



Sport

EUROPEAN FOOTBALL CHAMPIONSHIP 2000

It's Juve time

AMSTERDAM, June 29: France's last-minute victory over Portugal has lined up an intriguing finale to Euro 2000 for Juventus fans - whoever wins the other semifinal here between Italy and Holland, reports AFP.

The closing stages of the tournament have underlined the Turin club's importance to European football, and its dominant position in terms of both the transfer market and player development.

Wednesday night's match-winner for France, Zinedine Zidane, is the shining example. After joining the club from Bordeaux in 1996, his exposure to Serie A and Champions League soccer has matured him into probably the world's best midfielder.

However, Zidane is not the only Frenchman here with ties to the Turin club.

Captain Didier Deschamps won the 1996 European Cup with Juventus before leaving for Chelsea while Thierry Henry, who opened the scoring against the Portuguese, had a short but unhappy spell in Turin before joining Arsenal last season.

And in their latest splash on the transfer market, Henry's strike partner with "Les Bleus", David Trezeguet, has already agreed a move that should be announced once this tournament is over.

Italy's squad is predictably packed with men who play in the famous black and white stripes.

Seven members of the "Squadra Azzurra" are currently on the team's books - Gianni Zambrotta, Ciro Ferrara, Mark Juliano, Gianluca Pessotto, Antonio Conte, Filippo Inzaghi and Alessandro Del Piero.

An eighth, Angelo Di Livio, left in 1999 after six years during which he helped them become Italian, European and world champions.

Italy's team chief Dino Zoff was meanwhile both an outstanding goalkeeper for the club, winning six league titles and a UEFA Cup during his playing career, and later became their coach - winning one UEFA Cup and an Italian Cup.

However, even if Italy were to lose at the ArenA here on Thursday night, Juventus fans back home would still be able to see their favourite players in action this weekend.

Zidane would find his passage towards the Dutch goal in Sunday's final being barred by the very man whose combative, unflagging work in midfield every weekend gives the him that freedom to move up - Edgar Davids.

What the papers say

PARIS, June 29: French newspapers heaved a collective sigh of relief Thursday following the last-ditch French victory over Portugal in the Euro 2000 semifinals, reports AFP. "A Golden Penalty," headlined L'Equipe of the 119th minute penalty spot strike from man-of-the-match Zinedine Zidane which took France into the final on the "Golden Goal" rule.

L'Equipe said it was "an incredible end to a semi-final full of suspense." It also paid tribute to goalkeeper Fabien Barthez calling him "the impregnable fortress."

The Manchester United-bound Barthez made a wonderful reflex save from an Abel Xavier header almost on the final whistle of regulation time to keep France in the match.

"France Qualifies at the Death," Le Figaro exulted on its front page calling the 2-1 extra-time win over the Portuguese "a tremendous battle". Roger Lemerre's men "can now go ahead with their dream and their incredible adventure."

Champs Elysees comes alive

PARIS, June 29: Thousands of people gathered Wednesday evening in celebratory mood on the Champs Elysees in Paris as football fans celebrated France's qualification for the Euro 2000 final, reports AFP.

France, who will play Holland and 1-1, qualified by virtue of a 2-1 extra-time semi-final win over Portugal, sealed by a golden goal from the penalty spot by Zinedine Zidane.

Across Paris outside the Hotel de Ville (City Hall) an estimated 11,000 people had watched the match on a giant screen.

After victory was secured convoys of cars travelled through the streets with many people brandishing Tricolor flags and car horns being sounded in a cacophony of noise while flares were lit.

Earlier France's huge Portuguese community - estimated at 800,000 - had also been contributing to the atmosphere but after the result the French fans started chanting "N'entend plus chanter les Portugais" (We can't hear the Portuguese singing any more).

The scenes will doubtless be vastly exceeded should France win the final in Rotterdam on June 30.

In 1998 an estimated 2 million people swamped the Champs Elysees to welcome the victorious World Cup winning team on an open-top bus.



DID I DO THAT INTENTIONALLY? Portugal midfielder Abel Xavier (R) argues with referee Guenter Benko after the former handled an acutely angled goal-bound shot from Frenchman Sylvain Wiltord near the goal line and France were awarded with a penalty in the sudden death extra time during the first semifinal of the Euro 2000 in Brussels on June 28.

-AFP photo

Zinedine a class act

BRUSSELS, June 29 (AFP):

World Cup star Zinedine Zidane confirmed his hero status for France after scoring a golden goal penalty winner to propel France into the Euro 2000 final in a dramatic 2-1 win over Portugal on Wednesday.

Zidane, who scored two goals in France's 3-0 World Cup Final win over Brazil in 1998, struck in the last minute of extra-time with a spot kick after taking over penalty duties from Youri Djorkaeff, who did not play in this match.

"For the penalty I just put down the ball and I said to myself I must hit it as hard as possible. It went in OK so much the better for us," said Zidane.

"Our objective has always been victory in the final. It will be even harder on Sunday."

With five minutes of extra time left, substitute David Trezeguet ran into the box and was challenged by Portugal keeper Vitor Baia. The ball spun to Sylvain Wiltord who fired from an acute angle on the right and Abel Xavier deflected the ball behind the goal with his hand.

He began his career at Cannes, more famous for launching cinema stars than footballing talent, but it was after moving to Bordeaux in 1992 that Zidane first started to make name for himself outside of France.

He was part of the team which qualified through the Intertoto Cup before losing to Italy in Rotterdam on Sunday.

The Portuguese players reacted with fury and it was not until the 119th minute that Zidane was able to take the kick but he proved up to the task.

Earlier, Nuno Gomes had scored with a great curling left foot shot in the 19th minute and Thierry Henry equalised six minutes after the break.

Zidane is used to high acclaim and in January 1999 was given the European and World Player of the Year awards following his World Cup exploits in 1998.

Born on June 23, 1972 in Marseille as one of five children to Algerian parents Zinedine supported Marseille football club - his first footballing hero was Marseille's Uruguayan star Enzo Francescoli after whom Zidane later named his first son.

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