



EUROPEAN FOOTBALL CHAMPIONSHIP 2000



Popescu may follow his skipper

BUCHAREST, June 27: Sweeper Gheorghe Popescu said Tuesday that he was considering following illustrious Galatasaray and Romania colleague Gheorghe Hagi into retirement from the international stage after his country's 2-0 elimination in the Euro 2000 quarter-finals by Italy, reports AFP.

"I have not yet decided. I don't know if I am going to continue for the 2002 World Cup qualifiers," said the 34-year-old former Tottenham and Barcelona player.

Gica Popescu, who has prolonged his contract with his Istanbul-based club by two years, concurred with Hagi in slamming referees at Euro 2000, describing the performances of the men in black as 'hallucinating'.

Juve rope in Trezeguet

MONACO, June 27: France's Euro 2000 striker David Trezeguet has joined Italian First Division side Juventus, his French First Division club Monaco announced Tuesday, reports AFP.

The French champions have moved quickly to replace Trezeguet, signing Burundian Congolese international striker Shabani Nonda from Rennes.

Striker Shabani Nonda has Tuesday signed a five-year contract with AS Monaco and at the same time David Trezeguet has been transferred to the Italian club, Monaco announced in a statement Tuesday.

The principality outfit would not give details about the contract but Italian press reports have speculated that the fee is in the region of 23 million dollars while they say the player has signed a five-year contract.

Nuno shining bright

ERMELO, Netherland, June 27 (AP): Nuno Gomes, Portugal's fourth-choice striker before Euro 2000, has shot to stardom at these championships to help his country reach the semi-final and bring further glory to the name Gomes.

Fernando Gomes, who played for Spanish side Sporting Gijon and FC Porto, was a star centre forward for Portugal during the 80s.

Nuno Gomes, known as Nuno Ribeiro previously, decided to adopt the family name Gomes because of his adulation of his illustrious namesake.

Gomes, speaking at Monday's post-training conference in Ermelo, said: "Fernando Gomes was one of my favourite players because he scored so many goals. But I think I played differently to him.

The difference is he was more of a quiet player who did not move too much. But he was always waiting in the right place at the right time for the ball.

Benfica forward Gomes, 24 on Wednesday next week, had been regarded by many as a great prospect but only Euro 2000 he had only started twice for Portugal in 13 appearances.

He had not really shown his form at international level basically because he is a fourth-choice after Joao Pinto, Ricardo Sa Pinto and Pauleta. But after scoring the winner against England for 3-2 after being 2-0 down he made his mark.

SA Pinto's injury and Pauleta's suspension gave Gomes his chance against England and his two goals in the 2-0 win over Turkey in the quarter-finals in Amsterdam on Saturday yet further brought him acclaim.

He added about playing under pressure: "I deal with pressure all the time not only in this tournament. I'm used to pressure at club level during my whole career. I have always dealt with pressure so it's no different right now."

Portugal meet France in Wednesday's semi-final in Brussels (1845 GMT) and it was against France Gomes made his international debut in a 3-2 defeat on January 24 1996.

Gomes has been a prolific scorer for Portugal at junior levels of football.

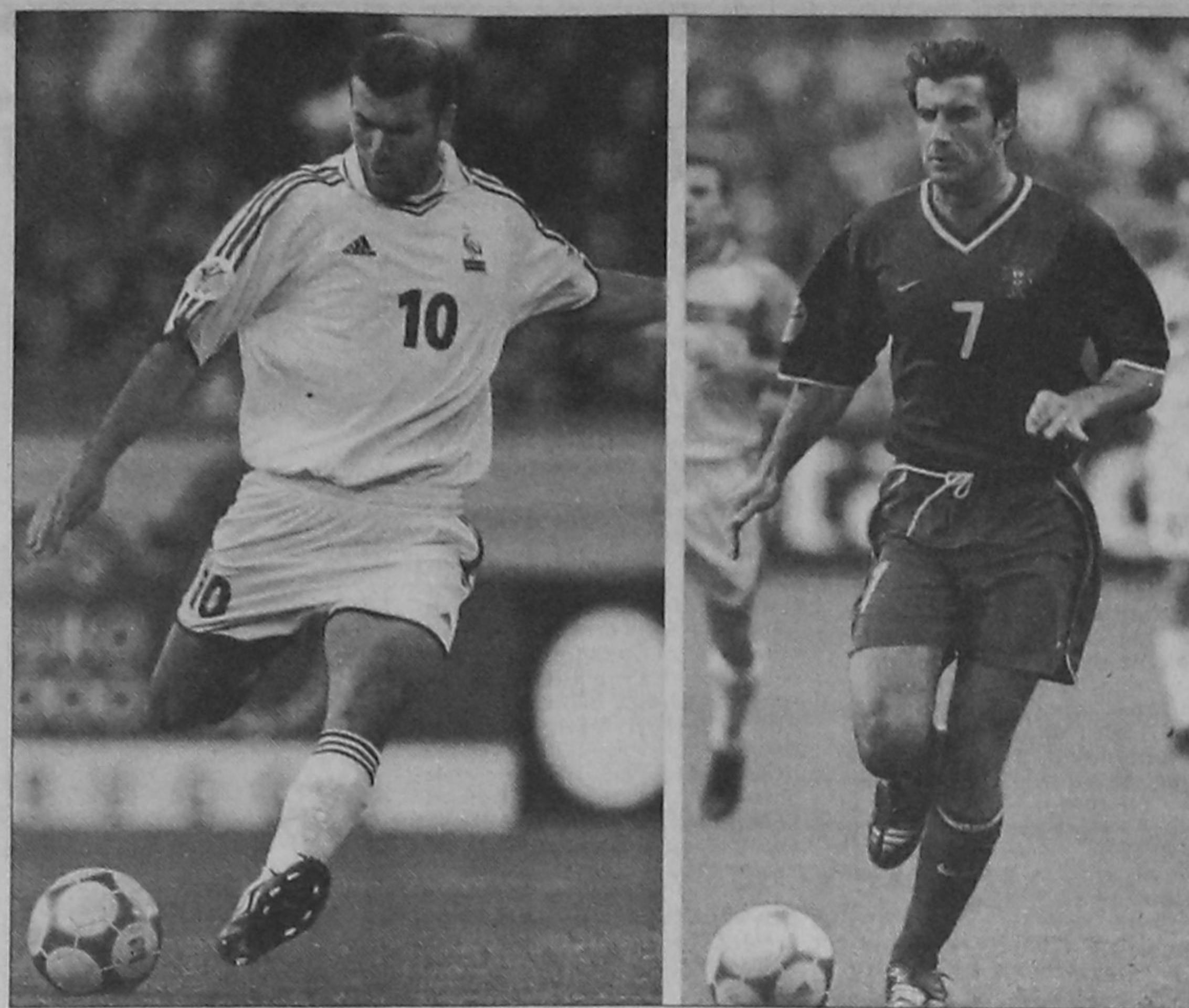
With Ajax's Dani and Sporting Lisbon's Beto, he was European under-18 champion, fourth at the Atlanta Olympics and third in the 1995 under-20 world championships in Qatar.

For that under-20 world event, Portugal beat Spain in the third-place play-off. Spain had Raul, Ivan de la Peña and Joseba Etxeberria in their line-up.

The full name of Gomes is Nuno Miguel Soares Pereira Ribeiro Gomes but his name was known at that under-20 event as Nuno Ribeiro, before he changed it because of his idol.

These championships usually throw up stars previously little known. Gomes is normally in the shadow of great players such as Luis Figo of Barcelona, Rui Costa of Fiorentina and Porto keeper Vitor Balta.

Perhaps at this event he will seal his international reputation with further goals to give a boost to his country who host the next finals in 2004.



WHO WILL SMILE LAST? AFP file photos of the opposing superstars of the first semifinal, France's mercurial Zinedine Zidane and the virtuoso Luis Figo of Portugal.

Figo v Zidane: Rivalry made in heaven

BRUSSELS, June 27 (AP): Portugal and France meet in Wednesday's Euro 2000 semi-final in Brussels with the winners due to play the victors of the other semi-final between Holland and Italy in Sunday's final at Rotterdam's De Kuip Stadium.

France will look to Zinedine Zidane to rekindle the form that helped them lift the World Cup two years ago while Luis Figo is the talisman for Portugal, who are looking to reach a major final for the first time.

ZINEDINE ZIDANE (France)

Cannes, on France's Mediterranean coast, is famous for the annual film festival that has turned countless cinema 'wannabees' into global superstars.

But it's rather less fashionable football club is also responsible for launching one megastar of the football world into orbit.

It was at the humble French Second Division club, where he played between 1988 and 1992, that Zinedine Zidane first burst onto the football scene.

Born on June 23, 1972 in Marseille as one of five children to Algerian parents Zinedine naturally grew up as a supporter of Marseille football club with the club's Uruguayan striker Enzo Francescoli his hero.

Zidane would later name the first of his sons Enzo.

But it was down the coast at Cannes where he was given his chance, signing on in 1988.

He made an indifferent start to the tournament and was suspended for two matches with he was sent off against Saudi Arabia in the group stages.

At the time he was just one of many talented products of the Portuguese youth system that allowed the Latin country to win the World Youth Cups in both 1989 and 1991.

He stayed with Sporting for five years winning one Portuguese Cup but it was only a matter of time before the fleet-footed Figo would move on.

Barcelona was the club that took the plunge and in 1995 Figo, then 22, made the move.

Figo's pace and dribbling skills make him a natural choice on the flanks but he is also capable of playing up front and in central midfield.

At Barcelona - in a team full of stars - he quickly overcame the prejudice that sometimes faces players of non-Catalan origin.

In 1997 he won the Spanish Cup and the European Cup Winners Cup.

The next year was even better and he pulled off a Treble of Primera Liga title, Spanish Cup and European Super Cup.

In 1999 he had to settle for the Primera Liga crown and so far this year is trophyless.

But two more good performances from Figo and his team-mates could ensure that changes by Sunday.

The resignations of Barcelona president Josep Lluis Nunez and coach Louis van Gaal have left 'King Luis' in limbo and rumours persist that he could be on the move - possibly to Lazio of Italy.

A European Championship winners-medal would certainly boost the asking price for Figo if the new regime at the Nou Camp does risk the wrath of the fans by trying to offload him.

Married to a Spanish wife he has indicated he would like to

end his career in Spain.

LUIS FIGO (Portugal)

FIFA may have in January named Rivaldo as World Player of the Year while Europe's football writers also voted for the Brazilian as the continent's top player because of his form for his Spanish club side

However, fans of the famous Catalan club disagreed with those verdicts. When the Nou Camp faithful cast their votes it was Portugal's Luis Figo that was named player of the year.

Luis Filipe Madeira Castro Figo was born on November 4, 1972 in the Portuguese capital of Lisbon.

It was Sporting Lisbon rather than their city rivals Benfica that won the race to capture the signature of Figo.

Figo was called into the national team for the first time on October 12, 1991 and played in the 1-1 draw with Luxembourg.

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The revelations by Matthaeus, holder of a world record 150 caps, confirm reports in Monday's Kicker magazine that such a plot existed.

The thinking behind the plot, according to Kicker, was to kill two birds by one stone - get rid of Ribbeck and enforce Matthaeus to renounce his playing role.

Matthaeus, presumably hurt by the implied slight on his playing ability, claims to have replied: "How can you imagine doing that? I have no experience. And I want to play myself which I could not do as coach. Anyway you can't just 'kill' a coach like this just before Euro 2000."

Ribbeck resigned after Germany's disastrous defence of their title ended with defeats by England and Portugal and a solitary draw with Romania in Group A.

His impressive performances so far in Euro 2000 have left him, alongside Figo, as arguably the player of the tournament so far.

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Their last chance to deliver?

HOENDERLOO, Netherlands, June 27: Holland's Marc Overmars admitted Tuesday that Euro 2000 might be the last chance for some of the older 'Oranje' stars to perform in a top international tournament, reports AFP.

Overmars was speaking a day after Holland coach Frank Rijkaard confirmed Monday that he wanted one of those elder statesmen Dennis Bergkamp to reconsider his decision to quit international football after this event.

Bergkamp had said before Euro 2000 that the tournament co-hosted by Holland and Belgium would be his last hurrah in the famous orange shirt.

Not least of 31-year-old Bergkamp's worries is his well-documented fear of flying - and with the 2002 World Cup to be played in Japan and South Korea it is difficult to see how the Arsenal player could play in that tournament without taking to the air.

Overmars admitted the older generation were under pressure from emerging stars in the Netherlands.

"It's difficult to say if it's their last chance. Quite a lot of people are getting over 30 or near 30 and in a few years time it will be a completely different team," said the 27-year-old Arsenals man.

"Our young players here are looking very good prospects for the future and I expect a lot of changes in the team for our next major event."

Regarding Holland's Euro 2000 hopes, Overmars said: "Naturally it's pressure in your own country but you can expect that. Fans can get behind us and with the stadiums 80 percent Dutch they give you a real boost."

Matthaeus reveals coup bid against Ribbeck

LOTHAR MATTHAEUS

BRUSSELS, June 27: German international libero Lothar Matthaeus Monday confirmed reports that certain of his Euro 2000 team-mates had tried to install him as coach of the national team instead of Erich Ribbeck just before the start of Euro 2000, reports AFP.

Deschamps has long since passed Manuel Amoros' previous record of 82 caps in the famous Blue shirt and in terms of medals won is the most successful French footballer in history but the signs are growing that this Napoleonic figure might be about to face his Waterloo.

The threat to Deschamps does not necessarily come from the Portuguese troops being marshalled at nearby Waterloo by coach Humberto Coelho.

A more pressing concern for the ageing Basque, like Napoleon diminutive in stature but reputedly with as say in all matters concerning France (or at least its football team), is the emergence of Patrick Vieira during Euro 2000.

The ringleaders of the putsch were Dietmar Hamann, Jens Jeremies and Markus Babbel, according to Matthaeus, and the plotting came to a head at a Pre-Euro 2000 training camp at Maurocja, Spain.

Hamann, Jeremies, Babbel and several others came to see me during the Majorca camp and said to me 'you should do it, you would do a lot better,'" Matthaeus told German TV channel SF.

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He will be assisted by compatriot Leif Lindberg and Denmark's Jens Larsen.

Austria's Gunter Benko will handle the semi-final between France and Portugal on Wednesday at Brussels while Germany's Markus Merk takes charge of the Holland v Italy semi-final at the Amsterdam ArenA on Thursday.

Football-loving Krajicek won the Wimbledon men's title in 1996 beating unseeded MaliVai Washington in the final. In that year he beat Pete Sampras - no-one has beaten the American at Wimbledon since.

Krajicek is worried that Wimbledon's draws will prevent him from watching Holland should they reach Thursday's

Rijkaard wants Bergkamp to stay

Holland to go for adjustments

HOENDERLOO, Netherlands, June 27: Holland coach Frank Rijkaard said here Tuesday that Holland would have to adjust their game plan against Italy in the Euro 2000 semi-final at the Amsterdam ArenA on Thursday (1600 GMT), reports AFP.

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