

GERMANS END 12-YEAR DROUGHT A Pole sinks the Poles

AFP, Klagenfurt

Polish-born forward Lukas Podolski ended Germany's 12-year wait for a European Championship win on Sunday with two goals as his side's Euro 2008 campaign began with a 2-0 win over Poland.

Having turned 23 last Wednesday, Podolski combined with Germany's other Polish-born forward Miroslav Klose for his first goal on 20 minutes and followed up with an unstoppable volley on 72 minutes.

After Group B rivals Croatia had earlier got off to a winning start with a 1-0 victory over co-hosts Austria in Vienna, the result puts the Germans top of their group and coach Joachim Loew praised his team.

"The whole team, not just Lukas Podolski, played well, we know Lukas is a very dangerous attacker for any goalkeeper, but Mario Gomez and Miroslav Klose helped him immensely," said Loew.

"I think from a tactical point of view our defence worked very well, we didn't make many defensive mistakes.

"We desperately wanted to start with a victory and we can be happy with the result."

The last time Germany won a European Championship game was back in June 30 1996 when they beat the Czech Republic to win Euro 1996 at London's Wembley Stadium.

There had been some controversy last Wednesday when Polish tabloid Super Express printed a mocked up picture of Poland coach Leo Beenhakker holding the severed heads of Loew and Germany captain Michael Ballack.

Both sides had played down any problem, but 140 German fans

were arrested here in the city centre on Sunday, although fans in the stadium were well-behaved.

Ballack said the Germans had been their traditional efficient selves in sealing the points.

"I think we played well. It's always difficult - you never know where you are before the first game of a tournament. I think we deserved victory. From the start we were aggressive," the Chelsea star told the BBC.

The Poles were making their European Championship debut, but are still yet to beat Germany in 16 meetings between the sides since 1933 with the Germans now claiming 12 wins with four draws between the neighbours.

"You can imagine how disappointed we are, but our opponents played at the highest level," said Beenhakker.

"The first goal was well taken. I was not impressed with the second goal, we tried to put some more pressure on and played a bit more open, which led to the consequence of the second goal.

"After the second goal it was all over.

"We matched them for 70 minutes, but the last 20 was best forgotten."

Beenhakker had opted for five in midfield with Euzebiusz Smolarek as the lone striker up front for Poland.

Loew had gone for a traditional 4-4-2 formation, keeping midfielder Bastian Schweinsteiger - a star of the 2006 World Cup - on the bench until half-time playing Podolski behind the two German strikers.

The move paid off as Podolski gave Germany an extra attacking option supporting front men Miroslav Klose, the top scorer at the

last World Cup, who was partnering VFB Stuttgart hot-shot Gomez up front.

After both sides squandered early chances, the trio combined to give Germany the break through they craved on 20 minutes.

Gomez flicked the ball over the defence for Klose to draw the goalkeeper before giving his Bayern Munich teammate Podolski a simple tap in on 20 minutes past Poland's Celtic goalkeeper Artur Boruc.

Poland's best chance of the first half - and ultimately the game - came when midfielder Wojciech Lobodzinski put in a superb pass, but Maciej Zurawski pulled his shot wide.

Polish striker Smolarek picked up the first booking on 40 minutes when he tripped Per Mertesacker.

During the half-time break, Beenhakker swapped his captain Maciej Zurawski for Brazilian-born Roger Guerreiro, but he made little impact and Lobodzinski earned Poland's second yellow card on 64 minutes for tripping Podolski.

Germany were dominating by this stage and when the ball fell to Podolski on 72 minutes he drove his shot into the top corner of the net to give his side some breathing space.

German goalkeeper Jens Lehmann produced a string of saves as Poland applied some late pressure, but his defence held.

The result means Group B's two unbeaten sides will meet Thursday when Germany return here to face Croatia.

Ballack said he was looking forward to playing Croatia but cautioned: "I think it's an open game - both teams are very strong."



DIVIDED LOYALTIES: Germany's Polish-born forward Lukas Podolski (L) evades a sliding tackle from Poland midfielder Mariusz Lewandowski during their Euro 2008 Championship Group B clash at Woerthersee Stadium in Klagenfurt, Austria on Sunday. Podolski struck both the goals in Germany's 2-0 win.



THIS PICTURE IS PERFECT: Two Polish fans enjoy their national team's match against cross-border rivals Germany in the Euro 2008 at Woerthersee Stadium in Klagenfurt, Austria on Sunday.

EURO 2008 BRIEFS

AFP, Vienna

Donadoni has an albatross round his neck

THE HAGUE: With just hours to go to the mouthwatering Holland v Italy Euro 2008 clash, the Dutch fans will have been heartened by the fact that coach Marco van Basten has never been beaten by former AC Milan and now Italy hander Roberto Donadoni....in golf. They have remained firm friends since their AC Milan days and regularly play golf on the most scenic courses in the Italian region of Lombardy.

PLATINI WAS MUTU'S PIN UP

BUCHAREST: Should Romanian star striker Adrian Mutu get into difficulty during Euro 2008 then he might expect a good hearing from

UEFA president and former France legend Michel Platini. Mutu confessed to a Romanian website that Platini was his childhood idol. "I adored his style of play, his passes and above all his freekicks. I had a giant poster of him in my bedroom, and if there is one player that I would have liked to exchange shirts with it would be him!" Mutu's francophilia knows no bounds as he lists Zinedine Zidane as his favourite player of recent times. "He (Zidane) knew how to make difficult things look simple."

BRUCKNER IN SYMPHONY WITH FANS

SEEFELD, Austria: Veteran Czech Republic coach Karel Bruckner may be at his last major tournament but he has built up quite a following since he took over the national side in 2002. The chess

playing long haired professional looking coach is much in demand when it comes to autograph hunters after their training sessions. Such was the case after the last one where numerous fans asked for his scrawl, the 68-year-old took out of his sports bag an envelope which had a pen and 50 postcards with his photograph on it and he dutifully signed each and every one to the delight of the recipients.

NIGHT MAYOR FOR RUSSIANS

INNSBRUCK: Spain's opening clash with Russia on Tuesday will be watched over by several dignitaries including the heir to the Spanish throne, Prince Felipe of the Asturias along with his wife Letizia. On the Russian side or in the red corner will be the formidable presence of Yuri Luzhkov.

Eto'o takes Cameroon on top

REUTERS, Curepipe

Cameroon eased to a second successive World Cup win by beating Mauritius 3-0 on Sunday to go top of African qualifying zone Group One.

Defender Andre Bikey, returning from suspension after a red card received in the African Nations Cup semifinal in February, scored the opening goal for the Indomitable Lions in the 12th minute before Samuel Eto'o added a second a quarter-hour later.

Cameroon substitute Gustave Mbangue, making only his second international appearance, completed a comfortable victory with a third goal three minutes from the end.

Cameroon won their opening game of the group phase last weekend when they beat the Cape Verde Islands 2-0 at home. Their next match is on Saturday away against Tanzania in Dar-es-Salaam.

USA hold Argentina

REUTERS, New York

Goalkeeper Tim Howard produced a string of first-half saves to help United States hold Argentina to a goalless draw in a full-blooded friendly on Sunday.

U.S. midfielder Pablo Mastroeni and Argentina's Javier Mascherano were sent off in a fiery second half of a game which either side could have won.

Both teams were warming up for World Cup qualifiers later this month.

Argentina went into the game on the back of a 4-1 win over Mexico while the U.S. had lost to England and Spain in their last two games without scoring.

In front of a packed Giants stadium, Argentina's best first half chances fell to Julio Cruz but the Inter Milan player was repeatedly frustrated by Howard.

Cruz broke down the left in the fourth minute but his shot was stopped by Howard, who also thwarted his attempt to chip the ball in from the rebound.

An incisive through ball from Lionel Messi sent Cruz clear but this time Howard came charging out and saved with his leg.

Cruz was foiled again by Howard just before halftime as he latched onto another Messi pass.

The U.S. also had their chances, Clint Dempsey going close with a deflected shot and Heath Pearce testing Roberto Abbondanzieri with a long-range effort.

Argentina lost their shine after Messi was taken off at halftime and rarely threatened in the second half.

The hosts were unlucky not to go ahead when Mastroeni headed against the crossbar three minutes after the restart.

SPAIN V RUSSIA

Spain fired up for opener

AFP, Innsbruck

International football's perennial underachievers Spain are in defiant mood ahead of their Euro 2008 Group D opener against Russia in Innsbruck on Tuesday.

The talented Spaniards have earned themselves a reputation as chokers and mentally brittle over the years after flattering to deceive time and again on the biggest stage.

But their players have been firing back with fighting talk this week and are in determined mood ahead of their clash against the unfancied Russians.

Mallorca striker Daniel Guiza insisted the team are paying no attention to their critics.

"I don't care what people are saying. We have to stay calm and not listen to these commentators," he said.

They have possibly the most talented midfield and attacking combination in the tournament with players such as Fernando Torres, David Villa, Cesc Fabregas and Barcelona pair Xavi and

Andres Iniesta to call upon.

Spain have some injury concerns over strikers Torres, Villa and Sergio Garcia while Iniesta recently went down with food poisoning but coach Luis Aragones is expecting everyone to be fit for the Russia match.

It appears that Aragones is veering towards leaving Fabregas

nod instead.

Russia looked to have a good chance of creating a surprise till losing star striker Pavel Pogrebnyak, who has been ruled out of the whole tournament with a knee injury.

The Zenit St Petersburg forward, who finished this season's UEFA Cup campaign as joint top scorer

Russia are regarded as one of the outsiders and will struggle to get through a group that also contains Sweden and holders Greece, but Dutch coach Guus Hiddink is not complaining.

"I've known about Arshavin for many months and Pogrebnyak in recent days," he said. "That's a setback. I can't complain and start crying, and anyway I have confidence... that the rest of the team can cover those two losses."

At least, though, Russia have been impressive in three recent friendly victories, including one over Serbia and Hiddink is determined his team will go out and attack.

"Of course there are nerves but I don't want them to play in a way that it will weigh heavily on them and affect their performance," he said. However, Spain have always had fine players but ones who fail to rise to the occasion and in a group where they are the clear favourites, the path ahead is a precarious one.

TODAY'S MATCHES		
Teams	Time	Venue
Spain v Russia	10:00pm	Innsbruck
Greece v Sweden	12:45am (Wednesday)	Salzburg

alongside Italy's Luca Toni with 10 goals, will be replaced by Samara midfielder Oleg Ivanov.

Pogrebnyak twisted his left knee in a warm-up match against Serbia in late May and his loss is a big blow for a side already missing another outstanding Zenit striker Andrei Arshavin, who is suspended, against Spain.

GREECE V SWEDEN

Champs look for a pick-up

AFP, Salzburg

Greece were the unlikelyst of Euro winners four years ago and to many people they would be an even unlikelier victor this time round as they set out on their bid to retain the title with an opening Group D match against Sweden.

One shouldn't expect much difference in their style as veteran German coach Otto Rehhagel is not one for shedding a winning formula and with the Greeks lacking depth in terms of creative talent, they will try and grind their opponents down and hit them on the counterattack.

Rehhagel, dubbed 'King Otto' for his achievements as coach or 'Rehhakles' as a play on the name of mythical Greek hero Heracles, is adamant that his squad must forget they are European champions - 11 of the heroes of 2004 remain in the group.

One of those Traianos Dellas, Rehhagel's defensive rock, concurs.

"The memories from 2004 are fantastic, but we must leave them behind us and look to the future," he said.

Whilst their warm-up results were not exactly eye-catching, a 0-0 draw against minnows Armenia and a 3-2 defeat by Hungary, hardly these days the 'Magnificent Magyars' of the 1950's, the players at least in public believe that they

can repeat their remarkable success of 2004.

For captain Angelos Basinas, however, this is going to be a much tougher tournament.

"Before, nobody could have imagined that such a small country would go so far in the competition but now people expect more," said the 32-year-old.

Defender Nikos Spyropoulos admitted the match with Armenia had not been their finest moment but said against Sweden it would be a different matter.

"The stress is a positive thing in such situations," he said.

"The match with Armenia was not one of our best. We did not play well, but we will be ready for Sweden. We know them well, but I believe the outcome of the match will depend on how well we play."

For their veteran goalkeeper Antonis Nikopolidis - nicknamed 'Clooney' because of his likeness to the Hollywood heartthrob George - there is nothing to be worried about.

"We are not under pressure, we have come to give the best of ourselves," said Nikopolidis.

However, there is a slight cloud hanging over them in the shape of playmaker Georgios Karagounis, who has been struggling with a knee problem but has declared that he believes he will be fit.

The Swedes, who have like the Dutch and Spanish flattered to

deceive at major tournaments, have a strong looking squad with Juventus-bound Olof Mellberg at the back and the battle hardened strike partnership of veteran Henrik Larsson and fiery Inter Milan forward Zlatan Ibrahimovic.

However, Ibrahimovic, who is seeking to end an international scoring drought dating back to October 2005, is not certain if he will be able to play all 90 minutes and 36-year-old Larsson has not played at this level since the 2006 World Cup finals - which left a sour taste in his mouth as they went out to hosts Germany and he missed a penalty.

"It is going to be a very physical match with the Greeks and I don't know whether 'Ibra' and Tobias Linderoth will be able to play for 90 minutes at this level," admitted coach Lars Lagerback.

For fullback Mikael Nilsson, who is likely to have to play in an unfamiliar role of leftback instead of rightback because Erik Edman is injured, there is little difference between the two sides.

"Our style is similar, very physical in defence and relying on the counter attack. In terms of the quality of the squads, I think we are evenly matched, so Tuesday is very much a 50-50 match," said Nilsson, who will be renewing acquaintance with several of his Panathinaikos teammates.

"Only great sportsmen are capable of making this kind of a comeback," Gazeta Wyborcza wrote.

"Robert feels comfortable in the world (of Formula 1) - like a serious contender not a playboy," Robert's father Artur told the Dziennik daily.

Loew plays down win

REUTERS, Tenoro

Germany coach Joachim Loew enjoyed Sunday's 2-0 win against Poland as much as anyone but the coach was quick to point out the team's faults in a bid to dampen any early Euro 2008 euphoria.

"It was a great experience," Loew, who is in his first tournament as head coach, told reporters after two goals from Lukas Podolski took Germany top of Group B.

"There is always a current that shoots through you when you sit on the bench during a game. It was a great atmosphere and every one is happy to get this tournament underway.

"But I think we've got to stay down to earth. At the end of the first

half we let ourselves drop back too far, we did not have the confidence we needed, our organisation wasn't great and we lost the ball too often.

"We've got to improve. We've got a long way ahead of us."

Germany took the lead in the 20th minute after Podolski finished off a swift move involving fellow forwards Mario Gomez and Miroslav Klose.

They lost their momentum before the break after chances came and went, however, and it was only when Podolski smashed in with 18 minutes to go that they regained red command.

Their next match is against Croatia, who beat co-hosts Austria in their first match, and the players are anxious to get qualification

sorted out as quickly as possible.

"We let Poland have control of the ball a bit too much in the second half but then we made it 2-0 at the right moment," captain Michael Ballack told reporters. "It's always good to start with a win. It gives us self-confidence. Croatia will be possibly a decisive match for the group and we want to win it." One curious aspect of the match was to see Podolski, who was born in Poland, hardly celebrating his goals.

"I was born in Poland and I've got a big family," the forward explained. "It's a part of my heart."

"The match tonight was just a first step. We've got to keep going. We can't relax now. We've got to go on the attack again."