



Maldini doubtful, Conte out of competition,

GEEL, Belgium, June 25: Italy midfielder and Juventus captain Antonio Conte has been ruled out of the rest of Euro 2000 and there are doubts over captain Paolo Maldini for the semi-finals, team officials said on Sunday, reports AFP.

Both men left the pitch during Saturday night's 2-0 quarter-final win over Romania in Brussels - Conte with a right ankle injury and Maldini suffering from a left thigh problem.

Team doctor Andrea Ferretti, who accompanied Conte to a hospital near here on Sunday morning, said an x-ray revealed a torn ligament just below his right ankle.

"It means he can no longer take part in these championships," Ferretti told reporters at Italy's training ground here.

"I have spoken to Juventus and they are happy for him to stay here at the team hotel," And he added: "He's feeling a bit down."

Ferretti said Conte would be out of action for several weeks and may not even make the start of Juventus' pre-season training camp.

Conte was scythed down by Gheorghe Hagi - a tackle which earned the Romania captain a yellow card, shortly before he was sent off for taking a dive in the Italian penalty area.

Ferretti revealed: "Hagi came to apologise to Conte after the match. But I'm not telling you what was said."

Team coach Dino Zoff told a news conference that Conte wanted to stick by the "Squadra Azzurra" at these championships, saying: "He has asked to stay on with the group and we are glad to have him."

Maldini's condition is less serious, Ferretti said, because the muscle has just been strained rather than torn. The skipper felt a twinge during Saturday's pre-match warm-up and then had to quit at half-time as the problem became steadily worse.

Doctors have bandaged the thigh and will remove it for inspection on Monday.

"We are hopeful," said Zoff of Maldini's prospects.

English players are that bad

BRUSSELS, June 25: European football's ruling body (UEFA) joined the British press, England's opponents and even national coach Kevin Keegan on Saturday in underlining just how bad England were at Euro 2000, reports AFP.

Keegan and his men have faced a barrage of criticism over their technical and tactical abilities since the team's humiliating exit after two defeats at these championships.

Now a survey of every group match at the tournament by UEFA's Technical Study Group (TSG) has rubbed salt in the wounds by producing a list of the best 50 players at these championships.

Only one England player, Manchester United's David Beckham, appears on the list.

And the TSG cannot be accused of knowing little about British football.

The group is coordinated by Scott Andry Roxburgh, head of UEFA's technical department, and includes former Blackburn Rovers boss Roy Hodgson and Liverpool's French coach Gerard Houllier.

The best side in the survey is Holland, with eight men placed among the top 50, followed by World Cup holders France, Portugal and Italy, each with seven.

Significantly for England, the best represented nation among the midfielders was Portugal with the four men - Manuel Rui Costa, Luis Figo, Sergio Conceicao and Paulo Bento - who ran rings around Keegan's side in their opening match.

The top 50 will be whittled down to an all-star squad of 16 after the semi-finals, with the winners being announced by Brazilian legend Pele shortly before the Euro 2000 final in Rotterdam on July 2.

Survey sponsors Eurocard-Mastercard will then donate 2,500 euros to the charity of choice of each of the 16 winners.

Trezeguet linked with Juve

ROME, June 25: Monaco's French international David Trezeguet's 21.5 million dollar transfer to Italian Serie A giants Juventus is set to go ahead, press reports said Saturday, reports AFP.

Italian papers suggest that agreement has been reached between the French champions and Juventus and Trezeguet is set to put pen to paper in the next few days.

False alarm

BRUSSELS, June 25: Police were alerted late Friday when a passer-by thought he saw armed men lurking outside the Yugoslav Euro 2000 headquarters at Edgemoor, reports AFP.

An investigation, however, soon uncovered that the suspects were none other than a father and his son having a late-night game of "paintball-gun."

EUROPEAN FOOTBALL CHAMPIONSHIP 2000



Oh! Beautiful Figo

AMSTERDAM, June 25 (AFP): Luis Figo confirmed himself as one of the world's great footballers with a virtuoso display for Portugal in their 2-0 victory over Turkey in the Euro 2000 quarter-finals here on Saturday.

Continually threatening the Turkish defence with dazzling dribbling and clever ball skills, Figo was a threat throughout the 90 minutes.

The 27-year-old Barcelona player, who won the world under-16 and under-20 world titles

with Portugal, has now become a senior player of supreme quality on the international stage.

Figo might not have got on the scoresheet, with the lightning going to Nuno Gomes who found the net in the 44th and 56th minutes, but he created both goals.

Figo ran down the right and his cross bounced in front of an unmarked Gomes whose header went just inside Turkish keeper Rustu Recber's right hand post for Portugal's first goal and his

second of the tournament.

For the second goal Figo, on the right wing, pushed the ball to the right of Hakan Unsal while running past him on the left to beat him with a clever bit of trickery. Figo then hit a low cross to an unmarked Gomes at the far post who side-footed the ball into an empty net.

Hapless Turkey were reduced to 10 men after the sending off of Alpay Ozalan and Arif Erdem missed a penalty both late in the first half.

Figo said afterwards: "The coach told us to keep moving positions to confuse other teams. It does not matter if I'm on the left side or the right side. The most important thing is that all the positions are occupied when we have got the ball."

The penalty save was crucial because it was seconds before the end of the first half," Figo said. "(Vitor) Baia was able to stop the penalty and Portugal not only went into the break 1-0 ahead but the Turks were a man down."

"Of course we would like to play the final. I would particularly like to play against Holland because I have many Dutch friends."

He dismissed the thought that he could go on to win the 2000 FIFA World Player of the Year award. "It's always difficult to talk about individual awards especially when they are chosen by 50 to 100 people who do not always reflect the feeling of the world of football."

"It is important for every player to be in tournaments like this though. If you are not at these events you cannot show yourself to the world."

When asked if Portugal could improve on this performance he said: "You can always improve and we really want to do better. Our football has been good up till now but we want to succeed so the team can really prove something."



LUIS THE GREAT: Portuguese maestro Luis Figo acknowledging the applause from the fans after the quarterfinal against Turkey. — AFP photo

Press' wrath on Alpay, Arif

ANKARA, June 25: Turkey's papers lashed out Sunday at the national team for the 2-0 Euro 2000 quarter-final defeat against Portugal, lambasting Alpay Ozalan, who was sent off, and Arif Erdem, who missed a penalty, as the villains of the piece, reports AFP.

"We were flattened by a single punch," the liberal daily Milliyet wrote in reference to Alpay's petulant push at Fernando Couto in the 29th minute, which was sanctioned with a red card.

Alpay's move was dubbed "irresponsible, stupid and unforgivable."

"It was an Alpay classic. He scuppered the team once again just as he did four years ago," Yeni Binyil daily said, referring to Alpay's failure to stop Croatia's Goran Vlaovic when he was heading alone towards the Turkish goal in a group match at the 1996 Euro finals in England.

Turkey lost the match 1-0 as Vlaovic scored, while Alpay received a fair-play award in the tournament, in which Turkey failed to win a point or score a single goal.

The press also did not let off Arif Erdem, who missed a crucial penalty in the first half following Alpay's expulsion.

Arif came under fire for volunteering for the duty despite his poor record in penalty-taking. "It is incomprehensible why Arif had to go for the penalty," Yeni Binyil said.

The only praise went for goalkeeper Rustu Recber, who spared Turkey a much heavier crush. "He was the hero of the match," Hurriyet wrote.

Sports commentators also blasted the overall performance of the team and the strategy that coach Mustafa Denizli had outlined.

"The philosophy of the team was built on obstructing the play of the opponent. A victory depended only on chance and Hakan Sukur's performance," the liberal Radikal wrote.

"You cannot solve the problems by blaming missed penalties and red cards. If we analyze our general play, it will be easier to wake up from the dream we had against Belgium," the daily said in reference to Turkey's 2-0 win against the Red Devils, which brought them a quarter-final berth.

Few were the columnists to acknowledge the Turkish team for making history by reaching the quarter-finals in what was only their second appearance in Euro finals.

"There is no need for more anger and regret. We still owe much to this team, who also made us experience many exciting and happy moments," Zeki Col wrote in Milliyet.

The Euro 2000 expectations of soccer-mad Turkey were boosted with the victory of Istanbul's Galatasaray in the UEFA Cup last month, the first ever European trophy won by a Turkish club.

A deserving day off

ERMELO, Netherlands, June 25: Portugal's victorious players were given the day off Sunday to savour their 2-0 quarter-final win over Turkey and to take in the France-Spain game in the evening, reports AFP.

Humberto Coelho's side will play the winner of that match between the world champions and their neighbours and greatest rivals in the semi-finals in Brussels on June 28.

And on the form they showed against Turkey, they need fear no-one.

Had they taken even half of the chances conjured up by star player Luis Figo, they could have won by five or six goals, and that lack of killer instinct in front of goal will be one of Coelho's concerns over the next three days.

He will also likely call for more discipline from his players after they picked up five bookings against the Turks in a game that was never over rough.

Joao Pinto, Fernando Couto, Rui Costa, Costinha and Paulo Sousa would miss the final if they were booked again and Portugal won their semi-final.

But unlike against Germany in their last group game when qualification was already assured, Coelho does not have the luxury of resting his top players. The opposition will be too good for that.

The Portuguese press on Sunday were in no doubt that their side could go all the way to the final in Rotterdam on July 2.

"Unbeatable!", trumpeted the Publico daily. "Vitor Baia saving a penalty, Nuno Gomes scoring a double and Luis Figo were the driving forces of the national team's win."

"Onwards Portugal!", exhorted the Correo de Manha which singled out the Barcelona midfielder for special praise in headlining "Figomenal."

"The pride of Portugal," said 24 Horas on a photo of Nuno Gomes and Figo. "Thank you Portugal," exclaimed A Bola.

By reaching the semi-finals, the Portuguese have now equalled their best ever performance at the European championships after their semi-final appearance in France in 1984.



Vitor Baia (L), the Portuguese custodian diving to his right to save a penalty from Turkey's Arif Erdem on June 24. — AFP photo

Looking as good as Brazil!

AMSTERDAM, June 25 (AFP): "Brazilians of Europe" is a label which is all the more apt for Portugal following their 2-0 beating of 10-man Turkey to reach the Euro 2000 semi-finals.

Portugal's golden generation, possessing the talent of their colonial cousins yet not the silverware to match, could finally end their championship-winning drought at senior level in the July 2 final in Rotterdam.

Rui Costa's shimmies and body serves, Figo's breathtaking skills in running at defenders, and the team's unpredictability and flair on the edge of the box smacked of the famous four-time world champions in the yellow shirts.

This tournament has been dubbed the last hurrah for a golden generation of Portuguese players yet it was a relative youngster - 24-year-old Nuno Gomes - who grabbed the headlines with two goals to set up Wednesday's tie in Brussels with either France or Spain.

The pedigree of Portuguese key performers has never been in question. Barcelona's Figo and Fiorentina's Rui Costa are a couple of attacking midfielders who would grace any side.

Paulo Sousa, who won the

European Cup with different clubs in successive years - Juventus in 1996 and Borussia Dortmund a year later - is still performing at the highest level with Parma in the Serie A.

Striker Joao Pinto, defenders Jorge Costa, Fernando Couto and keeper Vitor Baia also have an enormous amount of experience on the international stage.

All those players, Figo, Costa, Sousa, Joao Pinto, Jorge Costa, Couto and Baia are either in their 30's or they will be by the time the 2002 World Cup in Japan/South Korea comes around.

It must be all the more satisfying for them to have at last put on a spectacular exhibition of football. Figo confirmed himself beyond all doubt as a footballing superstar with a virtuoso display.

He continually threatened the Turkish defence with dazzling dribbling and clever ball skills throughout the 90 minutes. He was the architect of both Portuguese goals against the Turks and has been the outstanding player so far at the tournament.

Admittedly hapless Turkey were reduced to 10 men after the sending off of Alpay Ozalan and

Arif Erdem missed a penalty both late in the first half.

Figo said afterwards: "The coach has told us to keep moving positions to confuse other teams. It does not matter if I'm on the left side or the right side. The most important thing is that all the positions are occupied when we have got the ball."

Portugal's positioning was fluid. Sergio Conceicao would one minute be threatening down the right wing and the next he would be installed in the classic right back position.

Figo would be on the right flank, then the left flank and there was always a player to fill the void as soon as another player left his position. Rui Costa continually altered his positioning behind the strikers and the variation was clearly unsettling Turkey.

The rotation between defence and midfield was just as well worked with the rearguard moving up to add to the attacking options and central midfielders Costinha and Paulo Bento falling back to cover for them.

Rui Costa once said: "You are not a golden generation till you win something." Perhaps now the time is ripe for the trophy Portugal's talent so clearly merits.

The Azzurri roll on

BRUSSELS, June 25 (AFP): Italy striker Filippo Inzaghi sealed his team's place in the Euro 2000 semi-finals here on Saturday night and then trumpeted "The dream goes on!"

Inzaghi scored Italy's second - and his second of the tournament - as Dino Zoff's men beat a 10-man Romania side 2-0 in the quarter-finals here.

And the message from the "Squadra Azzurra" was that team spirit is at an all-time high, following a year of disappointing results, tactical changes and criticism in the press.

Inzaghi, who scored his first goal in open play for Italy for a year, said: "I'm happy. I'm happy because Italy have won, because we've managed to get a place in the semi-finals. The dream continues."

"We're doing good things, let's hope we can keep it up."

Francesco Totti, who opened the scoring here, also played up the team spirit - and played down any rivalry with the more famous Alessandro Del Piero, who he has been relegating on the subs' bench.

"I'm pleased at having scored - but above all I'm pleased that we're through to the next round," said the AS Roma idol. "That was what really counted."

"The most important thing now is that we stay calm and we keep this going."

As for his relationship with the Juventus star, he said: "We're friends. One plays or the other does, it doesn't matter. That's how you build team spirit."

Del Piero, who replaced Totti for the last 15 minutes, said:

He couldn't take it

BELGRADE, June 25: A man in the central Serbian town of Kraljevo died from a heart attack a few minutes after Yugoslavia were beaten by Spain in Euro 2000, a prominent sport daily reported Saturday, reports AFP.

Restaurant owner Slobodan Velickovic suffered a heart attack Wednesday after Spain had scored the winning goal in injury-time, beating Yugoslavia 4-3, the daily Sportski Zurnal said.

Velickovic "was bitter about the shameful, criminal refereeing by Frenchman Gilles Veissiere. After Spain's winning goal, his heart, overburdened by deep injustice towards the Yugoslav squad, let up and the death was inevitable," the daily said.

The Yugoslav press has been slamming Veissiere's refereeing following the game which saw the Yugoslavs let in two injury time goals.



THEY LOVE IT: Italian fans cheering their team from the stands at Brussels on June 24. — AFP photo

The champion's infamous last rite

BRUSSELS, June 25: Defiant to the last, Romanian star Gheorghe Hagi insisted he was cheated in the 0-2 Euro 2000 quarter-final defeat to Italy that brought down the curtain on his exceptional 17-year international career, reports AFP.

The 35-year-old known as "The Maradona of the Carpathians" was sent packing 14 minutes into the second half when he was yellow carded for the second time for diving in

second period when two yellow cards inside five minutes sent him packing.

The 35-year-old Galatasaray midfielder first scythed down Antonio Conte with a tackle that could easily have broken the Italian player's ankle, and was deserving of a red card in itself.

He then theatrically dived in the Italian box in search of a penalty, but instead Portuguese referee Vitor Manuel Melo Pereira stoically drew out first

what should we do now? Drag Hagi's name through the mud. Treat him like a snake because he could not control his temper? Certainly not!"

Hagi also got a red card last month in Galatasaray's UEFA Cup Final victory over Arsenal of England.

It had all started so brightly for Hagi who had missed the last Romanian match, the dramatic 3-2 win over England, after picking up two bookings against Germany and Portugal.

Taking the field with a shaven head, the result of a pledge he made to his teammates to encourage them to defeat the English, Hagi quickly reasserted his control over a team he has dominated for so long.

He came agonisingly close to getting the equaliser after Francesco Totti had opened the scoring for Italy after 33 minutes.

Hagi was quickest on to a speculative through ball from Adrian Mutu and lobbed it over the Italian keeper. The ball looked to be bounding into an empty net, but instead it caught the inside of an upright and rebounded back into play.

The second Italian goal just before half-time gave the Romanians a mountain to climb and it was clear shortly into the second half that Hagi's notoriously short fuse was about to blow again.

He is now expected to finish out his career with his Turkish club, although it would be no surprise to see him named Romanian coach in the not too distant future.

Three to be honoured

NYON, Switzerland, June 25: Yugoslavia's Savo Milosevic, Spain's Alfonso and Portugal's Fernando Couto have all been honoured for examples of fair play at Euro 2000 Saturday, reports AFP.

Milosevic, tournament top scorer with four goals ahead of the quarter-finals, and Alfonso both came to the rescue of French referee Gilles Veissiere when Yugoslav fans came on to the field of play.

Veissiere, struck by a coin in a separate incident, had said: "I am very grateful to both players. I think it would be a good thing if UEFA could find some way of rewarding the players' behaviour."

Milosevic will receive his award ahead of Sunday's quarter-final between Holland and Yugoslavia in Rotterdam while Alfonso will collect his before the match in Bruges, Belgium between France and Spain.

Portugal's Fernando Couto was singled out by UEFA for his diplomacy before the Group A match with Germany, won 3-0 by Portugal.

The Lazio player signalled to Portuguese supporters to be quiet when they started jeering the German national anthem before the match.

The Portuguese fans immediately fell silent.

Couto was due to be honoured before match between Turkey and Portugal.



ALL THE BEST: Dino Zoff (L) the Italian coach, shaking hands with Romanian great Gheorghe Hagi after the latter was sent off in his final appearance for his country on June 24. — AFP photo

the Italian box.

"(Italian defender Gianluca) Zambrotta brought me down. It was a clear penalty!" he said.

"Instead of showing me the red card, the referee should have awarded us a penalty and sent off Zambrotta."

Hagi had harsh words to say in general of the refereeing during Euro 2000. "In a big competition like this such refereeing is unacceptable. If they had no need for us, they should have said 'you little guys, there is no point in making all the effort to qualify'."

Playing for the 125th and final time for his country, Hagi snapped and snarled his way through the match, losing his cool totally shortly into the

a yellow card and then a red for faking.

Hagi snarled one more time at the referee, shook his head in disbelief and headed for an early bath. But he could not resist one last broadcast at a TV camera filming him as he left the field.

Ugly though his last appearance in a yellow shirt may have been, Hagi the footballing maestro will be missed.

"A star has fallen from the sky," headlined Bucharest's ProSport daily in its eight-page report on the match.

"His sports career has been magnificent, but now it is a thing of the past," it added.

Editor Catalin Tolontan sprung to Hagi's defence. "And