



EUROPEAN FOOTBALL CHAMPIONSHIP 2000



Ban on Xavier, Gomes, Bento

UEFA comes down hard on Portugal

ROTTERDAM, Netherlands, July 2: Portugal right back Abel Xavier was banned for nine months by European football's governing body UEFA here on Sunday for his part in the fracas at the end of his side's 2-1 defeat against France in the Euro 2000 semi-finals, reports AFP.

Striker Nuno Gomes was banned for eight months and midfielder Paulo Bento was banned for six months and the Portuguese federation received a 175,000 Swiss franc fine.

The heavy punishments include all UEFA competitions and Portugal have till midnight on July 5 to appeal.

Austrian referee Gunter Benko penalised Portugal's Abel Xavier for handling Sylvain Wiltord's shot after consulting assistant referee Igor Sranka of Slovakia at the King Baudouin stadium four minutes before the end of golden goal extra-time on Wednesday.

The decision sparked furious scenes in the Portuguese camp and it took several minutes for order to be restored allowing Zinedine Zidane to score the winner.

Nuno Gomes was shown the red card for his part in the incident and midfielder Luis Figo was seen throwing his shirt away in frustration before the spot-kick was taken. Other players appeared to jostle the official.

Benko and Sranka suffered bruising and scratching, according to UEFA's statement.

The fourth official, who also intervened trying to protect his colleagues, was harassed, pushed in the back and pulled by his clothing, the statement added. A Portuguese player also spat at Sranka.

Nuno Gomes gave the referee a violent push in the chest and Abel Xavier grabbed him by the arm. It was then that Benko gave Gomes the red card and Abel Xavier grabbed him by the arm. Bento tried to take the red card from the referee.

Gomes then took his shirt off and threw it in the direction of Sranka. UEFA on Thursday confirmed Benko had been correct to award the penalty which brought about the chaotic scenes. "It was an obvious handball," UEFA had said in Thursday's statement.

Ironically it had been Xavier who had almost won the match for Portugal with a superb header pushed away by keeper Fabien Barthez in perhaps the save of the tournament seconds before the end of full-time.

Nuno Gomes scored the goal against France with a left-footed curler which left Barthez stranded in the 19th minute before Thierry Henry equalised for France shortly after the break. He scored four goals in all at Euro 2000.

Bento is not a first-choice player for Portugal who have one of the best midfields in the world.



PAYING THE PRICE: A combo of AFP file photos of Portuguese stars Abel Xavier (R) and Nuno Gomes (2nd from L) confronting Austrian referee Gunter Benko following his penalty decision in favour of France in the first semifinal of the Euro 2000 on June 28. Both players were banned for nine and eight months respectively by the UEFA yesterday.

Unique prospect for Lemerre

ROTTERDAM, Netherlands, July 2(AFP): Coach Roger Lemerre said Saturday he was backing France to become the first reigning World Cup holders to go on to become European champions in Sunday's Euro 2000 final at the Kuip stadium against Italy (1800 GMT).

Lemerre, assistant to coach Aimé Jacquet at the 1998 World Cup, took over the top post eight days after their Stade de France final victory over Brazil.

"We would be happy to make history by winning the European championship just after winning the World Cup," Lemerre said at the Kuip stadium on Saturday.

"The Germans reached the European final in 1976 after winning the 1974 World Cup but did not make it so it would be a big thing for me."

And when asked who the favourites were, he said: "That does not matter. It's the result that counts. Holland were favourites against Italy in the semi-final but Italy still won."

He thought the Italian team had matured a little since France beat them in the 1998 quarter-finals on penalties.

"Of course they have not changed a lot but they have probably gained more experience and they have had two more years in the best championship in the world, Serie A, so it will be difficult to face them."

France have gained confidence by winning the World Cup, Lemerre

added. "Of course experience is a big part of the game but maybe it's not a real advantage but it brings a lot of confidence. Italy bring their good record over the years to the tournament."

"Each game has been more difficult and Italy won't be any different. The Dutch were at home but Italy managed with 10 players to go and win the game on penalties and they deserve to be in the final."

"It will be a very hard battle. People say Italy are strong mentally but France also have mental strength."

He picked out semi-final match-winner Zinedine Zidane as a fabulous player both technically and mentally.

Zidane scored the golden penalty winner in the last moments of extra time in the semi-final against Portugal on Wednesday for a 2-1 victory at the King Baudouin stadium in Brussels.

"Zidane is a magical player when he has the ball," Lemerre added. "But his mental strength is also excellent. The golden goal he scored showed he has nerves of steel and of course he is very important for the team."

Lemerre also confirmed France are fully fit. Midfielder Emmanuel Petit has a cold but the coach insisted it should not affect his availability for the final.

Petit a concern for France

ROTTERDAM, Netherlands, July 2: France coach Roger Lemerre revealed Saturday that Emmanuel Petit was a doubt for the Euro 2000 Final with Italy Sunday at Rotterdam's De Kuip Stadium.

Midfielder Petit has picked up a bug and is Lemerre's only doubt for the final.

Lemerre said: "We are a bit worried about Emmanuel Petit, he had a slight fever and a cold. He did not train yesterday, he stayed in the hotel. We are waiting and hoping."

If Petit does not make it then Christophe Dugarry could step in on the left hand side of the midfield.

Petit, who did a little weight training on Friday, did train in a closed session later on Saturday at the Kuip stadium, French team press officer Philippe Tournon confirmed.

However it was not immediately made clear whether he would be available for the final.

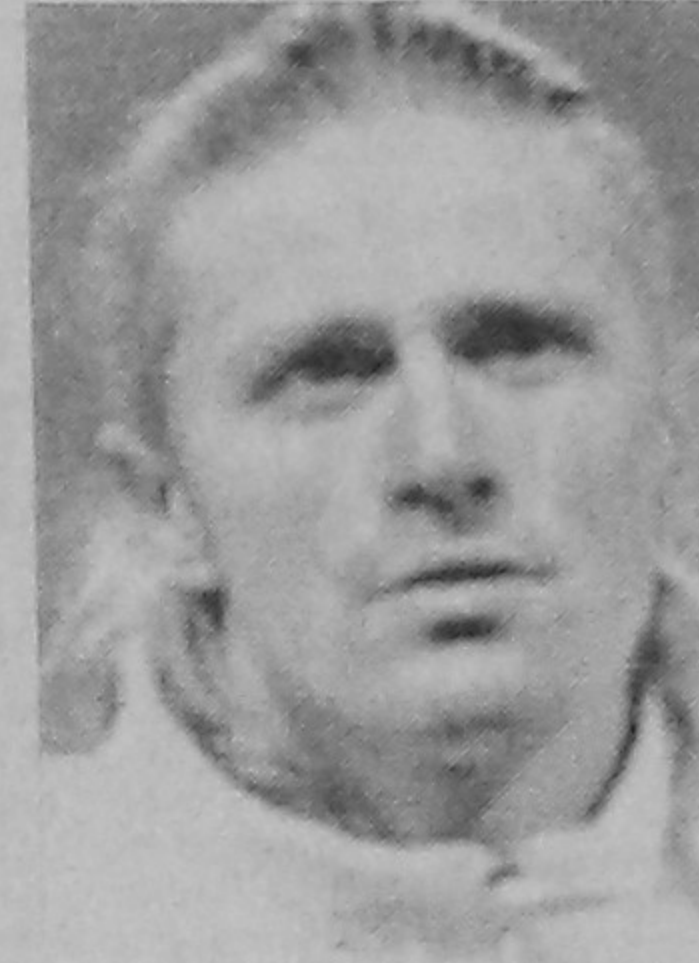
Turning to the match itself coach Lemerre said he was backing France to become the first reigning World Cup holders to go on to become European champions.

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ALL EYES ON HIM: French superstar Zinedine Zidane controlling the ball during a practice session at Wavre Stadium on June 30. —AFP photo

Zoff won't put a man on Zidane

GEEL, Belgium, July 2(AFP): Zinedine Zidane may be the undisputed star of Euro 2000, but Italy coach Dino Zoff said Saturday that no-one would be man-marking the French playmaker in Sunday's final at Rotterdam's De Kuip Stadium.

Zoff claimed that Italy could win Sunday's showdown by sticking to their usual game - albeit doing a bit more up front than in their 10-man semi-final battle with Holland at the Amsterdam Arena.

Asked whether he would devote one defender to marking France's former World Player of the Year and 1998 World Cup final hero, Zoff told a news conference: "We'll stick to a way of playing."

"Zidane is certainly a great player and he's one that we know well. But we cannot allow

ourselves to sacrifice men to keep on Zidane's back, which is often a pointless exercise anyway."

Zoff also knows that although fighting spirit and defensive skill were enough to see off the Dutch, it won't be enough to beat the world champions.

"It's hard to compare matches," he said. "But I'd say that the basics of physical effort, determination and willpower that we used against Holland would be an important start. But after that, we'll certainly need something extra."

And sounding the rallying cry, he added: "France have a great team, and a top-quality squad of players. But we don't feel beaten already and we are going to play to win."

Holland, with an extra man, were able to stop Italy pushing forward on the break, preventing Zoff's side from playing their usual game.

Though France will also seek to keep the "Squadra Azzurra" on the back foot, Zoff promised there would be more attacking from his side.

"We'll do everything we can to make them let us play," he insisted.

"Holland didn't let us, but in our other matches we were able to play the way we wanted: attacking, defending, attacking, defending. But you still have to keep a sense of balance - otherwise it's suicide."

Italy can only guess which team Roger Lemerre will pick on Sunday, but Zoff saw little point in trying to predict the formation.

"They've played with Zidane and two strikers, and with Zidane, Djorkaeff and a striker," he said. "But I don't think it changes very much."

As for his own side, who were exhausted by their marathon in Amsterdam on Thursday night,

he said: "The team have recovered and are ready to do well. If there's the will to fight, you don't feel the tiredness so much."

He said that suspended winger Gianluca Zambrotta would be replaced by either Angelo Di Livio or Gianluca Pessotto, while Alessandro Del Piero and Francesco Totti were each "50-50" for a place in the starting line-up alongside the centre-forward expected to be Filippo Inzaghi.

For a man of few words and even fewer public shows of feeling, Zoff did acknowledge that Sunday's final would be a moving experience for all of them.

"There'll certainly be some emotion," he said. "It's a European Championship final after all, and it's not something that happens every day."

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TOURNEY TREATS

UNDATED, July 2(AFP): Euro 2000 diary on Sunday:

BECKHAM WANTS TO CAPTAIN ENGLAND

LONDON: England and Manchester United midfielder David Beckham claims it would be his "ultimate dream" to captain England.

The performances of the midfielder were one of the few bright spots for England at Euro 2000, where Kevin Keegan's side failed to reach the quarter-finals.

Beckham told the Sunday Mirror: "Just being part of the England set-up and playing for my country is an achievement to me."

"But given the chance of course I would love to captain my country."

"I have a great deal of pride when I pull on an England shirt, but to captain my country would be the ultimate dream for me."

'ZIDANE NO MATCH FOR MARADONA'

LUXEMBOURG: France's Zinedine Zidane is a great player, but is no match for the likes of Argentinian legend Diego Maradona according to former French maestro Michel Platini.

Speaking ahead of the UEFA executive committee meeting, Platini said that Zidane, his successor as playmaker in the French side, was the only member of the 1998 World Cup winning side, who had improved since then.

"The others haven't. They are getting the benefits of Zizou's aura," said Platini.

Zidane does some extraordinary things, it's true. But you have to put everything in context. What Zidane does with a ball, Maradona could do with an orange," he added.

Platini said that the final would be spectacular provided there was an early goal in the game.

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Press tips for the finalists

UNDATED, July 2: Italy's papers called on coach Dino Zoff to add style to substance in what they hoped would be an Italian victory over France in the Euro 2000 final in Rotterdam on Sunday while the French press preferred to take inspiration from the historical significance of the occasion, reports AFP.

The Italians reached the final with a penalty shoot-out win over hosts Holland, but they were roundly condemned for playing an out-and-out defensive game to frustrate the attack-minded Dutch.

"This time again, Zoff must choose whom he wants," wrote La Repubblica, adding, "but with France there must be goals, and not just attempts to stop them."

In the same vein La Gazzetta dello Sport said that the win over Holland which had 25 million Italians glued to their television was "fine, excellent, unexpected."

"But the impression remains that the national team has not yet released all its offensive powers...Dear Zoff, unleash your thoroughbreds," it pleaded.

For the Corriere della Sera: "Spirit, determination and combative ferocity have won."

"And the Azzurri had more of these than the Dutch. Apart from (Edgar) Davids. This team has strong moral and athletic values."

"There is pride, a desire to

leave a mark on the history of football, faith in one's own youth and in friendship, there is love of their fatherland in these players."

The world champions have qualities, strength, combative ferocity and (Zinedine) Zidane," it went on.

"We have not beaten them since 1978; they kicked us out of the World Cup in 1986 and 1998. Many of them have enriched their professional careers in Italy; this is a derby of people who know each other well."

French papers were full of historical import Saturday as they previewed the final.

"The French team, driven by destiny, has a rendez-vous with history," was the grandiose commentary of the normally down-to-earth tabloid Le Parisien.

Roger Lemerre's men were "at eternity's doorstep" it went on in the same manner, saying that France's "Italian complex was a thing of the past" while warning that the Italians were still "blessed with luck, heroic, cunning and worthy of Machiavelli."

A French victory on Sunday would make them the first side to win the World Cup and go on to lift the European Cup. Only Germany in 1972 and 1974 did the double the other way around.

For France Soir: "Zidane's team are again close to making

history."

"Another win and Les Bleus will become one of the great teams of the last century," the paper wrote.

Le Figaro mimicking the French national anthem, La Marseillaise, said that "the day of belief is upon us."

It said that most of the French team had played with Italian sides or had strong Italian links and that the historical and cultural ties between the two countries made the final "a family affair, even a day out for old friends."

But it also warned against any complacency on the part of the favoured French saying "it is up to the Italians to wreck our dreams, a speciality they are experts at."

"A family affair, between players who know each other head to toe," headlined Liberation, which also devoted an entire page to Zidane "master-player, man of the moment, team leader, lover of great football and scrapper."

"Not only is football now popular, but it is reaching sections of society it never did before starting with women, mothers, daughters."

Leading sports daily L'Equipe was less dramatic, restricting itself to a tactical analysis of the final.

"Zidane is the key," it said simply.

Azzurri stick to history

ROTTERDAM, Netherlands, July 2: Italy will be starting off the new century in the same way they started the last - playing in white and taking on France - in Sunday's Euro 2000 final, reports AFP.

Though Italy are known the world over for their royal blue shirts, the "Squadra Azzurra" did not start out that way.

Italy's first recorded international, in the Milan Arena stadium - which still stands - was held on May 15, 1910. Italy played in white and thrashed their French visitors 6-2 in front of a crowd of 4,000.

Pietro Lana, who played for the Milan Foot-Ball and Cricket Club - better known today as AC Milan - secured two entries in the history books of Italian soccer that afternoon.

Not only did he score the nation's first international goal - their 1,000th was to come 87 years later from Christian Vieri in a France 98 qualifier against Moldova - but Lana also became Italy's first hat-trick hero.

Italy only switched to their familiar blue strip in their third international, a 1-0 defeat in Milan to Hungary, on January 6, 1911.

Italy have meanwhile the rare distinction of playing in a national football strip which is not taken from the colours of the national flag (green, white and red). Back in 1910, Italy played football for a country with a royal family - the House of Savoy - whose colour was blue.

Revenge on Italian minds

GEEL, Belgium, July 2: Italy may not be favourites for Sunday's Euro 2000 final against World Cup holders France - but Dino Zoff's men are convinced they can take their revenge in Rotterdam, reports AFP.

France knocked Cesare Maldini's Italy out of the World Cup quarter-finals after winning a penalty shoot-out at St Denis two years ago.

The French are now widely expected to repeat the feat, albeit without the need for spot-kicks, when the two sides meet at Feyenoord's De Kuip stadium.

But a string of Italian players finished training here on Saturday evening convinced that things will turn their way, despite the quality in depth of the French squad.

Italy's midfield revelation Stefano Fiore said: "It's a European championship final and they've got extraordinary players."

"But we're convinced that we can have our say, because we've got a really good team and we've got great morale as a group."

Alessandro Del Piero also played down the French side, saying: "In 1998, they were better technically and individually than

us. But now we are equal."

His rival for a place up front, Francesco Totti, dismissed the physical effects of Thursday night's marathon semi-final with Holland, saying: "We're not tired at all. We're in good shape - and tomorrow we're going to show it."

The only note of caution came from goalkeeper Francesco Toldo, the hero of their semi-final penalty shoot-out with the Dutch.

"They've got truly great players," he said. "They've an attack which is just incredible - Thierry Henry is a very gifted player and he's on form. And we all know (Zinedine) Zidane well."

"We're going to have to be very careful."

Panathinaikos roping in Sousa

PARIS, July 2: Portuguese international midfielder Paulo Sousa will sign for Greek First Division side Panathinaikos on Sunday, onefootball.com website revealed Saturday, reports AFP.

The Inter Milan man, a key member of the Borussia Dortmund side that won the 1997 European Champions League and World Club Championship, will sign a three-year contract.



NO SHORTAGE OF SUPPORT: A packed house at the stands of the Geel Sports Center cheering on the Italian national Team during a practice session on July 1. —AFP photo