



Spanish star Rafael Nadal is ecstatic after defeating Serbian opponent Novak Djokovic during their French Open semifinal at Roland Garros in Paris yesterday. Nadal won 6-4, 6-2, 7-6.

Van Persie out of Italy clash

AFP, Lausanne

Dutch attacking midfielder Robin van Persie was effectively ruled out of their opening Euro 2008 match with world champions Italy by national coach Marco van Basten on Friday.

The 23-year-old Arsenal star has not played a competitive match since the end of April and was racked by several injuries last season, including latterly a thigh problem which saw him reduced to light training for the first two weeks of the Euro training camp.

With two other tough matches to come in the 'Group of Death' against 2006 World Cup finalists France and dark horses Romania, van Basten appears not to be willing to risk the fragile van Persie for the first match.

"Robin is training normally with the squad," said van Basten, who steps down after the tournament to take over at tiling Dutch giants Ajax. "His condition is improving from day to day but it is logical that there is still some improvement to come. The Italy match will be too early for him."

Van Persie had indicated that he was available for selection by van Basten after training on Wednesday.

However, van Basten has a surfeit of attacking midfielders with Arjen Robben and his Real Madrid teammate Wesley Sneijder as well as Rafael van der Vaart capable of filling the three positions.

Spurs snap up Dos Santos

AFP, London

Barcelona's 19-year-old Mexican striker Giovanni dos Santos has joined Tottenham in the English Premiership club's second significant signing of the close season, the clubs said on Friday.

Dos Santos, who failed to break into a Barcelona first team loaded with attacking talent, signed in a deal initially worth 4.7 million pounds, although that could rise to 8.6 million pounds depending on the number of appearances he makes.

The signing of a player who was also reportedly being pursued by Chelsea and Manchester City is a coup for Tottenham's Spanish coach Juande Ramos, who has already added Croatia's midfielder playmaker Luka Modric to his squad for next season.

Barcelona have retained 20 percent of any fee Tottenham receive if he should move in the first two years of his contract and will take 10 percent of any transfer fee he moves after that.

A statement on Tottenham's official website said: "We are delighted to announce that we have reached agreement with Barcelona for the transfer of Giovanni dos Santos to the club, subject to a medical and agreeing personal terms."

Dos Santos, who has played five times for Mexico's senior squad, rarely played a whole match for Barcelona last season but showed his attacking talent when he scored a hat-trick in his last game for the club, a 5-3 win over Real Murcia.

He is expected to recover from an ankle injury in time for the Premier League kickoff in August.

His arrival is sure to fuel speculation that Dimitar Berbatov, the Bulgarian who scored 23 goals in a sensational debut season at Tottenham, will be leaving White Hart Lane, with Barcelona believed to be among the clubs chasing his signature.

SWITZERLAND V CZECH REPUBLIC Hosts rely on Tranquillo

AFP, Basel



Switzerland kick off Euro 2008 on Saturday with a tough opening match against the Czech Republic and the hopes of the joint hosts resting heavily on the slim shoulders of Tranquillo Barnetta.

The Bayer Leverkusen playmaker, an impish figure with a destructive turn of pace, has taken over from striker Alexander Frei as the star of the Swiss squad. The extent to which he lives up to that billing looks set to play a central role in determining the fate of Kobi Kuhn's side's bid to ensure they advance at least to the quarterfinals from a first-round group that also includes Portugal and Turkey.

Kuhn, who has had to cope with his wife being hospitalised and placed in an artificial coma following an epileptic fit earlier this week, knows opponents will find it difficult to score against his side, particularly now that Lyon centreback Patrick Muller is back in the fold, barely six months after undergoing cruciate ligament surgery.

But the Swiss rely heavily on Barnetta for their creative spark, which explains why alarm bells started ringing when the 23-year-old suffered a training ground ankle injury two weeks ago.

He has since returned to full training and will take up his familiar slot on the left of midfield in Basel's St-Jakob Park stadium on Saturday evening.

Barnetta is one of a group of young stars for whom Euro 2008 could represent a ticket to one of Europe's big clubs. But he insists personal ambition must take a back seat as the Swiss seek to at least match their performance at the last World Cup, where they went out on penalties to the Ukraine in the second round without having conceded a goal.

"You can't think about that sort of thing," he said. "You have to play for the team and if we have success everything else follows. If we get through the group it will be good for all the players, not just me."

Barnetta also dismissed suggestions that he may still be feeling the knock on his ankle. "I didn't train for two weeks, but, at the end of a long season, that is not necessarily a bad thing. I'm feeling fresh and ready to go."

The Czechs have been weakened by the loss of captain and playmaker, Tomas Rosicky, to injury but a side currently ranked

sixth in the world will still expect to inflict a heavy blow on Swiss morale.

Rosicky's Arsenal teammate, the Swiss defender Philippe Senderos, recognises that Saturday's encounter holds the key to Swiss hopes.

"We have been waiting for this moment for so long -- now it is here, hopefully we can make the country proud," Senderos said. "We know we are capable of that. Of course there is pressure on us but there is also a real desire to show what we are capable of."

With Barnetta charged with generating openings, the responsibility for finishing rests largely with Borussia Dortmund's Frei, the Swiss captain who has bagged a remarkable 35 goals in his 59 international appearances.

The 28-year-old is looking forward to a reunion with Chelsea goalkeeper Petr Cech, a former teammate from their days at

French club Rennes.

Cech's form is perceived to have dipped fractionally since he suffered a fractured skull at the end of 2006, an injury which has resulted in him having to wear an ice hockey helmet during matches.

But Frei remains an ardent admirer. "Petr could play with a motorbike helmet on and he would still be one of the best in the world. You know you have done a good job if you score against him."

Despite the Czechs' perceived superiority, Cech admits Saturday's encounter in the special atmosphere of a tournament opening match could be tricky.

"A lot will depend on how they (the Swiss) cope with the pressure," Cech said. "We saw with Germany at the last World Cup how the fans can motivate a host team. But the opposite can also happen. It can all get too much for them, like we saw when Portugal lost the final to Greece in 2004."



Swiss star Tranquillo Barnetta (front) and teammate Eren Derdiyok run during a training session in Freienbach on Thursday.

Mutu to pay 12m euros

AFP, Bucharest

A commission charged by world football's ruling body FIFA to resolve a conflict opposing Chelsea and Adrian Mutu has ruled that the Romanian international must pay his former club 12 million euros.

According to a report on the website of Mutu's current club Fiorentina, cited by the Mediafax agency here, the commission

ruled that Mutu must repay the Premier League club for revenues they claimed to have lost following his sacking for drugs use in 2004.

Chelsea signed Mutu for 15.8 million pounds (19.8 million euros) in the summer of 2003 but sacked him in October 2004 after he tested positive for cocaine during a doping control.

The club estimated that the affair, which led to Mutu serving a seven-month ban, cost them 13 million pounds (16.2 million

euros) in lost revenue. Mutu, currently with the Romanian national team in Switzerland preparing for their European Championships opener against France on June 9, is expected to appeal the decision, at a civil court. His lawyer told Romanian news channel Realitatea that Mutu would be doing so.

After serving his ban Mutu signed for Juventus only to be transferred to Fiorentina where he has resurrected his career.

Safina in Ivanovic's way

French Open

AFP, Paris

Newly-crowned world No.1 Ana Ivanovic of Serbia will look to complete a perfect fortnight in Paris by winning her first Grand Slam title against Dinara Safina of Russia in Saturday's French Open final.

The 20-year-old Belgrade beauty made sure of dislodging the sport's other glamour girl, Maria Sharapova, atop the rankings by defeating fellow Serb Jelena Jankovic 6-4, 3-6, 6-4 in the semifinals.

She will start favourite against Safina, who will be playing in her first Grand Slam final at the age of 22, but knows that she cannot afford a bout of nerves like in last year's title match when she collapsed in straight sets 6-1, 6-2 to the recently-retired Justine Henin.

Ivanovic, who also lost in straight sets to Sharapova in the Australian Open final in January, says she has no intentions of binning the memory of 12 months ago and insists she will be all the better for the experience.

"I don't want to forget it, because it was great learning experience," she said.

"I learned a lot from Justine and the emotions I was feeling going on the court. So I really hope I can work hard on it and play different this year."

"Obviously I feel like a different player coming into this French Open. A lot of experience I gained



ANA IVANOVIC

from that final and the final in Australia, so I really hope I can step up this time and make one more step.

The 22-year-old Safina has had a remarkable run into the final grappling her way back from a set and 2-5 down and matchpoint against her in back-to-back games against

Sharapova and Elena Dementieva. She had no such worries against another Russian, Svetlana Kuznetsova, in the semifinals winning 6-3, 6-2 and she says she is determined not to be overawed by the occasion on Saturday.

"I will just take it as another



DINARA SAFINA

match and just focus on myself and what I have to do," she said.

"I have to do the things that I know to do and try to avoid thinking as much as I can. This is the final but it is like the first round. It's the same court and the same ball."

The two finalists have played each other three times and

Ana stunned by number one spot

AFP, Paris

Serbia's Ana Ivanovic admitted she was stunned to discover that her French Open semifinal victory over compatriot Jelena Jankovic had elevated her to the world number one ranking.

"I didn't know going on to court today. Afterwards, in the locker room, the woman told me. I was obviously very excited," said 20-year-old Ivanovic who replaces Maria Sharapova at the top following the Russian's surprise Roland Garros fourth round defeat to Dinara Safina.

"I haven't thought about it at all. I didn't like to talk about the rankings at all with my team, so I didn't even know that this would happen."

Sharapova's reign at the top of the rankings lasted just three weeks when she inherited the position from Justine Henin following the Belgian's shock decision to quit.

Ivanovic, the second seed here, will face Safina, the 13th seed, in Saturday's final with both looking to win a first Grand Slam singles title.

Larry Scott, the chief executive of the WTA Tour, said: "Ana is both a remarkable player and person, and no doubt the best is still yet to come in her still young career. It is inspiring to see Ana's years of hard work and determination being rewarded."

Materazzi hits back at press

AFP, Baden

Much-maligned Italy centre-back Marco Materazzi lashed out at the press on Friday just three days before Italy's first Euro 2008 match against the Netherlands in Zurich.

Materazzi has had an injury-plagued season up until now and even when fit, often found himself benched both by club and country.

But he defended his own form and sent out a defiant message to his detractors, evoking a famous quote from former American president John F. Kennedy.

Asked about the criticisms levelled at him at the end of the season, he replied: "As someone, who I think was Kennedy, once said: forgive what they said but don't forget their names."

Despite the injury to captain Fabio Cannavaro, Materazzi is far from assured a starting berth on Monday.

He is in competition primarily with Andrea Barzagli of Palermo (soon to be of VfL Wolfsburg) and Juventus's Giorgio Chiellini for a starting role.

But the veteran insisted he is still at the peak of his powers.

"I'm aware of my own strengths but I have no certainty (that he will play)," said Materazzi, who was the unlikely goal scorer for Italy in the 2006 World Cup final.

"Ever since I was a child I've risen above prejudices, now I'm proving myself again, which serves to demonstrate once again what I'm worth."

One thing in Materazzi's favour for the first game could be his vast experience as playing up front for their opponents will be none other than the prolific Ruud van Nistelrooy.

Should he be picked, Materazzi - who during an unhappy sojourn in England with Everton once sank to his knees by the advertising hoardings having picked up another red card burst into tears and considered giving up the sport - would be facing the Real Madrid forward for the first time in his career.

"He's a great striker who is tough to mark. I've never been unlucky enough to play against him," he said.

PORTUGAL V TURKEY Gomes hunting goals

REUTERS, Neuchatel



Another two-goal winning performance from striker Nuno Gomes against Turkey would suit Portugal fine in their Euro 2008 opener at 1845 GMT on Saturday.

Nuno Gomes, who is expected to lead the line in the Group A game in Geneva, struck twice to give Portugal a 2-0 win over the Turks when they last met, in the Euro 2000 quarterfinals.

The result had other ramifications because coach Fatih Terim, now in charge of Turkey but then about to join Fiorentina, signed the Portuguese striker for the Italian team.

The two, who have a strong mutual respect for each other, meet again but on opposite sides as Portugal look to win a trophy they have edged ever closer to over the last 12 years.

Portugal, quarterfinalists in

England in 1996, reached the 2000 semifinals with that win over Turkey, and then the final when they hosted the tournament four years ago, only to become the victims of giant-killers Greece.

With Cristiano Ronaldo, then a raw if very talented teenager but now arguably Europe's top player, the Portuguese hope to finally lift their first major trophy.

"Like all of us, Ronaldo will defend Portugal up to the last minute of the last game. He knows his importance to the team," defender Fernando Meira told a news conference on Thursday.

First, they must make a better start than in 2004 on home soil when they were upset in their opening match -- an ominous earlier defeat by the Greeks.

"We have to make a winning start although I don't agree with those who believe that whichever team wins this match will be practically in the quarterfinals," said goalkeeper Ricardo.

Standing in Portugal's way is Terim, whose high rating outside his country took him from

Fiorentina to AC Milan, and his strongly committed Turkish team.

Coach Luiz Felipe Scolari has a fit squad after the minor scare when Ronaldo had to put ice on a knock on his right ankle during training on Monday, the squad's first day in Switzerland.

Midfielder Deco, also expected to play, did light training apart from the rest of the squad on Thursday for muscle toning purposes, team doctor Henrique Jones told reporters.

"However, I can guarantee he will be 100 per cent for the first game against Turkey," he said.

The Turks, making their first appearance at a major tournament since finishing third at the 2002 World Cup, are also injury free going into the match.

Midfielder Hamit Altintop, who was out for two months after breaking a metatarsal bone in a friendly against Belarus in March, has declared himself fit despite suffering a muscle problem in training last week.

English fans back Spain

AFP, London



English fans are putting a brave face on their country's absence from Euro 2008 by throwing their support behind countries whose star players play their trade in England, with Spain leading the way.

For the first time in 14 years, England are staying at home while a top international tournament takes place without them.

Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland also failed to qualify, and not even that traditional standby for British fans, the Republic of Ireland, made it to this month's finals in Austria and Switzerland.

Fortunately for heartbroken England fans deprived of seeing David Beckham, Wayne Rooney and co. in action, the highly international English Premier League is helping to fill the void. Supporters are simply choosing to support the countries that their favourite club players represent.

Richard Lawrence, 33, a carpenter from Essex who works in London, is a fan of lower division Ipswich, but he admires the skills of

Liverpool's Spanish striker Fernando Torres and playmaker Cesc Fabregas of Arsenal.

He said: "I'll be supporting Spain because they've got Torres and Fabregas. They really should be better than they've been in the past, given the players they've got."

"It's not a major deal for me that England aren't in it. I'll still go to the pub to watch some games and definitely the final."

He is not alone, with surveys showing English supporters leaning towards either Spain or the Netherlands.

Aidan Harvey, 26, a financial advisor in London, is pinning his colours to the Czech Republic -- because their midfielder Marek Matejovsky plays for his favourite club, Reading, who were relegated from the Premier League last month.

"We've been discussing this in the office and we've each chosen a team, but it had to be the Czechs for me. It's quite an unusual choice, but then Reading don't have too many international stars."

A detailed survey by lads' cable TV station Nuts found that 13 per cent of respondents favoured Spain, who are seeking to end a long wait for an international trophy stretching back to 1964.

The Dutch -- perhaps thanks to

the presence in their squad of Manchester United goalkeeper Edwin van der Sar -- came a close second in the poll, and they topped a poll in the left-leaning Guardian newspaper too.

But the fact that all 16 countries at the finals received some support shows how international the Premier League has become.

There is though one subject all British fans agree on -- the team they don't want to win is their old sporting enemy, Germany.

A whopping 31 per cent in the Nuts poll said British fans were hoping the Germans failed to add this year's title to the European crowns they won in 1996, and in 1972 and 1980 as West Germany.

Television coverage of the tournament in Britain will be extensive despite the British teams' no-show. Former England striker Gary Lineker, who will front the BBC's broadcasts, is also backing Spain to win, because he used to play for Barcelona.

He described England's failure to qualify as "a bit of a whack, a bit of a blow" but he can see a silver lining for a nation that has failed to win anything since the 1966 World Cup.

"The upside is we won't have to suffer the massive disappointment -- we'll escape that," he told The Times.

Blatter gets green light

Football

AFP, Brussels

FIFA president Sepp Blatter defended his controversial 'six plus five' foreign player system at the European parliament here, saying it would nurture young talent and benefit the national game.

Plans to further explore the system, which would limit clubs to fielding six home-grown players and a maximum of five foreigners, were given an overwhelming endorsement by the FIFA Congress in Sydney last week.

Blatter was in Brussels for talks after the European Commission

rejected the proposals, warning they would contravene EU labour rules.

"It's not only about the figure six plus five," said Blatter at a meeting with the parliament president Hans-Gert Potltering on Thursday.

"The objective is also the motivation of young players, the education of young players, to bring back an equilibrium in the competition, and naturally to have a strong national team and to give access to national team players to play in the best clubs."

During Thursday's meeting Potltering reiterated the commission's position, but said he would continue talks on the subject. "I'm very happy of the proposal

by the president that dialogue will go on," a delighted Blatter said.

"We are very prepared to take over this offer and to start a good dialogue to try to find whenever a solution on this matter. We have said we shall do that to explore it in the limit of the law."

Blatter is seeking the quota amid fears about the number of foreign players switching nationalities to play for different national teams, along with the competitiveness of club competitions.

He told the FIFA Congress in Sydney last week that he hoped to introduce the system from 2010 with a minimum of four home players, going up to five in 2011 and the full six by 2012.