



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, one.

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 jokes 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.

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

With Edgar Davids's 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 hosts 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 held 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.

He added another goal as England won 4-2 to advance and

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.

In Lisbon, the site where England fan Stephen Smith was stabbed and killed in an apparent robbery attempt has been turned into an international shrine draped with scarves and colours of a dozen competing nations united in grief and respect.

Not big enough to take it

AFP, 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 the 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 is 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 Bruckner to rest him from the 2-1 victory over Germany.

and it explained why he had a loping, almost shuffling, running style.

"We only really found out about this when he went to Italy and that began to be examined by the Italian doctors," he explained. "Before that, I don't think anyone really noticed at all."

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.

As he joined in the exercises with nine other senior players in front of a loyal band of Czech supporters, there was no evidence that he was any different to the other 22 men in the squad.

But, according to team doctor Petr Krejci, he is unique, the only man he knows whose kneecap is split into three different parts.

"Most people have a single piece of bone to make their kneecap," Krejci told Reuters on Thursday. "One per cent of people have two parts, but three parts. Only Nedved."

He said Nedved's unique knee was known as a patella tri-partitia

As to Nedved's fitness at Euro 2004, he said the Czechs' captain and midfield inspiration had complained of a slight soreness and pain, mostly due to an operation he underwent six years ago to tidy up one of the kneecaps.

Nedved is the European Footballer of the Year and joined Juventus from Lazio in 2001, having first moved to the Roman club from Sparta Prague in 1996.

He celebrated 10 years as an international this month and has emerged as not only one of the Czech Republic's greatest players, but also one of the most dynamic in the tournament.

Premiership 2004/05

Sell-out first up



AFP, London

New Chelsea manager Jose Mourinho faces a daunting introduction to the Premiership against Manchester United at Stamford Bridge in the opening fixture of the 2004/5 Premiership season on August 14.

Arsenal kick off the defence of their title against Everton, Sky Sports said Thursday.

Sir Alex Ferguson's side will hope to erase all memories of their last visit to Stamford Bridge where they lost 1-0 in the corresponding fixture last season through a Frank Lampard penalty.

Chelsea, then coached by Claudio Ranieri, eventually finished ahead of United in the Premiership and Ferguson will be eager to give Mourinho a baptism of fire.

Mourinho, who replaced Ranieri, got the better of Ferguson when his former side Porto knocked United out of the UEFA Champions League last season, winning in Portugal and drawing at Old Trafford.

There is no love lost between Mourinho and Ferguson, who were engaged in a bitter public spat after United's exit.

United fans will vividly remember the Portuguese coach dancing on the sidelines after his team scored a last minute goal at Old Trafford to seal the fate of Ferguson's side.

Mourinho will also be disappointed that his new side will be forced to finish the season with a tough looking fixture -- away to Sir Bobby Robson's Newcastle.

The Portuguese coach learnt his management skills under Robson as his assistant at Sporting Lisbon, Porto and Barcelona.

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger will meanwhile be fearful that his team's unbeaten streak in the Premiership could come to a sticky end at Goodison Park on August 14.

The match will be high-profile encounter if England hero Wayne Rooney is still playing for Everton.

It is a repeat of the fixture in

October 2002, when Rooney became the youngest player to score in the Premiership.

If the Gunners can overcome the Toffees then the defending champions will have to wait until the October 23 visit to Old Trafford before they meet any of their likely title contenders.

Arsenal visit Tottenham and Liverpool in November before Chelsea visit Highbury on December 11.

Manchester United have home fixtures against Norwich and Everton to follow the trip to Chelsea.

The Gunners wind up their season on May 14 with a trip to Birmingham.

United finish the season at Southampton.

Newly-promoted Norwich celebrate their return to the top flight with a home clash against fellow new boys Crystal Palace, before testing consecutive fixtures against Manchester United, Newcastle and Arsenal.

West Brom, who finished runners-up to the Canaries in Division One last season, open at Blackburn -- the 5-1 conquerors of newly-promoted Wolves in the opening fixture last term.

Tottenham manager Jacques Santini will have the chance to make an early impression with Spurs fans in an eagerly anticipated opening day home clash with Liverpool, who will be led by their own new boss Rafael Benitez.

Santini then faces a trip to Newcastle and then West Brom before playing Birmingham at home.

After his trip to Spurs, Benitez will take charge of his first game at Anfield against Manchester City, before another home clash with Portsmouth.

Newcastle visit Middlesbrough for a Tyne-Tees derby on the opening day.

Aston Villa will open the new campaign against Southampton, while their Midland rivals Birmingham travel to Portsmouth.

Bolton host Charlton and Manchester City welcome Fulham.

'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 trophy-less campaign - appears to have paved the way.

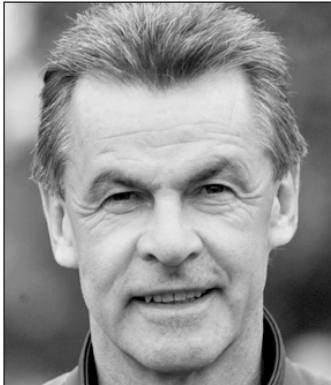
"I was coach at Borussia Dortmund and Bayern Munich so after the resignation of Voller it would be a logical step for me to be German national coach," Hitzfeld informed newspaper Die Welt on Thursday.

"Of course I will speak to DFB 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



OTTMAR HITZFELD

The intense media glare at Bayern was something Hitzfeld wanted to get away from but it will be doubled should he take over as German national coach.

"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

Bayern (1999, 2000, 2001, 2003) and is regarded as one of the finest ever coaches in German football.

He is the only manager to win the Champions League at two different clubs with Dortmund in 1997 and Bayern in 2001.

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 man who can guide Germany - Ottmar Hitzfeld."

"Without putting pressure on Mayer Vorfelder I would say he would be the logical choice. He is the best coach available to the national team and is not under contract."

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 is 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.



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.

A 2-1 defeat by a second-string Czech side in Lisbon on Wednesday saw 2002 World Cup finalists Germany leave Portugal without a win to their name after scoring just two goals in three matches.

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."

"We had four under-21 players playing against the Czechs and the future is not bleak."

Bayern Munich midfielder Bastian Schweinsteiger, 19, VfB

Stuttgart's Philipp Lahm, 21, Lukas Podolski of Cologne, 18, and Kevin Kuranyi, 22, all took part against the Czechs to offer a ray of hope for two years' time when Germany hosts the 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 can learn that."

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

Lahm, on loan at Stuttgart from Bayern Munich, was one of the positives with his marauding runs down the left flank exciting the German followers in Portugal.

Schweinsteiger was also a breath of fresh air with his energy and enthusiasm setting him apart from many of the older, more established stars, who failed to deliver.

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.

KICKIN' AROUND

AFP, Hanoi

State media in soccer-mad Vietnam has warned football fans staying up late to watch the Euro 2004 football championship could lead to psychological and digestive disorders, state media said Thursday.

"Staying up overnight and working the next day could exhaust watchers, making them lose their appetite," said the Vietnam News Agency.

"Shouting, screaming and yelling will hurt their throat, leading even to bronchitis," it added.

Football is by far the most popular sport in Vietnam.

In 2002, for the World Cup in

Eggs of vengeance were thrown at