

Slovenia the surprise package

PARIS, June 11 (AFP): Slovenia start the Euro 2000 finals as 200-1 outsiders to win the event but their surprise qualification proved they are capable of upsetting supposedly superior opposition.

The former Yugoslav republic is still in its infancy as a nation, but the country has already stamped its mark on European football.

MANAGER: Srecko Katanec

If one man can be credited with the dramatic emergence of Slovenia as a football nation to be taken seriously it is their young coach Srecko Katanec.

The former Yugoslav and Slovenian international, the youngest and least experienced of all 16 coaches at Euro 2000, has instilled confidence and discipline in a side who had played their first ever international just six years earlier.

"We were not lucky," said Katanec after Slovenia clinched a place in the finals with a 3-2 aggregate win over outright favourites Ukraine. "We deserved to qualify because we dared to be courageous throughout the tournament."

"If I taught the boys anything at all, it is that team spirit is vital and that we will only achieve good results if we are all good friends off the pitch and play with our hearts on it."

Katanec came to the post with only minimal coaching experience as manager of Slovenia's Under-21 team between 1996 and 1998 and Slovenian club side Hit Gorica.

In Slovenia's opening match against Yugoslavia at the Euro 2000 Katanec will pitch his tactical wits against veteran coach Vujadin Boskov, who coached the rangy defender at Sampdoria in Italy's Serie A from 1989 to 1992.

Capped 31 times for Yugoslavia and five times for Slovenia, Katanec began his playing career with clubs in Ljubljana before spells with

After finishing a surprising second in Group 2 behind Norway and ahead of Greece, Latvia, Albania and Georgia, the Slovenes caused a major upset by beating a powerful Ukraine in the play-offs to make the finals.

Since gaining full independence from Yugoslavia in 1991, the Slovenes have only rarely created waves on the international scene.

A 1-1 draw at home to Italy in a Euro-96 qualifier — their first competitive match — and a handful of victories over equally modest opposition represented the sum total of their achievements.

But the arrival of Srecko Katanec as coach transformed the country from whipping boys to winners in the space of just 15 months.

Under Katanec's inspirational management Slovenia won six and drew three of their 12 matches in 1999 as they moved up nearly 50 places in Paris, only to lose 2-3 to a last-minute strike.

After Slovenia clinched their 3-2 aggregate win in Kiev, thousands of fans braved freezing temperatures to give them a heroes' welcome as wild celebrations erupted all over the tiny mountainous republic.

Until the dramatic 1-1 draw

swept through the country's two million population in the build-up to the Euro 2000 finals where they will play their former overlords Yugoslavia as well as Spain and Norway.

The Slovenes again showed their capacity to upset in April when they led world champions France by two goals early on in Paris, only to lose 2-3 to a last-minute strike.

Most of the squad are drawn from the national league and are little known outside of Slovenia, but the pivot and inspiration of the team is the highly talented, if temperamental, midfielder Zlatko Zahovic.



Their successful campaign for Euro-2000 was all the more remarkable as their bid to make France '98 ended in disaster when they finished bottom of their group with just one point from eight games.

STARWATCH

Saso Udrovic (Slovenia)

PARIS, June 11 (Internet): The well-travelled striker is the most experienced front-runner in the squad, and he played in all 12 Euro 2000 qualifying matches. However, he failed to hit the target in those games, reducing the impressive goal ratio he had established when hitting double figures in his first 20 internationals.

He made his debut in 1993 against Estonia and has been a regular ever since. He has so far played in 35 international games for his country with 15 goals. The eighth most capped Slovenian of all time, only Zlatko Zahovic has scored more goals at international level for the national side. Despite his barren spell throughout the qualifying series he remains first choice, and his height and undoubted eye for goal will pose problems for any defence. Excellent at holding the ball up, allowing Zahovic to make storming runs, Udrovic is also a formidable penalty box poacher.

The sport was a mere side-show but football fever has

who, ironically, has never played club football in his homeland.

Zahovic is one of a hard core of players on which Slovenia's success has been built and on which their hopes at Euro 2000 will hang. The other key players are defenders Marinko Galic, Darko Milanic, Aleksander Knava and midfielders Dzoni Novak and Ales Ceh.

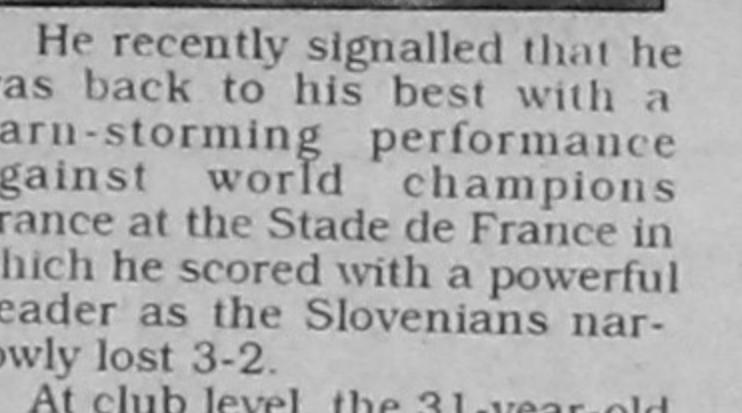
SQUAD

GOALKEEPERS: Mladen Dananovic (Lokeren/Bel), Dejan Nemejc (Mura), Marko Simeunovic (Maribor)

DEFENDERS: Spasoje Bulajic (FC Cologne/Ger), Marinko Galic (Maribor), Aleksander Knava (FC Tirol Innsbruck/Aut), Zeljko Milinovic (Lask Linz/Aut), Darko Milanic (Sturm Graz/Aut)

MIDFIELDERS: Milenko Acimovic (Red Star Belgrade/Yug), Ales Ceh (Sturm Graz/Aut), Saso Gajser (Gent/Bell), Rudolf Istenic (Bayer Uerdingen/Ger), Amir Karlic (Maribor), Miran Pavlin (Karlsruhe/Ger), Zoran Pavlovic (Dynamo Zagreb/Cro), Dzoni Novak (Sedan/Fra), Zlatko Zahovic (Olympiakos/Gre), Anton Zlogar (Hit Gorica)

FORWARDS: Milan Osteric (Olimpija Ljubljana/Slo), Mladen Rudonja (Saint-Truiden/Bell), Ermin Siljak (Servette/Swi), Saso Udrovic (LASK Linz/Aut)



He recently signalled that he was back to his best with a barn-storming performance against world champions France at the Stade de France in which he scored with a powerful header as the Slovenians narrowly lost 3-2.

At club level, the 31-year-old forward has played in his native country, as well as in Croatia, Belgium and Switzerland, before settling in Austria with LASK Linz.

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