florin Raduioiu have both been linked with London club West Ham.

A spate of transfers followed the World Cup in the United States two years ago and Euro '96 in Sweden.

But in the wake of the Bosman ruling, which allows greater movement of players at the end of their contracts, the market is likely to be busier than ever between now and the start of the new European domestic seasons in August and September.

Crucially, the legislation as a xenophobic "English-only" measure, intended as a symbolic stand against the rising tide of multiculturalism in American society.

The law imposes no restrictions on language services for Olympic visitors. Nor does it contravene the International Olympic Committee's designation of English and French as the official languages of the international athletic fete.

However, it has been criticised as an embarrassment for Georgia at a time when the state is preparing to greet an estimated 2 million visitors to the Olympic Games.

The bill's author, republican state Sen Mike Crotts, says the legislation was never meant to address cultural issues. Instead, it was intended to stop tax money from being spent to record deeds, wills and other government transactions in languages other than English.

There are 166 languages spoken in Georgia, said Crotts, who represents Conyers, Georgia. The reason we can't practically operate government in multiple languages is that first of all, economically we can't afford it."

Under the law, individuals can still file documents in foreign languages. But now they also must pay for an English translation that is filed simultaneously.

Abdul Awal Khan (R) and Mohammad Masir Hossain (L), the two senior sports journalists who were felicitated by Bangladesh Sports Writers Association, pose with the BSWA crest at the NSC conference room yesterday.

— Star photo



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Gazza, Sheryl get spliced

LONDON, July 2: England's trouble-prone soccer hero Paul Gascoigne, "Gazza" to his fans, on Monday married the mother of his child in an ostentatious ceremony with his teammates on hand to lend support, reports Reuter.

The wedding, at an exclusive country hotel where "Gazza" had booked all the rooms to deter unwelcome guests, was held less than a week after the English soccer team was beaten by Germany in a Euro '96 semifinal.

Guests included the entire side and Terry Venables, who stepped down as manager after the German defeat.

The guests arrived at the hotel in white limousines with blacked-out windows, frustrating dozens of fans who had waited in the rain hoping for a glimpse of their heroes.

Newspapers said Gascoigne had chosen a gold-coloured tailcoat for his wedding day while his bride, divorce Sheryl Failes, was to wear pink tulle and lace.

Tabloid newspapers say the couple have had a stormy five-year relationship. When Failes gave birth to their son Regan four months ago, Gascoigne was said to be drinking with friends.

Tabloid newspapers said Failes, 31, had banned the star from holding a traditional eve-of-wedding celebration with his male friends because she feared he would miss the wedding.

Gascoigne proposed to Failes two weeks ago after he scored a spectacular goal in England's victorious match against Scotland in the first round of the European Championships.

The media were excluded from the 100,000 pound (155,400 dollars) wedding, except for a glossy magazine which reportedly paid 150,000 pounds for exclusive photographs.

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Gibbons smuggled the Euro '96 ball out under his shirt on Sunday after it was booted into the Wembley crowd by a jubilant player as the game ended.

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Immigration officials expect about 500,000 foreign visitors to descend on Atlanta during the three weeks of the Games.

Tom Fisher, district director of the Immigration and Naturalisation Service, said about 60 per cent of those visitors will fly directly to Atlanta.

The biggest problems for visitors will be "Traffic and heat," predicted McConnell.

The five-ring Olympic symbol and a flame logo for the Atlanta Games that open on July 19 are both copyrighted.

Grinaker said sponsors paid to train Olympic athletes and if they pulled out the cash-strapped government may have to pay.



Boxer Hawk Makepula (C) leads the South African Olympic team through the terminal of Hartsfield International Airport in Atlanta on July 1.

— AFP/UNB photo