

Voeller thinking in realistic terms

AFP, Paris

German national coach Rudi Voller admitted on Monday to AFP that his side had improved since their dreadful Euro 2000 performance under predecessor Erich Ribbeck but there was still a long way to go before they could be considered viable 2002 World Cup contenders.

The former German international striker, a member of both the 1990 World Cup winning side and the one that lost the 1986 final, has guided a virtually unchanged team from the one that failed to win a match in Euro 2000 to three successive victories - including two in the World Cup qualifiers over Greece and main rivals England.

"You only need a few victories to elicit rave reviews but suffer one defeat and the critics spring up all over the place, that's football," explained 40-year-old Voller, who had virtually no coaching experience when taking up his post.

"We have certainly come out from the woods but we are nowhere near the summit at the moment," added Voller, who has brought his side here for a friendly with the World and European champions, France, on Tuesday.

Voller, who was given the top post when the man he was keeping the spot warm for his former boss at Bundesliga outfit Bayer Leverkusen Christoph Daum was unable to take it up after confessing to taking cocaine, said he was really looking forward to taking on the French again.

Voller, who scored in the 2-0 1986 World Cup semi-final win over France, said it was always a special occasion.

"The 1982 semi-final (Germany came from 3-1 down in extra-time to draw 3-3 and win on penalties) which I watched on holiday was a truly great match and one which France deserved to win," he said.

"It's always a special match when these two footballing giants meet, my players are too young to remember 1982 well but they're geared up now to beat the World Cup holders," he added.

Voller, who was capped 90 times, claimed that while Italian clubs had performed disastrously in European competition this season - they have no representatives in the UEFA Cup quarter-finals and Lazio are out of the Champions League - they still made up the best league in Europe.

"The Italian league is still the best and most competitive and I believe that the Bundesliga is on the same level as the English Premiership and French ones," he said.

Inzaghi, Del Piero get luggage shock

AFP, Rome

Juventus strikers Alessandro Del Piero and Filippo Inzaghi had their bags stolen as they arrived at Fiumicino airport to link up with the Italian team who play Argentina in a friendly at the Olympic Stadium on Wednesday.

Their bags - easily distinguishable with the emblem of the Italian national side - went missing and Inzaghi's had the lock forced with several items including cash taken.

Del Piero was later reunited with his luggage.

The Juventus players were travelling on the same flight as players from Parma and one theory was that fans of Italian league leaders AS Roma might have targeted the cases of players with Juventus, their principal rivals for the Scudetto.

SA booter airlifted to hospital

AFP, Cape Town

A South African Premier League footballer was airlifted to hospital after collapsing with heart trouble during a weekend match.

SuperSport United midfielder Thomas Madigale slumped to the ground when he collided with an opponent and was given oxygen and put on a drip before a helicopter landed.

"I knew it was serious when Thomas sank to a low level of consciousness and had trouble breathing. He suffered cardiac shock," United physiotherapist Cornell Driessens told reporters.

Club officials said Madigale, capped several times for South Africa in the build-up to the 1996 African Nations Cup, was out of danger and expected to be discharged soon.

The match against Hellenic at Hartleyvale Stadium finished goalless.

Italy v Argentina Champagne with caviar

AFP, Rome

Italy and Argentina meet Wednesday night in Rome's Olympic Stadium in a match that both sides admit is more than just a friendly.

The two countries, historically linked, are two of the aristocrats of the planet's most popular sport with five World Cup successes between them.

The last time these two giants of world football met was in the 1990 World Cup semi-final at Naples.

In that match Italy took the lead through Salvatore Totti Scillachi but Argentina equalised through Claudio Caniggia, going on to win the penalty shootout, eliminating the host nation and favourites.

They also met in the 1986 World Cup in Mexico - a 1-1 draw. In Spain in 1982 it was Italy, who had limped through qualifying with three draws against Poland, Peru and Cameroon, who eliminated the pre-tournament favourites.

Argentina's much-hyped Diego Maradona failed to shine - his time would come four years later in Mexico - and goals from Marco Tardelli and Antonio Cabrini gave

Italy a 2-1 win, putting them on the course that would take them past Brazil, Poland (again) and West Germany to win their first World Cup for 48 years.

Wednesday will be more of a festival occasion between Latin countries that have a lot in common.

Just as matches between Brazil and former colonial masters Portugal have a special resonance so do matches between Italy and Argentina which has a huge Italian population.

In football terms that migration is in reverse with countless Argentinians seeking their fortunes in Serie A. Nowhere is that trend more in evidence than in Rome.

Lazio have five Argentinians on their books with four - Hernan Crespo, Juan Sebastian Veron, Claudio Lopez and Diego Simeone - all featuring in Marcelo Bielsa's squad for Wednesday's friendly. Only young winger Lucas Martin Castromon misses out.

AS Roma, meanwhile, have three Argentinians in the peppy Gabriel Batistuta, Abel Balbo and Walter Samuel although only defender Samuel is in the reckoning for the match.

Three other Italy-based Argentinians are in the 18 players named by Bielsa with the others Inter Milan's Javier Zanetti, Na-

poli's Claudio Husain and Bologna's Julio Cruz.

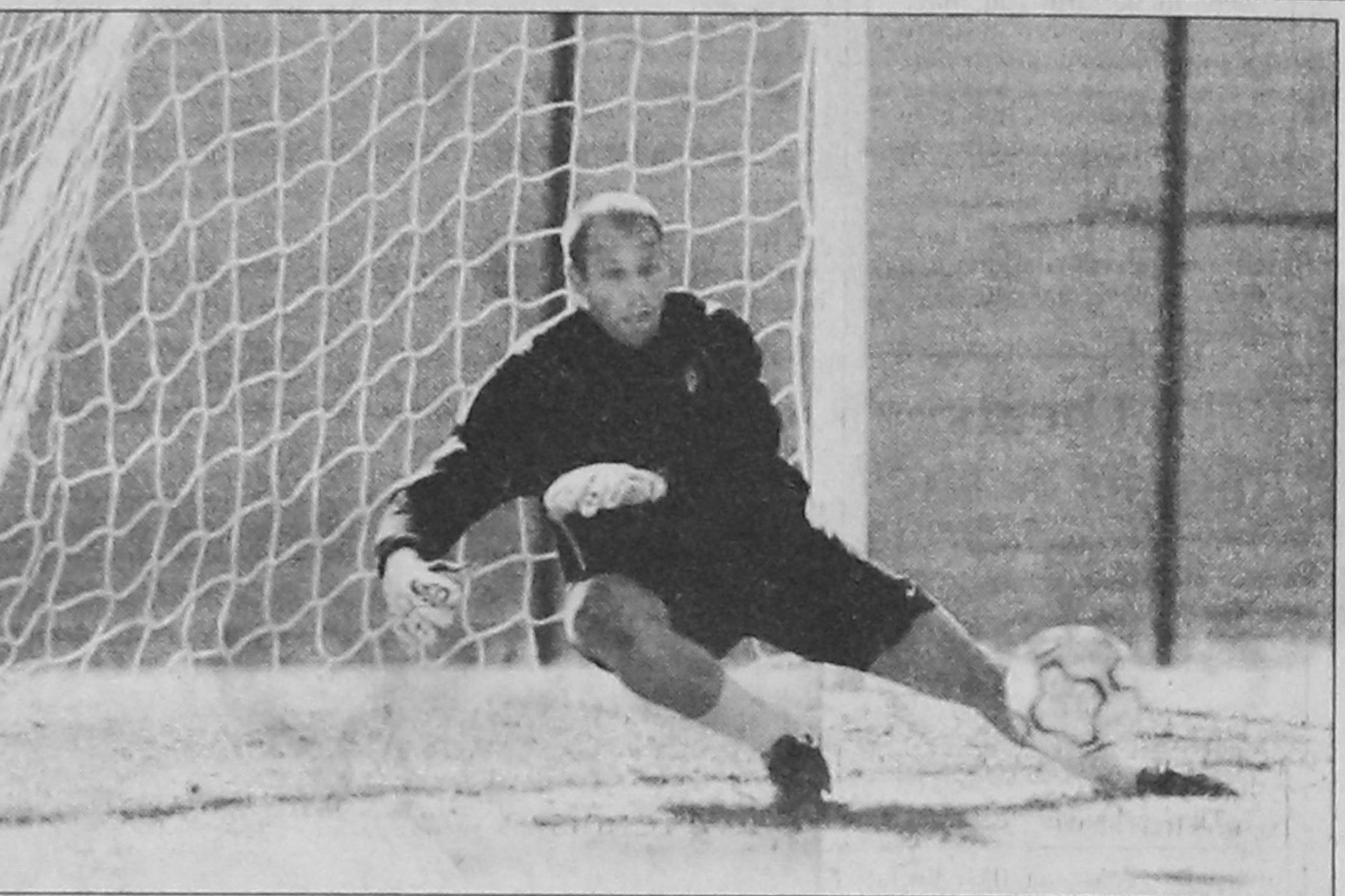
Bielsa admitted that Wednesday's match was more than just a friendly, saying: "It is not like other games. Italy have great players like (Paolo) Maldini, (Francesco) Totti and (Alessandro) Nesta. My boys are really looking forward to this match which will be fiercely contested and intense and they will want to prove the quality of our national team."

Italy boss Giovanni Trapattoni has bowed to the Roman theme of Wednesday's match by declaring he will definitely play Roma skipper Francesco Totti in his starting line-up.

Trapattoni said: "It is a prestige game, Argentina are among the top three or four countries in the world. It gives us a chance to try other solutions."

Atalanta's twins Cristiano and Damiano Zenoni will hope to become the fifth pair of brothers to play in the same match for Italy as both coaches admit they are using the opportunity to experiment with the 2002 World Cup in Japan and South Korea just over a year away.

With both sides well on the way to qualifying for that tournament few would be surprised if the next clash of these two giants will be in Asia.



United States goalie Brad Friedel practises blocking shots during a training session at the Columbus Crew Practice Facility in Obetz, Ohio on February 26.

US hope to catch 'em cold

AFP, Columbus

Welcome to the Cold War, World Cup style.

Longtime North American rivals Mexico and the United States kick off the final round of World Cup qualifying here Wednesday in a key match that could be played in a snowstorm.

Forecasts call for a 50 percent chance of snow in this Midwestern city, chosen as a host site in part because US officials wanted cold conditions and a place without a major Hispanic population that might cheer on the visitors.

The Americans see the cold as an edge against the Mexicans, whom they have beaten only twice in qualifying since 1934.

"The Mexican players are used to warm weather and a lot of the US players are used to the cold weather," US midfielder Chris Armas said. "The colder the better. If that happens to be an advantage, we will take it."

The US team has learned about

game-manship in the qualifying process.

The Americans have been forced to play on the road through the years in less than ideal conditions, including 7,500-foot high Mexico City and in the middle of the Guatemalan jungle.

The match kicks off a nine-month, 10-game schedule for each of six North American finalists. The tournament will determine three berths at next year's World Cup co-hosted by South Korea and Japan.

Challenging the favored US and Mexican teams are Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Honduras and Costa Rica.

Despite Mexico's sub-par results in recent friendlies, US coach Bruce Arena doesn't expect his country's archrivals to roll over and shiver.

The Mexicans enter the match in shambles. They are winless in five consecutive matches, including a 2-0 loss to the US team in Los Angeles last October and a 3-0 loss in last June's US Cup. Their players aren't talking to the media and

coach Enrique Meza has threatened to quit.

"They are not in as much trouble as they appear to be," Arena said. "I think they are going to have a good team on Wednesday and are going to be tough to beat. You need to ignore the results from the last few months. They will be insignificant when the whistle blows on Wednesday."

Mexico, however, will be without two starters - forward Cuauhtemoc Blanco, who was sidelined for several months after a vicious tackle by Trinidad and Tobago defender Ansil Eleock, and midfielder Ramon Ramirez, who was injured in a fatal car crash in December.

"The loss of Blanco and Ramirez will hurt them," Arena said. "You can't replace those types of players easily. But in international soccer you rarely have your full team on the field."

Luis Hernandez, who plays for the Los Angeles Galaxy but is currently on loan to America in the Mexican First Division, reportedly has a left hamstring pull. But when healthy, he is a dangerous player,

Holland v Turkey The 'Oranje' have a point to prove

AFP, Amsterdam

The Netherlands take on Turkey in a friendly international on Wednesday urgently needing to rediscover their Euro 2000 form and to revive hopes of qualifying for the 2002 World Cup.

The Dutch had a rather fortunate 2-1 win in Spain in their last friendly outing, but are languishing next to bottom in European qualifying group two, with only Andorra below them.

The Euro 2000 semifinalists had little time to recover their touch before a crucial game in Portugal next month, but coach Louis van Gaal has 12 players out, mostly through injury.

Manchester United's Jaap Stam should at least return to the porous Dutch defence, but left winger Boudewijn Zenden is out and the PSV trio of Arnold Bruggink, Kevin Hofland and Wilfred Bouma are unavailable.

Depotvri striker Roy Makaay is expected to team up in attack with Patrick Kluyvert, now back on form with Barcelona.

In defence, Van Gaal will get a chance to see the Stam/Frank de Boer combination - a little-tested partnership given Stam's long injury absence.

The game will also be a chance for several new players like Vitesse Arnhem's Victor Sikora and PSV's John de Jong, both expected to make their international debuts.

Turkey, who reached the Euro 2000 quarter-finals, see the friendly as a chance to make amends after a humiliating 4-0 defeat to France in a friendly in November.

"France was a bad result. Holland are a strong team. We need to think of defence as well as attack," Anatolian news agency quoted coach Senol Gunes as saying.

However, their World Cup qualifying campaign is reasonably on track. They drew 1-1 in Sweden in October, and a 1-0 win in Azerbaijan means they lead group four

with seven points from three matches. They host Slovakia in a month's time.

"We are a team that is continually improving and on the rise, we are not at the level of Spain or Italy but we are striving to get there," Gunes said.

Inter Milan striker Hakan Sukur said the side would have additional motivation from the financial crisis in Turkey.

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Batistuta out of action

AFP, Rome

Argentinian Gabriel Batistuta has strained the medial ligaments of his right knee and could be out of action for three to four weeks, doctors with his Italian club side AS Roma said Monday.

Batistuta sustained the injury during Roma's 2-0 victory over Vicenza at the weekend but has had problems with his knee all season.

The diagnosis was made after the player underwent a magnetic resonance scan in a Roman clinic on Monday evening.

His absence will be a blow to Roma who are leading the Italian First Division by six points.

Conceicao receives Spanish passport

AFP, La Coruna

Real Madrid's Brazilian midfielder Flavio Conceicao was awarded Spanish nationality on Monday which should improve his chances of gaining a place in the team as there are no limits on EU players playing in a team.

Gaining Spanish nationality is very important for me, it's a moment I've been waiting for for two years," said the 26-year-old.

The Brazilian international, who joined the European champions for 23 million dollars in the close season from Spanish title-holders Deportivo La Coruna, has had a frustrating season competing with the likes of Luis Figo, Steve McManaman and Claude Makelele for a midfield place - injury has seen him sidelined since January.

Lawyers dismiss Azhar's claim

REUTERS, Hyderabad

Former India captain Mohammad Azharuddin's claim that there were irregularities in the match-fixing inquiry which led to a life ban from the game were baseless, lawyers said on Monday.

Azharuddin was banned by the Indian cricket board (BCCI) after he and four Indian Test players were named in a federal Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) report on match-fixing last year.

The president of the BCCI and its anti-corruption official filed their replies on Monday in a court hearing Azharuddin's plea against his ban.

The civil court in Hyderabad set its next hearing for March 7 after Azharuddin's lawyer sought time to study the replies. Azharuddin challenged the decision in court last month.

His petition named the BCCI, BCCI chief AK Muthiah and anti-corruption investigator K Madhavan as respondents and contested the "irregularities" in the match-fixing inquiry conducted by Madhavan.

Bell back to NZ Test fold

INTERNET, unlabelled

Wellington skipper Matthew Bell has been recalled to the New Zealand team for the first Test against Pakistan, starting on March 8 in Auckland.

Bell, who on Sunday led Wellington to their first Shell Trophy victory in 11 years, replaces Matthew Horne, who will be sidelined for up to two months due to a virus.

Bell last played a Test in India in October 1999, scoring 29 runs from four innings in the series. His eight Tests have yielded 221 runs at an average of 15.78, with a highest score of 83 against England.

But he has been brilliant this season in the Shell Trophy, scoring 844 runs at an average of 52.75, including five centuries.

The 24-year-old, who celebrated his birthday on Sunday and then a day later, Wellington's Shell Trophy triumph, admitted he was mentally frail in his earlier Tests.

"I was probably a bit naive, I was reasonably young," Bell told the Press Association of New Zealand.

"I've fallen down in the past and frozen a bit. I've had my fear of failure like everybody else.

"I've learned not to put so much pressure on myself, accept I'm going to fail sometimes, but as long as I'm giving 120 per cent I'll be happy."

Wellington coach Vaughn Johnson said the Wellington captaincy had seen Bell mature as a batsman this year.

He believed Bell had bounced back well from the disappointment of being dropped from the Test side, but faced a tough task to retain his place.

"In the past he's thought a little bit too much about technique," Johnson said.

"He's more relaxed now.

"I'm very mindful that Pakistan are not an easy side to make your Test comeback against, and I hope he gets through it."

France v Germany Historic rivalry revisited

AFP, Paris

France and Germany may only be playing a friendly at the Stade de France on Tuesday - their first meeting for four years - but the word should only be used advisedly as every time these two play each other it is as if the World Cup trophy is up for grabs.

The two countries provided perhaps one of the greatest World Cup matches of all time in the 1982 semi-finals when Germany - whose goalkeeper Harald Schumacher had callously knocked out Patrick Batistuta in the second-half - came from 1-1 down in extra-time to beat the Michel Platini inspired French on penalties.

Four years later France having done the apparently hard bit by beating Brazil on penalties in the quarter-finals - PSG coach Luis Fernandez converting the decider - they slipped up again against the Germans losing 2-0 with current German coach Rudi Voller scoring the second.

Romantics believe the French team of the 1982-86 vintage were better than the team that have been crowned World and European champions in the space of two years.

However, those responsible for the modern day team would say that hard headed realism and strong defence have been brought in - two factors missing from the earlier team - but it is the latter that will face a searching test on Tuesday from the German attack.

Chelsea pair Frank Leboeuf, 33, and Marcel Desailly, 32, should line up in central defence while Bayern Munich's Bixente Lizarazu, 31, also remains a first choice for France, whether any of the three will be fast enough in 18 months



French football coach Roger Lemerre speaking to press during a conference in Clairfontaine, west of Paris, on February 26.

England v Spain Forced last minute adjustments

AFP, Birmingham

Last-minute withdrawals have disrupted the preparations of England and Spain for Wednesday's much-anticipated friendly at Villa Park.

Swedish coach Sven Goran Eriksson, taking charge of the England team for the first time, has lost at least five midfielders through injury.

Spain, too, have had a problematic build-up to Wednesday's game, their first since a 2-1 defeat by the Netherlands in November.

A few minutes before the squad was due to set off from Madrid's Barajas airport on Monday, Spain found out that Fernando Hierro would not be able to play because of the red card he was given against the Dutch.

Hierro had to collect his bags from the team bus and catch a taxi home, while coach Jose Antonio Camacho gave a last-minute call-up to Real Zaragoza's Paco.

Camacho was then forced to cancel the training session scheduled for Monday night at West Bromwich Albion because of a delay to the flight.

Goalkeepers Iker Casillas and Santiago Canizares are likely to play a half each, while Hierro's place could go to his club mate Ivan Helguera or to his replacement Paco.

Alaves striker Javi Moreno, leading scorer in the Spanish league with 17 goals so far this term, could have to wait until the second half to make his debut if Camacho sticks with his first-choice strike partnership of Raul and Ismael Urzaiz.

Luis Enrique, who has scored eight goals in his last six games, should start in midfield alongside his Barcelona team mate Pep Guardiola.

Novely abounds in the England camp, Eriksson is England's first foreign coach, the venue is a freshly-refurbished Villa Park -- not Wembley which itself is awaiting demolition -- and the team will even have a new strip for the occasion.

Eriksson, though, has been hit by the mass injury exodus familiar to all his predecessors and which

has so far shorn him of midfielders Steve McManaman, Kieron Dyer, Ray Parlour and Michael Carrick.

In addition, Manchester United's Paul Scholes has a stomach upset and is doubtful, while a sixth midfielder, injury-prone Steven Gerrard, was not even picked in the squad even though he played for Liverpool in Sunday's League Cup final.

West Ham United's uncapped Joe Cole is Scholes's obvious replacement and his selection would certainly prove popular with the fans and England's hard-to-please media.

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England (possible): David James; Gary Neville, Sol Campbell, Wes Brown, Ashley Cole; Nick Barmby, Nicky Butt, David Beckham (capt), Joe Cole; Emile Heskey, Robbie Fowler.

Spain (possible): Iker Casillas; Manuel Pablo, Abelardo, Ivan Helguera, Sergi; Pep Guardiola, Luis Enrique, Gaizka Mendiere, Joseba Etxeberria; Raul, Ismael Urzaiz.

Referee: Kyros Vassaras (Greece)

Terim storms out Fiorentina turn to Mancini

AFP, Florence

Roberto Mancini has been appointed new coach to Italian First Division side Fiorentina, the club's vice-president Mario Scercetti announced Monday evening.

Mancini was named just hours after his Turkish predecessor Fatih Terim had resigned after a week-end when the Florence club had made no effort to conceal that they were targeting Mancini.

But he takes over at a club in crisis with Fiorentina's director general Giancarlo Antognoni also quitting as did Terim's Turkish assistants, his number two Antonio Di Gennaro and goalkeeping coach Andrea Pazzagli in solidarity.

Fiorentina's new coach had assisted Sven Goran Eriksson at Lazio earlier this season but had most recently played on loan in England with Leicester City.

Earlier Monday, Azeoglio Vicini,

ends a 30-year association with the club. The manager had a bit in October 1971 and a spate of his loyalty to the club, refusing several offers from Juventus.

Terim's tenure, in contrast, lasted a mere nine months. He had joined the club on the crest of the wave after leading Istanbul outfit Galatasaray to the UEFA Cup, the first ever European trophy for a Turkish club.

He arrived at a time of crisis with Giovanni Trapattoni having quit and the club's talismanic Argentinian striker Gabriel Batistuta having announced he was ending a record-breaking nine-year stint in Florence to join AS Roma.

Almost immediately Terim fell out with club president Vittorio Cecchi Gori but despite having his hands tied - no say in transfer policy - he steered the club to the Italian Cup Final and was soon linked with the coaching post with AC Milan which many expect Alberto Zaccheroni to vacate in the summer.