



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-final 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-field incidents portrayed him in a 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 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 Cinecittà, 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

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.



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

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 New Metropolis 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 commanded 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 Gockeler 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

Euphoria worries Rijkaard



AMSTERDAM, June 28: Dutch coach Frank Rijkaard

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.

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

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."

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