

EUROPEAN FOOTBALL CHAMPIONSHIP 2000

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 Romanian 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 Scot Andy Roxburgh, head of UEFA's technical department, and includes former Blackburn Rovers boss Roy Hodgson and Liverpool's French coach Gerhard Houller.

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 Edegem, 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-gum."

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 found in front of an unmarked Gomes whose header went just inside Turkish keeper Rustu Rebecer'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, 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 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 voluntering 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 Rebecer, 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.

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 has been relegated 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."

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 Correio 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 fans have now equalled their best ever performance at the European championships after their semi-final appearance in France in 1984.

Press' wrath on Alpay, Arif

ANKARA, June 25: Turkey's

players 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

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