



The difference maker?

AFP, Alcochete

Manchester United's flamboyant Northern Irish winger George Best never made it to the finals of a major international tournament.

But an updated albeit calmer incarnation of the legend lives on in the shape of Cristiano Ronaldo, the Old Trafford star whose twists and turns have helped Portugal into the Euro 2004 quarter-finals.

Now, it is ironically England who Ronaldo and his teammates have in their sights as the two nations meet in Lisbon on Thursday in the European Championships quarter-finals.

Ronaldo and England hotshot Wayne Rooney will use the occasion to bolster their respective claims for player of the tournament.

"He is our Wayne Rooney," says Portugal defender Jorge Andrade, acknowledging that it was the winger's exuberance and silky skills which tied the Spanish in knots even if it was Nuno Gomes who ultimately delivered the coup de grace with the only goal.

Yet in discussing Rooney, the wiry Portuguese teenager says they cannot really be compared.

"You can't compare me and Rooney - he is a very different type of player. But he is having a tremendous tournament," Ronaldo told reporters on Tuesday at the Porto-guese training base at Alcochete just south of Lisbon.

"We will respect him and England.

"Anyway, England are not just Rooney. David Beckham and Michael Owen are great players.

"But Portugal are not afraid of anybody.

"It should be a great match against England."

The barrel-chested Rooney has mesmerised defenders in England's three games to date, showing a clean pair of heels to both Switzerland and Croatia to score two goals against both while proving a handful for holders France, although he did not score in a 2-1 loss in his country's opening game.

The way the 19-year-old has taken to the international stage had England coach Sven-Goran Eriksson talking of Rooney in the same breath as Pele, who was a World Cup winner at 17 with Brazil.

Ronaldo, nine months older than Rooney, has likewise had a galvanising effect on the Portuguese, albeit to a less spectacular degree.

He tortured the Spanish defence in Sunday's crucial 1-0 victory which allowed the hosts to escape from Group A after losing their opener to Greece, playing 84 minutes after coach Luiz Felipe Scolari elected to play him from the start.

Ronaldo, named after late US President Ronald Reagan, received a standing ovation when he gave

way to veteran defender Fernando Couto.

Ronaldo has come on leaps and bounds since becoming the world's most expensive teenager following his 17.5 million euro move to United from Sporting Lisbon, whose training facilities are home to the Portugal squad at Euro 2004, making him feel thoroughly at home.

Prior to the tournament Ronaldo said he might be an individualist but would not look to change his style.

"Sometimes people accuse me of excessive individualism, but I think if I am at Manchester United it is for a reason," he told Portuguese radio TSF going into the match with the Greeks in which he scored Portugal's goal in a 2-1 defeat having earlier conceded a penalty.

Unlike Rooney, who shone as a rare beacon of light in a poor Everton side, Ronaldo already has silverware in his trophy cabinet this season having scored in United's FA Cup final win over Millwall, while he was also voted the club's player of the season and made 29 appearances.

Now Ronaldo is plotting the downfall of the man whose boots he is in the process of filling at Old Trafford - one David Beckham.

For the United faithful, Best was the best, Beckham was the beloved - but Ronaldo is the future and the man England must stop on Thursday in the Stadium of Light.



THE WORLD WATCHES: Portuguese sensation Cristiano Ronaldo (R) looks at midfielder Deco during a training session at the Academia Sporting, near Lisbon on June 22.

Just crazy!

AFP, New Delhi

A housekeeper died of a heart attack and another suffered head injuries Wednesday when football fans ran riot at a motel in India after being told they could not watch the Italy-Bulgaria Euro 2004 match, police said.

The management of the motel in the southern city of Cochin ordered the television off as the noisy match, broadcast past midnight, was bothering other guests.

Eight fans responded by attacking the housekeeper who tried to switch off the TV set, hitting him in the head with a steel chair, said a police official quoted by the Press Trust of India.

Another hotel employee came to the aid of his bleeding colleague but suffered a heart attack and died on the way to hospital just as Italy were beating Bulgaria 2-1, the official said.

International football enjoys a dedicated fan base in India, although the sport comes nowhere near the popularity of cricket.

Eng at home in Portugal!

AFP, Lisbon

Despite playing Thursday's Euro 2004 quarterfinal with hosts Portugal in the lions' den of the Stadium of Light, England will feel almost as if they are playing at home with more fans than their rivals, media reports said Wednesday.

"The English have snapped up most of the tickets for the game," sources daily A Bola quoted "official sources" as saying, adding many England supporters, with more purchasing power than their hosts, had trawled the Internet to bag any ticket still going for the sellout meeting.

A Bola suggested some of the tickets had come from fans of Spain, who Portugal knocked out of the event and who had bought their own allocation hoping their own team would make it to the last eight.

Portugal's Brazilian coach Luiz Felipe Scolari said he was not worried that fans of his team were likely to be out-shouted by their English counterparts, however.

"I would have hoped for the stadium to be 60 per cent full of Portuguese people.

"But even if we only have one fan in the stands up against 64,999 English I would still call on him to take us with all his heart and soul and shout out."

The level of interest in the match has been such that a massive queue formed early Tuesday afternoon outside the Portuguese football federation for the last 500 tickets officially available and by Wednesday the line of those who had endured an overnight vigil had stretched to some 200 metres (yards) long.

It has echoes of last year's rugby World Cup in Australia where England fans appeared to even outnumber Australian fans at the final in Sydney.

No problem if England win

AFP, Lisbon

David Beckham said on Wednesday he was prepared to accept the criticism of his form at Euro 2004 so long as England kept on winning - starting with eliminating hosts Portugal in Thursday's quarterfinal.

The 29-year-old Real Madrid star accepted it as a fact of life that he would receive criticism of his performances but he said it was secondary to England's progress in the tournament.

"I'm happy with my performances," said Beckham, who along with striker Michael Owen have been regarded as being below-par compared to the rest of the team as they reached the quarter-finals.

"However I'm a strong enough man to take the criticism.

"If they carry on that's fine so long as we carry on winning," added Beckham, who revealed he had full recovered from the ankle knock he received in the 4-2 victory over Croatia.

Beckham said that overall he thought England were in a much better state than when they reached the 2002 World Cup quarter-finals and ended up losing 2-1 to 10-man Brazil.

"What you saw in the first-half of the match with Croatia (4-2 victory on Monday) was our best performance.

"Despite going behind our attacking was excellent. Similarly against the French (a 2-1 defeat in injury-time after leading 1-0) our positional play was outstanding.

"We know its going to be tough against the Portuguese as they have been improving with every match but we are in a really good state and I have never known an English squad to be this united...our state of togetherness is amazing."

Scandinavians to the script

REUTERS, Oporto

Mattias Jonson's scrambled goal a minute from time earned Sweden 2-2 draw with Denmark that sent both Scandinavian rivals through to the Euro 2004 quarter-finals on Tuesday at the expense of Italy.

Italian conspiracy theories had suggested the two sides would set up the 2-2 draw that suited both but there was never any suggestion of that as the teams tore into each other in a full-blooded contest.

Sweden, Denmark and Italy all finished on five points in Group C, with the Swedes top on goals scored. Sweden play the Group D runners-up, Germany, the Netherlands or Latvia, in the last eight, while the Danes face the Czech Republic.

"Fantastic, fantastic, it's a feeling of joy that you just can't describe," said Sweden striker Henrik Larsson.

Denmark coach Morten Olsen was more subdued.

"Of course I'm pleased that we are through but one must also be critical," he said. "We did not play very good football tonight and a couple of players were not in the desired shape."

Sweden looked to be heading out of the tournament as Denmark led 2-1 thanks to two goals from striker Jon Dahl Tomasson.

The Swedes had already recovered once with a Larsson penalty, though, and were rewarded for their resilience when Jonson pounced on a loose ball to beat Thomas Sorensen from eight metres.

Both sets of fans cheered and danced as Sweden played keep-ball to close out the game and the two teams threw themselves skidding across the pitch to celebrate.

The game started in torrential

rain and the tackles flew in from both sides with the ball skidding around on a pitch that had already been watered.

Denmark worried their opponents continually with sharp balls through the middle and the fizzing runs of wingers Jesper Gronkjaer and Martin Joergensen.

Gronkjaer popped up to take Tomasson's pass on 14 minutes and fire a shot into the side netting.

With Sweden sitting deep, Denmark continued to attack and Tomasson claimed the opener just before the half-hour mark with a spectacular dipping shot from 20 metres.

Sweden nearly equalised twice at the end of the first half, with defender Olof Mellberg and midfielder Jonson both sending in dangerous headers from corners, and they were level within two minutes of the re-start through

Larsson.

The recently returned striker raced on to a ball in the penalty area and was brought down by Sorensen. Larsson then stepped up to score his third goal of the tournament.

Sweden enjoyed a period of dominance but outstanding goalkeeping by Sorensen kept Denmark in the game, and Tomasson's sharpness brought further reward after 66 minutes.

Substitute Kasper Bogelund had an effort half blocked by the defence and the ball fell straight to Tomasson who slipped a low shot past Isaksson from eight metres for his third goal at Euro 2004.

Denmark looked to be heading for the quarter-finals as group winners, holding on relatively comfortably before Jonson's late intervention.

Blanc, Tigana in contention

AFP, Paris

France have a short-list of three candidates to replace Jacques Santini who quits as coach after Euro 2004 to manage English Premiership club Tottenham.

French federation president Claude Simonet told L'Equipe sports daily they would not open official talks as long as France are in Euro 2004 -- they play Greece in the quarter-finals on Friday.

But he added: "Three out of half a dozen merit our consideration."

He refused to respond to L'Equipe's suggestion that Laurent Blanc and Jean Tigana were two candidates on the short-list.

But added: "I've seen Jean Tigana and Laurent Blanc because we met at the Euro but we did not talk about the post."

Media reports this week said Simonet met Blanc, who finished his career at Manchester United, former Fulham manager Tigana and former Liverpool manager Gerard Houllier in Portugal this week.

Houllier, sacked by Liverpool in May, was coach of the France team which failed to qualify for the 1994 World Cup when they lost to Bulgaria in their last qualifying match. He also coached Paris St Germain to the French league title in 1986.

Blanc has no coaching experience but Tigana, a member of France's fabulous midfield quartet in the 1980s with Michel Platini, has managed Lyon, Monaco and Fulham.

Santini applied for the Tottenham job when Simonet refused to extend his contract until he had seen how France did in Euro 2004.

Batigol returning to Europe?

AFP, Buenos Aires

Argentinian football great Gabriel Batistuta said Tuesday he was considering a move back to Europe and had received offers to play in England and Spain.

The 35-year-old brushed aside talk of retirement and admitted that he could be lured away from his two-year deal with Qatari league club Al-Arabi which he joined in August 2003 if the offer was right.

"The only thing I'm sure of is that I want to continue playing but I still don't know where," said the striker who holds the record for goalscoring exploits for the Argentine national side with 57 goals in 78 internationals.

"I've had some offers, one from England, one from Spain, which I have to study," he said without revealing the names of the clubs except to say they were "midtable".

"I still have another year in Qatar, but if one of the offers tempts me I won't return to Qatar."

Fiorentina, where Batistuta played from 1991 to 2000, have returned to Serie A but the striker said he had not yet received an offer from the Florence-based Italian club.

"If in the meantime I receive an offer from Fiorentina I'll examine it as well but for the moment the only sure thing is that I want to continue playing," he added.

He previously played for River Plate (1989-90), Boca Juniors (1990-91), Fiorentina (1991-2000), AS Roma (2000-January 2003) and Inter Milan (January 2003-June 2003).

Tomasson's heart cries for Italy

AFP, Oporto

Denmark striker Jon Dahl Tomasson believes Italy deserved to qualify for the quarter-finals of Euro 2004 instead of Sweden.

Tomasson, who plays club football for Italian giants AC Milan, did his best to carry his nation to victory over Sweden - a result that could have saved Italy - in their final Group C game by scoring twice but the Swedes clawed back to 2-2.

But the forward who has made massive strides since flopping at English Premiership side Newcastle was far from happy after accepting his man of the match award.

The 2-2 draw sent Italy crashing out of the tournament regardless of

the game - we shouldn't have given away the goal at the end."

Tomasson said he hoped Denmark would prove they were worthy of a place in the last eight when they face the impressive Czech Republic in Oporto on Sunday.

"I hope to show in our next match what Danish people like to see and that's great football."

Tomasson's first goal was a classic - a 20-metre right-footed volley that soared over the head of Sweden's keeper Andreas Isaksson who had advanced off his line.

"I didn't see him (Isaksson) coming out. I had a great ball from Ebbe Sand and just went for the shot."

Tomasson added his second in the 66th minute when he pounced on a deflection from Swedish midfielder Kim Kallstrom and scored from close range.

His contention that Italy and not Sweden were the second best team in the group drew a sharp retort from the man he beat twice in the Swedish goal.

"That's what he says but if you take a look at the group's results Sweden are number one," said Isaksson.

Greek travel agents' Euro

AFP, Athens

Greek travel agents were scrambling for aircraft to carry local football fans to Portugal ahead of their national team's Friday match against France in the European Football Championship quarter-finals.

"Travel agents are in a race against the clock. Some of them see it as their patriotic duty to get as many fans to Portugal as possible," said Anna Anifanti, an official with Greece's Travel Agents Union HATTA.

Up to 6,000 Greek fans will travel to Portugal after Greece secured an unprecedented surprise qualification in the tournament's first round.

But travel agents' efforts to get them there are hampered by the lack of airplanes in Greece.

KICKIN' AROUND

AFP, Lisbon

One fan in the crowd at the Sweden v Denmark match made his feelings clear about the controversial 2-2 draw that enabled both sides to reach the quarter-finals at the expense of furious Italy on Tuesday.

Long before Sweden's Mattias Jonson scored the crucial equaliser in the 88th minute, the fan was holding up a banner in English that read: "2-2 draw = nordic victory".

WOMAN BOOKIE ARRESTED IN MALAYSIA

Malaysian police have arrested a woman accused of illegal bookmaking as part of a crackdown on gambling during Euro 2004.

The 28-year-old woman was seized in the central Selangor state as she was taking bets on Monday's England v Croatia and France v Switzerland matches, district deputy police chief Zulkipli Bashir told AFP on Wednesday.

"Total bets amounted to 92,700 ringgit (24,400 dollars)," he said. Zulkipli said police seized betting slips, cash, mobile telephones and calculators.

Football gambling is banned in Malaysia, a mainly Muslim nation, but betting on English Premiership matches is rife.

THE BEST BANK!

A Bosnian bank offered a low-interest loan to its customers who correctly guess the winner of Euro 2004, an official said on Wednesday.

The Central Profit bank's lottery is open for Bosnians who apply for a loan by the end of the week. Along with the application the clients present their "bet," a bank clerk said.

The first thirty lucky winners will have their interest rates reduced from about 10 to 4.7 per cent this year, he said adding that a number of football-mad Bosnians have already applied.

"So far, France is dominating the bets," the clerk added.



THEY LOVE IT: Front pages of Swedish daily newspapers and sports sections yesterday, a day after Sweden and Denmark drew 2-2 in their group C match in Porto.

Lippi taking over?

AFP, Rome

Coach Giovanni Trapattoni will resign on Friday after Italy's exit from Euro 2004 and will be replaced by Marcello Lippi, the director of Gazzetta dello sport newspaper said.

Lippi's contract with Juventus officially finished on June 30 and he has already said he is leaving the Turin-based club.

Italy crashed out of the European championships in the first round despite beating Bulgaria 2-1 on Tuesday, two years after a premature exit from the 2002 World Cup when Trapattoni was also in charge.

Gazzetta chief Pietro Calabrese told Italian TV that Trapattoni would offer his resignation at a meeting of the Italian football federation in Rome on Friday and federation president Franco Carraro could follow suit although he may be persuaded to stay in his job.

'Pele one and only'

AFP, Alcochete

Portugal's Brazilian coach Luiz Felipe Scolari has dismissed England boss Sven-Goran Eriksson's comparison of Wayne Rooney with Pele as fatuous.

As the tension mounts ahead of Portugal's quarter-final clash with England in Lisbon on Thursday, Scolari acknowledged Wayne Rooney's massive contribution to England's Euro 2004 campaign but said the 18-year-old could not be compared to the world's greatest ever player.

"He is a great player and we admire him. But Pele was unique," said Scolari, having first joked that the main difference between the two players was that

"one is white whereas the other is black!"

Eriksson said that after Rooney took his goal tally to four with a second consecutive double strike in the 4-2 win over Croatia, he could not think of any player having such an impact at a major event since 17-year-old Pele won the World Cup with Brazil in 1958.

But Scolari said Pele was peerless.

"In 1,000 years you won't have another Pele, not even in a computer game.

"Rooney has turned in some fine performances. But he is just one cog in a great team," Scolari told reporters at Portugal's training camp south of Lisbon.

"But I respect them now just as I did in Korea and Japan."

Portugal will go up against England's beefy teenaged goal machine when the two nations meet at the Stadium of Light looking for a place in the semi-finals.

Having plotted England's downfall at the same stage two years in the World Cup in Japan on the way to taking Brazil to glory, Scolari said Portugal's ability to break England down would be the key to the contest.

"They are well organised and well-drilled team. They have great players... and we must neutralise them," said Scolari.

"The English system is very different from Spain's."

"But I respect them now just as I did in Korea and Japan."