



**QUAZI ZULQUARNAIN ISLAM**

**I**f the World Cup represents the Holy Grail for every footballer worth his salt, playing in the European Championships would equate to a pilgrimage.

A quarterly event like that of its proverbial big brother, the World Cup, the Euro provides a remarkable challenge to every player the chance to make his nation the top amongst sixteen fiercely competitive sides vying for that exact same glory.

Such an award takes on even greater significance as the advent of globalization has all but seen nationalist traits erased

amongst European nations. The European Championships offer one last chance for fans of each nation to channel their patriotism through their national colours.

Traditionally the Euro's have also proved to be a rite of passage. Many of its stars have gone on to great things, some haven't (think Angelos Charisteas) but regardless they have made their mark on what is commonly recognized as the most competitive football competition in the world. Forget the Champions League, forget the World Cup Austria and Switzerland is where it's at this

summer. Which is the reason why over the past decade, it has grasped such tremendous interest amongst the football faithful of Bangladesh.

Interest in football (at least internationally) among Bangladeshi's is as high as it has ever been and many will brave sleepy eyes to watch their favourite footballers deep into the night like they did two years ago during the World Cup.

Also, if the last World Cup was any marker, at the moment, football in Europe is at its peak. Six of the eight quarterfinalists were European.

Subsequently all the four semifinalists who lined up were also European.

So when co-hosts, the Swiss kick-off the tournament against the Czech Republic tonight it will herald the start of a showpiece event littered with some of the biggest stars in the world.

Cristiano Ronaldo will be there the Portuguese magician jetting into the competition with the expectations of the world and the hopes of a nation on his shoulders. So will Franck Ribery, his brand of the exotic catching the eye for Les Blues fans much the way Zinedine

Zidane once did. Also, Fernando Torres, so impressive with Liverpool this season will look to replicate his club form for the perennial under-achievers.

But while these are the relatively young, the elder statesmen of Thierry Henry, Ruud van Nistelrooy, Luca Toni and Michael Ballack will be looking to stamp their authority on the tournament.

And as always, there will be dark horses look out for Croatia Luka Modric, an effervescent playmaker in his own right who will catch the eye.

France look the strongest on

paper, their mix of youth, stability and unpredictability may deliver their third trophy if they can negotiate a group that includes Italy and Holland.

While the former are always a handful, the Oranje mostly flatter to deceive.

Don't discount Germany too, the proverbial tournament team who are backed by a strong qualification campaign.

Spain are also set to prove a handful but chances are slim that we might have another surprise like Greece gave us last time around.

What is insured though is the fact that it will be three weeks of

sterling, competitive football where no one will give a quarter or an inch except maybe Austria.

The co-hosts are one of the lowest ranked teams to ever feature in the Euro and as a sideshow have had to deal with a petition from their own fans to pull out of their own showpiece event.

No such dramatics is forthcoming with all the twists and turns set to be pulled in the green fields of Austria and Switzerland.

The show is all set to begin.



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**NO DANDRUFF.\***

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