

France attempt the double

PARIS, June 9 (AFP): France have it all to prove at Euro 2000 this summer in an attempt to become the first World Cup winners to go on to immediately win this continental title.

France still have the bulk of the Aimé Jacquet squad which sparked off the biggest football

MANAGER: Roger Lemerre

French coach Roger Lemerre, who considered quitting his post after their last qualifier, has the task of ensuring France's World Cup win was no fluke by going on to take the Euro 2000 crown.

Lemerre was a member of the backroom team during the victorious 1998 World Cup campaign, and was in charge of the French military squad which won the world championships in 1995 to prove he has big tournament experience.

Before that, he was a defender at Sedan, Nantes, Nancy and Lens, played six times for France, and coached Red Star,



Lens, Paris FC and Strasbourg. That pedigree in professional football with stand him in good stead during the June 10 to July 2 finals held in Belgium and Holland this summer.

However he nearly quit the team ironically after winning their last qualifier at home to Iceland on October 9 last year which sealed their ticket to the tournament.

Lemerre spent the next day hunting very strongly that he was preparing either to stand down or embark on a major rethink of team policy.

At the post-match press conference a sombre Lemerre said his mission was accomplished and he heightened speculation that he was about to stand down when he was asked if he would be in charge for France's next match, a home friendly with Croatia.

Lemerre replied: "God only knows."

Questions about the possible axing of older players such as Laurent Blanc, Didier Deschamps and Marcel Desailly, allegedly eroding Lemerre's authority in the dressing room, eventually died down and all are expected to be key member of his side.

French federation boss Claude Simonet eventually said Lemerre would continue to the end of his contract which runs till the end of Euro 2000.

That episode is now consigned to the past and Lemerre recently spoke with confidence about France's chances.

He told the French press in March: "We have no reason to fear any other team because we are the world champions. We work together well, most of the players know what it is like to win a major championship, and we clearly have the talent to do all the way."

That does not mean we will win the title, but it gives us a great chance and lot of confidence."



party ever in France following their 3-0 victory over Brazil on July 12, 1998.

Players such as Didier Deschamps, Zinedine Zidane in midfield and the World Cup winning back four of Bixente Lizarazu, Laurent Blanc, Marcel Desailly and Lilian Thuram are, barring injury or massive loss of form, going to be key players this time.

However once again their striking options are at a premium.

There was no better illustration of that lack of firepower than the World Cup Final itself.

While Brazilian fans thought the 3-0 scoreline was humiliating it should be remembered that Stephane Guivarc'h squared three golden chances and substitute Christophe Dugarry one in

probably the most one-sided final in history.

Indeed the French have not had a world class strike force since the days of Jean-Pierre Papin and Eric Cantona.

Though both were prolific scorers the national team was not particularly successful with the Papin-Cantona axis up front.

Many candidates have tried and failed to make the striking position their own since then.

Guivarc'h, Tony Vairelles, Nicolas Anelka, Lilian Thuram, David Trezeguet, Sylvain Wiltord, Laurent Robert and Dugarry have all failed to seize the opportunity under Lemerre.

Anelka's good showings for Real Madrid as they went on to claim the European Champions League title recently boosted his hopes.

STARWATCH

Zinedine Zidane (France)

PARIS, June 9 (AFP): France's Zinedine Zidane is the French team's catalyst and perhaps the most important player in their bid for the Euro 2000 title.

His two headed goals against Brazil in the 1998 World Cup final granted him legendary status among teammates and the French public and earned him the world player of the year award.

The shy man of Algerian extraction, brought up on the outskirts of Marseille, has had continual problems with his knee since that famous 3-0 Stade de France victory, but the French public are willing the 27-year-old Juventus playmaker to stay healthy this summer.

France's group D has Euro 96 runners-up Czech Republic, Euro 92 winners Denmark, and Holland, many football experts choice as the most complete team at the 1998 World Cup.

I think England's and Germany's group is the toughest one," he told Italian press in March. "However we are world champions and have no need to fear anyone."

He's such a key figure for France, in terms of skill and personal influence, coach Roger Lemerre knows he would be virtually impossible to replace.

Zidane has been playing his usual major role at Juventus, in between bouts of injury and scandal involving his private life, although Carlo Ancelotti's side again came up short on both domestic and European fronts.

Speaking to the Italian press, Zidane said he would never again talk about his private life in public. His Spanish

wife is known to want to live in her native country and Zidane said he would be happy to play in Spain one day. The press latched on to that, speculating he might be leaving The Old Lady of Turin.

"I'll never talk about my family like that again," he said at the time.

He has never disguised the fact that though he takes great pleasure and professional satisfaction from playing for Juventus, he dislikes Turin believing it to be a soulless, industrial city offering a poor lifestyle.

Zidane played a deeper role for Juventus this year, drifting back into midfield rather than the hole just behind the striker's fit in with the players at Ancelotti's disposal.

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Perhaps, like at the World Cup, they will manage without a major front man with other players chipping in with goals and with the odd penalty-shootout victory.

Much will hinge on their Juventus playmaker Zinedine Zidane, who scored two headed goals in the World Cup final.

Though he has had a continuing knee problem and suffered chronic fatigue in the two years since France 98, Zidane is expected to yet again be the catalyst in the middle of the pitch.

France struggled when he missed four qualifiers against Ukraine, Armenia, Russia and Andorra, last year and suddenly France looked a better side when he returned.

French legend Platini, like Zidane also star at Juventus, once said Zidane could be the last of his generation of talented playmakers.

Keeper Fabien Barthez, perhaps with Zidane one of France's most respected players, is also going to be a major influence on their campaign in Belgium and Holland from June 10 to July 2.

Barthez has resisted major offers from some of Europe's top clubs but stayed at Monaco where he won the 1999/2000 French league title. He reportedly earns around 20 million francs a year at Monaco, making him the highest paid player in the league.

France will hope he pays back some of his rich pickings from the sport with a superb showing at Euro 2000 where they play in the tough group D against Czech Republic, Holland and Denmark.

"It's a big honour to have this match to officiate," said the 38-year-old dentist from Kaiserslautern.

UEFA Thursday named the officials for the first 13 matches of the tournament:

June 10: Belgium-Sweden (Group B-Brussels) Markus Merk (Ger)

June 11: Turkey-Italy (Group B-Arnhem) Hugh Dallas (Sco)

June 12: France-Denmark (Group D-Bruges) Gunter Benko (Aut)

June 13: Netherlands-Czech Rep (Group D-Amsterdam) Pierluigi Collina (Ita)

June 14: Germany-Romania (Group A-Liege) Kim Nielsen (Den)

June 15: Portugal-England (Group A-Eindhoven) Anders Frisk (Swe)

June 16: Spain-Norway (Group C-Rotterdam) Gamal El Ghandour (Egy)

June 17: Yugoslavia-Slovenia (Group C-Charleroi) Vitor Melo Pereira (Por)

June 18: Italy-Belgium (Group B-Brussels) Jose Maria Garcia Aranda (Spa)

June 19: Sweden-Turkey (Group B-Eindhoven) Dick Jol (Ned)

June 20: Czech Rep-France (Group D-Bruges) Graham Poll (Eng)

June 21: Denmark-Netherlands (Group D-Rotterdam) Urs Meier (Swi)

June 22: Romania-Portugal (Group A-Arnhem) Gilles Veissiere (Fra)

June 23: France-Italy (Group B-Eindhoven) Pierluigi Collina (Ita)

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June 80: Czech