



SOLITUDE IS THE ANSWER: A heart-broken Sweden fans sits in the stands after her team's exit from the Euro 2004.

Swedish grace

AFP, Stockholm

A Swedish sense of fair play was evident in Sunday's press coverage of the national team's nail-biting Euro 2004 quarter-final penalty shootout defeat by the Netherlands.

"Penalties brought Sweden down," said Dagens Nyheter's front-page headline, underneath a large photograph showing the fatal moment when Dutch keeper Edwin van der Sar saved a penalty kick by Swedish captain Olof Mellberg, the second Swede to miss, after Zlatan Ibrahimovic.

Dagens Nyheter said it was 'unlucky' that Sweden went down this way, especially after Henrik Larsson and Freddie Ljungberg hit the post and the crossbar during extra time, which ended 0-0, forcing the penalty shootout, which the Dutch won 5-4.

Instead of attributing blame, Dagens Nyheter thanked Mellberg "for everything you and the team have given us this (Saturday) evening and this summer".

Svenska Dagbladet hailed the match as "an unbelievable thriller" and praised the Dutch goalkeeper for his save of Mellberg's penalty,

calling van der Sar "the Dutch wizard between the goalposts".

Swedish tabloids also kept their disappointment under control, with Aftonbladet, with just a hint of criticism, saying Zlatan Ibrahimovic missed because he was "psyched out" by the intensity of the match.

Expressen, generously, said "Thank you, boys, for a match that we will never forget", adding that this included the unlucky Zlatan, who just over a week ago was a hero for his extraordinary equaliser in the 1-1 draw with Italy.

Zidane taking time

AFP, Paris

France's two-time world footballer of the year Zinedine Zidane said on Sunday he hadn't made up his mind as to whether he would retire from international football following his country's disappointing defence of their European title.

The 32-year-old told French TV station TF1 he would need more time but after another failed campaign to defend a title by France and with a new manager set to replace the departed Jacques Santini there would inevitably be changes to personnel - with immediate effect.

Zidane like several of his fellow World Cup and Euro 2000 winning team-mates seemed a shadow of the player that he once was and was virtually anonymous in the shock 1-0 defeat by Greece in the quarter-final match on Friday.

This has led to much speculation as to who of the 'golden generation' will stay or retire with captain Marcel Desailly at 35 and clearly on the wane looking certain to play his 117th and last match for Les Bleus against his country of birth, Ghana, in August in Rennes.

However Zidane like his former Bordeaux team-mate Bixente Lizarazu said he had not made up his mind yet.

"It is necessary to let the disappointment of the defeat pass, to digest it," said Zidane, whose injury during the 2002 World Cup finals played a large part in their limp defence of that title.

"It is true that is a lot to take, with the World Cup, the Euro... we will see, I don't know yet.

"At a certain point one must know it is time to change the personnel.

"It is of course imperative something changes and to change it one cannot wait till six months before the 2006 World Cup finals.

"I have not decided yet, I do not know what I am going to do. I will think about it and afterwards we will see."

Zidane, who like fellow Real superstars David Beckham, Luis Figo and Raul have underperformed at Euro reflecting the dreadful slump their Spanish side had endured from January onwards, said regarding the new coach he had a favourite but was not going to reveal who it was.

The favoured two candidates at the moment - though there are nine applicants - are former midfielder great Jean Tigana, who coached Monaco to the 1997 title, and Zidane's fellow World Cup and Euro winning team-mate Laurent Blanc.

"I have my preference but I will keep it to myself," said the ever discreet playmaker.

Hitzfeld setback?

AFP, Hamburg

Germany's search for a successor to Rudi Voller suffered an unexpected blow on Sunday when the hot favourite for the job former Bayern Munich coach Ottmar Hitzfeld said he was far from certain to take it.

The 55-year-old said he was less than a 50 percent chance to take over the German national side as his wife wanted the former mathematics professor to do something else.

"There is less than a 50 percent chance that I will succeed him," the coach known as the 'Gentleman' told Sunday newspaper Welt am Sonntag.

"My wife would be delighted that I do something else," added Hitzfeld, who is the only coach to have won the Champions League with two different teams, Borussia Dortmund (1997) and Bayern Munich (2001).

Hitzfeld, who had said earlier in the week he would like to coach the team after Voller stepped down when the 2002 World Cup finalists went out of Euro 2004 in the first round, also said if he were to take up the challenge it would come with a condition.

"If I do it, I will do it only if I have Michael Henke (who has been his deputy since 1991) as my assistant," said Hitzfeld.

The cooling of interest by Hitzfeld, who won two domestic championships at Dortmund (1996, 1997) and four at Bayern (1999, 2000, 2001, 2003), follows Greek coach Otto Rehhagel's declining to even be considered as a candidate.

However for 44-year-old Voller, Hitzfeld is the logical choice.

"Ottmar is because of his success, his experience, his status and his style, a very good and logical solution for the national team," said Voller, who was in charge of the team for four years.

"As coach of the national side, you must protect your team at all times even after defeats, which was not possible after Euro 2004," added the World Cup winning striker.

Santini attacks players

AFP, Paris

Jacques Santini launched an astonishing attack on the French squad on Saturday blaming them for France's failure to defend their European title successfully following the shock 1-0 defeat by Greece on Friday.

In his final press conference as national coach before taking over ailing Premiership side Spurs the 52-year-old accused the players of taking advantage of his being too nice to them which was just about the only thing he accepted responsibility for.

Santini, who had guided France to a 21 match unbeaten streak till the Greeks rudely dumped them out of the tournament.

Santini, who had a distinguished playing career as a midfielder being capped by France and played in the 1975 European Cup final for St Etienne against Bayern Munich, rejected suggestions he had damaged morale by announcing before the tournament he was leaving - instead it was the players who got the blame.

"There were maybe players who by the time they got here had already moved on from the era of

relaxed a manner or saying we were too good.

"In order to justify our favourite's tag we had to be really strong on top of our technical game, and that was what let us down in all four matches.

"And of course several players did not play to their normal level."

Clearly he had among others Marcel Desailly in mind, though his selection of him in the 2-2 draw with Croatia upset Bixente Lizarazu and almost cost the French the match.

"My choice visavis Marcel was always clear," said Santini.

back of delivering Lyon their first title.

"We knew that to go further we needed to be more competitive than we had been in the previous matches. I think the squad had the necessary elements to achieve that but against Greece we only played properly for 45 minutes and that was not enough," added the former French international.

Santini said he had not noticed as some observers had several of the players smiling after the final whistle had gone on their Euro campaign.

"If some people saw the players



PHOTO: AFP

THE JOURNEY HAS ENDED: French coach Jacques Santini sits in the team's coach as he leaves the Sidney Hotel in Santo Tirso, near Porto, northern Portugal on June 26.

"I tried to protect the squad by not bawling them out in public," said Santini, who took over from the hapless Roger Lemerre after the debacle of the defence of their world crown in the 2002 World Cup.

"Why did I ignore the reality of what was happening on the pitch? Because I am like that.

"Like one says I was too nice and they betrayed me by taking advantage of that.

"I am going to say what happened, if the players wish too then they can."

"I thought that when we got into the knockout stages the players experience would tell but instead I think after we beat Germany 3-0 in a warm-up match that several of them became complacent," added

Santini," said the former Lyon coach, alluding to the fact several players didn't really care how they played as he wasn't going to be around afterwards.

When asked had the team lacked leadership against the Greeks especially when they went 1-0 down in the 65th minute he declined to answer save to smile indicating he believed there had been no-one prepared to pull the team together.

Santini put a large part of their failure to go any further down to the lack of technical skills of the players.

"I have not been able to pin anything down as a reason in the few hours I have had to think about it.

"We did not come here in too

"I never told him he was a replacement. The fact he had not played in all the lead-up matches meant there had to be changes in the squad.

"His absence from the starting line-up in the last friendly against Ukraine was down to a specific thing of which I will not elaborate on. He can if he wishes," added Santini, who along with Desailly during the week leading up to the opening match with England had claimed the 35-year-old had a mysterious knee injury.

Santini said the team had lacked a competitive edge to it which was not just down to fatigue.

"Fatigue is not the sole preserve of French players," said Santini, who got the job on the

smiling that is their problem.

"I don't function like that. After the match I got the players and the staff together to speak to them. That is human nature which I attach a lot of importance to," he said.

As to whether the French could rebound from losing the title in time for the qualifiers for the 2006 World Cup finals Santini said they had to regroup quickly.

"Maybe they will bounce back.

"But they will have to do it quickly because the qualifiers for the 2006 World Cup start in two months (they have Ireland in their group).

"I do not know if it is the end of a generation but the squad has a lot of potential."

Becks on the brink

AFP, London

David Beckham has given a rare insight into the "intolerable" strains created by media intrusion into his private life and hinted that they could force him to quit Real Madrid.

Speaking candidly after England's quarter-final exit from Euro 2004, Beckham said he would be forced to "take a long look," at his situation if his two young boys, who are due to join him in Madrid this summer, are not spared the intense scrutiny that follows their father's every move.

"The intrusion and the invasion into my life is tough because I've got children and I want them to enjoy their lives but people will just say 'why's he complaining?'," the England captain said.

"I'm not complaining but of course it's tough. It's tough on any family."

Asked if the level of media attention he received had become intolerable, Beckham replied: "I think it's reached that a few times this year because the move to Spain is a new environment, people are not used to me there. In Manchester I was able to go to the Trafford (shopping) Centre and walk around with my family.

"That's not possible in Spain. I can't go out of my front door and people know that."

The media's fascination with Beckham, his pop-star wife Victoria and sons Brooklyn and Romeo reached new levels earlier this year when the player, who moved from Manchester United to Madrid in July 2003 while his family remained in England, was reported to have had an affair with his former personal assistant, Rebecca Loos.

Beckham denied the claims but has not taken any legal action against newspapers which published them.

Shortly after the reports emerged, it was announced that Victoria and the two boys would be moving to Madrid this summer, killing speculation Beckham would return to play for Chelsea in his native London in order to save his marriage.

"I had them around me more than people realised last season," Beckham said. "My wife was there most of the time apart from when Brooklyn was at school. It's always nice to be with your family and we finally have got Brooklyn in a school.

"One of the reasons why Brooklyn didn't go in a school was because of the press attention. I was told by (fellow Real star Zinedine) Zidane that his children were in school and for the first two months there were people filming his kids in the playground.

"I'm personally not prepared to put my children in that situation. If that's the situation I will take a long look at it. I'm very protective over my children.

"People say I do photo-shoots with my children. I've never done

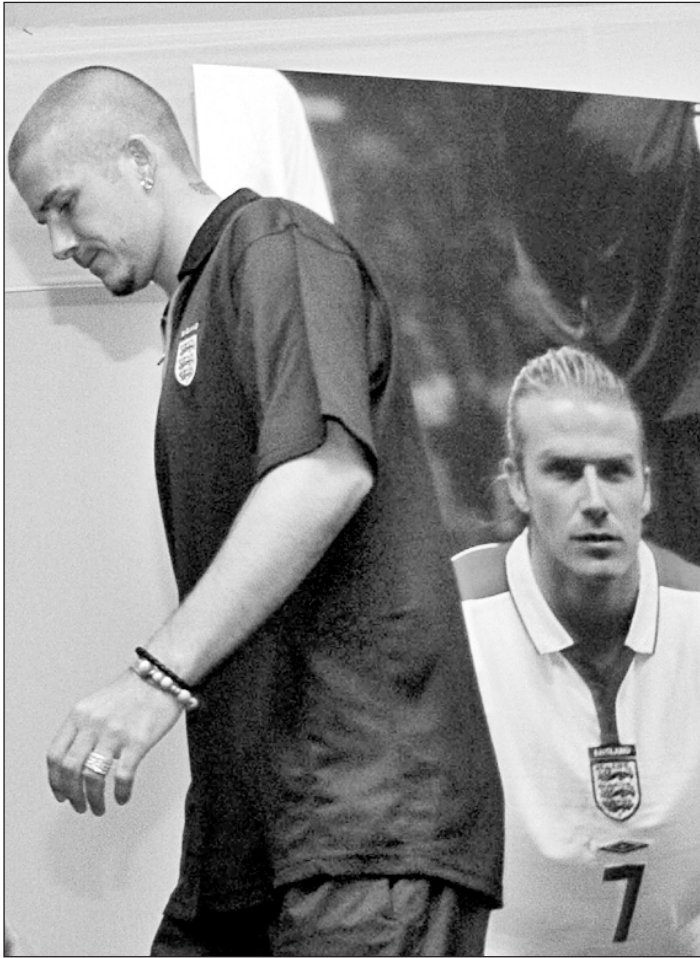


PHOTO: AFP

AN IMAGE TOO BIG LARGE FOR COMFORT! England captain David Beckham passes a poster of himself as he leaves a press conference in Lisbon on June 25.