



THIS IS A BULGARIAN DEFENDER: Swedes Fredy Ljungberg of Arsenal (L) says something to Henrik Larsson during a training session at Estoril Stadium in Lisbon on June 11.

Russia equals dubious record

REUTERS, Faro

Russia took their winless streak at European Championships to a record-equalling eight matches as they succumbed meekly to Spain in a 1-0 defeat on Saturday.

Russia matched the record also held by Yugoslavia and Romania who ended their streaks at Euro 2000.

Already weakened by injuries at the heart of their defence, Russia will now be without the suspended Sharanov when they take on hosts Portugal on Wednesday in what is a must-win game for both teams after their defeats on Saturday.

Portugal were stunned 2-1 by Greece who pulled off their best ever victory in the opening game of the three-week event.

"Before Euro 2004, everyone was thinking the tournament could be quite unpredictable," said Russian coach Georgy Yartsev.

"We too can produce some surprises," he added.

Yartsev, who shouted himself hoarse during the game, was disappointed with his team's performance.

"My players were probably a bit scared by the big names in the Spanish team. The yellow cards in the first half put pressure on our defence and the players were concerned about being sent off."

Russia have not won a match at a European Championship since the then Soviet Union beat Italy in the 1988 semifinals.

Of more concern to Yartsev will be ensuring that the largest nation in Euro 2004 does not suffer another early exit.

Asia goes crazy over Euro bet



AFP, Bangkok

Two Asian obsessions, football and gambling, are merging into a formidable force this month as fans lay down billions of dollars in bets during Euro 2004, despite regional efforts to snuff out the practice.

Boosted by the surging popularity of the sport, a rise in live satellite feeds of European league matches, and the spread of communications technology like mobile telephones, punters are finding it more appealing and easier than ever to place their bets.

Football-mad Thais are expected to wager some 800 million dollars on the European championships despite a much-publicised crackdown on illicit gambling ahead of the tournament, according to Thai surveys.

The Thai Farmers Bank Research Center said the punting could reach a staggering 33 billion baht (814 million dollars) -- some 0.5 percent of Thailand's estimated Gross Domestic Product this year -- for the three-week event, even more than was wagered during the 2002 World Cup.

The increase is in part due to the improving economy, but also the ease of communication through mobile phones and the Internet, it said.

Wagers are expected to hit astronomical figures as well in Singapore, the nation of 4.2 million people which laid down an estimated 294 million dollars -- 70 dollars for every man, woman and child -- in legal bets throughout World Cup 2002.

State-owned Singapore Pools, the only legal operator for football bets in the city-state, would not predict the turnover for Euro 2004, but there is nothing to suggest that Singaporeans have curbed their appetite for two years ago.

Underground and Internet betting there is said to flourish. As the games kick into gear in Portugal, hundreds of millions of Asians are believed to be watching the matches live, and international betting syndicates are looking for an explosion in business, police

say.

"Our anti-vice and gaming officers have identified several illegal bookmaking syndicates waiting to cash in on the championship," Malaysia's Criminal Investigations Department director Musa Hassan told the Star newspaper.

The daily quoted Musa Hassan as saying illegal syndicates were taking about six million ringgit (1.6 million dollars) on bets on each match day during the football season.

Malaysian police arrested 31 people from February to mid-April, including eight Chinese from Hong

major "Say No to Football Gambling" campaign in what is likely to be a vain attempt to cut down punting.

Football betting has proved a popular pastime there and on the Chinese mainland, where it is only allowed through state-run sports lotteries.

A Euro 2004 lottery went on sale countrywide on June 9, and while no figures on its popularity were available, one Beijing newspaper said 350,000 tickets had already been sold in that city alone.

The banner of communism has hardly stopped the capitalist betting craze, as the steady stream of

monthly, with some violators sentenced to lengthy jail terms.

"We always fight against illegal football betting but we will work harder on Euro 2004, especially in the big cities," said Duong Ngoc Chinh, a spokesman for the ministry of public security.

"We are also working on measures to prevent illegal football gambling syndicates from operating" during Euro 2004, he added.

Low pay and poor motivation, however, often make Vietnamese police an easy target for bribes from underground bookmakers.

Authorities often admit they are exasperated with the difficulties of yanking the illicit bookmakers out by the roots.

The Asian Football Confederation (AFC) on Friday recommended that football betting be legalised in the region to combat illegal gambling and increase interest in the sport.

AFC secretary general Peter Velappan was quoted by Malaysia's Star newspaper as saying betting was part of the Asian culture.

"Football is now developing into an industry and it generates a great amount of revenue, and legalised betting will be one of the commercial activities to generate income for football development," he said.

"Putting football betting on a legal platform will eliminate illegal betting. This will be good for the game," he added.

But, in tiny Cambodia, a privately-run legal betting agency -- which opened in 2002 in an attempt to cash in on football fever -- is still struggling to compete with blackmarket bookmakers and is not expecting a bumper Euro 2004.

"We don't have much hope on increasing betting, thanks to all of the illegal places you can bet here," a company official said.

Thailand too has faced the harsh reality that it was fighting a losing battle against football betting, and last year launched a feasibility study on legalising the vice.

No moves have been made yet, and Thai police have vowed a determined punting crackdown on the Beckhams, Figos, and Zidanees of Euro 2004 take to the pitch.

PREVIEW: BULGARIA v SWEDEN

Wary of Larsson



REUTERS, Estoril

Striker Henrik Larsson says it will be an honour to play for Sweden after coming out of international retirement for Euro 2004.

Larsson told reporters on Saturday that a sense of unfinished business prompted his change of heart in April after announcing his retirement after the 2002 World Cup.

"I didn't want to have any regrets," said the 32-year-old, who had helped Sweden finish third at the 1994 World Cup is grateful for another chance at the highest level.

"In all I had done before with Celtic, I never regretted turning down other clubs.

"I still felt that I wanted to do this and I had the opportunity because the coaches still wanted me back, that's why I changed my mind."

The Swede had originally quit because his tournament absences in 2000 and 2002 had upset his young son Jordan. A change of heart by the six-year-old cleared the way for him to reconsider.

Celtic's third highest scorer of all time, who has just ended a glorious seven-year stay at the club, is expected to lead the Sweden attack with Zlatan Ibrahimovic in a Group C campaign starting on Monday against Bulgaria.

"It's a great honour to play for your country," Larsson said.

"I've been playing World Cups and European Championships and it's always special. When you're a kid growing up, these are the tournaments you want to play in."

Larsson's return, after considerable lobbying, has been welcomed

not only by the fans back home but by the rest of the squad in Portugal.

"Everybody's been welcoming me since I came back and that's very good," Larsson said.

Asked what he could bring a side whose 2002 World Cup hopes ended in the second round, he said: "I think I bring a lot of experience. I've never been the guy who talks about what I do or don't do. I try to do all of those things on the pitch."

As for the current Sweden squad, he said: "It's always difficult to compare teams, but there's a lot of new players compared to the squad at Euro 2000 but a lot who were at the World Cup and are now a bit older and more experienced.

"I think we have a good atmosphere in the team and belief in ourselves, even though we respect our opponents."

Larsson's return has given Sweden a welcome boost for a tricky group phase which also includes games against Scandinavian rivals Denmark and Euro 2000 finalists Italy.

Ibrahimovic should be among the more immediate beneficiaries of Larsson's return, though the Ajax Amsterdam forward was wary of piling too big a burden on his team mate.

"It means a lot, not only for me but for the Swedish team, the supporters, the whole country," the 22-year-old said of Larsson's comeback.

"It's good. But at the same time we shouldn't put all the pressure on Henrik. As he says, we are a team."

Bulgaria are well aware of the threat Larsson brings.

"We know he is the star and we respect him," said goalkeeper Zdravko Zdravkov.

"But there is very little difference between the teams in this competition so anyone can spring a surprise," he added before Greece shocked Portugal in Saturday's opening game.

Bulgaria's hopes depend heavily on striker Dimitar Berbatov putting away the few chances he is likely to get but the likes of Larsson's Celtic team mate Stilian Petrov might have to be more concerned with defending than setting up attacks.

The Swedes have plenty of creativity in midfield, with Rennes youngster Kim Källstrom nicely complemented by Arsenal's hard running Freddie Ljungberg

Sweden's only concern is defender Olof Mellberg, who is playing through the pain of a long-term Achilles tendon injury.

Bulgaria's chief worry is midfielder Martin Petrov, who strained a hamstring earlier this week but is expected to play.

Sweden have an impressive seven wins and two draws from the past nine meetings and Bulgaria have to go back to 1967 for their last success.

Sorry Scolari

REUTERS, Oporto

Portugal coach Luiz Felipe Scolari, deflated after the hosts' shock 2-1 defeat by Greece in the opening Euro 2004 match on Saturday, apologised and said the next game would be a life or death affair.

"I want to apologise for the result and our performance which didn't reward the backing we had from the public," said the Brazilian.

"I'm upset and sad... and the players are down as well.

"In a competition like this where you play three games, you can only afford to lose one match. We had our defeat today. The next game is life or death. That is how we have to face it."

Portugal were made to pay dearly for an early mistake when defender Paulo Ferreira sent a pass out of defence straight to Greek midfielder Giorgos Karagounis, who gave his team a seventh-minute lead.

The hosts' fate was sealed when Angelos Basinas converted a penalty six minutes into the second half before Cristiano Ronaldo pulled one back in injury time.

They face Russia in Lisbon on Wednesday desperately needing a win to stay in the tournament.

Scolari said his team, who created only one genuine chance before their goal and often looked too lightweight to threaten their opponents, had failed to recover from their early setback.

"Right at the start of the game, we gave the ball away and we gave Greece what they most needed," said Scolari, who led Brazil to their fifth World Cup win in South Korea and Japan two years ago.

"Our error gave them a goal chance which completely changed our team's way of playing and gave confidence and personality to the Greeks.

"The second half was the same thing. We made another passing mistake at the start and they got the penalty.

"We created a few chances but Greece were well organised, they closed up at the back and exploited the counter-attack.

"We lost control of the game... We made mistakes in positioning, we made mistakes with our passing.

"These results happen and you have to be prepared for them. You have to know how to win and how to lose."

Quiet so far

REUTERS, Lisbon

Euro 2004 fans have caused only minor trouble, with a handful of arrests for fighting and ticket scalping, Portuguese police said on Sunday.

Four fans, including three Englishmen, have been arrested on public disturbance or assault charges since early Saturday, said Commissioner Alexandre Coimbra. Seven people have been arrested for illegal sale of tickets.

"Outside of these illegal ticket sales...absolutely everything has taken place normally," Coimbra told a news conference.

Authorities have stressed tight security amid fears of hooliganism, especially from English fans, and attacks by radicals. The three-week tournament started on Saturday.

England play France at 1845 GMT on Sunday in Lisbon. The game is their first in Group B teams and organisers say it carries a high risk of violence.

Greeks in ecstasy



REUTERS, Athens

Greeks wildly celebrated their shock 2-1 win over Euro 2004 hosts Portugal on Saturday as turning a golden page in their soccer history and a good omen for the Athens Olympic Games in August.

"I'm in seventh heaven. This has been a brilliant page in Greek football history. A golden page," said Efthimis Matisis, 70, a pensioner at his local cafe.

Greece's victory in the tournament's opening game at last wiped out memories of a national team that failed to score a goal in three matches at their last appearance in a major tournament, the World Cup in the United States 10 years ago.

"I didn't expect it. Nobody did. This morning I discussed the match with my friends at our usual cafe and we all agreed that if we just drew that would be a great victory," Matisis said.

Greek Prime Minister Costas Karamanlis sent an immediate congratulatory telegram to the team and fans poured on to Athens streets from cafes and bars where many watched the match on television.

In the final minutes of the game, waiters stopped serving drinks and food, joining fans in fixing their eyes on television screens.

Young men paraded around the main Syntagma Square with Greek flags draped over their shoulders as cars circled the square with horns

Kong, for running multi-million dollar illegal football gambling syndicates.

Hong Kong has launched a

arrests in Vietnam shows.

Raids in sports cafes in the southern business metropolis Ho Chi Minh City occur almost



Thai students walk past an advertisement showing Brazil's Roberto Carlos (L) and England's David Beckham, at a station in Bangkok on June 12.

PHOTO: AFP

KICKIN' AROUND



AFP, Baghdad

Thousands of British soldiers serving in Iraq got ready Sunday to tune in to England's football clash with Euro favourites France.

Daily bomb blasts in Iraq have failed to dampen the enthusiasm of the British soldiers, who put up TV screens especially for the game.

"Everyone is very excited. It is the only chat in all social areas. 'Special arrangements' had been made to watch the game," said Captain Donald Francis.

There was a lot of excitement among the other members of the multinational troops in Iraq, especially the Italian, Dutch and Danish contingents.

"It is just a shame that the French are missing," said another soldier.

PLAYERS KEEP COOL

AFP, Lisbon

Each player has his own methods of keeping relaxed amid the pressure cooker atmosphere of Euro 2004 which kicked off on Saturday.

Some of the Danish players have taken to the links for a relaxing round of golf, while the Swedes prefer a dip in the sea.

Italian defender Christian Panucci has another recipe. The AS Roma right back orders himself a glass of "rosso" (red wine) and relaxes at the Casa Italia.

"We'll see at the end who has the right idea," he quipped.

THAI ATTRACTIONS

AFP, Bangkok

Businesses in Thailand ranging from massage parlours to department stores have gone into overdrive in a bid to attract legions of Thai football fans glued to Euro 2004.

Sex workers and shop assistants are donning European football colours as firms install televisions so fans can go about their lives without missing a second of play.

One paper had a front page picture of female workers from a notorious massage parlour clad in European club tops and holding footballs to attract distracted fans.

HISTORY FAVOURS ENGLAND

AFP, Paris

France may be the favourites but England go into Sunday's Euro 2004 clash with history on their side.

Since their first international meeting, in Paris on November 1, 1906 ended in a 15-0 victory for England, the two countries have met a total of 35 times.

England have won 23, drawn five and lost only seven times, scoring a total of 128 goals against 38 conceded.

The imbalance is largely the result of England's dominance in the early part of the 20th century.

France's last competitive

victory over the English dates back to February 1963, when they won a Euro-64 qualifier 5-3 in Paris.

EURO MARRIAGE

REUTERS, Lisbon

A soccer-mad Portuguese woman chose the day of the opening game of Euro 2004 between Portugal and Greece to marry her Greek fiancé.

Alexandra Fialho Amaral and Dimitris Psarris tied the knot in a church at Coimbra on Saturday then set up a screen at the reception so both sides of the family could cheer their teams, the daily Diario de Noticias reported on Sunday.

Though the home side lost 2-1, the guests accepted the result "sportingly", the newspaper said.

COLOURFUL OPENING

AFP, Paris

Euro 2004 officially got off the ground at Porto's Dragon stadium Saturday with an opening ceremony under the theme "Portugal discovered the world. With Euro 2004 the world will now discover Portugal."

The 15-minute spectacular set a lively tone for the three week festival of football and featured over 900 carefully-choreographed performers, who took to the impeccably-manicured pitch in the late afternoon sunshine to give a colourful snapshot of their country's proud seafaring past.

blowing.

Mobile phone networks were stretched to capacity as congratulatory messages were flashed from friend to friend throughout the country.

George Anagnostopoulos, a painter and owner of a gallery in the city's main tourist district of Plaka said his worries that this August's Olympic Games would not set off a tourist boom had lifted.

"No matter what else happens in the tournament from now on, the win today is going to be a big positive for the success of the Games," he said. "It is going to make people more interested in the success of Greek athletes at the Games and just raise the mood in general."

Greece has withstood a barrage of international criticism about the Games because of delays in preparations.

Konstantinos Vanos, creative director of an advertising agency, agreed the Games had received a big boost.

"This has to be a good omen for the Olympics. We needed it and we got it through the boys. The mood of the whole nation is going to be lifted."



ATHENS OVER THE MOON: Young Greeks wave national flags while driving in the centre of Athens on June 12 after watching the national side defeat Portugal 2-1 in the opening game of the European Championship.

PHOTO: AFP

Friends turn foes for a day



REUTERS, Lisbon

It is hard to get the better of Italy defender Alessandro Nesta at the best of times but when you train with the AC Milan centre-half every day, like Denmark striker Jon Dahl Tomasson, the task becomes doubly difficult.

The pair, key members of Milan's scudetto-winning team, will meet in Monday's Group C opener in Guimaraes and although Nesta knows Tomasson's moves inside out the Italian says that just means he needs to be at his very best.

"I know him really well but the flipside is that he knows me too," said Nesta. "I cannot say which one of us will get the most advantage out of this situation.

"Jon is a very dangerous player. He moves up and down the pitch a lot and for a defender he is very difficult to deal with and it is trying to have to follow him around," said

Nesta.

"He also has a great sense for goals -- he is always first on to the loose ball, particular rebounds inside the area. We will need to concentrate 100 per cent because he will punish us for every mistake," said the central defender.

Tomasson arrived in Milan on a free transfer from Feyenoord two years ago having re-established his reputation with the Dutch club following a disappointing season in England's premier league with Newcastle United.

In his first season at the San Siro the Dane was mainly stuck on the bench as Andriy Shevchenko and Filippo Inzaghi led the line for Carlo Ancelotti's side.

However, Tomasson did grab the winner in the Champions League quarter-final win against Ajax Amsterdam that opened the gates to their European Cup triumph over Juventus.

This past season, though, Tomasson took advantage of injury to Inzaghi, which eventually cost the Milan striker a place in Italy's Euro 2004 squad, to claim 15 goals in all competitions and impress

most observers with his selfless play.

Nesta says he has been pleasantly surprised by the impact Tomasson has made at Milan.

"When he arrived we didn't think he would be such a great player. He started as a substitute but when he got opportunities he took them in the best possible way -- scoring important goals," said Nesta.

Tomasson's scoring record for Denmark is impressive with 28 goals in 60 appearances, although he failed to find the net at Euro 2000 when they went out at the group stage without a goal.

The Roskilde born 27-year-old could face more familiar faces if Milan midfielders Gennaro Gattuso and Andrea Pirlo make an appearance. The pair are expected to start on the substitutes' bench, a decision that will please Tomasson.

"I know them very well and I have to say that I will be very happy if they aren't playing against us, although obviously I will be sorry for them," Tomasson said this week.

Vieri's warning

REUTERS, Lisbon

Christian Vieri thinks Italy's defensive reputation is history and that the current Azzurri squad has matured since their World Cup disappointment in 2002.

"We are not a defensive side. We play with two strikers and two wide men who are effectively strikers as well. We will be playing to win, on the attack but attacking in the right way," the striker told a news conference on Saturday.

Italy, who were knocked out of the World Cup in the second round by South Korea two years ago, face Denmark in their Group C opener on Monday.

"We are in good shape and after Korea we have matured a lot. We've been training well and we are fired up and ready for a good championship," he said.

Asked what counted as a good result in the tournament for Italy, Vieri said expectations were always high.

"Every time we are at a European Championship or World Cup, we have to win. From our part there is no problem with being among the favourites," he added.