



Portugal find a sensation

ROTTERDAM, Netherlands, July 21 (AFP): A star was born for Portugal as Sergio Conceicao, whose name means conception, hit a hat-trick in their 3-0 victory over Germany in Euro 2000.

The 25-year-old Lazio playmaker, who was only a substitute against England and Romania, coming on for Joao Pinto, made the most of his call-up as coach Humberto Coelho made nine changes from their 1-0 win over Romania.

Conceicao had only scored one goal in nine appearances in the qualifiers but he took his opportunity with gusto in his first start in a major championship.

The 25-year-old Lazio right winger caused a myriad of problems for the German rear guard.

A Pauleta cross from the left was deflected by defender Marko Rehmer high into the path of Conceicao at the far post in the 35th minute for a simple, close-range header to put them 1-0 ahead at the interval.

In the 54th minute, he received the ball on the right wing, cut inside Dietmar Hamann on the edge of the box and fired a left foot shot into the left side of the goal despite Thomas Linke's challenge for 2-0.

By this time, the Portuguese contingent in the 51,000 capacity De Kuip Stadium were already celebrating.

Conceicao just refused to concede the limelight however. He outpaced Linke and his right foot shot went sailing past Kahn's right hand to complete his hat-trick with just under 20 minutes left.

He won two Portuguese league titles and two cups with Porto before moving to Lazio for 10 million dollars where he became a key member of their 1998/99 European Cup Winners Cup victory.

He made his international debut five months after Euro 96 in England, but such is Portugal's strength in attacking midfield, Conceicao has since struggled to be a first-choice player.

Amazingly, Coelho said Conceicao was not certain to play against Turkey in their quarter-final in Amsterdam on Saturday, presumably because Barcelona star Luis Figo is a similar type of player.

"Sergio, like all the others, has the right to try and get into the team. We do not know what will happen in the next match. I will decide in the next few days whether Sergio will or will not play," Coelho said in the post-match press conference.

When asked whether it was a problem having two similar players, Coelho added: "This is not a problem. The problem would be if I did not have Conceicao or Figo in my team. Both of those players are ready to play."

Media in mourning

LONDON, June 21: Dejected, despairing and disbelieving, England was a country in mourning after its football team was sent packing from Euro 2000 following a 3-2 defeat by Romania, reports AFP.

"And it all ends in tears," headlined the Mirror daily on its front page, against a picture of an emotional England captain Alan Shearer.

Inside, it succinctly summed up the England team's performance: "Dud, sweat and tears." And up and down the country, thousands of people who had gathered in town squares or the habitual bars to watch the match all felt the same.

"It's like a morgue," said Cathryn Gracey, who runs a bar in Huddersfield, northern England, afterwards.

There was widespread agreement that England did not deserve to win because they were technically inferior, unable to hold the ball and string more than two passes together.

"England were outplayed, out-manoeuvred and almost completely out-thought by a side who always looked superior," was the Sun's considered comment.

"They were found wanting in almost every area of the pitch," and hard work and spirit did not make up for the yawning gap.

"It was a disastrous end to a disastrous tournament for English football, after mindless thugs had dragged our name through the mud with their violence on the Belgian streets at the weekend," the Sun added.

"Over and out," lamented the Daily Mail.

"Careless to the last, how England self-destructed."

The Daily Telegraph wrote of the "desperately disappointing circumstances" of the defeat, Romania scoring a penalty two minutes from time.

The Guardian was more analytical.

"In terms of attacking football, they were played off the park," it said. England's two goals were lucky, but after that they had no more luck because, in truth, they did not deserve it.

The Times thought the demise of England and Germany was emblematic.

"The European championship is sweeping the old order away and casting some of the leading footballing powers into the wilderness of mediocrity."

EUROPEAN FOOTBALL CHAMPIONSHIP 2000



HAIL CONCEICAO: Portugal's Sergio Conceicao exults after completing his hat-trick against Germany at Rotterdam on June 20. — AFP photo

Conceicao brings down German Empire

ROTTERDAM, Netherlands, June 21: A Sergio Conceicao hat-trick earned Portugal an emphatic 3-0 victory over Germany here on Tuesday despite fielding their second string having already qualified for the Euro 2000 quarter-finals.

Conceicao, substitute against both Romania and England for Joao Pinto, scored in the 35th, 54th and 71st minutes to bring his side a 100 per cent record from group A and send home the defending champions.

Portugal had already been assured a quarter-final meeting with Turkey in Amsterdam and made nine changes with only Jorge Costa and Fernando Couto keeping their places.

Romania's 3-2 victory over England meant they take second spot in the group and meet Italy in Brussels in Saturday's other quarter-final.

But for Germany now the inquest begins with coach Erich Ribbeck set to stand down and the once-mighty footballing power now in no doubt that a decline has now turned into a crisis.

But the coach was dignified in defeat in what is almost certainly his last match in charge.

"It was so painful to watch. Once we got behind nothing worked for us. Portugal led us a merry dance because some of our players just did not fight," Ribbeck said.

"It's a shame for the team and especially for Lothar Matthaeus, who was playing his last international match and who certainly would have liked it to have finished differently."

"I am just as much to blame and I clearly said that if we went out in the group stages that would probably mean that I will stand down," he said.

"When I assumed this post two years ago, I had two objectives. First to qualify for Euro 2000 and second to have a successful tournament, meaning at least to survive the first phase. I admit I failed."

Romanians rejoice

BUCHAREST, June 21: Thirty-one people were injured during a night of wild celebrations in the Romanian capital Tuesday after their team's stunning Euro 2000 quarter-final qualification against England, reports AFP.

The Romanian capital came to a standstill when tens of thousands of citizens took to the streets for jubilant celebrations during which seven people were seriously injured and a further 24 treated for minor injuries.

Meanwhile police blocked off access to the British Embassy in Bucharest after fans descended on mass on the building to drive home their joy at their 3-2 victory.

Thousands had gathered in the city's Revolution Square to watch the national team snatch victory over England with a late penalty putting them second in Group A and through to a quarter-final place against Italy.

Already fifteen minutes before the final whistle the central University Square - the principle meeting place during mass demonstrations against the country's communist dictatorship in December 1989 - was blocked by thousands of supporters.

Romania, without suspended playmaker George Hagi, turned the tables on England after undeservedly trailing 2-1 at the start of the second half.

Cristian Chivu had opened the scoring in the 22nd minute, Dorinel Munteanu levelled for Romania three minutes after the break and two minutes before the end substitute Ioan Ganea drove the fans wild when

The 25-year-old Lazio right winger Conceicao caused a myriad of problems for the rear-guard of Germany, not among the first eight teams in this competition for the first time since 1968.

A Pauleta cross from the left was deflected by defender Marko Rehmer high into the path of Conceicao at the far post for a simple, close-range header to put them 1-0 ahead at the interval.

Germany, playing with Carsten Jancker as a lone striker, had little punch up front, with Sebastian Deisler firing in speculative balls into the box from the right.

Sa Pinto had a cross deflected into the top netting by Thomas Linke early on. After about a quarter-hour, a Conceicao cross from the right found Pauleto whose shot just went wide of the left hand post.

Germany's Jancker and Michael Ballack were both yellow carded before Beto was also cautioned by Dutch referee Dick Jol midway through the half.

On the half hour, Germany had their best chance. In a move started by Dietmar Hamann and also involving Lothar Matthaeus, Marco Bode fired a low left foot shot which came back into play off the right hand post.

Seconds before the break, Jancker had a point-blank shot saved by stand-in keeper Pedro Espinosa.

German coach Erich Ribbeck brought striker Paolo Rink on for midfielder Michael Ballack to try and give them more strength up front.

Lothar Matthaeus, earning his 150th cap for Germany, looked busy throughout the game but nothing could stop Conceicao.

He received the ball on the right wing, cut inside Dietmar Hamann on the edge of the box and fired a left foot shot into the left side of the goal despite Linke's challenge for 2-0.

By this time, the Portuguese contingent in the 51,000 capacity De Kuip Stadium were already celebrating.

Thomas Hassler came on for Mehmet Scholl and Ulf Kirsten came on for Jancker as Ribbeck tried hard to hit on a winning formula but it came to nothing.

Worrying for Portugal coach Humberto Coelho, Pauleta had to go off on a stretcher midway through the second half and was replaced by Nuno Gomes.

Kirsten missed a point blank header from a Rink cross from the left in what would have been his first touch and Hassler had a curling shot saved as Germany pushed forward.

Conceicao just refused to concede the limelight however. He outpaced Linke and his right foot shot went sailing past Kahn's right hand to complete his hat-trick.

Amazingly, Portugal coach Humberto Coelho said Conceicao was not certain to play the next game, presumably because Barcelona star Luis Figo is a similar type of player.

"Sergio, like all the others, has the right to try and get into the team. We do not know what will happen in the next match. I will decide in the next few days whether Sergio will or will not play," Coelho said in the post-match press conference.

When asked whether it was a problem having two similar players, he said: "This is not a problem. The problem would be if I did not have Conceicao or Figo in my team. Both of those players are ready to play."

He added success in football was a fleeting commodity and their feet needed to be kept firmly on the ground. "I'm very satisfied but football is like this. You win today and lose tomorrow. It's a great joy for us but we have to keep cool."

He denied Portugal fielded a reserve team. "Portugal do not have a second team and we have 22 players here to play in this championship."

he scored the match-winning penalty - after Phil Neville's late tackle brought striker down Viorel Moldovan.

Bucharest erupted when the penalty struck home with fireworks and car horns adding to the deafening sound of cheering.

More than 30,000 people - men and women, young and old, some carrying babies in their arms - then headed for the city centre to celebrate their historic win in Charleroi, the first in a European championship. Draped in the colours of the national flag, blue, yellow and red, many with their faces painted, they joined thousands of others who had watched the game on a giant screen.

"We've beaten them without Hagi, for Hagi," screamed one fan. "We're going to make a meal of Italy," said another.

"Thank you Portugal, thank you Portugal," chanted others referring to the Portuguese 3-0 victory against Germany which facilitated the Romanian qualification.

In the northern Iasi area, more than 10,000 supporters blocked the downtown area.

While similar scenes of jubilation were witnessed in major cities throughout the country notably Cluj (mid-west), Brasov (centre), Timisoara (western) and Constanta (south-eastern) where celebrations continued long into the night.

Isolated acts of vandalism were also reported by police during the night notably the destruction of telephone boxes and smashing of shop windows. Meanwhile Romanian president Emil Constantinescu announced Wednesday that he

Shearer sticks to his guns

SPA, Belgium, June 21: England skipper Alan Shearer on Wednesday said he would stick by his decision to retire from international football, reports AFP.

Speaking at a news conference the day after he led England to a 2-3 defeat at the hands of Romania ending his Euro 2000 hopes, Shearer confirmed it had been his last game for his country.

"I have made my decision and I will stick by it," he said.

"I never dreamed it would end as empty as it did last night, but it has and life just has to go on," said the Newcastle striker who scored England's opener from the penalty spot, his 30th for the national side.

Shearer again stressed the reason he's quitting international action is for family reasons, not because of media criticism.

He continued: "I wish to see more of my family and to stay the best for as long as I'm playing."

"To do that I'll need more rest. Not playing in the summer will give me more time to recover."

"If I was to carry on doing both playing domestic and international football injuries might take their toll. I want to control it before it happens."

On the tournament itself, the 29-year-old said: "We have to take responsibility for what has happened. Yes, there have been mistakes. We could have done better at certain things."

"We got the result we wanted against Germany but we didn't play well. The players are there - it's just getting them to perform."

"We had a job to do and we didn't do it. We weren't good enough. We don't have anyone else to blame."

Keegan as keen as ever

SPA, Belgium, June 21: Kevin Keegan pledged on Wednesday to stay on as England coach here Wednesday despite the harrowing loss to Romania which sent his side crashing out of the Euro 2000 finals, reports AFP.

"I am looking forward to the future," Keegan told a news conference at the England camp here, the day after a last minute penalty gave Romania a 3-2 win and a place in the quarterfinals at the expense of England.

He said the defeat had been a big blow to take but insisted: "I will bounce back." He will now turn toward preparing England for the 2002 World Cup qualifiers which start on October 7 with a game against Germany at Wembley.

Keegan said he believed he had chosen the best 22 players available to him although he admitted that he still had some way to go as a manager.

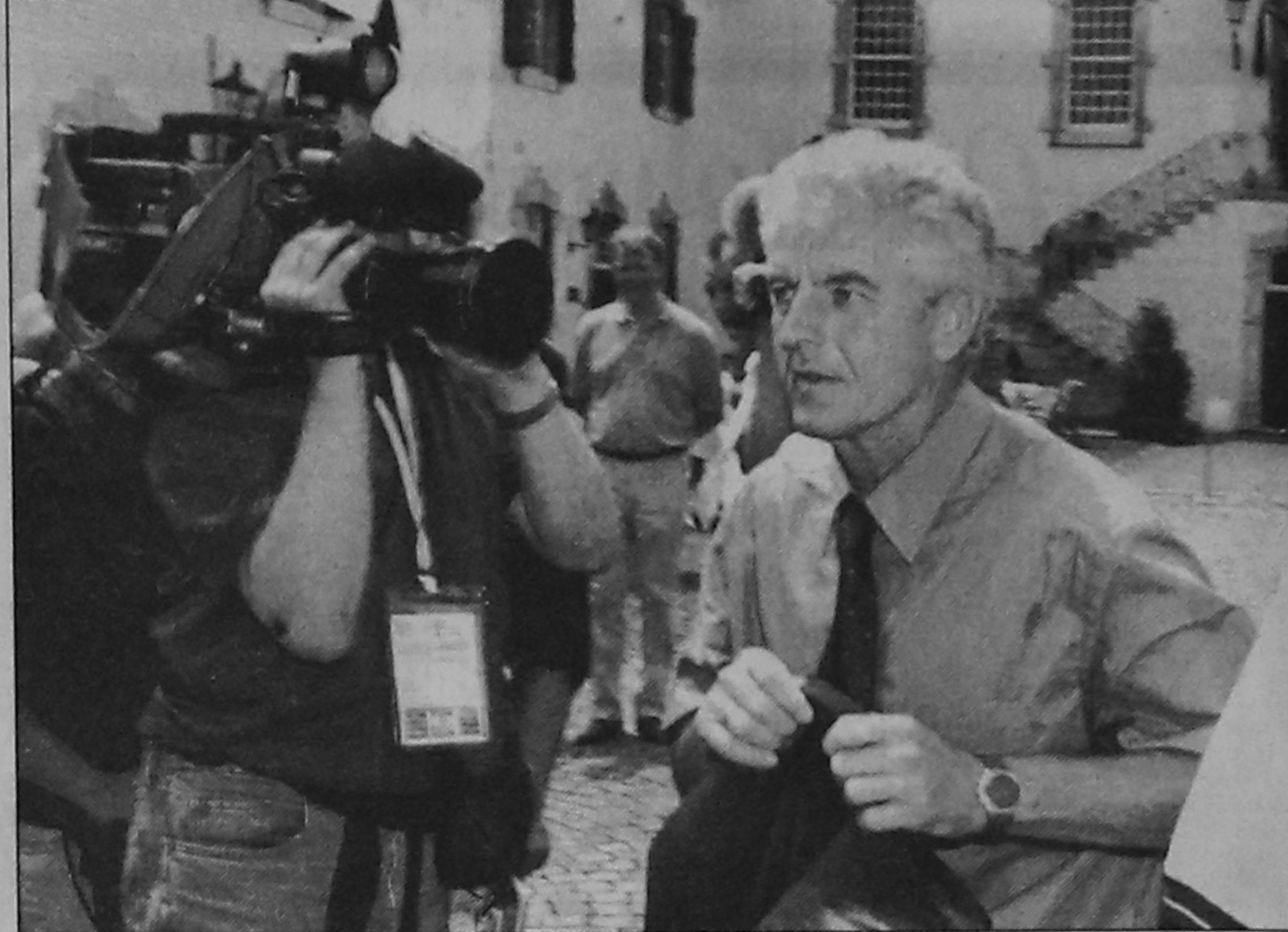
"I have learned things in this job. I have not set the world on fire so far with my management skills but I still get the opportunity to do that in a World Cup. "Bill Shankly, when I met him, would say you never stop learning at this game and I am looking forward to the future. I will bounce back. I have done that before and I will do it again."

"We had a lot of things going for us, fantastic support in the stadium, we led 2-1 at half-time. We were not good enough to go through in the end. We have always tried to be honest, I have, but we did not perform on the night."

The England coach defended his team for the effort and hard work they put in for the tournament, but he admitted there was a problem with standards.

"We've got to be honest and say our Premiership is a fantastic league but it doesn't fit with the style of international football."

"You haven't got the same players and you don't quite play the same system. You have to adjust and adapt and maybe that's let us down on this trip."



NO POINT IN STAYING: Erich Ribbeck, the German national team coach, leaving after announcing his resignation at a press conference at Vaals yesterday. — AFP photo

Ribbeck bids farewell

VAALS, Netherlands, June 21: Erich Ribbeck stood down as German coach Wednesday following his side's dismal performance in the Euro 2000 finals, reports AFP.

The 63-year-old Ribbeck said he had decided not to renew his contract with the German Football Federation (DFB) which came to a term with the end of their participation in Euro 2000.

Ribbeck has the distinction of being the first post-war German coach not to win either the World Cup or European title in this the DFB's centenary year.

Ribbeck told a news conference on Wednesday: "After turning during the night, I had a talk with Gerhard Mayer-Vorfelder (head of the German delegation and DFB vice-president) and this morning I had a telephone conversation with Egidius Braun (DFB president) to tell him I am resigning with immediate effect."

His side was sent crashing with a 0-3 defeat Tuesday to a second-string Portugal side. Germany also lost 0-1 to England and drew 1-1 with Romania.

signed, believing he was, in his own words, over qualified to just inflate footballs.

When asked whether he would retire in the post-match conference on Tuesday, Ribbeck had said: "When I assumed this post two years ago, I had two objectives: First to qualify for Euro 2000 and second to have a successful tournament, meaning at least to survive the first phase. I admit I have failed."

This was the first time that Germany have not been among the top eight nations of this competition since 1968 when both East and West Germany flopped.

He had also been fiercely criticized in the German press for what it believed was Ribbeck's blind loyalty in continuing with legend Lothar Matthaeus following a poor opening game against Romania.

His only major title as a coach is winning the UEFA Cup with Bayer Leverkusen in 1988.

His epitaph as German coach reads a direct qualification for Euro2000 and a "mediocre record of 10 victories, 6 draws and eight defeats."

STANDINGS										
BRUSSELS, June 21: Euro 2000 tables after Monday's final Group A matches:- (Played, won, drawn, lost, for, against, points)										
Group A										
Portugal	3	3	0	0	7	2	9			
Romania	3	1	1	0	4	4	4			
England	3	1	0	2	5	6	3			
Germany	3	0	1	2	1	5	1			
Group B										
Italy	3	3	0	0	6	2	9			
Turkey	3	1	1	1	3	2	4			
Belgium	3	1	0	2	2	5	3			
Sweden	3	0	1	2	2	4	1			
Group C										
Yugoslavia	2	1	1	0	4	3	4			
Norway	2	1	0	1	1	1	3			
Spain	2	1	0	1	2	2	3			
Slovenia	2	0	1	1	4	5	1			
Group D										
France	2	2	0	0	5	1	6			
Netherlands	2	2	0	0	4	0	6			
Czech Republic	2	0	0	2	1	3	0			
Denmark	2	0	0	2	0	6	0			

German press sink their teeth

BERLIN, June 21: Germany's newspapers on Wednesday blasted the national side and manager Erich Ribbeck following the humiliating 0-3 loss to a second-string Portugal side which sent them crashing out of Euro 2000, reports AFP.

"You are the idiots of football in Europe," headlined Bild. "Mega-humiliation," screamed Express and "Fiasco" lamented Neue Rhein Zeitung.

They also agreed that it was time for much-maligned coach Erich Ribbeck to call it a day.

"Germany is ashamed of you," the mass-circulation Bild said. "no wins, no heart, no struggle, no desire."

"Never before has a German team left a tournament in such a lamentable state," it said. "There is only one thing to do now: clear the decks and spare no-one. For that we need new men. The ideal would be Christoph Daum. Immediately. There is such a lot to be done."

Daum almost led unfashionable Bayern Leverkusen to its first German league title last season, losing out on the last day to Bayern Munich.

"The whole of Europe is laughing at our 'heroes', the Cologne Express said. "Thank God it's all over."

June 20. That was the day when a great footballing nation was buried. The sclerotic football of the German national side has become an international joke. Portugal's B team sent the German side into a footballing abyss, it went on.

For the Frankfurter Neue Presse: "The three-times world and European champions...again played like a team in agony, even a team in its death throes."

Maldini fit for quarters

GEEL, Belgium, June 21: Italy captain and defender Paolo Maldini, who injured his knee in Monday's 2-1 victory over Sweden, will be back for his side's quarter-final match in Brussels on June 24.



THE EAGLE HAS CRASHED: A crest fallen German fan coming to terms with his team's elimination from the Euro 2000 at Rotterdam on June 20. In front of his is a drum with the German national insignia of an eagle. — AFP photo