

Russia end Greek reign

AFP, Salzburg

Greece's reign as European champions came to an early end here on Saturday as Russia beat them 1-0 in their Group D Euro 2008 clash.

A goal by Konstantin Zyryanov in the 33rd minute was enough to see off the Greeks, a howler by one of their few world class players, goalkeeper Antonis Nikopolidis, contributing -- victory keeps Russian hopes alive of making the last eight but they will have to beat Sweden on Wednesday.

Spain have qualified as group winners while the Greeks join an unenviable list of European champions to go out in the first round -- Czechoslovakia in 1980, Denmark in 1996 and Germany in 2000.

However, Greece's veteran German coach Otto Rehhagel refused to be too downcast.

"I am not as disappointed as all that," said the former Werder Bremen and Bayern Munich coach.

"Because I knew at what level we were and everything had to come together for us to beat the Russians. Our problem is that we score so few goals," added Rehhagel, who has been criticised for deploying too defensive tactics.

For his Russia counterpart Guus Hiddink it was just reward for the manner in which his side had bounced back from their opening 4-1 defeat by Spain.

"I geed up the players a little after the Spanish match and they have reacted well," said the 61-year-old Dutchman.

"However, we need to improve in terms of taking our chances."

The Greeks had shown a mar-

ginally more adventurous approach than in their first match and their Atletico Madrid fullback Giourkas Seitaridis got down the right in the 12th minute and put in a dangerous cross only for Russian keeper Igor Akinfeev to gather safely.

The Russians bit back a minute later as the Greeks lost possession in midfield and the ball reached striker Roman Pavlyuchenko, whose lob Nikopolidis tipped over the bar for a corner.

The Greeks, though, had the clearest chance of the opening 20 minutes, as a freekick was floated in and their Euro 2004 hero Angelos Charisteas went up for it unmarked just two metres. But he unbelievably failed to make any contact and the ball bounced just wide of the goal off Igor Semshov's shoulder.

However, it was the Russians who deservedly took the lead in the 33rd minute as Nikopolidis astonishingly chased a lob which was drifting wide instead of allowing Ioannis Amanatidis to do the job of clearing it.

And it was a brilliant overhead kick by Sergei Semak that set up Zyryanov to tap the ball home.

The Russians were all over the Greeks and they were further unsettled in the 40th minute when Rehhagel decided to replace Seitaridis with playmaker Georgios Karagounis, who had been surprisingly left out of the starting line-up.

His first contribution, though, was to go into the referee's book in the 42nd minute for pulling back Semshov as he burst clear over the halfway line.

Charisteas' dreadful evening and even worse time since his night of glory continued within the first minute of the second-half as he got into a good position but with only Akinfeev to beat he lobbed his effort lamely into the goalkeepers' hands.

Pavlyuchenko hardly looked like a man who was struggling to make the match with a groin problem as twice in the opening minutes of the second period he forced Nikopolidis into saves.

Pavlyuchenko also produced a brilliant piece of skill in the 52nd minute as he nutmegged a Greek defender and advanced into the penalty area but his shot to the near post went wide.

Karagounis replied, at last forcing Akinfeev into making a save, though the shot was straight at him and that seemed to give the Greeks a sense of much-needed urgency as captain Angelos Basinas was well placed outside the box but got under the ball and lofted it high over the bar.

Russia, though, kept on creating chances but crucially not taking them as a delightful backheel by Pavlyuchenko inside the box set up Diniyar Bilyaletdinov but he sent his shot wide of the far post.

The Greeks huffed and puffed with little effect while the Russians produced the elegant football but only really went close to doubling their lead with 10 minutes to go as Zhirkov floated a freekick just wide of the post.

For all of Russia's profligacy the Greeks were unable to find that vital goal and the tears of joy of 2004 were replaced by ones of misery.



Russia midfielder Konstantin Zyryanov (L) celebrates with teammate Igor Semshov after scoring the all-important goal against Greece during their Euro 2008 match in Salzburg on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP

AUSTRIA V GERMANY

Hosts seek a miracle

REUTERS, Tenero

Euro 2008 co-hosts Austria will invoke the spirit of Cordoba against Germany on Monday and the prize this time could be more than just a sense of Schadenfreude.

At the 1978 World Cup in Argentina, an Austrian team with no chance of qualification beat West Germany 3-2 to take the reigning champions out of the tournament with them.

Thirty years on from that great upset, Austria have a chance to go one better.

A point would be enough for Germany to go through as Group B runners-up behind Croatia but victory for Austria could take them into the last eight at the expense of their old rivals, provided Poland do not beat Croatia by a bigger margin.

A 50,000 crowd will give the Austrians fervent backing in the capital but the cold reality is that Germany, despite a poor performance in their 2-1 defeat by Croatia, remain overwhelming favourites to get the point they need to go through.

That was acknowledged by Austria coach Josef Hickersberger, who played in that famous win in Cordoba -- Austria's only victory over Germany at a major tournament.

"You don't often win against Germany, at least not if you are Austria," he said. "You know the statistics. I can't remember when Germany have lost twice in a row."

Germany's goal will be to reproduce the sharp counter-attacking football that took them to a 2-0 win over Poland in their first match.

"We see this is a challenge rather than a crisis," centre-back Christoph Metzelder said at a news conference.

"Germany are always under pressure. It's exceptionally high for this game but our team spirit is good and it's just a matter of translating that on to the pitch."

Germany, three times European

champions, will be without Bastian Schweinsteiger after his red card against Croatia, and probably full-back Marcell Jansen, who has a shoulder injury.

Lukas Podolski, scorer of all three German goals so far, has overcome an ankle injury and will play. He is likely to shift up to attack alongside Miroslav Klose, with Mario Gomez losing his place after two unconvincing displays.

Clemens Fritz should drop back

from midfield to right-back to cover the absence of Jansen, with Philipp Lahm moving over to the left. Thomas Hitzlsperger and Tim Borowski could then come into midfield to give the side more creativity.

Austria are also hit by the suspension of Sebastian Proedl, who picked up his second yellow card before winning the team's late penalty in Thursday's 1-1 draw with Poland.



Germany captain Michael Ballack stretches during a training session in Tenero on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP

Gekas breaks cheekbone

AFP, Seekirchen Am Wallersee

Greek striker Theofanis Gekas suffered a broken cheekbone during the deposited titleholder's 1-0 Euro 2008 Group D defeat to Russia on Saturday.

The 28-year-old came on as a substitute in the Russian match which saw the Greeks become the fourth European champions exit at the first stage.

Gekas is highly unlikely to take any part in the Greeks final match of the tournament against group winners Spain on Wednesday.

Other injury worries concern fullbacks Vassilis Torosidis and Giourkas Seitaridis, who have both got groin problems and sat out training on Sunday.

German players clear the air

AFP, Tenero

Germany's players held a candid meeting to pick over individual and collective mistakes in their defeat by Croatia, captain Michael Ballack said on Sunday.

Ballack refused to give details about the meeting but said the players had spoken honestly and directly after a 2-1 defeat by Croatia left them facing a fight for their Euro 2008 future in Monday's Group B game against Austria in Vienna.

"It wasn't a crisis meeting but players were able to speak more openly away from the coaches," Ballack said at a news conference on the eve of the Austria match, when Germany will need to avoid defeat to reach the quarterfinals.

"Sometimes you need to talk as footballers do, among ourselves."

"The important thing is that any criticism is constructive. You are not out to run anybody down but sometimes you have to say things with a rough edge."

Germany played well enough in a 2-0 win over Poland in their opening Group B game but there was a great dip in performance in the Croatia match.

Ballack recognised that he was one of the players who had a lot more to offer than he has shown so far.

"I know I can play better and should play better," Ballack said. "Overall we haven't played to our full potential yet."

"We've resolved to give everything on Monday. We are honest enough to be self-critical. But let's look at the positive aspect: at least there's plenty of room for improvement."

Germany will be without suspended Bastian Schweinsteiger on Monday in Vienna, while assistant coach Hansi Flick confirmed on Sunday that Marcell Jansen's shoulder injury would keep him out.

A draw or a win for Germany on Monday would take them through as runners-up behind Croatia and set up a quarterfinal against Portugal.

Austria need to beat Germany and hope Poland to not beat the already-qualified Croatians by a bigger margin in Klagenfurt.

Old foes face scrap

AFP, Zurich

What a difference two years makes. In 2006 Italy overcame France at Berlin's majestic Olympic stadium to be crowned champions of the world.

Here on Tuesday at Euro 2008 those two same footballing superpowers roll up their sleeves in a back alley scrap for a route out of Group C on the heels of already qualified Holland.

The maths is 'relatively' straightforward.

Wide margin defeats to the Dutch (3-0 and 4-1 respectively) and 1-1 and 0-0 draws with Romania left Italy and France requiring a win and Holland to beat Romania for one of them to go through as group runners-up.

Given their inferior goal difference that is the only way France can make it.

Italy would still have a chance if they draw with France, and Romania lose, leaving them both with two points.

Here the permutations require the services of a Mensa brain but in a nutshell Italy would go through if they produce a score draw with France.

The reward is a quarterfinal date with Group D winners Spain in Vienna next Sunday.

France, whose famed defence, the traditional bedrock of Raymond Domenech's side, was embarrassingly torn apart by Holland, could welcome back talismanic captain Patrick Vieira who missed the opening two games with a left thigh problem.

Domenech has a real tactical conundrum on his hands as he's

already tried 4-4-2 and 4-3-2-1 with different players -- while his opposite number Roberto Donadoni made no fewer than five changes for the Azzurri's second game against Romania.

Italy would already be down and out if it hadn't been for keeper Gianluigi Buffon's heroics in saving a late penalty from Adrian Mutu.

possible for Italy."

Keeper Gregory Coupet, reeling from France's heaviest loss in almost three decades, said: "We have to lean on the good atmosphere in our group in a bid to bounce back against Italy."

Chelsea's Claude Makelele, who picked-up a yellow card in Berne on Friday, stressed the need for the squad to remain united.

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

Both sides know each other as well as aged aunts, with France coming out on top when they met in the Euro 2000 final only for Italy to gain handsome compensation in the 2006 World Cup.

They were also drawn together in qualifying for this competition.

Thierry Henry, who was deployed as a lone striker in that game, reflecting on the monumental task lying ahead in Zurich, said: "Now we know that we have to beat Italy and hope for good news from the other match. It's 'doable' but it's going to be a knife edge game with the Italians."

"We still have a possibility of qualifying, we're not defeated."

"This is not the first time we've been in this situation and I hope once more we can lift our heads and get out of it."

"We'll try and prepare the best

"We have to remain solid and try to go all out in the last game. If we're going to leave we have to leave with our heads held high."

Up at their Euro headquarters in Austria Donadoni says he can sense the determination in his players to pull off a houdini-style escape against Les Bleus.

"We have to beat France," the former AC Milan winger said.

"It is a crucial match because when one still has a chance to qualify you have to push yourself to the limit."

"I saw already at training... that the players are determined to prove how good they are against the French."

"They have a real hunger to prepare in the best possible manner for this challenge, which will dictate whether or not we progress or not."

Nikopolidis to quit after Euro

AFP, Seekirchen Am Wallersee

Greece's Euro 2004 winning goalkeeper Antonis Nikopolidis announced that he would be retiring from international football after Wednesday's final Euro 2008 match with Group D winners Spain.

The 36-year-old Olympiakos guardian made his announcement barely 12 hours after his howler handed Russia the only goal in a 1-0 win that ended Greece's four year reign as European champions.

"I have decided that the match against Spain will be my last one," said Nikopolidis, who was outstanding in Greece's Euro 2004 campaign.

"I took the decision a long time ago," added the goalkeeper, who acquired the nickname of 'Clooney' after Hollywood heart-throb George because of their similar looks.

Mutu sorry for penalty miss

AFP, Saint Gallen

Romania's star striker Adrian Mutu apologised on Sunday for missing the penalty -- his first in seven years on the international stage -- against world champions Italy in their Euro 2008 Group C 1-1 draw on Friday.

"I am sorry for missing the penalty," said Mutu, who did open the scoring for Romania.

"I would like to apologise to the Romanian fans and I will do all in my power to make up for it against the Dutch."

POLAND V CROATIA

Time to reward fans

REUTERS, Bad Tatzmannsdorf

Poland need to beat Croatia on Monday even if it only amounts to a graceful exit from Euro 2008, said defender Michal Zewlakow.

"We have let our fans down so far and they have been our driving force so we really have to do everything we can to give them something to cheer," Zewlakow told reporters.

"Also if there is merely a one-in-a-million chance we go through to the last eight we have to fight until the bitter end to seize the opportunity."

To have any chance of advancing Poland must win by two goals in Klagenfurt and hope Austria defeat Germany in Vienna by a more slender margin.

Croatia are already through as Group B winners but Zewlakow does not expect any favours.

"We know they will be relaxed and probably start with a number of second-string players eager to prove their worth and impress their coach," he said.

"They are on a high while the atmosphere in our camp took a dip after our opening 2-0 defeat to Germany and it's time we lifted ourselves."

Coach Leo Beenhakker, who dismissed Poland's chances of progressing after Thursday's 1-1 draw with Austria, has changed his mind.

"We still believe we can reach the knockout stage and we are completely focused on the task," said the Dutchman.

"Naturally we will send out an attacking line-up against Croatia because we need to score some goals."

While Beenhakker appears set to retain his 4-3-3 formation, counterpart Slaven Bilic made it clear he would rest several players.

"It would be madness to field first-choice players who are on one yellow card and we also have a few with minor knocks and bruises who need a break," said Bilic.

"We have pride to play for, just like against England at Wembley, so we are completely determined to field a strong team aiming to continue our winning streak."

Croatia had already qualified for the finals when they knocked England out with a 3-2 win in November.



A child sits in one of the 16 giant football boots bearing the colours of the 16 teams competing in the Euro 2008 in Vienna on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP