

Bilic confident of Euro glory

AFP, Bad Tatzmannsdorf

Croatia can win the Euro 2008 title claimed their highly-rated young coach Slaven Bilic on Wednesday.

The 39-year-old former distinguished central defender admitted there were the usual favourites such as Germany and Italy but that his young squad had nothing to fear and had the potential to go further than their predecessors in 1996 and 2004, with the former reaching the quarterfinals.

"I believe that we are strong enough to take the title," said Bilic, who is even more deeply involved in the campaign as he wrote their Euro 2008 song 'Fiery Madness' which he also recorded with his band 'Rawbau', for whom he plays guitar.

"The team is both good and solid, we qualified for Euro from one of the more difficult groups and we most notably of all beat England on two occasions during the qualifiers.

"On paper, there are as usual the same favourites: Germany, France and Italy. You could also include Spain and Holland. And the English too would have also been among the favourites... if they had qualified," added Bilic, who became a football idol in Croatia when despite a fractured hip he played in every match of their 1998 World Cup finals campaign where they reached the semifinals losing to eventual champions France.

Croatia open their Group B campaign on Sunday against co-hosts Austria in Vienna before confronting Germany in Klagenfurt, Austria, and round off the group stage against debutants Poland in Klagenfurt as well on June 16.

Polak warns goalkeepers

AFP, Prague

Czech Republic's long-shot expert Jan Polak said on Wednesday that the official Euro 2008 ball will be problematic for goalkeepers and favour players who strike from distance.

"With the speed and the changes in trajectory the ball is difficult for goalkeepers," the 27-year-old midfielder said.

"On the other hand, it will suit very well those who shoot from far out."

"The ball will change its trajectory completely and keepers will not know how to react," the Anderlecht player added.

The Czech Republic, drawn in Group A, will begin their Euro 2008 campaign against Switzerland on Saturday.

Sneijder limps out

AFP, Lausanne

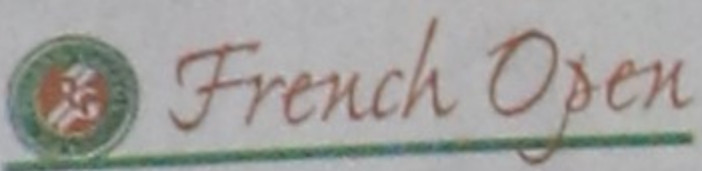
Dutch midfielder Wesley Sneijder limped out of a behind closed doors training session on Thursday according to Dutch TV station NOS.

The Real Madrid star is competing for one of the three attacking midfielder spots along with Robin van Persie, Rafael van der Vaart and Arjen Robben.

The Dutch -- attempting to emulate their compatriots in 1988 in winning the Euro -- begin their campaign on Monday against world champions Italy in Bern.

Holland are in the 'Group of Death', for besides Italy they have to face 2006 World Cup finalists France and dark horses Romania.

Safina reaches final



AFP, Paris

Russia's Dinara Safina moved one victory away from joining big brother Marat as a Grand Slam title winner when she reached the French Open final on Thursday.

The 13th seed saw off fourth-seeded compatriot, and overwhelming favourite, Svetlana Kuznetsova 6-3, 6-2 and will face either Ana Ivanovic, the second seed, or third seed Jelena Jankovic, both of Serbia, in Saturday's final.

Marat Safin won the US Open and Australian Open titles before his career went into steep decline and few would begrudge his little sister from triumphing in what will be her first Grand Slam final.

In both her previous rounds, the 22-year-old saw off top seed Maria Sharapova and Elena Dementieva by mounting comebacks from a set

and 2-5 down, as well as saving a match point in each.

"This is for me, Marat and all of my family," said Safina whose brother never got beyond the semifinals at Roland Garros.

"At 5-2 in the second set and 0-30 down I got a little tight. But I told myself to be more aggressive or she would take control.

"I never expected to get to the final, but sometimes when you least expect it, the results come."

Safina survived a lengthy test of her opening service game and then broke to lead 2-0.

In a first set which featured five breaks in nine games, Safina was the cooler of the two players when the crucial moment arrived.

A Kuznetsova forehand error gave her a 5-3 lead and she set up set point with a sweet backhand drop shot while Kuznetsova was pinned at the back of the court, claiming the opener when the fourth seed steered another simple forehand wide.

It was the first set the 22-year-old Kuznetsova had dropped at Roland Garros this year.

The pair exchanged breaks again in the first two games of the second set before Safina ripped ahead to lead 3-2.

An out-of-sorts Kuznetsova picked up a violation for launching a ball, baseball-style, into the upper tiers of the Court Philippe Chatrier as her frustrating afternoon continued.

Safina had proved her claycourt credentials in the run-up to Roland Garros by winning the prestigious Berlin tournament, claiming the scalps of former world number one Justine Henin and Serena Williams along the way.

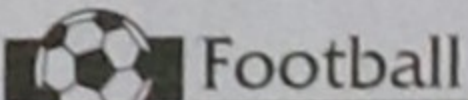
That confidence-boosting performance helped her get through a nervy sixth game before she again broke a flailing Kuznetsova to lead 5-2.

She wrapped up the semifinal when Kuznetsova unleashed another forgettable forehand.



Russian player Dinara Safina is ecstatic after beating compatriot Svetlana Kuznetsova during their French Open semifinal at Roland Garros in Paris on Thursday.

Thaksin after Ronaldinho



AFP, Manchester

Manchester City owner Thaksin Shinawatra is determined to bring Barcelona star Ronaldinho to Eastlands.

Thaksin is ready to hand Mark Hughes a 50-million-pound transfer fund and wants City's new manager to deliver Ronaldinho.

The Brazilian would cost Thaksin around 15 million pounds as well as wages of 150,000 pounds a week, but the former Thai prime minister won't let that stop him chasing one of the sport's biggest names.

"Ronaldinho -- you know, he is a great player. Whatever the club in your heart, you would want to see this player in England, wouldn't you?" Shinawatra told the Daily Mail.

"It is not a risk. Sponsors will contribute. It will not damage our wage structure. Garry and Pairoj,

my chief advisor, they are taking care of this transfer. I am very excited.

"I am 59 next birthday, so I am not a man who can wait for many years to see my dreams come true."

Although Ronaldinho's form has slumped in the last year, prompting suggestions that the former World Player of the Year has lost his desire, Thaksin is convinced a move to the Premier League would give him a new lease of life.

"Ronaldinho is 28. He has much still to offer, he is a star. You need a combination of new players, existing players, quality, young and old," he said.

"I admit also you need a player who is more than just winning the match. You need a star who can play on the pitch, but who can achieve much more for the club. Ronaldinho is that player."

"I am hearing good things about his hunger. I have spoken to his brother (and agent), Ronaldinho wants the new challenge, the

chance to play his best football again, to return to the days when he was really, really famous. The magic is still in his boots. Let us hope we can bring him."

Ronaldinho may not be the only Brazilian arriving at City during the close-season after Hughes gave his blessing for the club to move for CSKA Moscow's Brazil striker Jo.

A deal is on the cards according to executive chairman Garry Cook, who also backed Thaksin's bid to land Ronaldinho.

"We have had a conversation with Mark Hughes about this because we wanted to see what he felt but it would be fair to say we expect to see Jo at Manchester City," Cook said.

"Ronaldinho is one of the greatest players that has ever played. We want to bring the best players to our football club."

"It is well documented that we are well down that path, but we also know it is a very competitive landscape."

Double boost for Swiss

AFP, Feusisberg

Euro 2008 co-hosts Switzerland were handed a major boost on Wednesday when playmaker Tranquillo Barnetta and experienced defender Patrick Muller were declared fit for Saturday's tournament opener against the Czech Republic.

"Everyone is fully fit, (head coach) Kobi Kuhn will have 23 players to pick from for Saturday," squad doctor Roland Grosse reported at the Swiss squad's training base in the foothills of the Alps.

Muller may still be short of full match fitness as he continues his comeback from a long lay-off following cruciate ligament surgery and Kuhn will not make a final decision on his line-up until Friday.

But Arsenal centreback Philippe Senderos revealed that he was anticipating that Muller, who plays for French champions Lyon, would be alongside him against the Czechs.

"Patrick has been training hard and he has played the last two games with me," Senderos said. "It depends on the coach and how Patrick feels, but I think he'll be there."

The importance of Muller's vast experience to Switzerland was underlined by Borussia Dortmund striker Alexander Frei.

"Even at 90 per cent, he is a player of international class," Frei said.

Barnetta, who plays for Bayer Leverkusen in the Bundesliga, played down concerns over an ankle injury that prevented him from training for two weeks in the build-up to the tournament.

"In a way it could help because I've had a two-week break at the end of what was a very long season," Barnetta said.

"I'm feeling fresh."

As Switzerland's most creative player, Barnetta will carry a heavy burden of expectation on his shoulders as the Swiss seek to progress from a group that also includes Euro 2004 finalists Portugal and Turkey.

But he insisted Kuhn's squad could cope with the pressure.

"If you play football for a living, pressure is part of your life, you have it everyday."

"It has been a long wait but now we just want to get going and show what we can do."

Switzerland's assistant coach, Michel Pont, admitted that his side would be underdogs against a Czech side that finished ahead of Germany in qualifying for the finals.

"We are up against a team ranked 6th in the world so we are not favourites by any means but we are playing at home and we will play the role of outsider at 400 per cent," Pont vowed.

Eto'o sorry for headbutting

AFP, Yaounde

Barcelona's Cameroonian international striker Samuel Eto'o has apologised for headbutting a journalist, it emerged here Thursday.

Journalist Philippe Bony was reportedly headbutted by Eto'o and then assaulted by members of the Cameroon squad last Friday following journalists' decision to boycott a press conference over access to the team.

Eto'o said on Cameroon television late Wednesday he had met and apologised to Bony, adding, "In the name of all my teammates I want to apologise."

Bony, when contacted by AFP, confirmed that he and Eto'o had made up: "Yes, we met up and he has asked my forgiveness. He promised me a few things, let's see if he sticks to his promise."

Press reports here said that after Friday's incident members of the Cameroonian entourage confiscated all cameras and mobile telephones belonging to the press in a bid to get rid of the evidence.

Ruud ready to make amends

AFP, London

Ruud van Nistelrooy wants to star at Euro 2008 so he can erase the painful memory of a World Cup flop he blames on Manchester United.

Van Nistelrooy endured a dismal tournament in 2006 and was substituted in all three of Holland's group games before being dropped for the last 16 defeat by Portugal.

The Dutch striker is convinced he struggled in Germany because of the turmoil at United that led to his move to Real Madrid.

He was reportedly involved in a training ground with Cristiano Ronaldo and then fell out with United boss Sir Alex Ferguson.

Now he is far more relaxed after winning the Spanish title with Real and expects to shine for Marco van Basten's team in Austria and Switzerland.

"I've never said I didn't want to play for the national team," he told The Sun. "Right now I'm far calmer than two years ago and that was because at United I was going through a bad period."

"And at that time, with a big tournament, that was something I certainly didn't need."

"Then on top of that I had a conflict with Dutch coach Marco van Basten. Now I feel a lot better and I believe in our success."

Guardiola inks Barca contract

AFP, Madrid

Pep Guardiola on Thursday signed a two-year contract to coach Barcelona, the Spanish giants announced.

The 37-year-old Guardiola is a former Barca captain making over 250 appearances for the club between 1990 and 2001, and winning six league titles and the 1992 Champions League in the process.

His managerial experience is limited but Barca unveiled him last month as the successor to Frank Rijkaard, the Dutchman having spent five seasons at Camp Nou, the last two of which were without silverware.

Guardiola inherits a talented team including youngsters such as Lionel Messi and Bojan Krkic but there are sure to be summer exits as Guardiola looks to stamp his mark on the team.

Leo tries to add levity

AFP, Bad Waltersdorf



Poland's veteran Dutch coach Leo Beenhakker tried on Wednesday to add some much needed levity to the increasingly heated atmosphere surrounding their opening Euro 2008 clash with Germany this Sunday.

The 65-year-old, who as Dutch coach at the 1990 World Cup was involved in a fiery encounter in the quarterfinals with eventual champions the then West Germany which saw both Frank Rijkaard and Rudi Voller sent off, said there was only one way to beat the Germans.

"In Holland we say: to be certain

of beating the Germans it is imperative that one follows them to the bus taking them back to the hotel," he joked.

The atmosphere prior to the match, which is regarded as one of the most sensitive of the tournament given the history between the two countries, has got increasingly heated with notably Polish footballing legend Zbigniew Boniek commenting that the Poland players were "16 times more intelligent than the German players".

A Polish newspaper has also ratcheted up the atmosphere as tabloid Super Express printed a modified picture of Beenhakker holding the heads of Germany boss Joachim Loew and captain Michael Ballack.

The picture had the headline: "Leo, bring us their heads!" but the German camp -- who could well

field two Polish-born players on Sunday in Miroslav Klose and Lukas Podolski -- reacted calmly to the provocation.

Ballack, with 81 caps to his name, insisted the provocation would not hamper Germany's preparations.

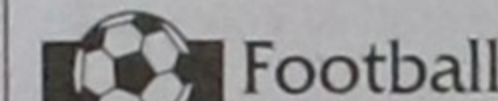
"Unfortunately, these things happen in football, although something like that is not normally seen," he told sports agency SID at Germany's Euro 2008 camp in south Switzerland.

"These things happen and they won't affect our preparations for the game."

The two sides have met each other 15 times since 1933 with Poland yet to win, the Germans having won 11 of them with the other four finishing in draws.

Aside from Germany and Poland, Group B also contains Croatia and co-hosts Austria.

Argentina thump Mexico



AP, San Diego

Sven-Goran Eriksson would seem to have much work ahead of him as the new Mexico coach after viewing a lopsided loss to Argentina in the first game since he was hired.

Maximiliano Rodriguez scored the last of three unanswered goals in the first 30 minutes, as Argentina

took control against Mexico on the way to a 4-1 victory on Wednesday night.

Eriksson, who was hired as the team's new coach on Tuesday, watched from the stands while interim coach Jesus Ramirez continued a five-game tenure that lasts through June 21.

"The difference between Argentina and Mexico was the opportunities that that they had," said Mexico midfielder Antonio

Naelson, who had his team's only goal in the second half. "They created, and we didn't."

Argentina's early outburst, which also included goals by Nicolas Burdisso and Lionel Messi, came before a record San Diego soccer crowd of 68,498 at Qualcomm Stadium to watch the tuneup for World Cup qualifiers.

"There's a basic lesson that we got" Naelson said. "We can be a more complete team if we play together."

Naelson accounted for Mexico's score in the 62nd minute, and Argentina's Sergio Aguero answered with a goal in the 71st minute.

"The score doesn't reflect the level of play of Mexico and Argentina," Ramirez said. "The different factor was the quality of forwards. We need to learn both offensively and defensively."

Ramirez indicated that he would be open to staying as an assistant coach with the national team.

"When this is finished, we will talk with the national federation to make a decision," Ramirez said. "Maybe later I will analyze, but for now, my thinking is right here."

Rodriguez, who scored an overtime goal to beat Mexico in the second round of the 2006 World Cup, scored from the edge of the goal on a deflection off a defender.

Argentina opened the scoring in the 11th minute on Burdisso's shot past goalkeeper Oswaldo Sanchez. Messi added the second score on a close-range attempt seven minutes later.

Goalkeeper Roberto Abbondanzieri made three saves for Argentina, and Sanchez had two.

Mexico's Carlos Vela missed out on a scoring chance in the seventh minute when he dribbled past two defenders but missed wide on a bouncing crossing shot.

Argentina improved to 5-1-2 over Mexico in this decade, including a 3-0 semifinal win in the 2007 Copa America. Overall, Argentina lead the series 11-4-11.



A block of flats, adorned with national flags of Portugal, Italy, Switzerland, France and Spain, is seen behind a notice in French reading: "It is strictly forbidden to play football on this place", in Renens, Switzerland on Thursday.