



Sweden star Zlatan Ibrahimovic jumps for joy after scoring a stunning goal against Greece during their Euro 2008 match in Salzburg on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Sweden off to a flier

AFP, Salzburg

Sweden beat defending champions Greece 2-0 here on Tuesday in their opening Euro 2008 Group D match here with Zlatan Ibrahimovic and Petter Hansson on target with quickfire second half efforts to get the Scandinavians off to a flier.

Greece stunned the world four years ago when, inspired by veteran coach Otto Rehhagel, they lifted their first silverware with a win over hosts Portugal in the final.

But although they qualified for this year's event in style -- having between-times missed out on the World Cup finals in 2006 -- they laboured to create much in the way of real chances against the Swedes and a repeat win does not appear on the cards.

Ibrahimovic, after netting his first international goal in three years, a piledriver, was jubilant.

"It was a difficult match, especially for the strikers, as the Greeks defended well."

"We did fantastically and played with intelligence. The important thing was to get the three points."

Swedish coach Lars Lagerback praised his side's efforts to break down a physical rival.

"We knew the Greeks were likely to string five across the back and

were physically strong. It's great to have won the first match -- our defence in particular was exemplary."

Sweden appeared hesitant in the first 45 minutes in Salzburg but their strong midfield snuffed out what little threat their rivals showed and then they hit their stride with two goals in quick succession.

The opener after 67 minutes of stalemate was a real belter.

Inter Milan star Ibrahimovic smashed in a superlative drive on the half-volley past keeper Antonis Nikopolidis and into the corner of the net following a neat flick on from the evergreen Henrik Larsson, three months off his 37th birthday, and now his country's oldest player to appear in the tournament.

Ibrahimovic's celebration was almost as fizzing, his joy palpable given that it was his first goal in his past 15 internationals, the drought extending back to an October 2005 World Cup qualifier against Iceland.

Rehhagel's reaction, in contrast, was to grimace and hold his head in his hands.

"The first half didn't go as we planned -- we didn't play high enough up the pitch and then we lost Ibrahimovic for a moment,

which left us a goal down," snorted Rehhagel afterwards.

"We will have to show a tougher side of us in the next match."

Minutes before his spectacular strike, Ibrahimovic had not quite hit the target, his header spinning just over after Freddie Ljungberg had swept a tantalising cross into the box.

Five minutes later, Hansson bundled home the second 18 minutes from time with Nikopolidis nowhere with the Greek defence all at sea after Ljungberg had seen an initial effort saved.

Ironically, seconds before the Swedes took the lead Hansson had almost scored an own goal as he nodded a Traianos Dellas cross from the right perilously close to his own net.

The Greeks, stunned by the opener, had no answer and with an effervescent Spain, as well as unpredictable Russia, to come, they will struggle to make the last eight on this evidence.

Angelos Charisteas, hero of the hour in the final four years ago for the Greeks in Lisbon, had a miserable time of it with two early half-chances going begging as the Swedish back line gave nothing away

Press fault strategy

AFP, Athens

The Greek press on Wednesday blamed titleholders Greece's 2-0 defeat by Sweden in their Euro 2008 opening match on "mingy" tactics employed by coach Otto Rehhagel.

A national hero for overseeing Greece's capture of the championship four years ago in Portugal, Rehhagel came under fire for an overly defensive strategy against the Swedes on Tuesday night.

Playing with five men at the back and only one true striker up front, Ethnos daily said Greece's game was "mingy" and "timid".

"Using the same system he had used in Portugal, Rehhagel tried to get a good result but his star did not shine this time," the daily said, warning that the tactics employed in 2004 "pose the greatest threat for an early goodbye."

"The 2004 recipe had an expiry date, only Rehhagel went and used it again," added Kathimerini daily.

Eleftherotypia daily said the Greeks had "knowingly abused" the game by passing the ball amongst themselves instead of going on the offensive, and got what they deserved.

"Advancing to the next round is probably out of the question... Rehhagel and his players must now make sure that European champions Greece are not humiliated in upcoming matches," warned Ta Nea. Greece next face Russia on June 14.

CROATIA V GERMANY

Looking for improvement

AFP, Klagenfurt

Croatia need to put together a much more convincing performance against Euro 2008 co-favourites Germany here on Thursday if they are to really reflect the confidence their coach Slaven Bilic has that they can win the title.

Croatia did win their first match but the manner of their 1-0 win over co-hosts Austria was laboured to say the least -- with bizarrely several of their players looking jaded by the start of the second half -- and a similar performance against the Germans could result in a real hammering.

The Germans looked alert and sharp in their 2-0 victory over Poland, with Polish-born Lukas Podolski grabbing a brace and showing once again that he is the man for the big stage.

Bilic, though, is convinced that his youngish side will step up to the plate and that it may be a case of being too complacent against the lowly rated Austrians.

"Against Germany, it is imperative we raise our level in every department."

"A team can get out of trouble with one player out of form. But not if there are five or six at the same time," added Bilic, who highlighted shortcomings in defence and in the attacking midfielders, who were

accused of not supporting the strikers enough.

Bilic, who was in the last Croatian team to win a Euro finals match when they beat defending champions Denmark 3-0 in 1996, said that the sport was such an odd game they could still beat the Germans not playing at their best.

"Football being what it is, we could beat Germany by playing less well than we did against Austria. But we can't rely on that happening," said Bilic, who even wrote and then with his band played the



German stars Lukas Podolski (L), Michael Ballack (C) and Miroslav Klose practise during a training session in Tenero on Tuesday.

signature tune for the Croats Euro adventure.

Key to the Croats ticking along nicely will be 'little genius' Luka Modric, the recent Spurs signing shone for the first 25 minutes against Austria before fading into anonymity for the rest of the match.

Bilic expects nothing less of his star man than for him to show that he will "be the best player of the tournament."

"That's not to put a burden on his shoulders but because it's what

I think," said 39-year-old Bilic.

Midfield partner Nico Kranjcar describes his teammate simply as "the new superstar of Croatian football."

Germany's already proven superstar Michael Ballack is certainly not taking anything for granted going into the Croat match especially after they beat England twice in their qualifying campaign.

"We are at 80-85 percent of our full potential, but we have to orientate ourselves towards Thursday's opponents," said Ballack.

"We will have a much different task against Croatia, they also want to be European champions and they beat England twice, which is no easy feat."

Meanwhile, Croatia's England-slayer Mladen Petric wants to draw inspiration from last November's Wembley winner as his side prepare to face the Germans.

The 27-year-old striker, who scored the winner in the 3-2 victory over England, failed to score in Sunday's 1-0 win over Austria but wants to also inflict an upset defeat on Germany.

"That was one of the most important games for us, because we proved to ourselves that a small country like Croatia can beat a big team like England, with all their good players," he said.

Ruud is 'King of Off-side'

AFP, Neuchatel

Portugal coach Luiz Felipe Scolari described Dutch striker Ruud van Nistelrooy on Tuesday as the "King of Off-side" insisting the Real Madrid forward's controversial goal against Italy was off-side.

Van Nistelrooy's opening goal for Holland in their 3-0 trouncing of world champions Italy in Monday's Euro 2008 Group C match was legal despite a clear offside said European football's governing body UEFA on Tuesday.

But Scolari disagreed with UEFA's ruling, saying the goal should not have been allowed, and said van Nistelrooy is an expert at pushing defences to the limits.

"He is the king of Off-side and is the best player in the world at beating the off-side trap," said Scolari at Portugal's Euro 2008 base here on Tuesday.

"To allow the goal creates confusion amongst the players, it was not valid, it shouldn't have been allowed."

But UEFA's secretary-general David Taylor said that even though van Nistelrooy was clearly offside the fact Italian defender Christian Panucci was behind the goalline without seeking permission from the officials placed the goalscorer inside.

AUSTRIA V POLAND

Time to gamble

REUTERS, Vienna

Coach Josef Hickersberger has told Austria to throw caution to the wind against Poland in a Group B game on Thursday that will leave the losers perilously close to a Euro 2008 exit.

Austria went down fighting in a 1-0 loss to Croatia in Vienna, while Poland were outclassed by tournament favourites Germany in a 2-0 defeat at Klagenfurt in Sunday's matches.

The co-hosts improved in the second half against Croatia but only looked really dangerous when

take risks from the start."

Looking back at his side's spirited display, he added: "In the second half we played very well. We gave a performance against an opponent like Croatia which months ago, weeks ago even, I would not have expected from my team."

They can again count on plenty of vocal home support at the Ernst Happel stadium, while Roland Linz and defender Emanuel Pogatzetz are both fit to play after minor injuries.

Poland need to overcome the loss of captain Maciej Zurawski, whose stay in the group stage ended at halftime on Sunday after

TODAY'S MATCHES		
Teams	Time	Venue
Croatia v Germany	10:00pm	Klagenfurt
Austria v Poland	12:45am (Friday)	Vienna

they surged forward in the final 20 minutes, exposing themselves at the back.

"It is clear to me that this is a decisive game, but it is the same for Poland," Hickersberger told a news conference on Tuesday. "Now it is all or nothing."

"We must beat them. We must

suffering a thigh injury.

The midfielder might be fit for later, should the Poles reach the last eight, though his team will clearly need to step up a gear after losing.

Poland looked a pale shadow of the side who secured their place at the finals as group winners and there are unlikely to be sweeping

changes in the line-up.

Forward Ebi Smolarek, who scored nine times in qualifying and had a goal narrowly disallowed for offside against Germany, should again provide the Poles' main threat down the middle.

Smolarek, who knows his side are already running short of options, told reporters: "We have to play Austria next and we must win that game if we are to have any chance; and then we also have to beat Croatia and that won't be easy."

Winger Wojciech Lobotzinski made some good runs down the right and Roger Guerreiro, a Brazilian-born midfielder who only received Polish nationality in April, should also get another chance after replacing Zurawski for the second half.

Jakub Wawrzyniak is likely to replace Pawel Golanski at left back after the latter struggled against the Germans and was at fault for at least one of the goals.

"The goals we conceded against Germany came as a result of individual mistakes and that's part of football," Poland coach Leo Beenhakker told a news conference on Tuesday.

"Sometimes you have miscommunication at the back but one of our players stepped out and didn't stick to what we had organised. And you cannot do that."

Sneijder on the threshold

AFP, Berne

Suddenly Cristiano Ronaldo does not look such a shoo-in for this year's European and world player of the year awards.

The Portugal winger is a short-odds favourite to claim both individual honours on the back of a 42-goal season with Manchester United that was provided the basis for his club's English Premier League and Champions League double.

But on the evidence presented in Monday's night demolition of world champions Italy, Ronaldo may have a serious rival in the shape of Holland's Wesley Sneijder, particularly if the Dutch live up to the potential they demonstrated at the Stade de Suisse.

The midfielder was the principal architect of Italy's humiliation, scoring one superb goal and playing a decisive role in the creation of the two others scored by his side in their historic 3-0 win.

Roberto Donadoni's ageing line-up were torn apart by a Dutch side that passed and moved at exhilarating pace.

squad to glory in this tournament.

Like Ronaldo, Sneijder came into the tournament on the back of a superb, title-winning season for his club, Real Madrid, where he mostly operates in the slipstream of his international teammate Ruud van Nistelrooy.

In the national side his creative contribution has sometimes been limited by him being used as a holding player. But with Nigel de Jong and Orlando Engelaar now taking the midfield defensive responsibilities in van Basten's 4-2-3-1 formation, Sneijder was deployed on Monday in an advanced position on the left and handed a licence to roam.

The results, from an Italian point of view, were devastating. Beautifully balanced, Sneijder is comfortable on either foot, although it is his left boot that has the slight edge in terms of raw power, a fact he demonstrated with the ferocious shot that van Nistelrooy turned in for the Dutch opener.

His eye for goal was then displayed as he used his right to smash a bouncing ball past Gianluigi Buffon for the second and the Dutch really should have been three up by half-time after Sneijder's perfectly angled pass for van Nistelrooy left his club-mate with only the Italian goalkeeper to beat.

Another incisive pass sliced Italy's defences apart in the build-up to Giovanni van Bronckhorst's third goal, ending any doubt about the destiny of the man-of-the-match award.

Like van Basten, Sneijder, who celebrated his 24th birthday in remarkable style on Monday, is refusing to get carried away with the euphoria created by Holland's first win over Italy in 30 years.

But he also sees no reason why this generation of Dutch players should not aim to emulate the van Basten-inspired squad that lifted the trophy in Germany 20 years ago.

"It was a great result and the fans may celebrate but we still have nothing," the midfielder said. "Our goal is still to reach and win the final, and therefore we need to stay calm."

"It was a long time since the Netherlands beat Italy so it was a good job, but we do not have time to celebrate. We have an important game against France on Friday and we have to be ready for them. If we lose to them we are back where we started."

The Dutch are expected to be without Arjen Robben again for the clash with the French but Robin van Persie, a substitute against the Italians, will come into contention for a starting place having completed his recovery from a thigh strain.

Scolari could join Chelsea

AFP, Neuchatel

Portugal coach Luiz Felipe Scolari said Tuesday he would have no problems swapping Lisbon for London if Premier League side Chelsea secure his services after Euro 2008.

Portugal coach Scolari is out of contract after the European Championships, which finish on June 29, and Chelsea are reported to have approached his current employers to acquire about his services.

The London club parted company with Avram Grant last month, despite the Israeli taking his team to the Champions League final and Scolari has been targeted to take his place.

"I have a contract with the Portuguese Football Federation which I will fulfil and we will see what happens at the end of that," said Scolari at Portugal's Euro 2008 base here.

"I will see what happens, it would be difficult to leave Portugal, if I have to do it, but I am professional and I could live in another country."

Sacked Inter Milan coach Roberto Mancini, ex-Barcelona boss Frank Rijkaard and Russia coach Gus Hiddink have all also been linked to the job.

Intriguing start to Euro

REUTERS, Basel

A superb hat-trick from Spain's David Villa and goals of beauty from Portugal, Germany, Netherlands and Sweden have put an extra sheen on a bright opening round of matches at Euro 2008.

One hugely debatable goal plus defeats for the reigning world champions Italy and European champions Greece and both co-hosts Switzerland and Austria have also added to an intriguing first four days of competition.

The action has been relatively clean too with such high stakes -- after eight games to Wednesday we had not seen a single red card.

Only one match, the sterile Group C opener between Romania

and France has failed to produce a goal or an outright winner.

Unusually in all four groups, the top two teams are due to meet each other in the second round of games over the next few days, including France who are second behind the Dutch in Group C over Romania for alphabetical reasons.

Depending on how the results go, four teams could reach the quarterfinals with a match to spare and while it is still early days, some likely favourites appear to be emerging.

Portugal, Germany, Netherlands and Spain all impressed in their openers, and Portugal coach Luiz Felipe Scolari summed up the feelings of all his colleagues after his side's impressive 2-0 win over Turkey in Geneva

in Group A on Saturday.

"It is so important to start well and win the first game as every opponent is tough," he said. "An opening win doesn't guarantee a place in the next round but it helps enormously."

Portugal, runners-up on home soil four years ago, look as though they can reach the later stages again with Pepe contributing an outstanding goal after excellent build-up play.

Germany, who strangely had not won a match in the finals since winning Euro 96, ended that run in equally impressive fashion with a 2-0 win over Poland in Klagenfurt on Sunday.

Lukas Podolski's second of the match, a stunning volley, finally

broke Poland's resistance.

The game of the tournament so far came when Netherlands beat Italy 3-0 in a match that evoked memories of Dutch Total Football of the 1970s.

Their second goal, a counter-attacking move ending with a volley from Wesley Sneijder, was simply breathtaking.

Their first, when Ruud van Nistelrooy scored from what looked like an offside position but was ruled as valid because Italian defender Christian Panucci was deemed to be playing him inside even though he was off the pitch, was the biggest talking point.

It could well lead to a clarification of the law by FIFA's International Board.



Spanish fans show their support before the Euro 2008 match against Russia in Innsbruck on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP