

Their game exposed

BRUSSELS, June 21 (AFP): England's exit from Euro 2000 may have calmed the fears of residents of the Low Countries - but it should set alarm bells ringing back home about the future of the country's favourite sport.

England's limits as an international footballing nation were cruelly exposed by a tournament which saw Kevin Keegan's side vying for newspaper space with the hooligan element among their travelling fans.

By Thursday, the troublemakers will have left. Keegan's problems on the pitch, however, will very much remain.

The days of kick and rush may be gone, but with the notable exception of midfielder David Beckham, England players still view ball possession as a damnation and intricate passing as a mystic art.

As a result, Keegan's men spent most of Euro 2000 chasing after a ball that was just out of reach. And when they did manage to win it back, England lacked the poise, the ball-skills and the patience to hold onto it for more than a minute.

It became a vicious circle, and one tempered only by a physical commitment that often bordered on the heroic.

However, as so many previous England sides have found out in the past, possessing courage and patriotism in industrial quantities is simply not enough to beat Latin-styled teams with better flair and technique.

It was significant that England defeated the only northern European side in their group, but were beaten by the two teams who play a quality, passing game - even though England took unconvincing leads in both matches.

Germany failed to break down a well-organised defence, but Portugal and Romania both simply played Keegan's men off the park.

And the question facing Keegan now with a 2002 World Cup qualifying campaign just around the corner, is: Where do we go from here?

Though Keegan can expect a hammering from the critics, there is little or nothing to blame him for in terms of team selection.

Keegan did not have a Manuel Rui Costa, a Luis Figo, a Zinedine Zidane or a Francesco Totti sitting on the subs' bench, waiting for his chance. And it's not by playing Gareth Southgate instead of Dennis Wise or Steven Gerrard instead of Paul Ince that England's performances would have been transformed.

English players, brought up on the frenetic pace of the Premiership, either lack the skill of the top European players or, if they have it, lack the self-confidence in their ability to knock the ball around in big matches.

As Keegan said himself: "We didn't trust ourselves to pass the ball well enough in all three games. It's something we tried to work on, it's something we've talked about, it's something that I think they intended to do."

"But when push comes to shove and you're actually out there on the pitch we didn't achieve that again. And that's why we're going home."

"Our strength is in our commitment and a lot passion. But those strengths alone, without passing a football well and having a bit of invention, make it difficult to win football matches."

Among those watching who reached the same conclusion was Dutch legend Johan Cruyff, who paid tribute to the Romanians and castigated the English.

"Romania's technique was far better," he said. "They created so many positions and moved the ball about very well. England were not good enough."

And he went on: "When we talk about technique, it doesn't mean getting on the ball and doing fancy tricks. In training, you have to pass the ball to each other at speed - there is nothing exciting about it."

"Without determination and 100 percent effort you can never play the game," he concluded. "But at this level, it is not enough. You must have technique as well."

Unsporting Bangkok police!

BANGKOK, June 21: Bangkok police angered by a night club show featuring topless women that cashed in on Euro 2000 fever have threatened to close down unlicensed venues that stage nude dancing, reports said Wednesday, reports AFP.

The crackdown on the city's notorious red light district came after one night spot staged a show celebrating the soccer championship, parading women who sported the team's names written on their chests in whipped cream.

They also featured the times of the kick-offs and carried the national flags of the teams competing in the tournament which has taken Thailand by storm.

Police Major General Wongkot Maneeran said he had sent notices to unlicensed entertainment venues that were staging risque shows.

He ordered the dancers to cover up or the nightclubs and bars would face "immediate closure", the Bangkok Post and The Nation newspapers reported.

He said the soccer revue was obscene and illegal and could not be performed in an ordinary entertainment venue. Any police officer found involved would face disciplinary action.

Matthaeus 150 and no more



took the freekick himself but skipper Fernando Couto headed the ball away for a corner.

Matthaeus caught the eye less after the break as Lazio winger Conceicao followed up with further goals in the 54th and 71st minutes. Nevertheless Matthaeus was there to contain the danger on a number of occasions though Conceicao was unstoppable on that form.

The 51,000-capacity De Kuip stadium, with of course a large German contingent, made a vocal showing of their displeasure which was a telling example that even legends cannot escape sporting lows.

It was a far cry from the adulation of skipping Germany to World Cup glory in 1990, scoring four goals on the way to earn FIFA's world player of the year award.

It's the first time Matthaeus, who won his first cap in 1980, has left this competition at such an early stage.

Time and tide wait for no man and Matthaeus is no exception.

Fittingly Matthaeus had his best game of the three group matches. He was clearly struggling for pace against Romania, particularly in the second half when Gheorghe Hagi moved up front to make a three-man attack.

His inclusion against England became a subject of national debate and Matthaeus even suggested to coach Erich Ribbeck that he step aside for the sake of squad unity. Ribbeck would have none of it and fielded the evergreen player who had a better game.

Germany, known for their Houdini escape acts under fierce pressure, looked again to Matthaeus for inspiration as they searched for the win against Portugal and then hoped Romania beat England.

The second part of the plan went ahead with Romania beating England, but Sergio Conceicao, not even a first-choice player, slammed in a hat-trick for Portugal in a 3-0 victory.

Matthaeus was involved in Germany's best chance of the match. In the 31st minute, Dilemar Hamann fed Matthaeus in a move where the ball eventually found Marco Bode surging into the area.

Bode's low left foot shot beat stand-in keeper Pedro Espinosa but the luck was not going Germany's way and the ball crashed back off the right hand post.

Matthaeus pushed up towards the end of the first half as Germany looked for an equalizer to Conceicao's 35th minute opener.

Costinha fouled Matthaeus to the left of the area and he

HE STANDS TALL NO MATTER WHAT: German legend Lothar Matthaeus (R) taking off his famous No. 10 national shirt for the last time after the defeat against Portugal at Rotterdam on June 20. — AFP photo

fitness to see off the likes of Hewitt — or even British eighth seed and possible quarterfinal opponent Tim Henman.

A year ago, Adelaide's Hewitt was a rising star with a couple of Tour titles under his belt who lost out to Sampras in the semis at Queen's.

To say the pony-tailed 19-year-old has progressed since would be a severe underestimate.

His 6-4, 6-4 dismissal of Sampras on Sunday comprised much more than revenge for the fortnight's time, eclipsing Roy Emerson.

Sampras may be lightly wounded after failing to land a second straight Queen's title — but six titles in the past seven years at the All-England Club and an untouchable 85-15 career mark on grass tell their own story.

With longtime rival Andre Agassi's form and fitness in some doubt and with Hewitt nursing an ankle problem which forced his withdrawal in Rosmalen, Sampras, who first faces little-known Jiri Vanek at the Czech Republic, will start as overwhelming favourite.

Most of the smart money will be split on Sampras, Hewitt and Agassi, whom Sampras beat in last year's final — assuming Agassi can shake off recent poor form which saw early losses in the Rome Masters Series and at the French Open.

Sampras insists anyone wanting to lay claim to his crown will snatch it away, metaphorically speaking, over his dead body.

The 28-year-old has won at least one Grand Slam a year for the past seven years — a record second only to Bjorn Borg's achievement of eight straight years and is bursting to keep on adding entries to the record books.

"I feel everything is in place, I'm where I want to be and I'm feeling confident," said Sampras despite his defeat by Hewitt — who now lurks tantalisingly in his quarter of the Wimbledon draw.

Agassi, Wimbledon champion in 1992, would refute any suggestion that his own star is on the wane after last year's spectacular accomplishments. But his preparations suffered a setback when a back spasm forced him out of Queen's last Thursday while playing Italian Gianluca Pozzi.

"This injury is not ideal," the Las Vegas admitted.

"I'll try to bluff my way through some matches at Wimborne," he added.

That might be enough for the early rounds — but thereafter Agassi, who starts his campaign against a qualifier but who could then meet experienced compatriot Todd Martin, will need more than bluff and semi-

finals.

IN MEN'S SINGLES

WIN MEN'S SINGLES TITLE

Boris Becker (GER) 1995

Richard Krajicek (NED) 1996

QUALIFIER TO MAKE MOST

PROGRESS

IN MEN'S SINGLES

WIN MEN'S SINGLES

CHAMP

1985 — Boris Becker (GER) 17

years 22 days

YOUNGEST WOMEN'S

SINGLES CHAMP

1887 — Lottie Dod (GBR) 15

years 285 days

OLDEST MEN'S

SINGLES CHAMP

1909 — Arthur Gore (GBR) 41

years 182 days

OLDEST WOMEN'S

SINGLES CHAMP

1908 — Charlotte Sterry

(GBR) 37 yrs 282 days

MOST GAMES IN A MATCH

112 — Pancho Gonzales

(USA) bt Charles Pasarell (USA)

22-24, 1-6, 16-14, 6-3, 11-9 (1st

round 1969)

MOST GAMES IN A MATCH

John McEnroe (USA)

reached semifinals 1977

QUALIFIER TO MAKE MOST

PROGRESS

IN WOMEN'S

SINGLES CHAMP

Alexandra Stevenson (USA)

reached semifinals 1999

QUALIFIER TO MAKE MOST

PROGRESS

IN WOMEN'S

SINGLES CHAMP

Alexandra Stevenson (USA)

reached semifinals 1999

QUALIFIER TO MAKE MOST

PROGRESS

IN WOMEN'S

SINGLES CHAMP

Jaroslav Drobny (Cze)

reached semifinals 1999

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