



PHOTO: AFP
RUUD AWAKENING! Latvian goalkeeper Aleksandrs Kolinko (L) fails to prevent a header from Dutch ace Ruud Van Nistelrooy (C) going in at Braga on June 23.

A Dutch piece of cake

REUTERS, Braga

In the end the Dutch made qualifying for the Euro 2004 quarter-finals look easy.

Their emphatic 3-0 win over Latvia coupled with Germany's 2-1 defeat by a second-string Czech Republic side meant the Netherlands qualified for the knockout stages two points clear of their arch-rivals.

Group D was always going to end with at least one of its three former champions failing to qualify but was a canter for the Czechs who won all three matches, the only one of the 16 finalists to do that.

While the Czechs finished with nine points, the Dutch ended on four, Germany two and Latvia, outplayed but not discredited overall.

Now, if it is possible for them, the Dutch could even enjoy the next few days and much vilified coach Dick Advocaat can continue to be the butt of his countrymen's joke for a while longer.

"Let's Go Home Dick" and "Dick Does Your Wife Still Understand You?" were two of the more polite messages on Dutch banners at Braga's spectacular rock-face stadium hewn out of an old quarry.

Advocaat probably needs a

rock-hard mentality to see off the continual jibes from fans and the Dutch media over his selection policies and tactics.

But on Wednesday he got it all right and the Dutch can now prepare in relative peace and calm for their quarter-final against Sweden in Faro on Saturday.

The Dutch are world class at infighting and arguing, a trait that tends to get in the way of their footballing talents but when they do play well they have the ability to beat almost anyone.

It is not inconceivable that they can win this tournament, but while that is probably a step too far, a semi-final place is a realistic ambition for Advocaat's team of talented individuals.

Ruud van Nistelrooy has long been regarded as one of Europe's top strikers and his two goals against Latvia meant he pulled level at the top of the tournament scoring chart with England's Wayne Rooney on four goals.

Roxy Makaay, who would probably be an automatic first choice in any other team, added another after coming on as a substitute, but the Dutch drive was fuelled by the turbo-charged contributions of Arjen Robben down one flank and Andriy van der Meijde on the other.

With Edgar Davids' piston engine motoring away in midfield,

the Dutch steam-rolled their way over Latvia, and could have won by a far bigger margin but for an outstanding performance by Latvian goalkeeper Aleksandrs Kolinko.

The Netherlands have now reached the knockout stage for the fifth successive European Championship, in contrast to Germany who have been eliminated in the group stage at the last two.

There are many similarities between the Germans and the Dutch, fuelling a fierce rivalry which on the football field, at least, dates back to West Germany's victory in the 1974 World Cup final.

But while the Dutch have pulled themselves together and reached the knockout stage after drawing 1-1 with the Germans and losing 3-2 to the Czechs, the Germans are on their way home.

These might be nervous, worrying times for Dutch football and their fans, but at least they are having a better time of it than the Germans.

If reaching the quarter-finals is one thing to make them happy, Germany's failure to do so should be another.

A happy Dutch camp might be something of a rarity, but surely even they will be delighted at reaching the last eight.

Absorbing so far

REUTERS, Lisbon

Euro 2004 got off to a flying start with Greece's upset 2-1 win over host Portugal and the tournament has not looked back since.

The group stage has produced surprise results, positive football, the emergence of precocious young talent and one of the all-time classic matches.

Even Portugal, viewing from the safety of quarter-final qualification, might now be able to appreciate the wholehearted display by Greece, who were never overawed, played with a fierce resolve and set the tone for the rest of the first round.

Tournament debutants Latvia picked up the baton when they led the Czech Republic and although eventually losing 2-1 they go home with heads high having fielded three-times winners Germany to a goalless draw.

Henrik Larsson had the chance to complete a dream return to the big time two years after retiring when, having scored twice in two minutes, the first a classic diving header, Sweden were awarded a penalty against Bulgaria.

With a hat-trick beckoning Larsson chose to share the glory and insisted his strike partner Zlatan Ibrahimovic took the kick, which he did successfully to help the Swedes to a 5-0 win.

Ibrahimovic was to the fore again in Sweden's second game, his spectacular mid-air back-heel earning his side a vital 1-1 draw with Italy who had played brilliantly for an hour.

Italy goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon, reduced to flailing by Ibrahimovic's execution, left the pitch smiling, arm in arm with the striker in a nice display of cross-border camaraderie.

A week later, however, the Swedes had become his worst enemy as he sourly accused them of collusion with Denmark in the 2-2 Scandinavian derby draw that sent the Italians out.

Tournaments always throw up special individual talents and though the qualities of Wayne Rooney and Cristiano Ronaldo were well known to their club fans, they have now won millions of new admirers.

Despite his two-goal performance in England's 3-0 win over Switzerland, 18-year-old Rooney's real international arrival came against Croatia when he drilled an explosive shot that knocked goalkeeper Tomislav Butina's arm aside before crashing into the net.

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though comparisons with a young Pele might be over the top, Rooney has certainly earned his place in the spotlight as has Ronaldo.

Spain fullback Raul Bravo was left looking like an amateur as Ronaldo, the ball glued to his foot more impressively than in any computer-generated TV commercial, unleashed his extraordinary bag of tricks to help the hosts to an historic 1-0 win over their neighbours.

Other more established names have furthered their already considerable reputations.

Zinedine Zidane has risen to the occasion as usual, turning defeat into victory with two injury-time goals for France in their 2-1 win over England, while Ruud van Nistelrooy conjured an acrobatic goal to earn the Dutch a 1-1 draw with Germany, the first of his four at Euro 2004.

The match of the tournament was undoubtedly in Aveiro where the Czech Republic fought back from 2-0 down to beat the Netherlands 3-2.

The scoreline barely tells the story of a stream of wonderful attacking football played at a relentless pace as both teams found myriad ways to advance, only to be foiled by superb goalkeeping displays from Petr Cech and Edwin van der Sar.

There were almost 40 goal attempts, including Czech midfielder Pavel Nedved's astonishing 30-metre thunderbolt that almost shattered the goalframe two minutes from time.

The Dutch can possibly look back and enjoy it now having also qualified alongside the consistently impressive Czechs and for those in the stands it was a privilege to watch.

The game's tendency to produce dramatic swings in emotion, epitomised by Italy forward Antonio Cassano's joy at scoring the winner against Bulgaria only to discover moments later his team had failed to reach the quarter-finals, has been matched by its ability to help heal far more serious wounds.

Jesper Gronkjaer missed Denmark's opening game to spend time with his dying mother then returned to score in their victory over Bulgaria, his tearful celebration already an enduring image of the tournament.

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Not big enough to take it

APP, Lisbon

Italy's failure to accept that the 2-2 draw between Sweden and Denmark was a fair result perhaps says more about the current paranoid state of Italian football than it does about the Euro 2004 tournament.

Several top players and the president of the Italian football federation (FIGC) believe the Danes and the Swedes colluded to get the high-scoring draw that enabled them both to qualify for the quarter-finals at Italy's expense.

FIGC president Franco Carraro pulled no punches after Italy's campaign was ended after just three matches and stopped short of the knockout stages.

"There are no doubts in my mind that these two teams were trying for the draw, but obviously this is difficult to prove," he said after Italy's 2-1 victory over Bulgaria had proved futile.

Goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon also questioned the morality of Denmark and Sweden after the two Scandinavians produced the one result Italy feared the most.

"It was a shameful way they qualified," said the Juventus star, the world's most expensive goalkeeper.

"I'm shocked because these two nations have a reputation for being fair."

"We Italians are forever pointing out our own faults, but there are other nations who are even worse."

Italy team manager Gigi Riva was equally suspicious of the outcome of the all-Scandinavian clash that resulted in third-placed finish for the Azzurri.

"There are those who say Italian football is particularly prone to conspiracies, but other federations are just as bad, if not worse," said the former Italy star, who scored 35 goals in 42 appearances for the Azzurri.

"They (Denmark and Sweden) produced a great acting performance, pretending to be happy when taking the lead, yet always conceding an equaliser."

Italy's rage was similarly undignified following their shock second-round defeat to South Korea at the 2002 World Cup.

Italy's reaction to their exits in the last two tournaments appears to reflect the country's mindset that has established itself in their domestic league for years.

Almost every season is tarnished with allegations of bribery or match-fixing and every controversial incident meticulously scrutinised with television replays to see if anything untoward might have happened.

World's finest knee!

REUTERS, Sintra

Less than 12 hours after watching from the substitutes' bench as his team mates secured a third successive Euro 2004 victory, Pavel Nedved returned to training with his usual relish on Thursday.

Jogging, sprinting, turning and diving, he showed no signs of fatigue or the slight knee injury that persuaded the Czech Republic's coach Karel Brueckner to rest him from the 2-1 victory over Germany.

He said Nedved's knees were both the same and that this explained his running style and his ability to retain control of the ball so adeptly in many tight situations.



PHOTO: AFP

MIND THE KNEE! Czech superstar Pavel Nedved flies over teammate Marek Jankulovsky during a training session in Sintra near Lisbon yesterday.

'Give me the job'

AFP, Berlin

Former Bayern Munich manager Ottmar Hitzfeld said he was ready to step into the shoes of Rudi Voller as German national coach just hours after the former Roma striker resigned from his post in the wake of the disastrous Euro 2004 exit.

Voller, 44, felt he was not the right man to guide Germany to the 2006 World Cup to be held on home soil after Wednesday's 2-1 defeat by the Czech Republic saw the three-time European champions limp out of the Portugal finals without a win to their name.

Hitzfeld has long been touted as a future chief of the German team and his release by Bayern at the end of the season - following a trophyless campaign - appears to have paved the way.

"I was coach at Borussia Dortmund and Bayern Munich so after the resignation of Voller it would be a logical step for me to be German national coach," Hitzfeld informed newspaper *Die Welt* on Thursday.

"Of course I will speak to DBF president Gerhard Mayer Vorfelder. He is a friend of mine after bringing me to VfB Stuttgart as a player."

Mayer Vorfelder admitted 55-year-old Hitzfeld was one of the contenders to take over the reins.

"It is clear that the name of Ottmar Hitzfeld will figure in our thinking," said Vorfelder. "But I am not willing to sit here and run through a list of candidates."

While Hitzfeld has put himself

forward for the role he acknowledged there were doubts about returning to a high-profile post so soon.

"It would be an honour to be German national boss but I have to do some thinking," admitted Hitzfeld. "After leaving Bayern I wanted to take time to get away from football."

Franz Beckenbauer, Bayern president and coach of the 1990 German World Cup-winning team, believes Hitzfeld is the only choice.

"It will be difficult to find a successor as there are no magicians," said Beckenbauer. "But looking forward to the 2006 World Cup there is only one man who can guide Germany - Ottmar Hitzfeld."

Hitzfeld knows all about the qualities of players in the German national team with Michael Ballack, Bastian Schweinsteiger, Jens Jeremies and Oliver Kahn all playing under him at Bayern.

Greece's German coach Otto Rehhagel, who has guided the nation to the quarter-finals of Euro 2004 for the first time in their history, is the other name to emerge, but a firm outsider.

Rehhagel was known as 'King Otto' after winning two German championships, two German Cups and the UEFA Cup with Werder Bremen and has elevated his status to near royalty in Greece after this triumph.

"I would like to take a post with less pressure," Hitzfeld said on leaving Bayern.

A former maths teacher, Hitzfeld won two domestic championships at Dortmund (1996, 1997) and four German titles at

KICKIN' AROUND

Japan and South Korea, state-owned enterprises and state agencies had to let their employees watching games at work to avoid massive absenteeism.

This time, all games happen at night and some foreign companies complain about a very low efficiency among local staff.

"A good or bad performance by their favorite team could cause stress," VNA says. "Getting out of bed late and driving too fast to work the morning after is (also) a potentially fatal risk."

TAKE THAT!

Rome

Eggs of vengeance were thrown at

In 2002, for the World Cup in



PHOTO: AFP
HIS TIME WILL COME: An absolutely distraught German striker Kevin Kuranyi walks past some celebrating Czech players in Lisbon on June 23.

Sunshine tomorrow?

AFP, Almancil

German football is at a low ebb after the national side exited Euro 2004 and coach Rudi Voller resigned, but Voller claimed on Thursday there was cause for optimism ahead of the 2006 World Cup.

"It is a lot better than a few years ago, with a lot of young players showing promise," added Voller.

"Kuranyi and Podolski are talented but lack the killer instinct in front of goal but they have learned that," said Voller.

"There are a few players who go home as winners despite our defeat, such as Lahm and Schweinsteiger."

Immediately after the match, comparisons were drawn with the European championships four years ago when Erich Ribbeck was dismissed after Germany only scored once and failed to taste victory in the Netherlands and Belgium.

"It was not like the debacle four years ago but we are going home nevertheless," bemoaned Voller. "But I must stress that German football is not on the same low it was four years ago."

First round exits in successive European championships is not something three-time World Cup winners Germany are accustomed to and the pressure is building not to flop at the World Cup on home soil.

Borussia Dortmund, missing through injury, along with Bayern's Sebastian Deisler - still recovering from a bout of depression - would also