

Playmaker to reformer

Football

AFP, Paris

As many French football fans would testify, Michel Platini cut an unlikely figure during his brief stint as coach of the national team.

However, few would deny that the former France and Juventus legend – one of only a few players to be voted European footballer of the year three times – was always destined to play a leading role in the game.

Platini on Friday achieved his dream of being given the chance to lead European football into a new era when he defeated incumbent chief Lennart Johansson of Sweden in a vote for the UEFA presidency.

The scene is now set for the 51-year-old Frenchman to build on his promise of giving the smaller nations a bigger voice in the 52-member association during his four-year tenure.

"It's the start of an adventure," said an emotional Platini after winning the vote.

"I want to thank everyone who have stayed loyal to me. I'm delighted to be able to represent European football."

Born the son of a stonemason from Piedmont in Italy, Platini made his name as a swashbuckling number 10, the number attributed to the

playmakers who usually combine goal-creating qualities with goal-scoring skills.

In both, Platini was one of the best.

In the 1980s, during spells with Nancy, Saint Etienne and Juventus, he won the coveted Ballon d'Or (European footballer of the Year) three years consecutively – in 1983, 1984 and 1985.

In 1984, he inspired France to the European Championship title on home soil, but after retiring, a four-year stint as coach of the France team failed to bear fruit.

In 1992 Platini resigned after France exited the European Championships at the first round.

Instead, it was in football's corridors of power that the curly-haired Frenchman would find his true path, moving slowly up the administrative ladder from a first administrative post at the French Football Federation.

Prior to France's hosting of the 1998 World Cup, Platini was taken under the wing of FFF president Fernand Sastre.

Together, they oversaw a successful campaign which led to France triumphing on home soil and bringing home a first international trophy since 1984.

A year later Platini declared his support for Sepp Blatter, becoming the FFF's specialist adviser.

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Newly elected UEFA President Michel Platini (R) hugs incumbent head Lennart Johansson after the French legend was voted in at the UEFA Congress in Dusseldorf on Friday.

Platini UEFA president

Football

AFP, Dusseldorf

French football legend Michel Platini won the vote for the presidency of UEFA here on Friday ousting long-time incumbent Lennart Johansson of Sweden with a call for reform.

The 51-year-old former national team captain and coach won a secret-ballot vote of the 52 UEFA member associations by 27-23 and will head European football's governing body for at least the next four years.

"I am very emotionally moved but so happy," said Platini after the vote result had been announced.

"When I was a footballer after a victory we got the cup and did a lap of honour with our team-mates.

"Today it's a great triumph for me, but I won't be doing any lap of honour. I am just happy to be representing European football. It is the start of a great adventure."

The campaign for the UEFA top job had turned increasingly bitter with the 77-year-old Johansson, president since 1990, campaigning as the candidate of continuity and the challenger Platini advocating reform.

The Frenchman notably said he was in favour of limiting Europe's big guns like Spain, Italy and England to just three teams in the prestigious Champions League instead of the current four as a way of boosting representation from smaller countries.

He won support from Sepp Blatter, the president of world governing body FIFA, and an old rival of Johansson, but Germany's influential Franz Beckenbauer came out strongly in favour of the Swede.

Beckenbauer conceded after the vote: "We have to respect the result of the vote. We (Germans) made our choice widely known, but life goes on."

"We hope to work constructively with Michel Platini."

Platini is widely revered in France and throughout Europe playing 72 times for his country, 50 as captain, and scoring a national record which still stands of 41 goals.

He notably captained the side that won the 1984 European title on home soil and played in three World Cups, reaching the semi-finals twice in 1982 and 1986. In club football he starred for St Etienne and Italian giants Juventus.

He then went on to become national team manager from 1988 to 1992 before acting as co-president of the 1998 World Cup organising committee and sitting on the UEFA and FIFA executive committees.

Platini will be the sixth president of the Geneva-based UEFA which was established in 1954 and the second Frenchman after Jacques Georges (1984-1990) to occupy the post.

For Johansson, the vote will be a massive blow for an official who oversaw huge develop-

ments in European football during his 16 years at the top, but who had been criticised for losing touch with the grass roots of the sport.

The Swede was given a standing ovation by the UEFA members and named as an honorary president of the organisation, but he had some angry words to say against Blatter, against whom he lost the FIFA presidency in 1998.

"I thank Joseph Blatter for praising our work, but I can't appreciate the way the FIFA president interfered in the UEFA election," he said before the vote had been announced.

"It is not up to the president of FIFA to decide, it is up to the UEFA congress."

Platini's triumph will go some way to wiping out the stain felt in France by losing to London the race to stage the 2012 Olympic Games.

One of the reasons given for that slap in the face was the fact that France has no representation on the executive commission of the controlling International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the only French head of an international sports federation is Rene Roch, in fencing.

Platini's election though will see no immediate changes to the Champions League format as it is fixed until the summer of 2009 when the present television deals expire.

Ruud calls C'Ron

AFP, Madrid

Manchester United coach Sir Alex Ferguson insists he is going nowhere but former United star Ruud van Nistelrooy says Portuguese winger and former clubmate Cristiano Ronaldo would be more than welcome were he to opt for a new challenge in Madrid.

According to Spanish media reports the Spanish giants would be willing to pay United 50 million euros (65 million dollars) for the popular 21-year-old Portugal international, who has been in brilliant form this season.

That would make him the club's third most expensive signing ever, after Zinedine Zidane (94 million dollars) and Luis Figo (72 million dollars).

Ronaldo's contract at Old Trafford runs out in 2010, and United's assistant boss Carlos Queiroz said recently the club are already planning to start negotiations on extending that deal.

AS sports daily Friday quoted

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SHARPOVA V WILLIAMS Old foes clash

Australian Open The Grand Slam of Asia/Pacific

AFP, Melbourne

written off as too unfit and unmotivated by many pundits, with ex-Wimbledon champion Pat Cash labelling her "delusional".

The 2003 and 2005 Australian champion goes into this year's decider the underdog, a marked contrast to their 2004 Wimbledon final when the American was the heavy favourite against a little known 17-year-old.

Sharapova, now 19, scored an upset win and the odds favour her to repeat the feat Saturday.

Both players are gunning to rewrite the history books. Sharapova is bidding to become the first Russian woman to claim the title and Williams the only unseeded champion since 1978.

Victory would provide seventh-time Grand Slam winner Williams, who is producing a movie about her tennis idol Althea Gibson, with a Hollywood ending to her comeback from injury.

Unseeded and entering the competition ranked number 81 after an injury-plagued 2006, she was

asked about the reasons for her success, she replied: "My stamina, my mental ability, my sheer desire. I played a couple of good matches but I definitely haven't peaked."

"I always say I've got to get into the finals to peak. Hopefully that's what I'm doing."

Williams refused to outline her long-term goals because she did not want to "jinx" herself.

But her "number one" gestures to the Melbourne Park crowd after her quarter- and semi-final wins are a likely indication of where she believes she should be.

The world number one spot is a title that Sharapova has only just claimed and she will be out to consolidate it with a win over Williams Saturday.

The glamour girl of the women's tour said she felt confident ahead of a match that will pit Williams' serving power against her ability to throw her leggy frame around the Friday.

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Third time unlucky

AFP, Melbourne

It was third time unlucky for Tommy Haas whose Australian Open semi-final jinx came back to haunt him Friday, and he admitted there was nothing he could do about it.

The German 12th seed has only

ever made three Grand Slam semi-finals from 34 attempts in a career spanning 11 years and they were all at Melbourne Park.

He has lost them all, but none as emphatically as against Fernando Gonzalez.

The Chilean's thumping of Haas was almost as comprehensive as the manner Roger Federer dismissed Andy Roddick in his semi-final on Thursday.

Federer took 1hr 23mins to get the job done and Gonzalez took just eight minutes longer.

It was a humiliating end for Haas who had been playing sizzling tennis up until meeting the Chilean, but he couldn't get anything right

Friday.

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Gonzalez inking fairytale

Australian Open The Grand Slam of Asia/Pacific

AFP, Melbourne

seeded German.

So perfect was Gonzalez's performance that his winning match point fittingly coincided with the start of the nearby Australia Day holiday fireworks display.

"I'm enjoying my tennis. I've been playing the last four months at a very high level," Gonzalez said.

"I am very calm at the important moments."

He only committed three unforced errors in the match and struck 42 outright winners, 18 off his favourite forehand. He dominated the points 82-45.

"And one of them (errors) was really stupid," he said. "It's not too tough for me because I've been playing many years with 42 unforced errors and three winners, so now I'm trying to work the points."

"I can volley better, I can play five sets if I want, I'm really happy with this."

Of his upcoming final with Federer on Sunday, Gonzalez said: "Roger is the number one by far but on Sunday we only have to play one match, there's only one match

left in this tournament.

"I've lost many times to him (9-0) but I am playing much better than the last time I played him. In tennis you always have a new opportunity and I have a really nice opportunity now."

Gonzalez is only the third South American to reach the Australian Open final in the Open Era (post-1969) after Marcelo Rios in 1998 and Guillermo Vilas in 1977-79.

It was further heartbreak for 28-year-old Haas, who was playing in his third losing Australian semi-final after going down to Yevgeny Kafelnikov in 1999 and Marat Safin three years later.

Haas failed to get one break point in Gonzalez's 11 service games.

"Just really pretty much everything he touched tonight seemed to go his way," Haas said. "I felt at times that I didn't even play bad. I played actually pretty good tennis."

"Every time I tried to do something differently, he came up with

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Kaiser drafted into FIFA committee

REUTERS, Dusseldorf