



TOURNEY TREATS

BRUSSELS, June 30(AFP): Euro 2000 diary for Friday, the 21st day of Euro 2000.

LEMERRE SINGS ZIZU MUSIC

GENVAL, Belgium: France coach Roger Lemerre turned poetical when asked to describe the performance of his side's talisman Zinedine Zidane in Euro 2000.

Lemerre, like former Manchester United striker Eric Cantona, can be something of a quixotic figure in interviews although some of his previous remarks such as "When my hat tells me how to vote I will burn my hat" are often baffling to scribes not on the same intellectual wavelength as Lemerre.

And he did not let down his more literary admirers when asked to sum up Zidane.

"He's a delicious chap, he listens, he looks," Lemerre told AFP. "I am demanding with him because it is so much better when he has the ball when he passes it. When he is waiting for the ball when he is a mere tributary to the others it is less good."

"In his technique, his way of being nothing is forbidden to him. It's the blossoming of the artist. It's the difference between what is learned and the innate. He tries to make football as limpid as possible."

Or, as an English coach might have put it, "The boy does good."

LIONEL IN ROTTERDAM

ROTTERDAM, June 30: Tenors Luciano Pavarotti, Placido Domingo and Jose Carreras may be absent from Rotterdam's eve-of-final Euro 2000 knees-up Saturday.

But American soul legend Lionel Richie will top the bill at the concert at Rotterdam's concert on a floating stage on the waterfront.

Richie will be disappointed that the concert was not arranged for the Amsterdam ArenA that has a retractable roof.

It would have been the perfect opportunity for him to perform a literal interpretation of his famous hit "Dancing on the Ceiling."

EUSEBIO TOO BLAMES LINESMAN

BRUGES, Belgium: Legendary striker Eusebio has joined the chorus of Portuguese criticism aimed at the linesman's decision to award France their match-winning penalty in the European Championship semi-final.

Portugal, who had won their four previous matches, slipped to a 2-1 defeat when Zinedine Zidane converted a spot-kick late in extra time.

Video replay appeared to back up the linesman's opinion that defender Abel Xavier was guilty of a handball.

But Eusebio is still bitter about receiving the brunt of England's rough tactics in the 1986 World Cup semi-final when Portugal were eliminated, wrote in his diary in Portuguese newspaper O Jogo: "We were wronged in the 1986 World Cup and now we come back to be penalised by being a country with little influence at the worldwide level."

"The small one always suffers, but we showed we can beat any team in the world. What transpired yesterday is unacceptable and unforgivable, having been eliminated by a referee's assistant who was afraid of France, the champions of the world."

Cards record

AMSTERDAM, June 30: German referee Markus Merk handed out a record one red and 10 yellow cards during the Euro 2000 semi-final between Italy and Holland here Thursday, reports AFP.

Merk sent off Italy's Gianluca Zambrotta for two yellow cards and he also sanctioned Mark Iuliano, Francesco Toldo, Paolo Maldini and Luigi Di Biagio of Italy as well as Boudevijn Zenden, Edgar Davids, Giovanni van Bronckhorst and Jaap Stam of Holland.

The previous most carded match was the Portugal-Turkey quarter-final with eight yellow cards and one red.

Munteanu moves to Atletico

BUCHAREST, June 30: Romanian international midfielder Catalin Munteanu of Spanish Second Division side Salamanca has been sold to relegated Spanish giants Atletico Madrid, the player's agent Giovanni Becali announced Friday, reports AFP.

The two teams have agreed on the transfer and I now have to negotiate the salary but I don't foresee any problems," said Becali.

Munteanu was part of the Romanian squad during qualifying matches for Euro 2000 but was not retained for the finals although he has been tipped as a possible successor to Romanian legend Gheorghe Hagi.

Hagi who despite an illustrious Romanian career was sent off in Romania's quarter-final elimination at the hands of Italy and has retired from international football.

EUROPEAN FOOTBALL CHAMPIONSHIP 2000



BITTER PILL: Outgoing Dutch coach Frank Rijkaard (L) consoles Peter van Vossen (R) while Frank de Boer walks away after the semifinal loss to Italy. —AFP photo

Van Gaal favourite to take over

Rijkaard steps down

AMSTERDAM, June 30: Dutch coach Frank Rijkaard quit here Thursday after his side lost 3-1 on penalties to Italy in the Euro 2000 semi-finals, saying he had to obey the law of the coaching game, reports AFP.

Rijkaard, whose team failed to beat an Italy side who were down to 10 men for almost 90 minutes, said the decision was final and that it was due to the result rather than the way his team played.

"It had nothing to do with the match in itself," he said. "It's just that I had a goal in mind and I think that this generation of football players deserved it. I didn't manage it. For me, it's a great, great disappointment."

"But that's part of the sport and from the bottom of my heart I want to thank all the players for their support, and for the wonderful time I had with them."

"But we didn't manage to get to the final and I have to draw my conclusions from that."

And he added: "My decision was taken before the match, because my aim was to win this championship... when I started two years ago."

"I find it terrible for the players, to have had to resign. But it's a law in football that once something like this happens it's time for another man to take over. My place is in football, but no longer with the national team."

Asked if Holland's defeat after a goalless draw was also a defeat for football - their attacking style having been beaten by traditional Italian defending, he replied: "That's up to journalists to decide."

"We had the game in hand and after missing the first penalty and then the second it was always going to be difficult for us to come back and win the game."

Rijkaard indicated that the psychological blows of two missed spot-kicks proved decisive when the Dutch players had to face the shoot-out.

"I find it difficult to explain why we missed the penalties," he said.

"But we had a psychological disadvantage because we missed two penalties in the match and when Italy scored their first one in the shoot-out, we had another disadvantage because we missed our first one."

"So that's one of the reasons for being out of the tournament."

Rijkaard denied having been taken back by the Italians' fighting spirit, and put his team's failure down to missed chances.

"I wasn't surprised," he said. "We studied the Italians very well and they played their game as we expected."

"I think that we really started well and we dominated the game. And that if we'd managed to break open the game, we could have played 11 men against 10 with a 1-0 lead."

"But after the second penalty miss, you could see some of the force - also psychologically - went out of the team. And the

Italians became more determined to keep it 0-0 and they did a good job at that."

Asked why he had picked skipper Frank de Boer to take the first shoot-out penalty after he had missed a spot-kick in the first-half, Rijkaard said: "Frank de Boer is normally reliable from the penalty spot."

"We all know that no-one is eager to take a penalty in that situation. But I picked one of the most reliable players to take our first one."

Rijkaard, who won two European Cups and two Italian league titles in a five-year spell at AC Milan during his playing career, took over as coach from Guus Hiddink after the 1998 World Cup in France - when the Dutch again went out on penalties at the semi-final stage, 4-2 to Brazil. He had been Hiddink's assistant.

Although lacking in experience he was brought in as coach as it was felt he could command respect in the dressing room among Holland's notoriously divided players.

Former Ajax Amsterdam and Barcelona coach Louis van Gaal emerged as an early contender for the vacancy.

Former Dutch international Arnold Muhren, a team-mate of Rijkaard in the 1988 European Championship winning 'Oranje' side, was one of the first to call for Van Gaal.

"I think he'd be a good national manager, he did a great job at Ajax and at Barcelona," Muhren told the onefootball.com website.

And looking ahead to Sunday's final the Algemeen Dagblad summed up the mood of its sister journals when hoping that "Zidane and his (French) colleagues on Sunday teach a lesson to the cowards and followers of Dino Zoff's negative style of football."

Meanwhile the Italian press lavished praise on its national side.

"Brothers of Italy, we are in the final," headlined Corriere dello Sport, which in common with other papers carried a photo of goalkeeping hero Francesco Toldo after he had saved the final penalty kick from Paul Bosvelt.

"Toldo is a giant, the 10-man Azzurri held out to the end," Corriere said. "Luck was on our side, but it came after 10 years of humiliation," the paper added, referring to a decade of penalty shoot-out losses for Italy straddling three World Cups.

The Gazzetta dello Sport said that Dino Zoff's men had carried off "an heroic miracle."

"The Azzurri down to 10 men for over 90 minutes, Toldo super-goals, and now for France in the final," it said.

"Blue miracle, Italy is in the final," headlined Corriere della Sera. The paper admitted that "Italian football was esthetically questionable" but it lauded "its extraordinary effectiveness."

"Incredible Italy in the final after penalties," Repubblica wrote, evoking "the end of the penalty-kick curse which for centuries has stopped us from sleeping."

La Stampa hailed "a victory, Italian style." "We are the best in the world at winning with our backs to the wall," it wrote.

Zambrotta joins Conte on sidelines

AMSTERDAM, June 30: Italian Gianluca Zambrotta will miss Sunday's Euro 2000 Final with France after being sent off during the semi-final victory over Holland, reports AFP.

Midfielder Zambrotta was red carded after 33 minutes for a second bookable offence in the 0-0 draw which Italy went on to win 3-1 on penalties.

That will add to the problems of Italy coach Dino Zoff in midfield with his Juventus team-mate Antonio Conte already ruled out.

Conte was the victim of a dreadful tackle by Romania's Gheorghe Hagi in the 2-0 quarter-final victory for the 'Azzurri', sustaining torn ankle ligaments that make him a doubt for the start of Italy's Serie A season.

Platini and Zidane both made their international debuts against Bohemians - Platini against Czechoslovakia and Zidane against the Czech Republic. Both matches finished 2-2.

Both also wore the number 10 shirt with distinction not only for France but also for Italian giants Juventus at the time of their Euro heroics.

Both came good on historic occasions for their countries - Platini scored the opener and made the winner when France beat Spain 2-0 in the 1984 Euro Final. It was the first time France reached a major final in the tournament with nine goals.

In 1998 - in France's first World Cup Final - Zidane's two headed goals put them on course for a 3-0 victory over Brazil.

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nothing went past him: Italy's hero of the night custodian Francesco Toldo is over the moon after making the penalty shoot-out save that gave Italy the semifinal win over Holland at Rotterdam on June 29.

—AFP photo

Bergkamp calls it a day

AMSTERDAM, June 30: Holland striker Dennis Bergkamp said Thursday that he would not reconsider his decision to quit international football, reports AFP.

Bergkamp has a phobia for flying which would all but rule him out of the 2002 World Cup being co-hosted by Japan and South Korea.

Bergkamp, speaking after Holland had lost a Euro 2000 semi-final to Italy 3-1 on penalties after the match finished 0-0, will continue playing club football.

Contrasting media moods

UNDATED, June 30(AFP): A mournful Dutch press lamented the penalty drama that spelled the end of the Netherlands' Euro 2000 dream on Thursday night.

"Magnificent on the pitch the Dutch withered completely as soon as it came to penalties" was the verdict of the daily Volkskrant after the co-hosts 3-1 spot-kick semi-final defeat to Italy.

With the Netherlands missing five out of their six penalties the paper spoke about the "real psychological burden for the players."

The Algemeen Dagblad woke up Friday with a terrible "hang-over" after what it described as a "dramatic" match which saw Frank de Boer and Patrick Kluitert, the quarter-final hat-trick hero, miss spot-kicks in normal time and the whole team failing to score despite facing an Italian team reduced to 10 men.

"Double loss for the Oranjes" was how Trouw summed up the twin blow of coach Frank Rijkaard's retirement and the ending of the "orange madness" that had swept the country for the last three weeks.

It added: "The Dutch as ever lacked sang-froid around the goal."

The country's most popular paper, the Telegraaf, drew a parallel with the recent past, observing: "Just like in 1992, 1996 and 1998 shots at goal proved fatal for us."

The Italians' didn't escape criticism either.

Trouw slated their "almost cowardly" performance.

Back at the Telegraaf its sports editorial reckoned that Italy had won "a match it didn't deserve to win" and that "anti-football has thus been rewarded."

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—AFP photo



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Toldo can afford to be bullish

AMSTERDAM, June 30

(Reuters): Italy goalkeeper Francesco Toldo said the Dutch could have besieged his goal for hours more in their Euro 2000 semi-final on Thursday and would still never have scored.

"The script for this match was written before kickoff," said Toldo, who saved three penalties as the Italians, down to 10 men for most of the match, held out against the Dutch for 120 minutes before winning on spot-kicks.

"They could have played for an entire day taking shots at our goal and they would never have scored."

Toldo saved a 38th minute penalty from Frank de Boer and then watched Patrick Kluitert crash a second spotkick against his right hand post in the 62nd minute.

The Fiorentina goalkeeper then saved penalties from Frank de Boer (again) and Paul Bosvelt and watched Jaap Stam blast his kick over the crossbar as the Italians won 3-1 on spot-

kicks after extra time.

"Penalties are psychological things, wars between you and the attacker," said Toldo, who would have been Italy's second choice goalkeeper here had Gianluigi Buffon not fractured a bone in his hand on the eve of the tournament.

"Psychologically you have to try to unsettle your opponent," he said. "That's why Stam missed."

"My first save was the best. That was the turning point."

Toldo said De Boer's penalty in the first half, awarded by German referee Markus Merk for a tug by Italy centreback Alessandro Nesta on Kluitert, should never have been given.

"What penalty was there?" he asked.

Asked whether he now believed he was the best goalkeeper of the tournament, as many observers have claimed, Toldo said: "You can't make that judgement until after the final."

Toldo's spectacular semi-

nal performance marked the high point of a career which had owned as much to fortune as coincidence as his undeniable talent.

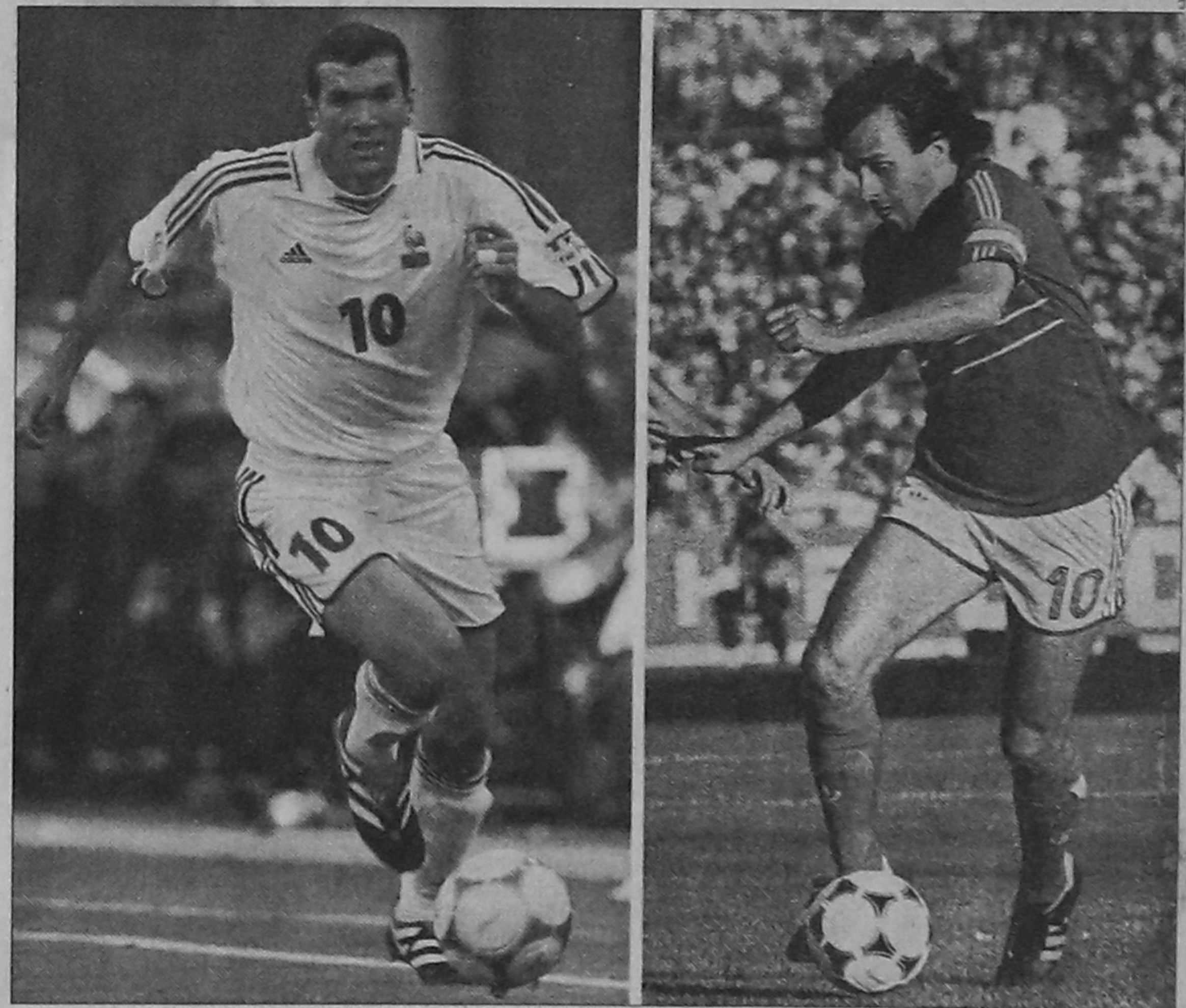
He won his first cap as a substitute in a qualifier for Euro 96 after Italy's second choice keeper at the time, Luca Bucci, was sent off against Croatia.

The Fiorentina keeper had not even been due to travel to the match in Split but was called up at the last minute when first choice goalkeeper Angelo Peruzzi suffered an injury.

Toldo had already packed his bags to go on holiday for the weekend when he was drafted in to the squad.

Toldo profited a second time from Peruzzi's bad luck on the eve of the 1998 World Cup when he was called up as Italy's third choice keeper when the Juventus player suffered another injury.

Buffon's injury gave him another opportunity to show his worth.



MAESTROS: AFP file photos of French superstars Zinedine Zidane(L) and Michel Platini.

Zidane a la Platini!

BRUSSELS, June 30(AFP): History repeated itself when Zinedine Zidane converted a 119th-minute penalty Wednesday to fire France to a 2-1 golden goal victory over Portugal and into a Euro 2000 Final meeting with Italy.

In 1984 another French playmaker Michel Platini struck to see his side overcome Portugal - this time 3-2 - and book a place in the final of the European Championship.

Both men have worn the number 10 shirt - the traditional preserve of the playmaker - with pride and Zidane, if France beat Italy in Sunday's final, looks certain to follow his predecessor and be selected player of the tournament.

The comparisons do not end there. Both men were born in France but were the sons of immigrants - Platini's parents were Italian and Zidane's Algerian.

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—AFP photo

Platini featured in the legendary midfield of Alain Giresse, Jean Tigana and Luis Fernandez while Zidane also keeps distinguished company in the form of Didier Deschamps, Emmanuel Petit and Youri Djorkaeff.

Both have one thing that the other does not, however.

Zidane has a World Cup winners' medal - Platini twice, lost out in the semi-finals, most memorably in 1982 when West Germany defeated France on penalties in a match still notorious for German goalkeeper Harald Schumacher's brutal foul on French defender Patrick Battiston.

But, unlike Zidane, Platini has a European Championship winners' medal - however by Sunday night Zidane could well have one as well.

—AFP photo

—AFP photo