



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 manouevre, 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, Emile Mpenza.

"I don't need egocentric-type players, but generous, hard-working and sellless 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 in 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 Championships (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, Emile Mpenza

As co-hosts they will be expected to do well — 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 4-4-2 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, Mert Anderson

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.

"Our objective at the European championships 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 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 slipped over the qualification finishing line after closing 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: Mustapha Denizli

Key players: Hakan Sukur, Serdar 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 Serdar 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): Huddled 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

have 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.

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They 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.

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.

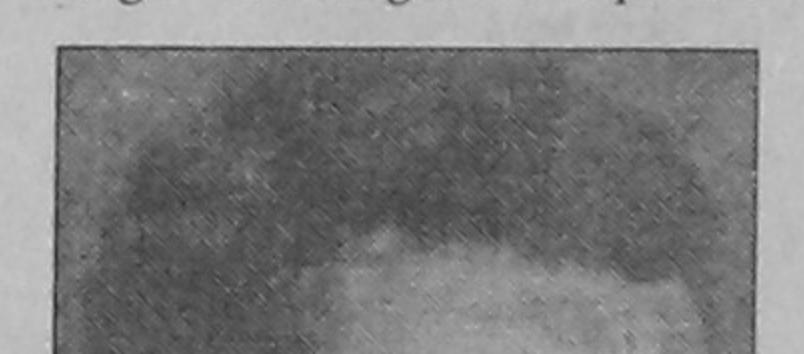
Zoff clearly has plenty of options for his starting line-up.

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.

MANAGER: Dino Zoff

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



ended in a 0-0 draw against Belarus, ranked 100th in the world by FIFA, in Minsk in November.

A subsequent friendly against Belgium, for which Zoff abandoned his beloved 4-4-2 formation to try a three-man attack, ended in a 3-1 defeat and did nothing to allay fears that the azzurri are no more than the threatening side they once were.

Zoff's dedication and talent for the game are undeniable, and easily illustrated by the numerous records he holds.

He missed no matches for the national side between September 20, 1972 and June 15, 1974, remaining unbeaten for 1143 minutes, namely twelve full games. But unless he takes Italy close to where the tifosi believe they should be, Zoff risks being remembered for Italy's failure in a competition for which, at least on paper, they should have every chance of winning.

SQUAD

GOALKEEPERS: Christian

Abbiati (AC Milan), Francesco

Toldo (Fiorentina), Francesco

Antonoli (AS Roma)

DEFENDERS: Fabio

Canavaro (Parma), Alessandro

Nesta (Lazio), Ciro

Ferrara (Juventus), Mark

Iuliano (Juventus), Paolo

Maldini (AC Milan), Paolo

Negro (Lazio), Gianni

Pessotto (Juventus)

MIDFIELDERS: Massimo

Ambrosini (AC Milan),

Demetrio Albertini (AC Milan),

Antonio Conte (Juventus), An-

gelio Di Livio (Fiorentina), Ste-

fano Fiore (Udinese), Gianluca

Zambrotta (Juventus), Luigi Di

Biagio (Inter Milan)

FORWARDS: Filippo Inzaghi