

# Injury toll mounts

AFP, Paris

Even before opening match protagonists Switzerland and the Czech Republic had kicked a ball in anger a growing clutch of the 16 participating nations were seeking a clean bill of health in vain on Saturday.

Poland, facing Germany in their opening game on Sunday, have been hardest hit with two of their squad already having had to pull out while Portugal goalkeeper Quim has succumbed to a hand fracture.

The Swiss also lost their talismanic captain and striker Alexander Frei after just 42 minutes against the Czechs as he had to go off after tangling with Czech defender Zdenek Grygera.

The Czechs themselves had to leave out Zdenek Pospisil, the defender suffering from a fever and a virus.

They were dropping like flies on Saturday afternoon when Quim made his premature exit while Holland announced that flying winger Arjen Robben will miss their first game against Italy on Monday in Geneva after he suffered a groin strain in training.

The Dutch were already without recovering thigh strain victim Robin van Persie.

France are sweating on captain Patrick Vieira, who faces an eleventh-hour fitness test on his

injured thigh ahead of Monday's Group C opener against Romania.

Gallic teammates Thierry Henry and Franck Ribery have also only been undertaking light training after receiving knocks in the 1-0 friendly win over Colombia on Tuesday.

If Barcelona's Henry is not ready then Chelsea's Nicolas Anelka will likely play alongside Lyon's Karim Benzema up front.

After a long club season international teams often have to make their own luck and so far, that of three-times champions Germany is holding.

In contrast, the Poles have had to reshuffle the pack before taking on Die Mannschaft after midfielder Jakub Blaszczykowski had to pull out of the tournament having aggravated a hamstring injury in training on Thursday.

Lukasz Piszczek of German outfit Hertha Berlin stepped into the breach.

Coach Leo Beenhakker also lost left-back Grzegorz Bronowicki from his provisional squad last month because of a knee injury and now must field a makeshift defence in the Germany match with goalkeeper Tomasz Kuszczak also ruled out of the event because of a back injury.

Poland team officials have asked European football's governing body UEFA to replace Manchester United's Kuszczak

with Wojciech Kowalewski, who plays for Polish first division side Korona Kielce.

Beenhakker, who has seen it all before at 65, could afford a grim smile on Saturday after the injury blows forced a rethink.

"We're not going to do anything different - we're not going to go running around the park tomorrow in the nude!"

"We'll go the stadium singing tralala. Will it be tralala afterwards? That I don't know," he laughed.

Poland's rivals Croatia were hoping that defender Vedran Corluka will recover from an Achilles tendon problem to play against Austria on Sunday.

The malaise has also afflicted holders Greece with midfielder Georgios Karagounis battling to be fit for the start of his country's title defence after suffering a knee injury in a warm-up encounter.

The Panathinaikos star said on Saturday he was "optimistic" of facing Sweden on Tuesday.

Russia have already bade farewell to leading striker Pavel Pogrebnyak after he pulled out Saturday with a left knee injury.

The Zenit St Petersburg forward, who finished this season's UEFA Cup campaign as joint top scorer along with Luca Toni with 10 goals, will be replaced by Samara midfielder Oleg Ivanov.

## EURO 2008 BRIEFS

AFP, Vienna

AFP Euro 2008 briefs on Sunday:  
AN APPLE JUICE A DAY...

GENEVA: A beer will cost more in Geneva than in Zurich during the Euro. The official lager, which has a monopoly in all the stadia and public viewing zones, left it to the cantons to decide on the price, in true Swiss fashion. The result: one decilitre of beer will cost 1.20 Swiss franc (0.74 euro) in Zurich, compared to 1.65 in Geneva. Authorities there said they wanted to prevent excessive drinking. The alternative? Apple juice, which will cost only 1 Swiss franc for 3 decilitres.

TOP SECRET

ST GALLEN: High-level security surrounds Romania's base in the Swiss town of St Gallen. The hotel has been shrouded in a large black

cover "so nobody can look into the courtyard," the rooms have no Romanian television channels and minibars contain "only water and maybe some fruit." All on the orders of national coach Victor Piturca, who has done his best to turn the hotel into a bunker, according to Romanian sports daily Gazeta Sporturilor.

GOING DOWN

BERLIN: Germany is starting to doubt its chances during the European championship. A survey by football magazine Kicker found that 43 percent of Germans believed the Mannschaft would make it to the final, down from 48 percent in February. But 80 percent of those asked still saw Ballack and his teammates reaching the semifinals.

ASKING PRICE

BUCHAREST The championship hasn't even started and already

players' values are going up. After Nicolae Dica scored a double for Romania in Saturday's friendly against Montenegro, Steaua Bucharest boss Gigi Becali immediately announced that his midfielder's value had "gone up by one million euros." How much more will he be worth if he scores another double during the tournament?

ALREADY A WINNER

THE HAGUE: Marco van Basten has racked up more victories than any other Dutch national coach since the end of World War II. In 48 games, "San Marco" has had 32 wins, topping Dick Advocaat's 31 victories in 55 matches. But he still has some way to go before he can beat the Briton Bob Glendenning, who managed 36 wins in 87 games with the Dutch national team between 1923 and 1940.

## NETHERLANDS V ITALY

# Dutch look for revenge

AFP, Berne

Holland embark on yet another major finals campaign with high expectations but their first clash of Euro 2008 will evoke memories of another failure to cash in on their constant conveyor belt of talent when they face world champions Italy here on Monday.

The Dutch -- out to emulate their 1988 compatriots in being European champions -- looked to have the upper hand over the same opposition in the Euro 2000 semi-final playing as 11 against 10 for the majority of the match but missed two penalties in playing time and eventually lost on a penalty shoot-out.

There are two survivors in the present squad from that traumatic experience in goalkeeper Edwin van der Sar and Giovanni van Bronckhorst but it is the absence of one of the Italians who played that day, Fabio Cannavaro, who suffered an ankle injury earlier in the week ruling him out of the tournament, that has given the Dutch a boost.

"In a sense, his (Cannavaro's) absence is a good thing for us," said Dutch coach Marco van Basten, who steps down after the tournament to take over ailing Dutch

giants Ajax.

"He is a huge name, a great player, and a huge personality. He was fundamental to the Italian game," added van Basten, otherwise known as 'Saint Marco'.

Van Basten, though, has had his own injury problems to deal with, with the injury-plagued Arjen Robben out with a groin strain and 'San Marco' may not wish to risk throwing the equally injury-prone Robin van Persie into such a high velocity match, as the Arsenal star has not played since the end of April.

However, the worry for van Basten is that his defence and more importantly his two defensive midfielders have given cause for concern as he has failed to fill those two spots since Marc van Bommel refused to play under him after the 2006 World Cup while Clarence Seedorf withdrew from contention late on, saying he believed the coach did not have confidence in him.

Even van Basten does not seem to know what his best pairing of defensive midfielders will be.

"I am no longer certain who to select for the defensive midfielder positions," said van Basten.

Hardly cause for optimism, but it is another player who he fell out

with and who he has subsequently rebuilt his bridges with, striker Ruud van Nistelrooy, who has declared himself happy with the preparations for the tournament.

"Our warm-up matches really reassured me," he said.

"Of course we lacked consistency but in terms of attacking tactics we are capable of putting some great moves together," added van Nistelrooy, who has scored 31 goals in 61 matches.

However, the Italians are determined to emulate France in adding the European crown to their world title -- the French having won Euro 2000 after landing the 1998 World Cup -- and playmaker Andrea Pirlo has made no secret of their determination to do just that and amazingly give the Italians just their second win in the tournament's history.

"I'll play and I've come here to win. I want to lift this cup," said Pirlo, who was man of the match in the 2006 World Cup final.

"With Cannavaro (out) Italy have lost a lot but we have the same desire as at the World Cup in Germany and, on top of that, the motivation that Italy hasn't won the Euro in 40 years."

"It's time to bring this trophy back home."



THIS ONE COUNTS: Portuguese defender Pepe (C) fires home the first goal against Turkey in the Euro 2008 at the Geneva Stadium in Geneva on Saturday. Portugal won the match 2-0.

# Portugal lay down marker

AFP, Geneva

Portugal avoided the same fate that befell them in 2004 when getting their Euro 2008 campaign off to the perfect start with a 2-0 win over Turkey here on Saturday.

Luiz Felipe Scolari's side, beaten as hosts in their opener four years ago by Greece, the gatecrashers that would go on to deny them in the final itself, took the points in this Group A tie with a second half goal from Real Madrid defender Pepe.

Late substitute Raul Meireles bagged the injury time second.

Man of the match Pepe said: "I can hardly describe the emotion I felt - but the important thing was we played like a real team and knew sooner or later we'd score a goal."

Scolari praised his side for their impressive opening performance, their best showing since the World Cup when they reached the semifinals.

"They showed good technical quality and impressive form - they were dynamic and willing to win."

"We're on the right path, we won and we've got 50 percent of what we need to qualify with two more games to go."

Turkey coach Fatih Terim said Portugal had made life difficult for him.

"It wasn't easy to play against Portugal - they have world renowned players and are among the favourites for the tournament."

"Nevertheless we worked very hard and tried to score and attack and keep the game on an equal footing but then we conceded the goal."

"It was unfortunate as we lost the ball, conceded the goal just when we could have perhaps done something but as I say it's not easy to play against Ronaldo, Simao, and the others!"

Scolari was forced into a late change of plan when his intended starter in goal, Quim, fractured his hand in training, with Ricardo

by the linesman's flag - held aloft for offside.

With both sides in attacking mode the near 30,000 full house at the Stade de Geneve had plenty to keep them warm on a chilly summer's night by Lake Lemman, not least in the 30th minute when Ronaldo scythed his way through the Turkish defence only to scuff his shot.

On 38 minutes the 23-year-old goalscoring machine drilled in a low angled freekick from 20m out on the left and only the hand of

Turkey's calls for a 47th minute penalty when Nihat Kahveci went down after a challenge by Simao fell on German referee Herbert Fandel's deaf ears.

Down at the other end in a move orchestrated by Simao, captain Nuno Gomes let fly with only Volkan to beat but the ball ricocheted off the near post.

With Ronaldo now a free agent and given licence by Scolari to roam as he pleased Portugal looked doubly dangerous and on the hour they finally got the goal they deserved.

It was the fruit of a neat three-cornered move involving Ronaldo then Gomes and finished off by Pepe's low 10m shot with the linesmen this time leaving the defender to enjoy his handywork.

Nuno Gomes, who almost doubled up with a header which hit Volkan's woodwork, was replaced by Nani with his United teammate Ronaldo inheriting the skipper's armband.

Substitute Emre Asik had a free shot late on but it didn't have enough legs to trouble Ricardo then FC Porto's Meireles popped up to leave Portugal sitting pretty to survive the opening round.

Portugal next face the Czech Republic, 1-0 winners over Switzerland earlier, on Wednesday with Turkey up against co-hosts the Swiss on the same day.

TODAY'S MATCHES		
Teams	Time	Venue
Romania v France	10:00pm	Zurich
Netherlands v Italy	12:45am (Tuesday)	Berne

standing in for the out-of-commission Benfica keeper.

'Big Phil' deployed Nuno Gomes as a lone striker with Cristiano Ronaldo on the right wing against a Turkish side that was fielding the same 4-3-2-1 format.

Manchester United's most prized asset was, surprise surprise, the first with a shot on goal.

Pepe headed in a corner past Volkan Demirel after quarter of an hour and ran half the pitch with his arms in the air in celebration only to have his Kodak moment ruined

Volkan which deflected the ball onto the far post stopped Portugal going into the lead.

Besiktas back Gokhan Zan then did well to snuff out a live threat as Portugal went for broke just before the break.

Turkish fans had to wait until first half injury time before their side found the target but Ricardo comfortably coped with Mevlut Erdinc's snap shot from 20m out.

Mevlut failed to appear for the second half, coach Fatih Terim replacing him with Sabri Sanoglu.

## City in pursuit of Ronaldinho

AFP, London

Manchester City have edged closer to sealing the signature of former two-time World Footballer of the Year Ronaldinho by travelling to Brazil to meet the player's agents, reports said Sunday.

City owner Shinawatra Thaksin is ready to hand his new manager Mark Hughes a 50-million-pound (62 million euro) transfer fund, and reports say up to 15 million euros of that is earmarked for the Barcelona forward.

According to the Sunday Times a delegation from City has travelled to Porto Alegre in Brazil to meet representatives for Ronaldinho in a bid to seal a deal.

The report said that Barcelona have agreed to City's trip, and that Ronaldinho may even sign at Eastlands within two or three days.

Capturing Ronaldinho would be a huge coup for City, who would expect to recoup much of the Brazilian's reported weekly wage, in excess of 130,000 pounds (162,000 euros) and making him the highest-paid player in the Premier League, through marketing.

City owner Shinawatra, a former prime minister in Thailand, said earlier this week: "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?"

"It is not a risk. Sponsors will contribute. It will not damage our wage structure."

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

## ROMANIA V FRANCE

# Underdogs plot French fall

AFP, Zurich

Romania's Scottish Premier League-based striker Marius Niculae believes his countrymen should use a little Highland know-how if they are to belie their underdog tag and silence France's bark in Monday's Group C opener in Zurich.

Raymond Domenech's France are vying for favouritism to lift the championships and will be out to reinforce that status against a Romanian side that pipped fellow Group C rivals the Dutch in qualifying.

And Niculae, who plays for Inverness Caledonian Thistle, reckons Romania are in with a squeak of upsetting the two time winners and 2006 World Cup finalists if they follow the example set by Scotland, who beat France twice in qualifying.

"Maybe we can learn something from the way the Scots played against France," the 27-year-old attacker suggested.

"They were very compact and took their chances when they came along. Our first game is the most important game because we want a good start and we hope to get some points on the board against France," he told euro2008.com.

Teaming up with Niculae in trying to breach the seasoned French defence which has not leaked a goal in their last four

matches is Adrian Mutu.

Mutu, in his first major finals since, said: "It was a hard group in 2000 but we didn't have to play the World Cup winners and the team they played in the final. None of the teams wish to play in this group. It is the hardest group ever."

Yet Mutu doesn't underestimate the monumental task facing them.

"We have a tough draw on paper and only those who like an adrenalin rush would bet on us, but we will do our best and a positive result against France would give us real impetus for the games against Italy and Holland. As our captain Cristian Chivu said, 'It's time for us to show what we can do.'"

France, facing their first finals without the master, Zinedine Zidane, look set to be bereft of their captain, Patrick Vieira, unless the seasoned midfielder passes an eleventh-hour fitness test on his injured thigh.

Lyon midfielder Jeremy Toulalan is being readied to fill Vieira's place, with Claude Makelele commenting: "(Jeremy) Toulalan and Patrick have different qualities."

"There is a great complicity between Toulalan and myself. When I move up he sits in front of the defence. There's no problem. You adapt to your opponents. We

are intelligent enough to read their game and make adjustments - it's up to the players to decide."

For most it is Franck Ribery who has taken over the baton from Zidane.

The Bayern Munich star is in red hot form after lifting the league title and Cup in his first season in Germany and striking a penalty in last Tuesday's final prep against Colombia to mark in the best possible way Thierry Henry's 100th cap.

Back at the 2006 World Cup there was a noticeable lack of public support for Domenech's Les Bleus during the first round group phase.

Two years on and Gallic confidence is seemingly back with a survey for sports daily L'Equipe on Saturday suggesting one in three fans back home believe France can win this Euro.

But Domenech is taking nothing for granted ahead, and assessing the complexities of Group C he said: "All four teams have the same chance."

Romania finished above the Netherlands in qualifying so I see no reason why we should now say they are weaker. They're a solid team and are very capable of hurting opponents on the counterattack.

"We're not arriving with our hands in our pockets thinking we're going to win easily."

## Pepe thrilled by his goal

REUTERS, Geneva

Brazilian-born central defender Pepe, capped for the first time seven months ago, expressed his joy over scoring his first goal for Portugal at Euro 2008 on Saturday.

Pepe netted the crucial opening goal after an hour of Portugal's 2-0 victory over Turkey in the Group A match at Stade de Geneve.

"It was an incredible sensation, scoring my first goal for Portugal," the strong, 25-year-old told Reuters after winning his fourth cap.

"I just went for it," he said of his run into attack where he exchanged passes with striker Nuno Gomes before racing into the area to score.

"I was very motivated," said the softly-spoken defender, who joined Real Madrid at the start of last season for 30 million euros (\$46.82 million).

He had shown his attacking prowess in the first half when he headed a cross home only for his effort to be ruled out for offside.

"Portugal have shown their quality, they have a great defence," said playmaker Deco, who praised the back four for their work in holding off a spirited Turkish attack.

"We came up against a good team, we expected them to be as good as they were. Now we know what we have to do to be able to qualify," he added.

## Sverkos savours imperfection

REUTERS, Basel

Czech Republic striker Vaclav Sverkos may have scored his first international goal on Saturday but he still managed to find fault with it.

"It wasn't exactly how I wanted to do it... well, it was because it went it, but I wanted to shoot higher," he told reporters after clinching a 1-0 win over Euro 2008 co-hosts Switzerland in the Group A opener to the tournament.

The 24-year-old, winning only his third cap, said scoring 15 minutes after coming on as a substitute for the experienced Jan Koller had been the best moment of his career.

"It was even better because our fans were right behind the goal... it was my best moment in my footballing life," he said with a big smile.

Koller, the country's all-time leading scorer, had high praise for his young replacement.

Asked whether Sverkos could repeat team mate Milan Baros' feat four years ago of being the tournament's top scorer, Koller said: "Why not? He is on great form."

Sverkos came into the tournament as top scorer in the Czech championship last season with his club Banik Ostrava and only made his international debut last week.

He conceded that he was unlikely to oust Koller from coach Karel Bruckner's starting lineup but would like the chance to score more goals.

"I am just happy to be here at all. The main thing is for us to be successful as a team," he said. "I've got to work hard and run hard."



Italian striker Luca Toni (C) fights for possession of the ball with a teammate during a training session in Maria Enzersdorf in Austria ahead of their today's Group C opener of the Euro 2008 against The Netherlands.