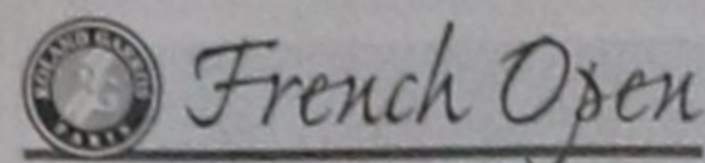


FRENCH OPEN STARTS TODAY

Nadal, Federer play mindgames



AFP, Paris

Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal have turned to playing mindgames ahead of the latest instalment of their epic French Open rivalry.

Federer, desperate for a first Roland Garros title to add to his 12-strong Grand Slam collection, believes he is the more positive of the two men while Nadal, bidding for a fourth historic trophy, says the world number one's decision to bring in Jose Higuera as coach could backfire.

Nadal, with a perfect record of 21 wins in 21 matches here, holds a mesmerizing stranglehold over the world number one, winning eight of their nine claycourt meetings, including the last two finals here, and 10 of their 16 total career clashes.

That dominance has continued in 2008 with Nadal beating Federer in the finals of the Monte Carlo and Hamburg Masters.

But the Swiss superstar, who needs a Roland Garros title to become just the sixth man to clinch a career Grand Slam, insists his

approach has not reaped its rewards.

"I know I can beat him. I'm the one playing aggressive. I'm the one trying hard. I'm the one taking the risks in those matches, so I think I have positive chances of winning here," said Federer who will face tricky American Sam Querrey in his opener.

In an effort to iron out the problems, he has turned to Higuera who coached Michael Chang and Jim Courier to the title here.

However, Nadal, is not convinced by the merits of that decision.

"It's difficult to change the style of probably the best player in history in just three or four weeks," said Nadal who will be bidding to follow Bjorn Borg into the record books by winning four French Opens in a row.

"It's a long job. If I had a new coach it would be impossible for me to change my game in three weeks."

The 21-year-old Nadal will begin his campaign against a qualifier but could face world number three Novak Djokovic, the Australian Open and Rome Masters winner, in the semifinals.

Compared to Federer, he has the toughest of the two draws with a potential quarterfinal match-up with Argentina's David Nalbandian, against whom he has played two and lost two, also to consider.

But his record on clay is intimidating.

Since April 2005, the 21-year-old Spaniard has racked up 108 wins in 110 matches on the surface.

Djokovic, who starts his campaign against Germany's Denis Gremelmayr, is the man breathing down both Federer and Nadal's necks.

All the talk is of the new generation -- Maria Sharapova or Ana Ivanovic -- to win the French Open and replace the freshly-retired Justine Henin as world No. 1.

But the "veteran" Serena Williams believes this could be the year she adds a second Roland Garros crown to the one she won in the final against sister Venus in 2002.

Still only 26 years old despite having been in the spotlight for a decade, Williams was bubbling with confidence when she met the press ahead of Sunday's kick-off to the year's second Grand Slam

tournament.

"It's probably the best preparation I've had since 2002. I feel like I've played so many clay court tournaments," the American former world No. 1 said.

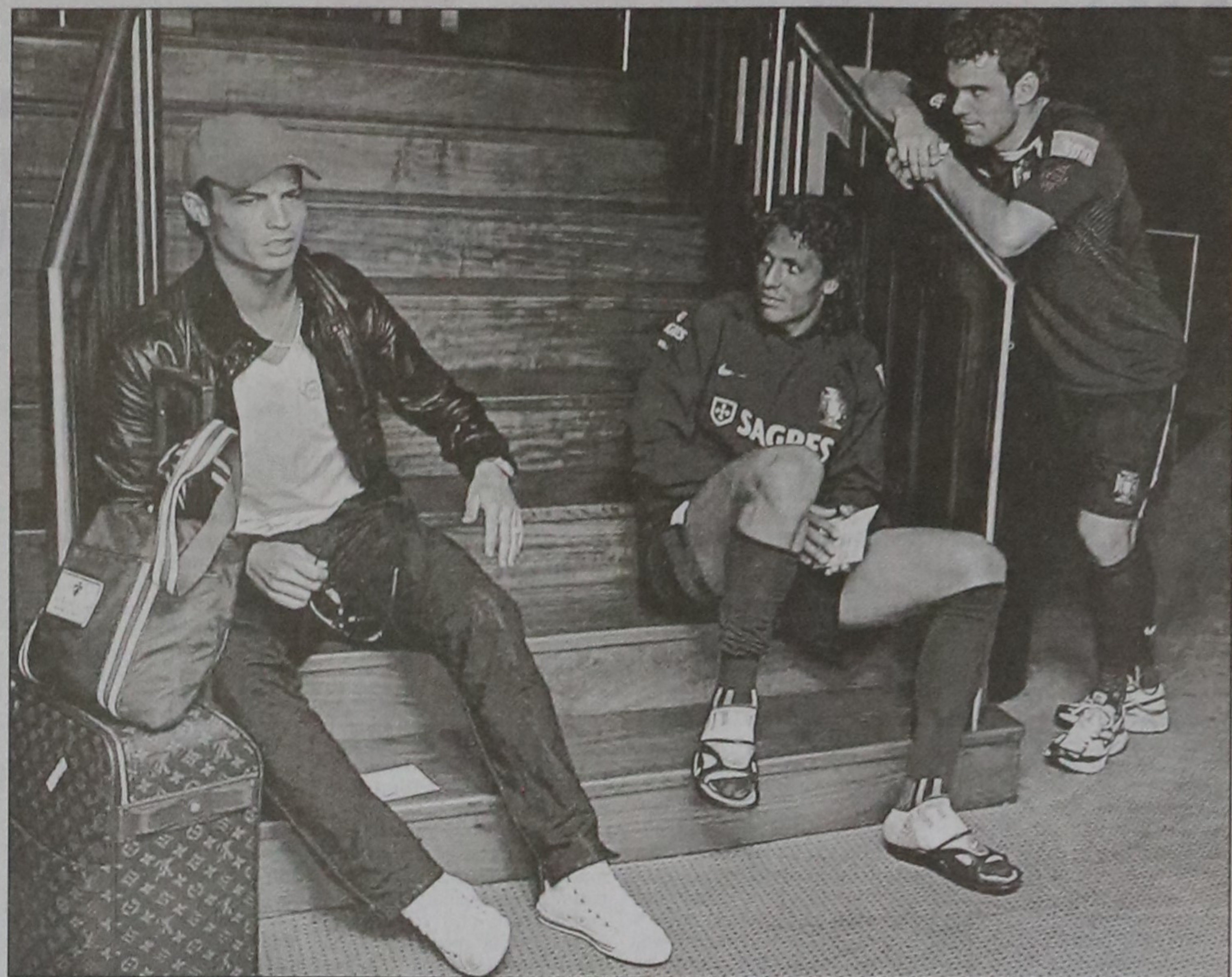
Sharapova is the new world No. 1 and freely admits that the slow clay surface of Roland Garros is not her favourite surface, but she is dismissive of those who say that she can never win in Paris as she has already done at Wimbledon and at the US and Australian Opens.

"To be quite honest, it's quite amazing to be 21 years old and have somebody tell you that it's the only Grand Slam that you haven't won," she said.

That leaves the rest of the Russian brigade with any of 2006 runner-up Svetlana Kuznetsova, 2004 runner-up Elena Dementieva, Anna Chakvetadze or Vera Zvonareva capable of mounting a challenge.

Amelie Mauresmo looks set to be in a downward spiral and will be lucky to make it past the first week. Marion Bartoli is not at her best on clay and last week's surprise Italian Open finalist Alize Cornet is still too tender at just 18.

The French Open gets underway on Sunday.



Portugal star Cristiano Ronaldo (L) is seen chatting with Bruno Alves (C) and Jorge Ribeiro upon his arrival at the hotel in Viseu on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

Hosts look to capitalise

AFP, Paris



2008 challenges.

Staging the European championships has proved a rewarding experience for Spain in 1964, Italy in 1968, and France in 1984.

Curiously though with the exception of Portugal four years ago, not one of the other eight stagings of the tournament has a host nation made it past the semifinals.

A case of all or nothing it seems when it comes to the continental crown.

The last time the tournament was co-hosted was in 2000 when the Dutch lost out on spot-kicks in their semifinal clash with Italy, Belgium were unable to make it past the opening group phase.

Euro 2008 no-shows England won't need any reminding of how close they came to making it through to the finals when football came home in 1996 -- crashing out 6-5 on penalties to old foes and subsequent winners Germany.

There's no doubt playing in front of your home supporters helps but it wasn't quite enough to stop gatecrashers Greece spoiling Portugal's party in Lisbon in 2004.

While the heady heights of an

appearance in the 2008 final in Vienna on June 29 might be about as likely as Jose Mourinho taking up a job with Accrington Stanley Austria will at least be out to uphold national honour.

But it's not going to be easy for the team ranked 101st in the world to avoid ending finishing bottom of Group B where they come up against Germany, Poland and Croatia.

While they may not succeed in winning on the pitch, off it a study this month suggested that the Austrian economy will be boosted by nearly a quarter of a per centage point.

The Swiss have a far better chance of making an impact in the competition which gets under way with their opening match-up with

1996 finalists Czech Republic in Basel on June 7.

Also in the 48th ranked team in the world's group are Portugal and 2002 World Cup semifinalists Turkey.

For manager Kobi Kuhn there is the added incentive of wanting to walk away from the post he's held for the past seven years on a high.

But the most likely scenario is that both these alpine countries have mountains to climb just to make it into the knockout stages.

Still, one thing is assured, with picture postcard settings, the two countries' renowned for efficiency and organisation, and a party atmosphere generated by an expected two million visitors, the Euro 2008 is shaping up to be a major success.

Russia thrash Kazakhstan

AFP, Moscow

Russia thrashed Kazakhstan 6-0 in a Euro 2008 warm-up at Lokomotiv's 32,000-seater ground here on Friday.

Zenit St Petersburg striker Pavel Pogrebnyak, who shared the UEFA Cup scorers contest with Bayern Munich marksman Luca Toni on 10 goals, opened the rout.

His opener was followed by strikes from Vladimir Bystrov, Konstantin Zyryanov, Diniyar Bilyaletdinov, Dmitry Torbinsky and Dmitry Sychev.

The Kazakhs, after some tight defending, were unable to prevent Pogrebnyak's opening goal from the spot in the 26th minute after Kazakhstan's full back Kairat Nurdautov handled the ball in his box.

After missing a string of chances Bystrov made it 2-0 firing under the crossbar from eight metres from Pogrebnyak's left-handed cross just before the break.

After the interval Russia continued to make Kazakhstan goalkeeper David Loria the most over-worked player on the pitch.

Zyryanov added his goal 14 minutes after the restart firing into the left post with an 11-metre unopposed shot following a mix-up in the Kazakh defence.

After that Lokomotiv Moscow trio: midfielders Bilyaletdinov and Torbinsky and striker Sychev in injury time contributed to the goal tally.

Dunga calls up Adriano

AFP, Sao Paulo

Brazil coach Dunga on Friday called up striker Adriano for upcoming international friendly matches against Canada and Venezuela as a replacement for injured Chelsea player Alex.

Brazil play Canada on May 31 in Seattle and Venezuela in Boston on June 6.

Brazil's next South American World Cup qualifiers are against Paraguay on June 15 in Asuncion and against Argentina in Belo Horizonte, in the south east of Brazil, on June 18.

Adriano has been loaned out by Inter Milan to Brazilian champions Sao Paulo till July 10.

As Sao Paulo were on Wednesday eliminated from the Copa Libertadores, the South American equivalent of the European Champions League, Dunga decided to call on Adriano for the friendlies.

Barca line up Keita

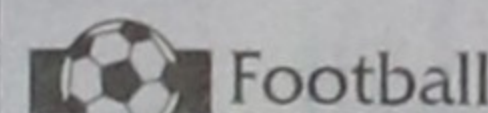
AFP, Madrid

Barcelona have lined up Seville's Malian midfielder Seydou Keita on a four-year deal, media reports said Saturday, adding he had already had a medical exam.

Keita, 28, is set to join for a fee of 14 million euros, the reports said, as Barca engage in a summer clearout which is likely to see him replace Portugal star Deco, according to Barcelona-based daily El Periodico de Catalunya.

Barca, who are furthermore offloading Ronaldinho, are also interested in Seville's Brazilian defender Dani Alves.

Real's car ready for C'Ron



AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid's enthusiasm to land Manchester United star Cristiano Ronaldo is such that they even have a club car ready and waiting for the Portugal star, Marca sports daily reported on Saturday.

"Is that the definitive proof?" asked Marca, headlining a photograph showing a brand new top of the range Audi, along with a handwritten notice on the dashboard bearing the legend: "deliver to Cristiano Ronaldo".

Another notice includes the words "sponsorship Madrid," implying the motor is destined for

the club, with which it has a sponsorship agreement.

According to Marca, the vehicle is in an Audi parking lot in Spain.

There has been feverish speculation for weeks in the Spanish capital that Ronaldo, having now led United to the Premiership and Champions League double, will quit Old Trafford for the Bernabeu although he has four years left on his existing contract.

United boss Sir Alex Ferguson on Friday launched a stinging attack on Real, accusing the Spanish champions of "lacking morals" in their attempts to lure Ronaldo.

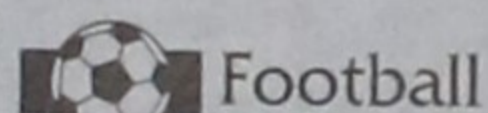
The Manchester United manager is furious at statements made by Real coach Bernd Schuster and president Ramon Calderon ques-

tioning whether Ronaldo really wants to stay at Old Trafford and accused them of attempting to unsettle his player.

"The simple facts are that he is with us and has four years left on his contract and that's the first thing. And Calderon makes that great statement 'slavery was abolished many, many years ago'. Did he tell Franco that? Jesus Christ, give me a break.

"Do you not think we've not had many interests from the big clubs in Europe about our best players? Of course. But they don't get into the nonsense that they (Real Madrid) get into. And they've no moral issues at all. They think that they can ride roughshod over everyone but they won't do it with us."

Fergie backs Queiroz



AFP, London

Sir Alex Ferguson has given a tongue-in-cheek hint that assistant coach Carlos Queiroz could one day succeed him as manager of Manchester United, two days after winning the Champions League title.

Carlos Queiroz has been credited generally with organising the impressive array of fitness experts around the players which has ensured they have competed in maximum physical condition.

Queiroz's year at Real Madrid, sandwiched between his two spells at United, has, according to Ferguson, also enabled him to advise Cristiano Ronaldo and be a persuasive influence to keep him at the club.

Benfica are among his admirers while there has even been talk he might be offered the Portugal job if, as expected, Luis Felipe Scolari stands down after Euro 2008.

Ferguson generally navigates his way round talk of his possible successors and predictably sidestepped a direct question on the matter on Friday as he basked in the glow of United's triumph over Chelsea.

But the Scot then went on to give Queiroz the most glowing refer-

ence imaginable.

"Carlos is well respected," said Ferguson. "His preparation for the game on Wednesday, from all aspects, was fantastic. There has been a lot of talk about him recently and I am sure the Portugal job would be a big attraction for him."

"What happens after I go is not my domain. But there is no doubt I think Carlos will be here for a long time. As long as me anyway."

The last sentence was added with a definite twinkle in his eye but there is no doubting Ferguson's faith in Queiroz.

Indeed, having recruited the Mozambique-born former South Africa coach twice, the second time after an ill-fated year at Real Madrid, Ferguson is relying heavily on Queiroz to help keep Cristiano Ronaldo.

The coach has a persuasive influence on the winger and was pivotal in his decision to remain with the Old Trafford outfit in the aftermath of his row with Wayne Rooney at the 2006 World Cup.

And, as Real Madrid step up their interest in the 23-year-old, Ferguson feels Queiroz can be a useful ally in providing first-hand experience of life at the Bernabeu.

"Carlos has the experience of being at Real Madrid," said Ferguson. "That is helping us now with all the nonsense we have to

talk about.

"Carlos' experience means he can advise Cristiano quite well about that kind of club. That is a plus point for us."

By his own admission, Ferguson remains a 'dinosaur' in some aspects of the game's development.

Having spent years at Aberdeen merely attempting to recruit a second physio, only to be met with total resistance from Dons chairman Dick Donald, it is perhaps little wonder that, at 66, the Scot requires assistance in some areas, which Queiroz happily provides.

"Carlos is improving a lot of things," said Ferguson. "I am a bit of a dinosaur in that respect. I have recognised progress needed to be made in different areas that I am expert at."

"We have five physios now. I would have been happy with that, plus a nutritionist, a weight coach, a fitness coach."

"I even brought an orthoptist to assist on the eye training. That kind of things is fine."

"But the levels we are going to now are unbelievable. Carlos has increased it in all sorts of ways."

"The entire medical side is fantastic. I don't think there is anywhere better in the world now. That is all down to Carlos' vision of the future which I would not have had."

Hagi tips Romania to spring a surprise

AFP, Bucharest



punch above their weight at Euro 2008.

That's the verdict of former Romania great Gheorghe Hagi, known in his playing days as the "Maradona of the Carpathians".

"I don't think a (rival) coach can say he fears us, especially when we're talking about Italy, France and the Dutch."

"But we can be the surprise of the competition, like Greece (winners in 2004)," the former interna-

tional and national team coach says.

To back up his assertion He harked back to his country's performance at Euro 2000 when with Hagi in the team Romania drew 1-1 with Germany, lost 1-0 to Portugal before defeating England 3-2 to qualify for the second round.

He reflected: "Back in 2000 we were also in a difficult group. "Nobody gave us any chance at all but we still managed to make it out of the first round. Precedents do exist. It is possible to spring a surprise."

Hagi said the class of 2008 "must believe in their potential" and above all "start well against France (on June 9) as the first match is always the hardest".

After the French hors d'oeuvre Romania face Italy on June 13 followed by Holland on June 17.

Pique set for Barcelona

AFP, London

Manchester United defender Gerard Pique is set to rejoin Barcelona after he claimed talks with the Catalan club were "at an advanced stage."

Pique, who never really made his mark in England since joining the Red Devils aged 17 in 2004.

"Negotiations with Barca are at a very advanced stage," he told Barcelona's website, www.fcbarcelona.cat.

"I like the idea of being able to play in a Barcelona shirt again. At the moment there's nothing official. Now we just have to wait for more details."

"At the moment the decision has to be made by other people."

Pique is back in Barcelona to prepare for a friendly game between Catalonia and Argentina on Saturday.

AFP, Paris

Memorable moments of previous European football championships ahead of Euro 2008, which gets underway on June 7 and is being co-hosted by Austria and Switzerland:

2004 - BECKHAM'S MISSED PENALTY

England's problems at penalty shootouts came back to haunt them again just when it looked like they could add a major trophy to the 1966 World Cup. Spot kicks have become the equivalent of an albatross round successive England team's necks and this time it was the turn of England icon and captain David Beckham who slipped and sent his penalty sky high in the quarterfinal shootout with Portugal. Beckham, who had already endured nightmares wearing the England shirt, took it in his stride because for all of the criticism of his glamorous lifestyle something the lad from London has never been lacking in is guts and stoicism. England were to lose to Portugal again under Sven Goran Eriksson in another penalty shootout at the 2006 World Cup -- this time Beckham was not to blame as he was in tears on the sidelines having been substituted because of an injury.

2004 - ZIZOU'S COOL NERVES

France's Real Madrid 'galactico' Zinedine Zidane, Beckham being England's representative in that hallowed circle at the meringues, showed what it takes to take a penalty when he did just that to England in their first round match.

Having fallen behind 1-0 to the English, the French pulled back to 1-1 and then a howler of an error by goalkeeper Dave 'Calamity' James handed the French a penalty late on in the match. Zidane, who had been pretty much incapacitated during France's desperate defence of their World Cup crown in 2002, stepped up and slotted the penalty into the net. However, the pressure of taking such an important penalty even got to the great man, who promptly threw up. France, though, were not to retain their European title either as eventual champions Greece put them out in the last eight.

2000 - TREZEGUET IS JUST GOLDEN

David Trezeguet may not be Raymond Domenech's golden boy but he was certainly France's in 2000. France had trailed 1-0 to Italy going into the final minutes of the

final when Sylvain Wiltord popped up to level the match and take it into extra-time. The Italians were visibly down and it looked only a matter of time before the French added the title to their world champions tag. Sure enough World Cup winner Trezeguet popped up with a brilliant volley 13 minutes in to win the match for the French with a golden goal -- he was promptly snapped up from Monaco by Juventus showing the Italians bore no grudge.

2000 - DUTCH PAY THE PENALTY -- AGAIN

The Dutch had already lost a penalty shootout to Brazil in the 1998 World Cup semifinal but were to pay the penalty once again, this time to the Italians, once more in the semifinals. It should never even have got to that stage as Italy had been reduced to 10 men in the 34th minute, the Dutch -- who co-hosted the tournament with Belgium -- then missed two penalties in normal time and unbelievably three in the penalty shootout. Frank de Boer was the most unfortunate of all as he had missed one in normal time and then another in the shootout -- his brother Ronald missed the crucial one in the 1998 World Cup. A case of losing de Boer war....

1996 - ENGLAND GROW TO LIKE ORANGE

Belittled England manager Graham Taylor famously once said 'do I not like orange' when the Dutch ended England's hopes of qualifying for the 1994 World Cup finals. However, his successor Terry Venables definitely must have thought 'Oranges are the only fruit' at Euro '96 being hosted by England when the English side probably produced one of their finest performances ever to destroy an as ever multi-talented Dutch side 4-1 with Alan Shearer and Teddy Sheringham scoring a brace apiece. Even given the fact that as usual the Dutch were riven by internal racial discord it was still a phenomenal performance. Sadly despite a penalty shootout victory over Spain, they were to go out to Germany by the same heartbroken method in the semifinal. Gareth Southgate the man who missed the crucial penalty was to benefit from it by appearing somewhat bizarrely in pizza advertisements afterwards.

1992 - DANES BRING HOME THE BACON

The Germans are usually renowned for taking all the best places on the beach before anyone else has but this time round they were outfoxed by the Danes of all

people. For the Danes were on their summer holidays when they were called up to replace Yugoslavia in the finals as the Yugoslavs were banned over the strife in the Balkans. Not really made up of star names but they stunned the Germans in the final with goals from the unlikely pair of John Jensen and Kim Vilfort to become perhaps the unlikely winners of the title until Greece popped up in 2004. And no they did not distract the Germans from wearing their swimming trunks and laying out towels on the goal line.

1988 - 'SAINT' JACK DOES OVER HIS COMPATRIOTS

Jack Charlton was already being touted for canonisation by an Irish public who did not know what finals of a major tournament meant despite previous years of having players of the class of Liam Brady and Johnny Giles. However, the 1966 World Cup winner assumed super hero status when not only having guided the Irish to the Euro finals in his first match there and against England up popped the diminutive Ray Houghton to head home and the Irish held on for a 1-0 victory. Indeed the Irish only missed out on the semifinals because of a late goal by The Netherlands' Ruud Gullit.

1988 - VAN BASTEN SCORES 'THAT GOAL'

The Dutch for once managed to keep team unity together during the tournament and it showed as they ended up 2-0 winners over the then Soviet Union in the final. However, the match more than the result will be forever remembered on account of a quite remarkable goal by Marco van Basten, now the Dutch coach for Euro 2008. Veteran midfielder Arnold Muhren sent over a long ball and van Basten met it with a quite stunning volley from a pretty sharp angle to send it crashing past Soviet keeper Rinat Dasaev. Such was the outstanding Soviet 'keeper's shock that he visibly stumbled on realising that the ball had flown past him.

1984 - FRENCH ELAN DOWN PORTUGUESE MEN OF WAR

France possessed a quite superb team in the early 1980's and they went into hosting Euro '84 in fine heart. However, the 'magic square' of a midfield which consisted of Michel Platini, Alain Giresse, Jean Tigana and Luis Fernandez were really suffering against Portugal in the semifinals who led 2-1 in extra-time, only for France to level. The French, however, dug deep and a minute from a penalty shootout

Tigana weaved his way into the penalty area and cut it back for Platini to be there to prod it home and secure victory in what many view as the finest match of all time. France fortunately did not wilt and beat Spain 2-0 in the final to gain the trophy that they truly deserved.

1980 - IT'S HORST FOR COURSES

West Germany produced perhaps their least likely hero of major finals in Horst Hrubesch. Hrubesch was hardly the epitome of previous greats like Gerd Muller or Franz Beckenbauer or indeed of several of his teammates like Karl-Heinz Rummenigge but the big muscular blond was on hand when it mattered as 'The Monster' as he was nicknamed headed both goals in the 2-1 win in the final over Belgium. His honest panting efforts kept him there even for the 1982 World Cup finals where he scored the decisive penalty in the victorious semifinal shootout win over France.

1976 - CHEEKY CZECH PANENKA AVOIDS FACTORY LIFE

Antonin Panenka succeeded where later generation of Czech players such as Pavel Nedved and Karel Poborsky failed in winning the European title, though, at the time it was with Czechoslovakia. However, as he remarked afterwards it was a damn close run thing as he stepped up to take the decisive penalty in a shootout with West Germany, who had fought back from 2-0 down to level at 2-2 before it went to penalties. Uli Hoenes missed his spot kick and it was left to 28-year-old Panenka to shoulder the responsibility. Cheekily and as cool as a Budvar beer he slotted it high and straight down the middle to seal victory for Czechoslovakia. "If I had failed it would have had serious consequences for me, I would have been sent to a factory," admitted Panenka, as Czechoslovakia was still behind the Iron Curtain under Communist rule.

1968 - FACCHETTI JUST LOVES TOSS-CA

One would want Giacinto Facchetti to be your tipster or to have been the captain of the Titanic such was his luck. There being no penalty shootout in those days and with the Soviet Union and Italy tied at 0-0 after extra-time it literally came down to the toss of a coin. Facchetti called correctly with the Italian fans blissfully unaware as it was carried out in the corridors of the San Paolo Stadium in Naples. Italy went onto win the final against Yugoslavia.