



EUROPEAN FOOTBALL CHAMPIONSHIP 2000



Kluivert v Nesta: None ready to spare an inch

AMSTERDAM, June 28: Holland and Italy do battle in the Amsterdam Arena here Thursday in a Euro 2000 semi-final for the right to play the victors of the France v Portugal semi in Sunday's final at Rotterdam's De Kuip Stadium.

Co-hosts Holland will look to Patrick Kluivert to maintain the form that has made him joint top scorer in the tournament with five goals but the Barcelona marksman will have to contend with a resolute Italian defence marshalled by Alessandro Nesta who is fast emerging as the latest in a long line of legendary defenders for the "Azzurri".

PATRICK KLUIVERT (Holland)

It has taken him a long time but Patrick Kluivert's ovation as he left the field to be replaced during the 6-1 quarter-final defeat of Yugoslavia showed that the 'Oranje' fans have finally taken the 23-year-old Barcelona striker to their hearts.

For a long time Kluivert's name was routinely jeered in his homeland after a string of off-the-field incidents portrayed him in less-than-favourable light.

He was involved in a fatal road crash and was also accused of rape although he has since been vindicated and compensated over that allegation.

Like many of Holland's top stars Kluivert has his roots in Surinam.

But he was born in Amsterdam in 1976 - the year after Holland's South American colony had achieved independence.

Someone as prodigiously talented as Kluivert did not go unnoticed for long and he soon came to the attention of Ajax Amsterdam and was soon incorporated into their famous youth policy.

Even at 17 he was being touted as a world beater but then came



PATRICK KLUIVERT



ALESSANDRO NESTA

the personal problems that for a while threatened to see his career go off the rails.

In 1995 Kluivert had a memorable year. He was a member of the Ajax team that won the Champions League, scoring the only goal against his future employers AC Milan and also featured in the team that won the Intercontinental Cup (World Club Championship) against Brazilian side Gremio.

But 1995 was also the year of that car crash.

He then switched to Milan but had an unhappy year at the San Siro.

But he moved to Barcelona and under the guidance of his former mentor at Ajax Louis van Gaal he began to flourish again and won a Spanish title in 1999.

Going into the semi-final with Italy, Kluivert is the tournament's joint top scorer with Savo Milosevic of Yugoslavia on five goals - he had briefly topped the scoring charts on Sunday night before UEFA took away the third of his four goals against the Yugoslavs, instead ruling it an own goal. That decision leaves him with a tally of 28 strikes in 44 appearances for the 'Oranje'.

He credits family responsibility with a more mature attitude off the pitch but if Holland go on to win Euro 2000 on home soil then Kluivert could really be said to have come of age.

ALESSANDRO NESTA (Italy)

With matinee idol looks and hailing from the Rome suburb of Cinecitta, synonymous with the film-making exploits of late Italian director Federico Fellini, Alessandro Nesta might have expected to make a beeline for the film industry.

But 24-year-old Nesta instead has earned his living in the equally



PRACTICING HOW TO RUN RINGS AROUND THE ITALIANS? The Dutch squad running in circles during a practice session at Hoenderloo on June 27.

---AFP photo

glamorous world of Serie A soccer.

Nesta has emerged as a player of true international pedigree during Euro 2000 with his performance in the 2-0 quarter-final victory over Romania his best yet in the famous blue shirt.

Now the Italian press, notoriously hard taskmasters, are hailing him as the successor to Franco Baresi, the cultured defender who was a legend in his AC Milan and 'Azzurri' days.

Nesta, despite his choirboy looks the working class son of a railway worker, was an integral part of the Lazio side that in May lifted only their second ever Serie A title.

In fact Nesta only arrived at Lazio in 1992 through the back door.

Initially he looked set to play for their city rivals AS Roma but the Giallorossi turned him down - and have been kicking themselves ever since.

His international debut for Italy was in 1996 where he appeared in a 3-1 away victory over Moldova - the youngster learned of his call-up when then coach Arrigo Sacchi contacted him on his mobile phone while he was on a ferry to Olbia.

In the past two years he has racked up an impressive medal collection.

In 1998 he won the Italian Cup and followed that up in 1999 by featuring in the Lazio team that won the last ever Cup Winners Cup.

But 2000 has been the year that has seen Nesta really emerge and he was an integral member of the Scudetto-winning side, adding a second Italian Cup for good measure.

Victory in Euro 2000 would make Nesta a fixture in the 'Squadra Azzurra' for years to come.

TOURNEY TREATS

BRUSSELS, June 28(AFP): Euro 2000 diary for Wednesday, the 19th day of Euro 2000:

ARENA SET FOR GOODBYE

AMSTERDAM: Amsterdam is prepared to wave goodbye to Euro 2000 after Thursday's semi-final between Holland and Italy in its state-of-the-art Arena.

But, despite having lost to Rotterdam's De Kuip Stadium the right to host the final, the city is determined to go out with a bang.

Sixteen barrel organs - traditional Dutch 'hurdy-gurdys' - will be in place around the four main canals from Wednesday and on Saturday they will all be in the Nieuwmarkt for a barrel organ competition with 20 competitors.

On Saturday evening there will be a closing party at the NewMetropolis and featuring a 'Nightglow' - a hot air balloon with laser and light effects.

THE LAST SURVIVING GERMAN

BRUSSELS: Their players may have gone on summer holiday, courtesy of a 3-0 Portuguese rout and a 1-0 slip up against England, but at least there is one German still left at Euro 2000 in the form of Markus Merk.

Unlike the German team, he has been commended for his good form and chosen to referee Thursday's semi final between Holland and Italy.

Merk, a 38 year old dentist, is the first German to officiate at the penultimate stage of either a World Cup or European championships for 28 years.

The last time was at the 1972 European titles when East Germany's Rudi Glockner oversaw the Soviet Union's 1-0 semi final victory over fellow East Bloc nation Hungary.

"I hope that everyone who supported the German team will now cross their fingers for me," Merk said after learning of his nomination. "Recently my trusted 15 year old whistle broke. Now I've got new ones though in green, red, yellow and grey to match the colours of my various shirts."

WISHING A FRENCH SLIDE

LONDON: British bookies William Hill are hoping that France are not crowned European Champions in Rotterdam on July 2, after the majority of punters backed Les Bleus to win Euro 2000.

"The French are clearly the best backed of the sides still in the competition, although we have just taken the largest single stake on the outcome of Euro 2000 - a bet of 20,000 pounds on Holland from an international client," said Hills spokesman Graham Sharpe.

France are the 6/4 favourites, with Holland on offer at 13/8, Italy at 9/2 and Portugal available at 11/2.

Meanwhile, Hills will also give you 50-1 about Patrick Kluivert scoring four goals or more for Holland in their semi-final against Italy tomorrow. The Dutch are 4-5 to win the match in 90 minutes with the draw at 9-4 and the Italians 14-5.

Happy as he is

HOENDERLOO, Netherlands, June 28: Holland's Marc Overmars is happy to continue in what for him is an unorthodox position on the right side of midfield in their Euro 2000 semi-final against Italy on Thursday, reports AFP.

Although Barcelona's Ronald de Boer is said to be over his groin injury and is available to replace Overmars Dutch coach Frank Rijkaard looks set to keep a winning team and retain the 27-year-old Arsenal winger in the same role.

Overmars scored the final two goals in the Oranje's 6-1 thrashing of Yugoslavia, shooting back to form after a poor game in the 3-2 victory over France in Amsterdam last Wednesday.

Rijkaard needs players who have really peaked for their Amsterdam ArenA clash with Italy and Overmars was a key player against Yugoslavia, the only real time - Holland both won and entertained their demanding fans.

Overmars signalled his intent to sacrifice his individual preference in the name of team solidarity in a press conference at Holland's Hoenderloo training base to the north of Arnhem on Tuesday.

"At this stage of the tournament, the team is very much more important than my own interests," said the Arsenal player. "I accept the position on the right side. If it's better for the team it's better for me."

He continued: "Of course it changes things a little bit because I have played so many years on the left side and am used to that. Everybody knows that for me to play 100 percent it's better for me on the left side."

Against Yugoslavia, Overmars started on the right but tried to keep the ball on his left foot and often drifted towards his natural side.

The former Ajax and Willem II Tilburg player nevertheless brought to the match all the experience of his 59 appearances, and 13 goals, since his debut in a 3-1 victory over Turkey on February 24 1993.

His superb understanding with Arsenal teammate Dennis Bergkamp helped the non-flying Dutchman - Bergkamp refuses to travel by plane because of a phobia - put in a virtuoso playmaking role against the Yugoslavs.

Overmars said: "Dennis plays behind the strikers and his strength is creating goals. Last season at Arsenal he did not score as much as he has done in the past but he was still important to the Arsenal team."

Holland have been fiercely criticized by legend Johan Cruyff but an unfazed Overmars said criticism had come from all quarters.

"It was not only Johan Cruyff but all the media the last few weeks even though we won all the matches in our group," he said, adding probably only in the Yugoslavia game did they really entertain as well as winning.

"What criticism we have in the past is history and the players have more experience now. They know they have to concentrate because you only play a few big tournaments in your life."

Overmars impressed at both the 1994 and 1998 World Cups where Holland lost in a penalty shoot-out in the semi-final to Brazil in Marseille, France. However this is his first European championships after missing Euro 96 in England through injury.

Surely nothing would come bigger for any Dutchman than winning this tournament in front of 51,000 mainly home supporters in Sunday's final in Rotterdam.

Euphoria worries Rijkaard



AMSTERDAM, June 28: Dutch coach Frank Rijkaard was busy trying to damp down the euphoria surrounding his team before their semi-final clash against Italy at Euro 2000 here on Thursday, reports AFP.

Momentum has built up behind Holland and their 'Orange Army' of supporters after Rijkaard's side thrashed Yugoslavia 6-1 in the quarter-finals, convincing many here that the hosts can go all the way.

However, Rijkaard is wary of his side being swept along on a wave of enthusiasm.

Asked about the widespread expectation that Holland will beat Dino Zoff's team here at the ArenA on Thursday, he told ANP news agency: "It's not right, and it's not good."

"We are facing an extremely strong opponent. The result against Yugoslavia doesn't matter anymore. The final is still a long way away."

He went on: "We've set ourselves a target, we know what we are capable of. Now we have to make it happen. One thing is certain: it's going to be really difficult."

Unlike other teams at this tournament, the Dutch opted not to hold a news conference on the eve of the match. UEFA spokesman Govan Havik said it was up to the teams to decide: "They don't have to - they are only recommended to."

Just can't ignore Pippo

AMSTERDAM, June 28(AFP): Love him or loathe him, Filippo Inzaghi is the key figure in an Italian attack which has taken Dino Zoff's men all the way to a place in the semi-finals against the Netherlands at Euro 2000.

The tournament has probably seen the best and the worst of Juventus' lanky centre-forward, who was widely accused of diving when he earned - and then converted - the penalty winner against Turkey.

Inzaghi has a reputation in the Serie A as being tumble-prone and even he admitted after the Turkey match: "It was the kind of penalty that a referee could have given - but might not have done."

However, Inzaghi's other speciality is the predator's sense of being in the right place at the right time, and it is no coincidence that he is a self-confessed admirer of Gary Lineker.

The man from Piacenza, dubbed 'SuperPippo' by his fans, has poached an average of 25 goals in each of his three seasons for Juventus between league and Cup duty, and was the Serie A's top scorer in 1996-97 for lowly Atalanta.

Curiously, for one of the most prolific strikers in the world's toughest league, Inzaghi can't shoot the ball from any distance, he can't dribble and his heading ability could be generously described as limited.

However, he can do two things better than anyone else in Italian football - the blind side run to the edge of the six-yard box, where he scores most of his goals, and jumping the off-side trap by one centimetre.

Inzaghi offered a rare insight into his game as he prepared for Juventus' Champions League semi-final first leg against Manchester United in 1999.

Asked about his fondness for living on the waler-thin line between on- and off-side, he said: "It's true, my presence keeps the linesmen extremely busy for the whole 90 minutes. But that's the way I play."

"I'm always at the very edge of the off-side line waiting for a defender to make a mistake, to lose me for a split-second or to stay one step behind his teammates and keep me on-side."

"For me, the important thing is not to get demoralised," he said. "I

might be caught off-side 10 times in a match. But in the end, something almost always goes my way. The thing is to wait for it and believe it will happen."

That belief is also shared here by Zoff, who has stuck by his number 9 despite a mixed time at Euro 2000.

Inzaghi could easily have scored a hat-trick in open play against Turkey but fluffed every chance that came his way.

It was little different in the 2-0 over Belgium with the 26-year-old missing two clear chances - offset though by working the one-two which enabled Stefano Fiore to hammer Italy's second past Filip De Wilde.

Zoff stuck by his man and although the Italy coach never discusses team tactics, he has evidently told Inzaghi to keep just on-side and instructed the midfielders to keep trying the long ball forward for him.

AC Milan's Demetrio Albertini managed it three times against Romania, with an encouraging result - one goal, one shot deflected onto the post by the goalkeeper and one shot rifled narrowly wide.

Inzaghi had waited a year to score for the national side in open play and Zoff admitted on Sunday: "I hope the goal helps him to move forward."

Hours earlier, Inzaghi had been basking in the glory of victory and trying to win over the hearts of Italians even further, deflecting his personal success onto the team, saying: "The important thing is that Italy won... the dream continues."

Inzaghi's public image certainly needed a lift.

Just four months earlier, he was castigated in the national press for having selfishly converted scoring chances that he could have passed onto struggling teammate Alessandro Del Piero, who hadn't scored in open play since October 1998.

"Inzaghi is the most opportunistic and egotistical goal poacher in the league," said the Corriere dello Sport, while the Gazzetta dello Sport headlined: "But Ale needed a hand, to help him out of his goal nightmare."

Inzaghi may not be everybody's favourite footballer. But at Euro 2000, he has shown what's he capable of doing - and it's taken Italy into the semi-finals.



Filippo Inzaghi(L), the Italian striker going through a maneuver during a training session at Geel's Sport Center on June 27. Teammate Alessandro Del Piero watches.

---AFP photo

Dutch lose Makaay, Numan

HOENDERLOO, Netherlands, June 28: Dutch striker Roy Makaay is out of the Euro 2000 finals after tearing his right ankle ligaments in training, Dutch team officials said Wednesday.

Makaay, the Deportivo La Coruna player who has been understudying Patrick Kluivert in the Dutch side, will need to rest up for around three months, team spokesman Rob De Leed said.

He is the second Dutch player to withdraw through their paces in a closed training session Wednesday morning, the day before the semi-final match against Italy in Amsterdam.

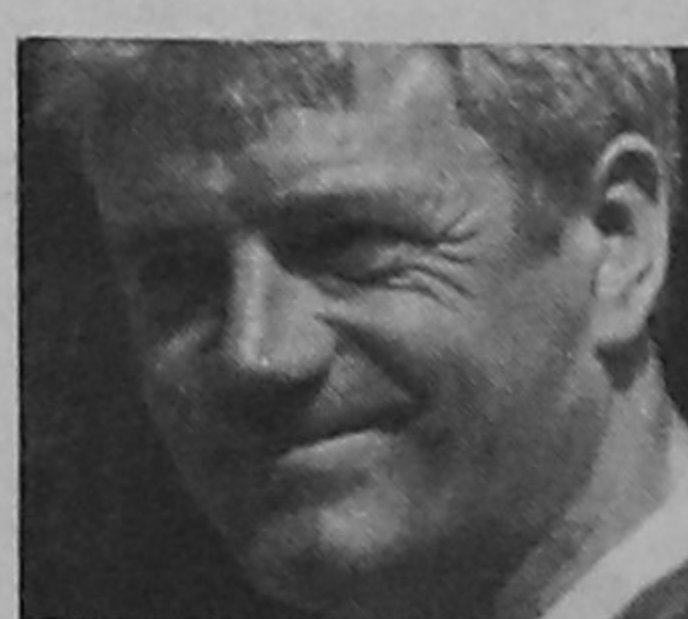
UEFA report slams Keegan

LONDON, June 28: Coach Kevin Keegan's tactics have been criticised by the European governing body UEFA in a damning report on England's brief stay at Euro 2000, reports AFP.

The report - one of 12 published by the tournament organisers on their official website about countries already eliminated from the championships - also claims that the England coach "added to the delusion" of supporters with his declaration that England could win the event.

The report begins: "For England the lessons of yesterday never seem to impact on the fevered anticipation of tomorrow."

"A nation that since 1966 boasts just one European Championship semi-final and a single FIFA World Cup semi-final should have no expectation of success, but another early exit from a major tournament is accompanied by the backdrop of



Kevin Keegan

bitter anguish."

The report went on to suggest that given England's poor qualifying campaign, which had to rely on Sweden beating Poland in their final group match and then "sneaked through the back door" via a narrow play-off victory over Scotland, supporters should not have expected to reach the latter stages of the competition.

UEFA were also critical of Keegan's apparent naivety when

it came to team formation, particularly against Portugal. The report continued: "Keegan did not know his best formation, yet alone his best team."

"He wanted to utilise the creative talents of Steve McManaman, but could not find a way to do it successfully."

"Keegan's main complaint was that his players could not pass the ball with any great efficiency but, with the exceptions of David Beckham and Paul Scholes, that has been obvious for some time."

"With Graeme Le Saux injured, there was not a decent left-back to choose from - not while Kevin Keegan continued to overlook Nigel Winterburn."

"Phil Neville had to bear that responsibility and the blame for the catastrophic defeat against Romania."

"These problems seem certain to dog him (Keegan) through the World Cup qualifying campaign."



A visibly disappointed Dutch defender Arthur Numan at a press conference at Hoenderloo on June 27 where it was announced that Numan is out of the Euro 2000 due to an injury.

---AFP photo