



Ukrainian players sweating it out during a training session in Potsdam on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP

Superbuehler silences critics

REUTERS, Hanover

Switzerland's Pascal Zuberbuehler was delighted to prove his critics wrong on Friday, after becoming the only unbeaten goalkeeper in the World Cup's opening group stage.

Zuberbuehler, 32, kept a third successive clean sheet during Switzerland's 2-0 win over South Korea to help send his team into the second round as surprise Group G winners ahead of former world champions France.

It completed a remarkable turnaround for the FC Basel keeper, who just weeks ago was facing a media campaign by Switzerland's best-selling tabloid paper calling for him to be dropped from the starting line-up.

Highly critical of Zuberbuehler during Switzerland's nerve-jangling World Cup qualifying campaign, the same newspaper has subsequently renamed the keeper 'Superbuehler'.

"I don't need to answer the critics," Zuberbuehler said after the game. "I have given my reply on the pitch."

Zuberbuehler's impeccable record at the tournament so far has certainly been helped by an impressive Swiss back line with young Arsenal centre back Philippe Senderos and Zuberbuehler's experienced Basel team-mate Patrick Mueller forming a particularly effective partnership.

Zuberbuehler had to be alert on Friday to deal with a string of close-range strikes from a Korean side desperate for the win that would have kept them in the competition.

"I'm proud of the team and above all I'm proud of us reaching the second round," Zuberbuehler added. "But being the only keeper to have not let in a goal is certainly a bonus."

Having previously denied France's Thierry Henry and Togo's Emmanuel Adebayor, Zuberbuehler will next be testing his reflexes against Andriy Shevchenko when the Swiss meet Ukraine in Monday's second round match.

"I have always said that once you get to the second round then anything is possible," Switzerland's new national hero said before getting on the team bus.

"You always need a bit of luck in football but those three clean sheets didn't come from nowhere and we still have more to show at this World Cup."

Wicky doubly motivated

FIFA WORLD CUP.COM

There is more than one reason Switzerland midfielder Raphael Wicky wants to beat Ukraine in the Round of 16 in Cologne on Monday night.

The 29-year-old plays his club football for Hamburg, the venue for a quarterfinal tie which will feature the winners of Monday's games featuring the Swiss against Ukraine, and Italy and Australia who meet in Kaiserslautern.

"To play in Hamburg would be brilliant," said Wicky. "There would be a lot of fans."

Frei the big cheese

AFP, Hanover

Switzerland coach Kobi Kuhn is tipping the in-form Alexander Frei to be the big cheese amongst the goalscorers at the World Cup.

The 26-year-old, the former bad boy of Swiss football who was sent home in disgrace from the 2004 Euro Championships for spitting at England's Steven Gerrard, has netted twice in Switzerland's march to the last 16.

The want-away Rennes striker netted Switzerland's first goal in the 2-0 victory over Togo and caused uproar amongst the South Korean players when he slid the ball home from a suspiciously offside position in the Group G crunch match on Friday.

Frei has recently recovered from injury and Kuhn is delighted that the striker, who has now scored 27 goals for Switzerland, is peaking at the World Cup.

"He has come back well after a long injury," said 62-year-old Kuhn. "He had two games with Rennes and then joined the national squad"

which gave him the opportunity to come back into form.

"I think he can score more goals in the competition. Whether or not he will be the best of the strikers, I do not know, but there is a chance."

Kuhn, whose popularity has skyrocketed since he led Switzerland through a tough World Cup qualifying group, was also full of praise for his stingy defence which has yet to concede a goal at the World Cup.

He singled out Pascal Zuberbuehler who has silenced his critics with three clean sheets making him the only goalkeeper not to concede a goal in the first round.

"No goals scored against us in three matches - I am grateful to the defence and goalie," said the silver-haired Kuhn.

"Pascal (Zuberbuehler) is the only keeper not to have had a goal scored against him in the World Cup."

"If I did not think he could play well (for us) I would not have made him my number one goalkeeper for the World Cup."

Kuhn added that the players were growing in confidence and there was a belief that they could beat Ukraine and advance to the quarterfinals.

"We have a very strong opponent to play in the next round but we are confident enough in ourselves to say it will be possible to advance to the last eight," he said.

Switzerland, though, have suffered a serious blow with the tournament-ending injury to outstanding young defender Philippe Senderos after the Arsenal centreback dislocated his shoulder in the second half.

Swiss team doctor Rudolf Roeder said that 21-year-old Senderos had also damaged ligaments and would be out for a minimum of two weeks.

"There is a 50 per cent chance he will require an operation but the most important thing is rest for now," said Roeder.

The likely replacement for Senderos will be close friend and Arsenal teammate, 19-year-old Johan Djourou.



HEARTBREAKER: A Mexican supporter and her child look dejected after Mexico's second round exit against Argentina at the Leipzig Stadium on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP

SWITZERLAND V UKRAINE

Battle of the forwards

AFP, Cologne

Ukraine and superstar striker Andriy Shevchenko break new ground when they face a young and hungry Switzerland in the last 16 of the World Cup here on Monday.

The Ukrainians reached the second phase in their first appearance at the World Cup after staging a remarkable turnaround in fortunes.

Outclassed 4-0 by Spain in their first group match, they looked to be heading for an early exit before Shevchenko, the team's undoubted leader, recovered from a knee injury and drove his team to a 4-0 win over Saudi Arabia.

KEY QUOTES

Switzerland coach Kobi Kuhn: "Taking seven points from the group stage and not letting in any goals was a great achievement for a Swiss team. We've reached our original target of a place in the second round but now it's a knockout format and we know we can still go further."

Ukraine captain Andriy Shevchenko: "It's a hugely important achievement for Ukrainian football that we have got into the next round. We always kept our belief despite the terrible defeat against Spain."

Ukraine coach Blokhin: "We have already achieved the goal we set ourselves before the finals."

The 29-year-old who has just joined Chelsea's star-studded squad in a deal worth 30 million pounds (43.5 million euros) showed all his experience in the 1-0 win over Tunisia which clinched the runner's-up spot in Group H, winning a penalty even though there seemed to have been no contact with the defender.

Shevchenko played down his contribution, saying the team unit would be the key to Ukraine reaching the quarterfinals where they would face either Italy or Australia, who also meet on Monday.

"All the teams are strong at this stage. If the team shows heart then with our fans behind us we can hope to go further," Shevchenko said.

Ukraine coach Oleg Blokhin knows the worth of great strikers having been one himself for Dynamo Kiev and the Soviet Union, scoring 42 times in 112 international games.

But while all eyes will be on Shevchenko, Swiss coach Kobi Kuhn has tipped the in-form Alexander Frei to be the goal-scoring surprise of the final stages.

HEAD TO HEAD

Switzerland v Ukraine head-to-head record (FIFA records)
First meeting

Frei, the former bad boy of Swiss football who was sent home in disgrace after spitting at England's Steven Gerrard at Euro 2004, netted twice in Switzerland's march into the last 16.

The 26-year-old, who is hoping to wrap up a move from French club Rennes to Germany's Borussia Dortmund, notched the first goal in the 2-0 victory over Togo and caused an uproar among the South Korean players when he slid the ball home from what appeared to be an offside position in the 2-0 victory as the Swiss won Group G on Friday.

"He has come back from a long injury," said Kuhn.

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TEAMS

Switzerland (4-5-1)

1-Pascal Zuberbuehler; 3-Ludovic Magnin, 2-Johann Djourou, 20-Patrick Mueller, 23-Philipp Degen; 6-Raphael Wicky, 6-Johann Vogel, 7-Ricardo Cabanas, 22-Hakan Yakin, 16-Tranquillo Barnetta; 9-Alex Frei

Ukraine (3-5-2)

1-Oleksandr Shovkovsky; 5-Volodymyr Yezersky, 17-Vladislav Vashchuk, 2-Andriy Nesmachnyy, 9-Oleg Gusev, 4-Anatoly Tymoshchuk, 8-Oleg Shelsyev, 19-Maxim Kalinichenko, 11-Serhiy Rebrov; 7-Andriy Shevchenko, 10-Andriy Voronin.

Ukraine need more class

REUTERS, Berlin

Ukraine acknowledge they need to play a better class of football than they have shown in some group matches if they are to progress any further in the World Cup.

A scrappy 1-0 win over Tunisia on Friday earned the Ukrainians a second-round match against Group G winners Switzerland, and although coach Oleg Blokhin was satisfied with the result, he was unhappy about the quality of the football.

He said his team needed to do some serious thinking before Monday's match in Cologne but was hopeful that Ukraine could progress to the quarter-finals.

"Chances always die last," he told reporters.

But to get any further they will need to do what no other team has managed in the tournament so far - score against Switzerland, the only side yet to concede a goal.

That job will fall to striker Andriy Shevchenko, European Footballer of the Year in 2004.

Shevchenko is by far the team's most skilful and well known player, but Blokhin said football was all about the team rather than individuals.

"I don't ever single out one player (for praise or criticism) - the team either wins or loses," Blokhin said.

The first European team to qualify for the finals, the Ukrainians came to Germany viewed as the dark horses.

A 4-0 loss to group winners Spain raised questions about that, although they answered critics with a 4-0 win over Saudi Arabia.

Even if Ukraine are knocked out on Monday, the team will still be pleased with their World Cup debut.

"It's the first time Ukraine have got to the tournament, the first time Ukraine have qualified from the group. I congratulate the whole of Ukraine, especially the fans, with this big achievement," Blokhin said.

AFP, Berlin

Oleg Blokhin will probably survive the cull of World Cup finals managers having taken Ukraine to the last 16 in their first appearance and a winnable tie on Monday with Switzerland.

But the former European player of the year knows what it is like to earn a precarious living.

The 53-year-old Ukrainian football legend was heavily involved in the volatile world of domestic politics for several years.

He was a deputy, first with the Communist Party, and then the United Social Democratic party who supported former president Leonid Kuchma until he lost his seat in the March elections.

However, judging by his remarks while he has been coach



LOOKING AHEAD: Swiss forwards Daniel Gyga (R) and David Degen are having a light jog during their training at the Suedstadion in Cologne on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP

Political failure, sporting success

AFP, Berlin

there are not too many countries in the west that would have seen him elected given the rhetoric he used about Ukrainian domestic football and the presence of black players.

"Let them (Ukrainian-born players) learn from an Andriy Shevchenko or a Blokhin, and not some Zumba-Bumba who they took off a tree, gave him two bananas and now he plays in the Ukrainian league," he said.

On that statement alone it is highly unlikely Blokhin will be doing the rounds like so many foreign coaches do of the African continent and he certainly won't be the last footballer to try his hand at politics.

The political world, however, is not littered with great footballers enjoying equally successful careers in that field and Blokhin will have

to bide his time if he wants to return to the fray as his party is out of favour.

Five-time world champions Brazil have rewarded two of their greatest footballers with the post of Minister of Sport notably the greatest footballer of them all Pele who served in the role for three unremarkable years (1995-98).

He left the post under a cloud after being allegedly involved in a bribery scandal, which was not the case for soon to be former Japan coach Zico.

The classy midfielder held the minister's portfolio for a year in 1990 while his colourful chain-smoking former midfield partner Socrates dabbled briefly with politics rather than his profession of doctor with the Workers Party.

Liberia's George Weah is per-

haps the one former footballing great that got closest to holding the reins of power as he at one time looked like winning the presidential election this year, but in the end was soundly beaten in the second round of voting by Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.

However the former world footballer of the year, who enjoyed superb spells at Paris Saint Germain and especially at AC Milan, showed he had not cut all his ties with football by protesting over the vote - this time taking the electoral commission to task instead of the referee.

"All of us voters are eager to know the results, but at the same time... I observed the election was fraudulent," Weah said in April.

A leopard as they say never changes its spots.