



EUROPEAN FOOTBALL CHAMPIONSHIP 2000

GROUP-B

Belgium

Italy

Sweden

Turkey



Belgian underdogs ready to bite

PARIS, June 8 (AFP): Belgium may be among the underdogs at Euro 2000 but the tournament's joint hosts are convinced they can sink their teeth into the top sides after their revival under new coach Robert Waseige.

Belgian soccer was in a sorry state last September, when Waseige replaced Georges Leekens in the wake of an embarrassing 4-3 defeat to Finland.

But a string of sparkling performances, characterised by fine teamwork and a fluid attacking manoeuvre, has transformed their chances and earned their coach a new contract until the end of the 2002 World Cup.

Within a month of taking over, Belgium outclassed future Group B rivals Italy 3-1 at Lecce. They have also held Euro 2000 favourites Holland (twice), hammered Morocco, drawn with Portugal and narrowly lost to England.

In late April, they defeated



Norway 2-0 as team confidence at the Red Devils gathered momentum and on June 10 they will have home support as they open the championships in Brussels against Sweden.

Waseige may not have big name footballers, but veteran skipper Lorenzo Staelens marshals a well-organised defence, while Marc Wilmots of FC Schalke 04 is a human dynamo in midfield, providing support

to both the attack and defence. Up front, the Belgian coach can count on the experience of Luc Nilis and the younger sparkle of Derby County's Branko Strupar and Wilmots' club teammate in the Bundesliga, Emilie Mpenza.

"I don't need egocentric-type players, but generous, hard-working and selfless players," says Waseige, who sees a bright future for his team at Euro

2000. "Our group is difficult, but I think we can get to the quarter-finals," he said after his side's draw in March with Holland. And he added: "Once we get to that stage, the underdogs' chances get better and better."

Holland ready to roll

HOENDERLOO, Netherlands, June 8: The Dutch, including Marc Overmars, should be fit for their Euro 2000 opener against the Czech Republic on Sunday and mental sharpness is building to a peak, coach Frank Rijkaard said today, reports Reuters.

Defender Frank de Boer was the only absentee from training while midfielder Phillip Cocu left after the initial warm-up, but Rijkaard said neither was a concern.

"It's just a matter of extra rest, nothing special. They're both a bit stiff in their upper legs," Rijkaard told a news conference.

Winger Overmars, the main worry earlier in the week due to a strained leg muscle, took part throughout, although he was drawn aside at the end for a few extra runs.

Rijkaard said he was confident the Arsenal left winger would be at his sprinting best by the weekend.

"We are focusing 100 per cent on the Czech match for him," the coach said.

Rijkaard said he had almost settled on his starting 11 but gave no hints of it today, saying the players would have to hear first.

A few tactical matters needed to be sorted out, he said, but the mental edge that certain players have missed in recent matches was sharpening.

"We know where we're going. The group knows this... The players themselves want the tournament to begin," Rijkaard said.

In the past, the Dutch have been criticised for laying more emphasis on the manner of play in key games than on the result.

Vice captain Edgar Davids stressed that for this Dutch team the result was everything. "That comes before whether or not we're attractive," Davids said.

Yugoslavs can proceed

BRUSSELS, June 8: A Belgian court ruled yesterday that Yugoslavia was free to play in the Euro 2000 soccer tournament, but lawyers said they would appeal against the decision to the European Commission, reports Reuters.

"We know that the decision is negative, so we have lost," Jean-Pierre Jacques, a lawyer at one of the two law firms which led the action on behalf of Kosovars and Albanians living in Belgium.

Jacques said the court had found the request to force the Belgian government to withdraw visas from the Yugoslav team taking part in the championship, which kicks off on Saturday, to be "groundless."

Jacques said an appeal had been lodged with the European Commission, which administers European Union sanctions imposed against Yugoslavia during last year's Kosovo conflict.

"We have already sent a complaint to Commission President Romano Prodi on the grounds Belgium has violated the EU treaty," Jacques said.

European Union member states had an obligation to respect EU laws which banned visas being issued to officials close to Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic, he said.

Most Yugoslav players already have valid EU visas because they play for European clubs.

A spokesman for the European Commission said he was not aware of the complaint, but noted it was up to national authorities to apply the visa ban according to a regularly updated list of Serb officials.

The latest version of the list was published in the EU's Official Journal yesterday.

LEADING SCORERS

PARIS, June 8 (AFP): Leading scorers in previous European Championship (qualifying and final phase matches):

1960: Just Fontaine (France), Jean Vincent (France), Titus Bubernik (Czechoslovakia) all 5 goals
1964: Ole Madsen (Denmark) 11 goals
1968: Luigi Riva (Italy) 7 goals
1972: Gerd Muller (West Germany) 11 goals
1976: Don Givens (Republic of Ireland) 8 goals
1980: Kevin Keegan (England) 7 goals
1984: Michel Platini (France) 9 goals
1988: Marco van Basten (Holland), Alessandro Altobelli (Italy), Nico Claesen (Belgium) all 7 goals
1992: Jean-Pierre Papin (France) 11 goals
1996: Davor Suker (Croatia) 15 goals

BRIEFS

BELGIUM

Coach: Robert Waseige
Key players: Marc Wilmots, Branko Strupar, Emilie Mpenza

As co-hosts they will be expected to do well but — unlike for Holland — a place in the semi-finals will probably be seen as an acceptable outcome. Their form was giving real concern but the replacement of George Leekens as coach by Waseige in August seems to have revitalised the "Red Devils".

Waseige has introduced a 4-2-2 system and the players have responded with an impressive string of results, notably a 3-1 friendly win in Italy.

Belgium have fared relatively well in the draw although Italy will be determined to make them pay for that friendly defeat. Belgium's large Turkish community will also have divided loyalties while Sweden proved formidable qualifiers.

SWEDEN

Coach: Tommy Soderberg
Key players: Magnus Hedman, Henrik Larsson, Kenneth Andersson

Times have been lean since Sweden finished third in the 1994 World Cup but at last they are back on the big stage after a convincing qualifying campaign in which they outplayed England twice.

Organisation is the key to Sweden, who play a very English-style game and are great believers in the team ethic.

The availability of Larsson after he horrifically broke his leg for his Scottish club side Celtic against Lyon is an unexpected boost for Soderberg.

Italy are the only "great nation" in the pool but have been struggling lately and Sweden will fancy their chances of progressing in what is a relatively easy pool.

ITALY

Coach: Dino Zoff
Key players: Alessandro Del Piero, Francesco Totti, Filippo Inzaghi

Italy started qualifying in top gear but in the end limped over the qualification finishing line after losing with a 3-2 home defeat by Denmark and a 0-0 draw in Belarus.

That brought the knives out for Zoff, who found out that the national hero status he earned as a 1982 World Cup winner — he also won Euro 68 as a player — counts for nothing when you are in charge of the Azzurri.

An injury to the world's most expensive player Inter Milan's Christian Vieri means the 50 million dollar man will be unavailable while there remains a doubt over ace defender Paolo Maldini.

Zoff is yet to decide on his permutation up front with Totti, Del Piero and Inzaghi all yet to convince.

TURKEY

Coach: Mustafa Denizli
Key players: Hakan Sukur, Serkan Yalcin, Arif Erdem

Turkish football has never been in better shape with the country still basking in Galatasaray's UEFA Cup victory, the first ever for a Turkish team at European level — no less than 11 employees of the Istanbul outfit were in the preliminary squad of 27.

They earned their spot via a stormy two-legged play-off win over the Republic of Ireland and their victory also proved a tonic for a country ravaged by disaster in the form of earthquakes that claimed the lives of 45,000 people.

The Turks are eager to redeem themselves for a disappointing showing in Euro 1996 in England and looked a useful outfit in qualifying, beating Germany 1-0 in an early qualifier.

"Bull of the Bosphorus" Hakan Sukur scored that goal but Sukur is widely dependent on Serkan Yalcin, who is the key creator in the side with Arif Erdem also well capable of grabbing a goal.



Italy out to make amends

MILAN, June 8 (AFP): Humiliated before a worldwide audience at Euro 96, Italy's main aim at Euro 2000 isn't to win the tournament — but to come away with their credibility intact.

Dino Zoff needs to restore the footballing pride of a nation who reached the 1994 World Cup final, but who have since slumped to 14th in the FIFA rankings and whose club sides failed to reach any European cup semi-finals this season.

Wary of setting his sights too high, the man who replaced Cesare Maldini as coach after France 98 would settle for a victory in the quarter-finals.

"Our objective is to reach the semi-finals," he told reporters in Rome. "If we don't overestimate ourselves and don't underestimate ourselves either, we can achieve that."

Even that would be a major improvement on the debacle of Euro 96.

Italy, then led by Arrigo Sacchi, failed to even make it past the group phase after he famously dropped half the team who won their opener against Russia.

They slumped to a 2-1 defeat to eventual finalists Czech Republic in their next match and were eliminated at Old Trafford in a 0-0 draw with eventual winners Germany after Gianfranco Zola missed a penalty.

The axe fell on Sacchi a few months later, just as it fell on Maldini after Luigi Di Biagio, Italy's best midfielder at France 98, smacked a penalty against the crossbar in their quarter-final shoot-out with France.

Now Italy are back, with Zoff needing a convincing performance from the team if he is to keep his job for the 2002 World Cup qualifiers.

Italy suffered a last minute hiccup when their first choice goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon had to pull out of the championship following a fracture in his left hand. But they still have a top rated custodian in Francesco Toldo, and world-class defenders like Paolo Maldini, Alessandro Nesta, Ciro Ferrara and Fabio Cannavaro.

But they have problems in midfield — where there has been a dearth of creative talent — and also in attack, where poor form and injury has wrought havoc with the Serie A's elite.

Italy may have found the attacking midfielder they need in Stefano Fiore, who was outstanding in their recent 2-0 friendly win over Portugal.

But that was only his third match for Italy, and it would be dangerous to rely on a relative novice at such a major event.

Fiore is meanwhile surrounded by players like Antonio Conte, Demetrio Albertini and Di Biagio who are long on work rate but much shorter on the creative skills that are the hallmarks of the best teams.

On paper, Zoff has an abundance of riches up front. But on pitch, the outlook is not so rosy.

Christian Vieri, whose five goals took Italy to the quarter-finals in France, has been forced out of the squad after injuring himself in the Italian playoff match against Parma.

There have to be question-marks too about Juventus duo Alessandro Del Piero and Filippo Inzaghi.

Del Piero flopped at the World Cup and, penalties aside, hasn't scored a league goal since October 1998.

Inzaghi bagged more than 25 goals between cup and league this season but only fires blanks whenever he pulls on a blue shirt — with just two goals to show for three years of international football.

Marco Delvecchio suffers from the same problem although AS Roma teammate Francesco Totti looks to have overcome it, judging by his superb 30-metre strike against Portugal.

Zoff clearly has plenty of candidates for his starting lineup. His problem will be knitting them together in a fluid, well-disciplined system of play in time for their Group B opener against Turkey on June 11.

Former Italian international goalkeeper Dino Zoff succeeded Cesare Maldini as national coach following Italy's disappointing showing at the 1998 World Cup, where they lost to France in the quarter-finals.

The former Juventus star has been unable to work the magic that might be expected

STARWATCH



Paolo Maldini (Italy)

ROME, June 8: Paolo Maldini is the only player set to win a place in Italy's squad for Euro 2000 who has come close to emulating the feats of his coach Dino Zoff, reports Reuters.

The elegant AC Milan left-back has played 105 times for the Azzurri since making his debut in a friendly against Yugoslavia on March 31, 1988.

Only Zoff, with 112 caps, has played more often for the country. And Maldini, who will turn 32 during the tournament, shows no sign of stopping.

He was voted the best Italian player on the pitch in last month's 2-0 defeat in Spain and appears set to stretch his extraordinary international career as far as the World Cup finals of 2002.

He has been linked with a move to Gianluca Vialli's Chelsea after the finals but has publicly pledged his future to Milan, the club where he has spent his entire career.

Maldini has more than fulfilled the promise his father Cesare, Zoff's predecessor at Italy coach, claimed for him.

"Paolo's better than me," Cesare, who captained Milan when they won the European Cup in 1963, said after seeing his 16-year-old son make his debut for Milan on a cold after seeing him in Udine in January 1985.

"He has two feet whereas I only had one. And when I was 16, I was much more scrappy than he is."

For the rest of that season Maldini had to settle for a place in the youth team with his younger brother Piercesare.

But his ability to spread the ball with both feet and his pace on the left flank soon won him a first team place and since then he has won six league titles, three European Cup winners' medals and a cluster of Italian, European and world supercups.

Maldini's Milan had suffered two dreadful seasons in the run-up to the 1998 World Cup and their captain, along with long time teammates Demetrio Albertini and Alessandro Costacurva, were being written off as yesterday's men. But after a series of composed performances for the Azzurri, Maldini returned to Serie A in 1998-99 to guide Alberti Zaccaroni's team to their 16th league title against all odds.

Of the pitch, Maldini has the relaxed air of a man secure in his abilities and used to dealing with big occasions.

Married to a Venezuelan model, Adriana, he has one son, Christian, who might just carry on the Maldini dynasty.

For the rest of that season Maldini had to settle for a place in the youth team with his younger brother Piercesare.

But his ability to spread the ball with both feet and his pace on the left flank soon won him a first team place and since then he has won six league titles, three European Cup winners' medals and a cluster of Italian, European and world supercups.

Maldini's Milan had suffered two dreadful seasons in the run-up to the 1998 World Cup and their captain, along with long time teammates Demetrio Albertini and Alessandro Costacurva, were being written off as yesterday's men. But after a series of composed performances for the Azzurri, Maldini returned to Serie A in 1998-99 to guide Alberti Zaccaroni's team to their 16th league title against all odds.

Of the pitch, Maldini has the relaxed air of a man secure in his abilities and used to dealing with big occasions.

Married to a Venezuelan model, Adriana, he has one son, Christian, who might just carry on the Maldini dynasty.

For the rest of that season Maldini had to settle for a place in the youth team with his younger brother Piercesare.

But his ability to spread the ball with both feet and his pace on the left flank soon won him a first team place and since then he has won six league titles, three European Cup winners' medals and a cluster of Italian, European and world supercups.

Maldini's Milan had suffered two dreadful seasons in the run-up to the 1998 World Cup and their captain, along with long time teammates Demetrio Albertini and Alessandro Costacurva, were being written off as yesterday's men. But after a series of composed performances for the Azzurri, Maldini returned to Serie A in 1998-99 to guide Alberti Zaccaroni's team to their 16th league title against all odds.

Of the pitch, Maldini has the relaxed air of a man secure in his abilities and used to dealing with big occasions.

Married to a Venezuelan model, Adriana, he has one son, Christian, who might just carry on the Maldini dynasty.

STARWATCH



Marc Wilmots (Belgium)

BRUSSELS, June 8 (AP): The unquestionable heart and soul of the Red Devils is their mid-field dynamo, Marc Wilmots. At 30, it seems the flame will always burn.

With unbridled passion for the game, Wilmots' instinctive and feisty leadership skills will be central in the continued resurgence of the Red Devils.

A veteran of three World Cups, with 45 international caps to his name and 16 goals to his credit, life has been good for the experienced FC Schalke 04 midfielder who has been known to deliver some heroic efforts when the need arises.

Dubbed "Wild Boar" by his fans and colleagues in the German Bundesliga, Wilmots lived up to his notorious nickname by scoring five goals on the way to the UEFA Cup final against Inter Milan in 1997, including the decisive shootout goal that secured victory.

Young and old look to him for inspiration on the field.

Wilmots ensures that team play, rather than big egos, will have to dominate. "What do you think was the secret behind the success of the French in 1998? That they became a group.... We have to mirror that example," Wilmots said.

Starting his soccer career at 16, with Belgium also-ran Sint Truiden, Wilmots made his first international debut in 1990 against Romania.

Wilmots has scored 89 goals with Schalke and looks likely to stay playing there for another three years at least.

Belgium's fortunes will rest on his experience to inject confidence and spark into the defence from midfield. Wilmots' ability to play hard sometimes gets him into trouble with referees however.

MANAGER: Robert Waseige

Robert Waseige was appointed national team coach in the wake of Belgium's disappointing run of results under much-criticised George Leekens.

For the Belgian football federation, who had come under pressure from the media, and with all thoughts turned towards the co-hosting of the Euro-2000, enough was enough.

A poor performance at France '98 was followed by a spell in which Leekens capped 17 fresh faces in an attempt to find the magic formula — none of whom truly led the team any nearer to success. Over his 30-month, 29-match stay, Leekens had used 70 players in the Belgium set-up.

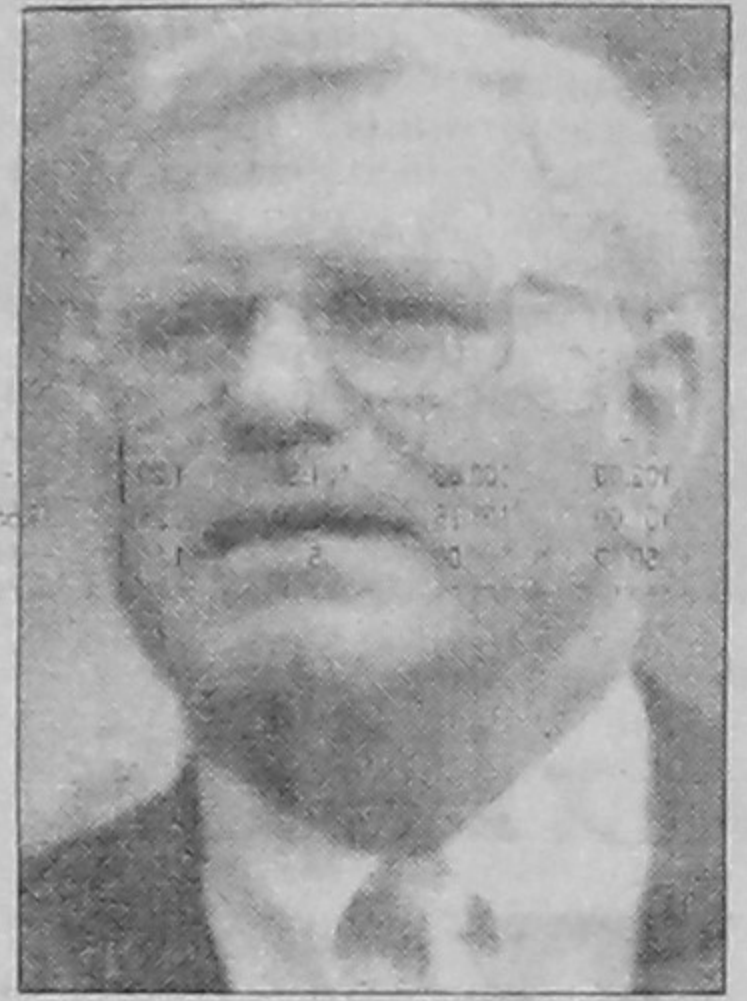
Accordingly, he was shown the door in August. From day one of 60-year-old Waseige taking over the team, things began to change.

First and foremost, results took a positive turn. After the former Liege and Charleroi coach arrived in August 1999, despite still being regarded as the whipping boys of European football, Belgium put a string of impressive results together, with a 5-5 draw against Holland, and culminating in a surprise 3-1 victory over Dino Zoff's Italy. More recently, a 2-0 friendly victory over Norway has given Belgium fresh impetus.

The key to this relative success lies in Waseige's motivational powers. While Leekens was more technically-minded, Waseige is a man-motivator. Where Leekens seemed on a mission to find the players who would catapult the Belgians to success, Waseige is comfortable with an experienced squad which he admits must operate within certain limits.

Finally, many players were mysteriously unavailable to play under Leekens, they are now falling over themselves to form part of Waseige's plans, perhaps, in some part, due to the timing and location of the Euro 2000.

For the opening game against group opponents Sweden on June 10, Waseige might need more than psychology, although the cigar-smoking Francophone has already endeared himself to the whole country with his attempts to speak Flemish.



SQUAD

GOALKEEPERS: Gert De Vlieger (Willem II Tilburg/Ned), Filip De Wilde (Anderlecht), Frederic Herpoel (Gent)

DEFENDERS: Eric Deflandre (FC Brugge), Philippe Leonard (Monaco), Jacky Peeters (Arminia Bielefeld/Ger), Lorenzo Staelens (Anderlecht), Joos Valgaeren (Roda JC Kerkrade/Ned), Nico Van Kerckhoven (Schalke 04/Ger), Eric Van Meir (Lierse)

MIDFIELDERS: Philippe Clement (FC Brugge), Bart Goor (Anderlecht), Marc Hendrikx (FC Genk), Mbo Mpenza (Sporting Lisbon/Port), Yves Vanderhaeghe (Mouscron), Gert Verheyen (FC Brugge), Johan Walem (Parma/Ita), Marc Wilmots (Schalke 04/Ger)

FORWARDS: Gilles De Bilde (Sheffild Wednesday/Eng), Emilie Mpenza (Schalke 04/Ger), Luc Nilis (PSV Eindhoven/Ned), Branko Strupar (Derby County/Eng)

RENDEZVOUS

PARIS, June 8 (AFP): In all eight stadia will be in use during Euro 2000 which will be co-hosted by Belgium and the Netherlands. Here is a look at four of them:

BELGIUM
BRUSSELS - KING BAUDOUIN STADIUM
Clubs: None
Capacity: 50,000
Built: 1930
Renovated: 1995

Tournament schedule: Three group matches including the opener, plus one quarter-final and one semifinal.

Like most Belgian cities, football is well established in Brussels the headquarters of the 15-nation European Union and one of the most cosmopolitan cities in Europe. The 50,000-capacity King Baudouin stadium will provide one of the country's most significant arenas for the Euro 2000 finals. If all goes to plan, this will go a long way to help exorcise the ghosts of the Heysel (King Baudouin's former name) disaster. On May 29, 1985, 39 people died during clashes between sets of Liverpool and Juventus supporters during the European Cup final.

CHARLEROI - LE MAMBOURG STADIUM
Clubs: Charleroi SC and

Olympic Charleroi
Capacity: 29,813
Built: 1904
Renovated: 1999
Tournament schedule: Three group matches

With 206,000 inhabitants, Charleroi is one of main cities in the French-speaking region of Wallonia. Previously a mining and iron industry capital, Charleroi is in the process of converting to a centre for finance. As a European hot spot for table tennis, following the European championships Charleroi will share its newly-renovated stadium with Sporting Charleroi and Olympic Charleroi. However, doubts have been raised about whether this little stadium is suitable to welcome the hordes of English and German supporters, who will accompany their respective teams on June 17 for the Group A crunch match.

BRUGES - JAN BREYDEL-STADION
Clubs: FC Brugge and Cercle Brugge
Capacity: 30,000
Built: 1972

Tournament schedule: Three group matches plus one quarter-final

As the largest tourist attraction in Belgium, Bruges is the most visited city in the country. It comprises several hundred kilometres of canals,

allowing tourists and the city's 120,000 inhabitants to fully enjoy the perfectly-preserved medieval architecture. On the sports front, FC Brugge is one of the country's most successful football teams sharing the Jan Breydelstadion with Cercle Brugge. Recently, the stadium capacity has practically been doubled, now an all-seater with 30,000 places.

LIEGE - STADE DE SCLESSIN
Club: Standard Liege
Capacity: 30,023
Built: 1909
Renovated: 1998
Tournament schedule: Three group matches

With around 200,000 inhabitants, Liege is the second largest city in Wallonia, behind its slightly larger regional neighbour Charleroi. Accordingly, the city is the centre for many of the country's French-speaking institutions, universities and industries. The Stade de Sclessin was renovated for the Euro 2000 finals and now has a 30,000 all-seater capacity. The home of Standard Liege it has produced more than its fair share of class players as well as a big name in the field of coaching (Raymond Goethals). The stadium itself is English in style, with the fans close to the field of play. It often merits its nickname of "the Sclessin Inferno".