

Henry being English!



AFP, Santo Tirso (Portugal)

France striker Thierry Henry says England are strong enough to win Euro 2004 as both teams prepared to face each other in Lisbon on Sunday.

Henry will face a handful of his Arsenal teammates in the England team and said he was well-placed to judge the strengths of the side captained by David Beckham.

"I respect them and I know better than anyone that they are capable of winning the Euro," said Henry, whose 30 goals led the English Premiership scoring charts last season.

"They qualified for the 2002 World Cup by beating Germany 5-1 in Germany. They went to Turkey and got the goalless draw they needed to reach Euro 2004, which is not an easy thing to do either.

"The English play with their hearts. In England you give 100 per cent, which is something I learned over there. Tactical or not, they always give their all. I pay tribute to those I like people who play like that, who show their emotions through their play instead of just talking."

Henry, who is almost certain to start Sunday's match, said he would be paying special attention to midfielder Frank Lampard, who has

forced his way into England's first eleven after an outstanding season for Chelsea.

"He has been incredible this season. I voted for him as my player of the year," said Henry, who instead received the honour, voted for by his fellow professionals.

England striker Michael Owen this week described Henry as the "best striker in the world", but the compliment drew a humble response from the Frenchman.

"Firstly, I'd like to say thank you," said Henry.

"I also admire what he does because I can't do the same thing. I can't stay in the penalty box waiting for the ball like him.

"I have to move and touch the ball. I must feel involved. That's just my way of playing. Even if I score I'm not happy unless I've played well."

Despite his praise for England, Henry still makes France the favourites to defend their title, unlike at the 2002 World Cup when they failed to win a match and he had a dreadful tournament.

"You can't hide the fact that France are favourites, especially with the team we have."

Henry's partner in attack for Sunday's big first round match remains in the balance after normal first choice David Trezeguet returned to full training on Tuesday after missing Sunday's friendly victory over Ukraine because of a sprained ankle.



PHOTO: AFP

WHO'S FIRST? Star French striker Thierry Henry (R) looks at his partner David Trezeguet as they sprint during a training session at Santo Triso, north of Porto on June 9.

Sweden's Italian job



REUTERS, Estoril

Sweden's Fredrik Ljungberg believes his side have the ability and motivation to surprise a surprise in Euro 2004 Group C.

The 27-year-old midfielder, whose 2002 World Cup campaign was wrecked by injuries, wants to make up for lost time, starting with matches against Bulgaria, Italy and Denmark.

"Now it is time that we as a squad really did something good," he said. "We have a consistent team but despite some good results our achievements have been mixed when it mattered in recent years."

Italy are clear favourites to win the group, particularly after enjoying unusually serene preparations that have raised genuine hopes they can go one better than Euro 2000 when they finished runners-up to France.

Coach Giovanni Trapattoni was in confident mood going into Monday's opening match against Denmark.

"From a physical and mental

point of view we are ready," he said. "Denmark are strong because they have a Nordic mentality mixed with Latin creativeness. It will be difficult to beat them."

The Swedes qualified unbeaten for Euro 2000 but went home after the first round, and in the last World Cup they topped a tough group ahead of England and Argentina before losing to Senegal.

"Everyone thought we should beat Senegal," Ljungberg said. "The trouble was that everyone thought that was an easy game -- but it was only easy in theory. And that has been our main problem, making progress in the final stages when people expect it."

Ljungberg believes Sweden, who meet Bulgaria on Monday in their opening match, have the ability to cause problems for Italy.

"We have met them before and we know they are a good team," he said. "But we think we can unsettle them."

"We don't know so much about Bulgaria, except that they are now well organised and have talented players, but when it comes to Denmark, of course, it is a different story."

"It will be a huge game for us against them -- a kind of Scandinavian derby with a lot at

stake. It will be all-action and very physical. But these are the kind of games that made me want to become a footballer in the first place."

Sweden, who finished third at the 1994 World Cup, have now gone full circle with a team combining promising youngsters with seasoned professionals, including returning striker Henrik Larsson, in a rigid 4-4-2 formation.

Danish hopes of an upset have not been helped by winger Jesper Gronkjaer's decision to stay behind in Denmark due to a family illness but coach Morten Olsen has remained confident.

"One thing is for sure," said Olsen. "In order to be successful at a tournament like this you have to be in good shape, you need some luck, and you need to be free of injury."

"This applies particularly to the smaller nations, who do not have so many players to pick from."

Bulgaria are also firmly in that category and Denmark have little chance of repeating their shock victory in the 1992 European Championship. They know they need a confidence-boosting result in their first game against the Italians to keep alive realistic hopes of reaching the quarterfinals.

Portugal will win

AFP, Lisbon

Four in 10 Portuguese believe that the tournament hosts will win the Euro 2004 finals, a poll showed.

The survey published in daily newspaper Correio da Manha found that 14 per cent think coach Luiz Felipe Scolari will not get the squad past the first round of the 16-nation tournament while 13 per cent say he will not get them to the semifinals.

Scolari, who guided his native Brazil to the 2002 World Cup title, has said he will leave his post if Portugal does not reach the Euro 2004 quarterfinals.

The championships get underway Saturday when Portugal play Greece and runs until July 4.

Portugal was ranked in 22nd place on the latest FIFA ranking of the best football nations in the world, behind other Euro 2004 participants like France and Spain.

Thais big gamblers

AFP, Bangkok

Football-crazed Thais are expected to shell out some 800 million dollars on Euro 2004 bets despite a crackdown on illicit gambling ahead of the championship, Thai surveys said.

The Thai Farmers Bank Research Centre surveyed 1,269 people across the country and concluded that football punting could reach a staggering 33 billion baht (814 million dollars) for the three-week event -- even more than was wagered during the 2002 World Cup.

"The economic situation has improved, so people have more money to bet," the survey from a prominent research house said Thursday. "The number of gamblers among students and workers is higher."

The figure equates to some 0.5 percent of Thailand's estimated Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for 2004.

Collina to blow opening whistle

AFP, Lisbon

Italy's Pierluigi Collina will referee the Euro 2004 opener between Portugal and Greece in Porto on Saturday, UEFA announced on Thursday.

The bald-headed 44-year-old financial adviser from Bologna, will be accompanied by assistant referees Marco Ivaldi and Narciso Pisacreta, also from Italy. Alain Hamer from Luxembourg will be the fourth official.

In a distinguished career, Collina has refereed the world's top matches.

He officiated at the 2002 World Cup final between Brazil and Germany in Yokohama and the 1999 Champions League final.

Switzerland's Urs Meier will be in charge of the tournament's second game - Saturday's other Group A match between Spain and Russia in Faro.

Sunday's big clash between France and England in Lisbon will be taken by Germany referee Markus Merk with compatriots Christian Schraer and Jan-Hendrik Salver as his assistants. Lubo Michel from Slovakia is the fourth official.

Jordan slay Iran

AFP, Hong Kong

Two-time finalists Iran suffered a major setback to their hopes of making the 2006 World Cup finals on Wednesday while Japan, South Korea and China recorded easy victories in the latest round of Asian qualifying.

Iran, who reached the finals in 1978 and 1998, went down to a 1-0 defeat to Group One rivals Jordan in Tehran where Haytham Al-Shoubul grabbed the winner seven minutes from time.

The win gave Jordan maximum points at the top of their group as the team, coached by veteran Egyptian Mahmoud El-Gohary, clinched their third win over Iran in the last two years.

With Qatar also recording their first win, a 5-0 success over group whipping boys Laos, the pressure will be on Iran when they travel to

Amman for the return in September.

China went into their Group 4 match against Malaysia in Tianjin brimming with confidence.

A win over Hungary last week had left Dutch coach Arie Haan confident his side would breeze past the Malaysians.

The Chinese were forced to endure a nervous opening to the match however, and had to wait until just before half-time before veteran striker Hao Haidong lashed in the first goal on 42 minutes.

Manchester City's Sun Jihai fired home number two in the 66th minute before the impressive Li Xiaopeng made it 3-0 four minutes later with a well-timed headed goal.

Li then bagged a second from the penalty spot to complete the scoring for China, who top the group with three wins out of three while Kuwait stay second after a 3-0 home win against Hong Kong.

Meanwhile, in Group Five,

North Korea trampled on Thailand's hopes with an emphatic 4-1 win in Bangkok.

Kim Yong-Su scored twice but the United Arab Emirates stay top after a 3-0 win over Yemen in Al Ain.

Rashid Abdul Rahman and Mohammed Omar (2) were on the scoresheet for UAE in a match which was the last for caretaker coach Jean Francois Jodar, who now makes way for Dutchman Aad De Mos.

In a Group Eight encounter in Jakarta, Indonesia edged out Sri Lanka 1-0 thanks to a first-half strike by Elie Aiboy but overwhelming favourites Saudi Arabia, who have reached the last three finals, stayed on course for a return with a 3-0 defeat of Turkmenistan.

In Group Two, Iraq crushed Taipei 6-1 in Amman to go second but Uzbekistan lead the way after a 3-0 win over previous leaders Palestine while in Group Six, Bahrain are top following a 5-0 demolition of Kyrgyzstan.

respect. Maybe Italy has never had anyone as strong and decisive as him."

Owen and Van Nistelrooy are prolific goalscorers, lacking the traditional artistry of many great number 10s but making up for that with their ruthless finishing.

Other candidates to shine in the number 10 jersey include Spain striker Fernando Morientes, fresh from a prolific season with Monaco, Tomas Rosicky, the main creative force in the Czech Republic side, and silky Portugal forward Rui Costa.

Among those less likely to make headlines may be Greece midfielder Vassilis Tsartas and Denmark striker Martin Joergensen.

With the famous number 10 on their backs, however, they could just be inspired.

"Totti is similar to Platini in that

with a clutch of high-class, younger replacements in the wings it is doubtful whether Lizarazu and Thuram will still be first choices at the 2006 World Cup.

Goalkeepers tend to go on longer than defenders and Barthez's main rival, Gregory Coupet, is not much younger than the bald-headed acrobat from Olympique Marseille.

Santini stuck with Barthez last season even when he was sitting on the bench at Manchester United.

However, the coach's departure to English Premier League club Tottenham Hotspur after Euro 2004 could lead to Barthez being eased aside for a younger man, such as Mickael Landreau.

Coupet, not Barthez, was between the posts the last time France conceded a goal, against Turkey in a 3-2 defeat in the Confederations Cup semi-final when Tuncay Sanli scored in the 48th minute.

Since then France have played 11 matches, both friendlies and European qualifiers, and scored 23 goals.

Their form bodes well for the defence of their European crown although statistics do not offer as much consolation.

The only international run before a major tournament to better that by the French was Italy's in the run-up to the 1974 World Cup when they went 12 games without conceding a goal from October 1972 to June 1974.

Goalkeeper Dino Zoff established a record of 1,143 unbeaten minutes before letting in a goal in the first match of the finals against Haiti.

They beat Haiti 3-1 but a draw with Argentina and a defeat by Poland meant Italy were knocked out in the group stage.

Terry must prove fitness today

AFP, Lisbon

England coach Sven-Goran Eriksson has given Chelsea defender John Terry until Friday to prove he is fit enough to take part in England's Euro 2004 opener against France.

Terry is struggling to recover from a hamstring strain that has kept him sidelined since last Tuesday's warm-up match against Japan in Manchester.

The 23-year-old was able to do some light jogging on Wednesday but spent the rest of England's training session working alone with physiotherapist Gary Lewin.

"John has made progress today and will work in the gym this afternoon and tomorrow, then on Friday we will decide," Eriksson told the Football Association's website, www.TheFA.com.

"We will see this afternoon and tomorrow how much they can push him."

The Swede was cautiously optimistic Terry would be ready to take his place alongside Sol Campbell in the heart of England's defence.

But he is wary of taking any risks which could jeopardise Terry's participation in what could be a six-match campaign if England go all the way to the final.

"We have to be careful because this is more than one game and we don't want him to break down for the rest of the tournament."

"We have (Jamie) Carragher and we have Ledley King and they are both in very good shape and I'm sure they'll both like to play in the first game."

Liverpool's Carragher is the favourite to get the nod if Terry is not ready having played and performed well alongside Campbell in the final warm-up against Iceland.

Don't Czech out



REUTERS, Lisbon

Four years after having their hopes shattered at Euro 2000 the Czech Republic once again arrive at a major finals with an outside chance of success.

If they are to claim their first silverware since winning the 1976 European Championship in the former Yugoslavia, however, they will first have to pick a path through a treacherous looking Group D.

At the last European Championship they were grouped with eventual winners France, the Netherlands and Denmark. This time they must face the Dutch again, three-times winners Germany and rank outsiders Latvia.

It is a formidable test but at least the Czechs, who drew with and then beat the Dutch in qualifying, have the chance to erase some recent bad memories from the finals.

At Euro 2000 they outplayed co-hosts the Netherlands, twice hitting the woodwork only to lose 1-0 to a last-minute penalty, a result that paved the way to an early exit.

Four years earlier they unexpectedly reached the final at Wembley but were struck down in the final by Oliver Bierhoff's golden goal for Germany.

Form can be misleading in the build-up to major tournaments but if it can be used in making predictions then the Czechs should progress to the quarterfinals.

With just two defeats in 24 matches since 64-year-old Karel Bruckner took charge and with former European Footballer of the Year Pavel Nedved pulling the strings in midfield, the Czechs should outclass Latvia in their June 19 opener in Aveiro.

Nedved is desperate to succeed, especially after being vilified when the Czechs failed to reach the 2002 World Cup finals. At 31, the

Juventus player knows he is running out of time to reward his talent on the international stage.

After Nedved attempts to dismantle Latvia the focus will turn to Tuesday's other Group D match between Germany and the Netherlands in Porto -- one of the true heavyweight fixtures of world football.

Defeat for either team will fuel the criticism spread by woeful friendly results in the weeks leading up to Euro 2004.

Germany suffered a humiliating 5-1 loss in Romania and were jeered off the pitch after a 2-0 home defeat by Hungary while the Netherlands lost to Belgium and Ireland.

The Germans, though, have an uncanny ability to rise to the big occasion and goalkeeper and captain Oliver Kahn, in top form during their journey to the last World Cup final, expects it to be no different this time.

"You will see a totally different Germany," said the inspirational 34-year-old, aiming to help his country to a first victory over the Dutch since a friendly in 1996.

Germany's hopes will rest on the shoulders of their one world-class flair player Michael Ballack.

The Dutch are blessed with an abundance of talent but forging it into a functioning unit has been beyond most previous coaches, barring Rinus Michels who steered them to European glory in 1988, their only title to date.

Dick Advocaat is charged with that task this time and he will probably be relieved when the first game kicks off after a build-up marred by poor performances and injury worries.

Experienced midfielder Clarence Seedorf is a definite non-starter against Germany after injuring a hamstring in the 1-0 defeat by Ireland -- a result that has prompted Advocaat to opt for an attacking 4-3-3 system.

Andy van der Meide, Marc Overmars and Arjen Robben will provide the width, though all three

have minor injury worries.

Latvia coach Aleksandrs Starkovs has no such pressure with most people expecting the small Baltic state to return home pointlessly after he labelled their qualification "a miracle".

Nevertheless, the three big guns will be fearful of becoming the fall guys for one of the freakish results often thrown up in the group stages.

Indeed, Latvia's results could be the decisive factor in a group that is too close to call.

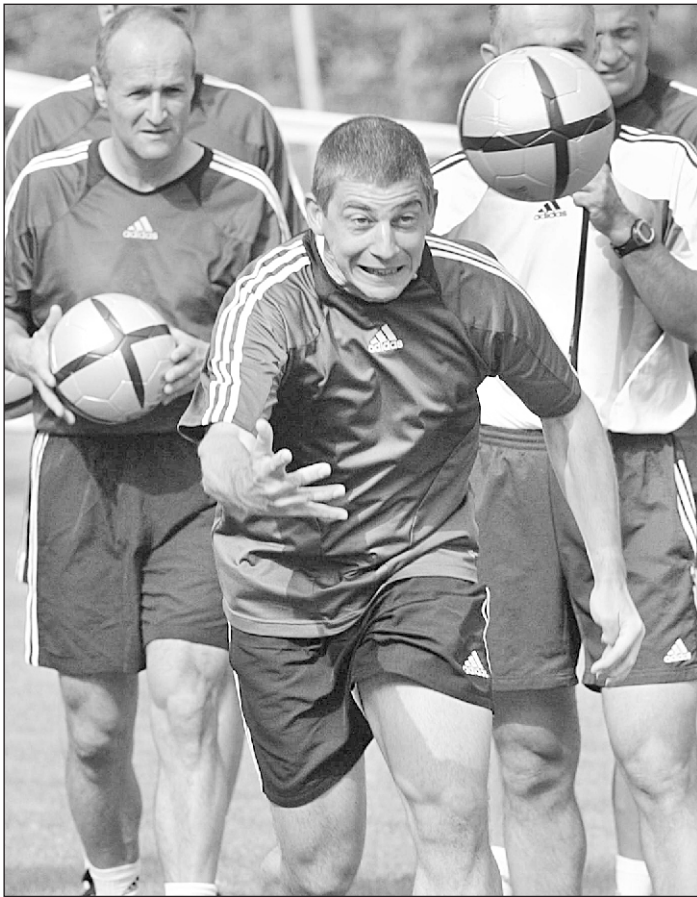


PHOTO: AFP

REFS' OWN GAME: A Euro 2004 referee starts running while his colleagues wait in the background at Espinho near Porto yesterday.