

Vastic breaks Poles' hearts

AFP, Vienna

Croatian-born Austrian player of the year Ivica Vastic became the oldest scorer in Euro championships history as he converted an injury-time penalty to give the co-hosts a 1-1 draw with Poland and ironically send his Croatia compatriots into the Euro 2008 quarterfinals.

The 38-year-old - who also scored the last time Austria appeared in a major finals at the 1998 World Cup in France - slotted home to keep Austrian hopes alive of making the quarterfinals, though they will have to beat Germany to do so.

Austrian coach Josef Hickersberger believed that justice had been done.

"The Poles really had their backs to the wall in the first-half and we should have been 2-0 up but we just didn't score," said Hickersberger, who is in his second spell as national coach.

"But the team reacted really well after falling 1-0 behind to a goal that was offside.

"The sport of football is not always about justice: when the referee decides on something, it is like he is God."

The Poles, who were incredulous at English referee Howard Webb's decision, had earlier taken the lead through 26-year-old Brazilian-born striker Roger Guerreiro, who only became a naturalised Pole in March.

Poland's veteran Dutch coach Leo Beenhakker had been apoplectic at Webb's decision but the 65-year-old had calmed down enough afterwards to make an honest assessment of the Poles chances of

making the last eight.

"I am happy with my boys, I cannot reproach them for anything. But I don't believe that we have a chance of qualifying. If we had won today (Thursday) then yes, but now..." mused the former Holland and Trinidad and Tobago coach.

The Austrians started brightly with captain Andreas Ivanschitz -- whose romantic life has featured largely in the papers of late -- having two shots at goal, one sailing harmlessly wide while his 32 metres freekick didn't pose a problem for Polish 'keeper Artur Boruc.

However, Boruc had to be at his best in the 11th minute as a poor backpass by a Polish defender released Austria's Martin Harnik, who raced clear but his shot into the far corner was deflected by the Celtic 'keeper for a corner.

Boruc did even better two minutes later as Vmit Korkmaz put in a great pass into the penalty area but Harnik again had his shot saved by Boruc with his legs failing to add to his international haul of two goals.

The Polish guardian was again equal to the task a few minutes later as with the Poland defence in disarray Christoph Leitgeb ran onto a beautifully weighted pass but his shot was again saved by Boruc.

Marek Saganowski controlled the ball after a brilliant cross from Euzebiusz Smolarek inside the penalty area and managed to get his pass past the outstretched hand of Jurgen Macho and the boot of Austria's Middlesbrough defender Emmanuel Pogatzetz, for Guerreiro to slot it into the net, though he looked to be offside.



Austria midfielder Ivica Vastic (L) scores the equalising goal from a penalty during their Euro 2008 match against Poland at the Ernst-Happel Stadium in Vienna on Thursday.

PHOTO: INTERNET

'Modric is best in Europe'

AFP, Klagenfurt

Tottenham have picked up a rare diamond who is better than Cristiano Ronaldo, if Croatia coach Slaven Bilic is to be believed.

Spurs' new signing Luca Modric pulled the strings and earned the man-of-the-match award as Croatia exposed Germany's weaknesses in a 2-1 victory here on Thursday.

And now the 22-year-old, who outshone Germany playmaker Michael Ballack, will set the Premier League alight according to Bilic.

Asked if Modric could become the player of the tournament, the coach insisted he didn't need to build his reputation any more.

"Luca is already a star even without this tournament," said Bilic. "I keep saying to him every day that he's the best player in Europe."

"But he's not the only great player on our team, we have world class players and they prove it day in, day out, every day in training and in every match in each part of the pitch."

Modric, who made his name in the Bosnian league, was reportedly a target for many top European clubs but it was Tottenham who won the race for his signature in a deal worth reportedly something between 20 and 25 million euros from Dinamo Zagreb.

And his form here so far in the tournament suggests that Tottenham were right to beat off reported competition from

Arsenal, Chelsea, Manchester City and Newcastle for his signature.

Right now, though, Modric is hoping to guide Croatia into the latter stages of the tournament and there is a growing and palpable feeling that the former Yugoslav republic is not just here to make up the numbers.

Croatia's previous best result in international competition was reaching the semifinals of the 1998 World Cup in France, during which they beat Germany 3-0 in the quarterfinals.

But this victory delighted Modric just as much as that one did

co-hosts Austria in which they were holding on during the second half.

They looked anything but potential winners during that match but it was a different side that took to the pitch against Germany and they dominated throughout.

"We're not surprised by how many chances we created, we think we played an excellent match, we moved a lot and when we do that we're very dangerous and can create many chances against any side, not only Germany," he added.

"We're very satisfied. We still

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

the Croatian stars of the time.

"We are overjoyed by this win. We started off playing tough, playing the way we wanted to," he said.

"We wanted to exert pressure on our opponents so as not to let them develop their own game."

"We wanted to show that the criticism we received after our first match was unjustified."

"Now we are able to show that we're very strong and can rightly aspire to a great result."

Croatia played far better than they had in their opening match, an unspectacular 1-0 victory over

have to play Poland so we're not in the quarterfinals yet.

"We'll see how Austria and Poland finish but I think the Czech Republic would be good opponents for us in the quarterfinals."

That shows how confident the Croats are feeling but with Modric pulling their strings, it's easy to see why.

This side, who beat England home and away in their qualifying group, could rival the class of 1998 and Modric might just be as good as Zvonimir Boban, Davor Suker or Alan Boksic.

Torres not angry at Aragones

REUTERS, Innsbruck

Spain striker Fernando Torres has denied that he was angry with coach Luis Aragones for taking him off in the team's 4-1 win against Russia in their opening game at Euro 2008.

Torres walked past Aragones when he was replaced by Cesc Fabregas early in the second half of Tuesday's match and did not acknowledge the coach's outstretched hand.

"I was angry with myself and it isn't true that I refused to shake the coach's hand," Torres told Spanish radio station Cadena Ser on Friday. "Luis was six metres away from me, we weren't that close and I would never show any disrespect to a coach."

"I know that I can't get angry for more than 30 seconds when I've got teammates next to me who didn't play (in the game) at all."

Aragones, who coached Torres when he was at Atletico Madrid, said earlier this week that he understood the striker's anger at being taken off but that he would not let the incident pass.

"The big advantage of having an ex-player as the coach is that he has experienced these things hundreds of times," said Torres.

"Luis showed me the rules of dressing room when I was 16 years old and the important thing is that what happens is left on the pitch."

Torres is almost certain to be in the starting line-up when Spain play Sweden in their second match in Group D on Saturday.

GREECE V RUSSIA

Win the only option

REUTERS, Klagenfurt

Holders Greece and Russia are expected to ring the changes on Saturday in their bid to avoid a dreaded second defeat in a row in Group D at Euro 2008.

Tactical changes are mooted for Greece, whose cautious approach failed to pay off in Tuesday's 2-0 loss to Sweden, while coach Guus Hiddink has called for a different mentality among his Russia side after a 4-1 drubbing by Spain.

Greece coach Otto Rehhagel is expected to scrap the tactic of a five-man defence, which was eventually prised open by the Swedes in Salzburg, and opt for a more attacking 4-3-3 lineup.

Fanis Gekas should start as his pace will trouble Russia's defence but there is a question mark over whether Angelos Charisteas and Yannis Amanatidis will make the starting XI.

Rehhagel could opt for the experienced Nikos Liberopoulos,

who has often scored from long range and is good at set pieces, to replace either of them.

He might also deploy attack-minded defender Christos Patsatzoglou to close the gap between the back four and a midfield that looked shaky on Tuesday.

"We promise you that we will be a different team. We can't tell you if we will win or lose but we won't be the same team as against Sweden," captain Angelos Basinas said.

Hiddink has said he is unlikely to make any big changes to the team, although he may be forced to if striker Roman Pavlyuchenko does not recover from a thigh problem that forced him to miss some training on Thursday.

His absence would be a blow to Russia, already without suspended forward Andrei Arshavin and injured striker Pavel Pogrebnyak. Pavlyuchenko scored their only goal against Spain.

Asked by Russian television

channel Sport if he planned many changes, Hiddink said: "No, not really. Mainly because we have a young team and we're not one of those national sides where one of the 23 players can replace another and play just as well."

The Dutchman has told his players to put their error-strewn performance against Spain out of their minds.

"Guus told us that we need to forget the Spain result as soon as possible," captain Sergei Semak said.

Hiddink added that his young team had paid the price for their inexperience against Spain, when they were repeatedly caught out on the break. After the match, he told his players they had just days to become less naive and more mature.

Midfielder Konstantin Zyryanov summed up the mood, saying: "It's going to be a tough match between the two group outsiders. Our chances were good before the Spain game and remain good."

Bastian to miss Austria match

REUTERS, Vienna

Germany midfielder Bastian Schweinsteiger will miss Monday's game against co-hosts Austria after being banned for one match at Euro 2008.

UEFA said in a statement on Friday he had been suspended for unsporting conduct after being sent off against Croatia in the 92nd minute of Thursday's Group B game, which Germany lost 2-1.

Schweinsteiger became the first player to be sent off at these finals when he pushed Jerko Leko to the ground in retaliation for a tackle from behind in injury time.

Germany need only a draw against Austria to join Croatia, who have already qualified, in the last eight.

Sixteen fans arrested

AFP, Klagenfurt

Sixteen fans of different nationalities were arrested following minor disputes Thursday evening in Klagenfurt, as Germany and Croatia played a group stage match, police said.

The fans were questioned by police and charged with various criminal and administrative offences, Klagenfurt police said in a statement, without giving any details about the identities of those arrested.

Celebrations remained peaceful however in the south Austrian city, despite fears that German and Croatian fans may cause some unrest.

A young Croatian supporter, aged about 20, died earlier in the afternoon in Klagenfurt's fan zone of a heart attack but police were keen to point out it was an accident.

"There was no violence, no external causes, it was of a medical nature," Klagenfurt police spokesman Gottlieb Tuerk told AFP.

Some 55,000 fans descended on the Klagenfurt Thursday for the second group B match between Germany and Croatia.

Police estimated some 28,000 Croatian fans and 5,000 Germans were in town for the game.

Euro does not impress Basile

REUTERS, Buenos Aires

Argentina coach Alfio Basile has not been impressed by Euro 2008.

"I don't like the European championship," he told a news conference on Thursday.

"As always, the Europeans play firstly to qualify. I don't have a favourite but I always believe in the major powers."

"Spain had a good win but they don't have the history which Germany and Italy have."

Basile, whose team face Ecuador in a World Cup qualifier on Sunday and visit Brazil three days later, said he would not be fooled by Brazil's 2-0 friendly defeat to Venezuela last Friday.

"Imagine (Brazil coach) Dunga feels terrible, he probably feels like jumping into a helicopter and flying off."



Spanish forward David Villa (C) poses with supporters after a training session in Neustift on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

SWEDEN V SPAIN

Respect for each other

REUTERS, Innsbruck

Familiar foes Sweden and Spain meet at Euro 2008 on Saturday with nothing but mutual respect after locking horns in qualifying.

"Sweden are a very difficult side to play against," Spain coach Luis Aragones told reporters this week. "They play at great pace on the counter-attack and have some excellent forwards. They are definitely a team to worry about."

Opposite number Lars Lagerback expressed similar sentiments about the Spanish before the Group D game in Innsbruck.

"We know all about Spain having played them in qualifying," he said. "They like to keep the ball and are very dangerous in attack. We will have to be patient and play our own game, like we did against Greece."

"Spain are a quality team. If some of the players that are sitting

on their bench had Swedish passports, I would certainly have them in my team."

Spain finished two points ahead of Sweden in qualification although honours were even in head-to-head meetings, the Scandinavians winning 2-0 in Solna in October 2006, but then going down 3-0 in Madrid in November last year.

The two sides notched up convincing wins in their opening matches on Tuesday, Spain crushing Russia 4-1 and Sweden beating defending champions Greece 2-0.

It means a victory for either side on Saturday would move them to within touching distance of the quarterfinals; with a place in the last eight guaranteed for the victors should Greece's late kickoff against Russia end in a draw.

Spain have no significant injury problems and Aragones is likely to stick with the same side that beat

Russia. Striker David Villa, who notched a hat-trick on Tuesday, suffered a hairline fracture to his right index finger after getting it caught in Fernando Torres's shirt during the celebrations for his opening goal but will be available.

Sweden, however, will have to reconstruct their right flank following injuries to Christian Wilhelmsson and defender Niclas Alexandersson.

Alexandersson's place is set to go to Fredrik Stoor, who replaced him as substitute against the Greeks, while it is a toss up between Sebastian Larsson and Johan Elmander for Wilhelmsson's berth on the right wing.

Zlatan Ibrahimovic, who opened the scoring against Greece, has a swollen knee but should be fit enough to start again alongside Henrik Larsson on front.