



French strikers Thierry Henry (L) and Karim Benzema stretch during a training session in Chatel-Saint-Denis on Monday.

FRANCE V ITALY

Survival at stake

REUTERS, Zurich

Heavyweights Italy and France, used to battling it out with a trophy at stake, will face each other on Tuesday with the prize of merely surviving the group stage at Euro 2008 to fight for.

The final act in Group C will see one of the last two World Cup finalists, or maybe both, on the tournament scrapheap after their showdown on Zurich's Letzigrund pitch.

The pair's fate is out of their hands with unfancied Romania certain to qualify if they beat Netherlands. The Dutch outplayed Italy and France in quick succession to make sure of winning the group.

France, struggling to find the right mix between ageing stalwarts and promising youngsters, will go through only if they overcome their Latin rivals and Romania do not beat the Dutch.

Apart from a win, Italy, who have also looked rusty and surprisingly vulnerable at the back, might just squeeze through with a

scoring draw, or even with a goalless draw, providing Romania lose 3-0 or by a four-goal margin.

The match would have been dramatic enough in any circumstances, Italy having beaten France on penalties in the 2006 World Cup final featuring Zinedine Zidane's infamous headbutt, to name just one episode in their colourful history.

Italian and French media are both worried that Netherlands will field a weakened side against Romania or the players will pull out of tackles to avoid injury.

"We have put ourselves in that situation and only have ourselves to blame for it," said France coach Raymond Domenech. "We should not worry about the Dutch, nor should they worry about us."

Domenech, who could be excused for feeling let down by his old guard in general and his defence in particular, could opt for a revamped side with Lilian Thuram and Willy Sagnol likely to lose their places at the back.

His Italian counterpart Roberto Donadoni is not expected to be so

radical but has hinted he was considering bringing forward Antonio Cassano into the side.

"The fact I have played him for a little bit of the two games against Netherlands and Romania shows that he impresses me," Donadoni told reporters. "I think he is a top player, I have brought him with me and it is possible he will play."

While Donadoni will hope for some Cassano wizardry to brighten Italy's horizons, Domenech might give young striker Karim Benzema, confined to the bench against the Dutch, a chance to show off his skills.

The two coaches' jobs could be threatened if they were to be sent packing from a tournament they both aspired to win so early.

Domenech, however, did his best to sound excited rather than worried before what is likely to be a tense affair.

"It's a fantastic opportunity," he said. "I'm not saying we'll win but I know we'll fight. The players have a lot to prove. Not making the most of it would be stupid."



Italian strikers Luca Toni (L) and Alessandro Del Piero practise with the ball during a training session in Maria Enzersdorf on Sunday.

NETHERLANDS V ROMANIA

Mind games do the trick

AFP, Berne

France and Italy's attempts to goad Holland into taking their match against Romania seriously appear to have done the trick.

Almost as soon as the second round of matches in group C were completed, players and officials from the French and Italian camps started suggesting that the already-qualified Dutch would be quite happy to lose their final match to ensure Romania join them in the quarterfinals and that two more dangerous rivals are eliminated.

The result? Everyone in the Dutch camp has turned Orange-faced in indignation and players like Robin van Persie go into Tuesday's match convinced they have something to prove to the world about their personal integrity.

"I can't even bear losing at ping-pong," the Arsenal forward declared bullishly, while his teammate Khalid Boulahrouz underlined the importance of delivering a performance for the tens of thousands of Dutch supporters who have set up camp in and around the Swiss capital.

"It has been like playing at home and we can't let those fans down," said the defender.

Dutch coach Marco van Basten has confirmed that a number of the players who ripped the Italians and French apart will be rested, but insists that does not mean he is taking the final match lightly.

"Every match is important to us

and the fact there will be some changes in the team does not alter anything," he said.

Ajax defender Andre Ooijer and Hamburg midfielder Nigel de Jong are certain to sit out the Romania game as one more yellow card would rule either of them out of the quarterfinal while Real Madrid winger Arjen Robben is expected to start for the first time in the tournament.

Ajax striker Klas-Jan Huntelaar is expected to replace Ruud van Nistelrooy up front with van Persie playing in a more withdrawn role than he occupies for Arsenal.

PSV Eindhoven's Ibrahim Afellay is also tipped for promotion

by van Basten's men in their two opening matches suggests that is the most likely outcome.

The Romanians however are a resilient outfit and were by no means fortunate to hold both the French and the Italians to goalless and 1-1 draws respectively in their opening matches.

If Adrian Mutu had managed to convert a late penalty, they would have beaten Italy and their captain Cristian Chivu, who made his name at Ajax, believes his side can repeat their defeat of the Dutch during qualification.

"This is a special moment for us now," said the midfielder. "We have

Qualification possibilities

AFP, Vienna

Different possibilities of who can finish runner-up to Holland in Group C ahead of Tuesday's final group matches:

Group C

HOLLAND

Already qualified and certain to be top

ROMANIA

Will qualify if:
They beat the Dutch
Draw with the Dutch, as well as a draw between France and Italy

A defeat to the Dutch with less than a three goals deficit, provided Italy and France draw 0-0. Romania qualify by dint of better goal difference in all the group matches

Losing by three-goal deficit but scoring at least one goal and that France and Italy draw 0-0. Romania qualify for having scored more goals in the group matches.

FRANCE

Will qualify if:
They beat Italy and Romania draw or lose to Holland

ITALY

Will qualify if:
They beat France and Romania draw or lose to Holland.

Draw with France scoring at least one goal and Romania lose - Italy qualify by dint of number of goals scored in meetings between teams on same amount of points.

0-0 draw with France and Romania lose 3-0. Italy top Romania with a better UEFA coefficient

Draw 0-0 with France, while Romania lose by more than three goals. Italy head Romania on goal difference.

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

into the attacking midfield trident behind the lone forward with Wesley Sneijder and Rafael van der Vaart expected to be rested.

Romania must beat the Dutch to be sure of going through but could also squeeze into the last eight if France and Italy's replay of the 2006 World Cup final ends in a stalemate.

A win for the Dutch will allow France or Italy a reprieve if they win their match and the form displayed

the chance to reach the quarter finals and we're going to give everything for 90 minutes to do that."

Romania's cause has been hit however by the loss of two key players, the holding midfielder Miral Radoi, whose tournament has been ended by an eye injury, and the centreback Dorin Goian, who is suspended after collecting a needless second yellow card for time-wasting during the Italy match.

Czechs shell-shocked

REUTERS, Innsbruck

Czech Republic leave Euro 2008 feeling shell-shocked and bemused at how they let a quarterfinal place slip through their fingers in a final few minutes of madness.

Leading 2-0 with 15 minutes to go, they had a last-eight place firmly within their grasp on Sunday before Turkey stunned them with three quick goals that left their dreams in tatters and their coach lost for an explanation.

"The third goal marked a total collapse, which I cannot explain. I will not forget this for a very long time," Karel Brueckner told a news conference after what was his last match in charge before retiring.

The absence of injured playmaker Tomas Rosicky had already knocked the team before the championship had even started but the Czechs refused to dwell on it and took comfort from the fact that in Petr Cech they had one of the world's

best goalkeepers.

All the more shocking, then, that the man who had saved them on so many other occasions should make a rare blunder that handed Turkey an equaliser three minutes from time and gave them the momentum to score another to send the Czechs home.

"I am going to be upset about this for a long time, especially because it was my mistake that decided the match," newspaper Blesk quoted Cech as saying after he inexplicably dropped the ball at Nihat Kahveci's feet.

Living up to the pulsating performances that took them to the semifinals of Euro 2004 was always going to be hard when the core of the magical midfield -- Pavel Nedved, Karel Poborsky and Vladimir Smicer -- had all retired.

Some fans, and several newspaper columnists, would argue the writing was already on the wall for a disappointing showing this time round after an up-and-down qualify-

ing campaign.

The fact that Milan Baros, winner of the golden boot four years ago, had forgotten how to locate the back of the net left Brueckner relying on 35-year-old Jan Koller as the lone striker.

The tall Koller was ineffective in the lucky 1-0 win over co-hosts Switzerland in the first Group A match, prompting Brueckner to make the surprise move of reinstating Baros in the starting XI for the match against Portugal.

Although they lost that match 3-1, they were buoyed by a much-improved performance that showed the beginnings of a coherent attack, thanks to an injection of pace from Baros and some creative thinking from midfielder Marek Matejovsky.

Brueckner brought back Koller for the final match and he paid his coach back with his 55th goal in 90 appearances, but along with defensive midfielder Tomas Galasek, the striker has hung up his international boots on a heart-breaking note.

'Zlatan has matured'

AFP, Lugano

Fiery Swedish striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic has matured both as a player and as a person claimed national coach Lars Lagerback on Monday.

Lagerback also denied that they had had a personal problem over the coach's decision to punish the Inter Milan striker by leaving him out of the national squad in 2006 after he went out drinking.

However, while Lagerback didn't claim that this piece of disciplinary action had prompted Ibrahimovic's change of direction, he said he was delighted he had matured.

That maturity has been reflected here at Euro 2008 as he has scored two of his three goals -- ending his three

year goal drought for the national side taking his total to 20 in 52 appearances -- and played through the pain barrier with a sore left knee.

"He has matured as a person and as a player," said Lagerback, who has been sole coach since Euro 2004 having been joint coach with Tommy Soderbergh from 2000.

"Some young players don't understand everything, and he really helps them as he is a real team player. He is a positive man to have on and off the pitch. Every team would benefit in having such a player," gushed Lagerback, who turns 60 in July.

Lagerback, who has been coach of virtually every age group in the Swedish national set-up, said that overall his relationship with the 26-year-old had been good.

"I can't say we have had so many up and downs, we have had a good relationship since he joined the national team," said Lagerback.

"I understand what you are referring to, it (the drinking episode) was an isolated incident."

"I don't think he agrees with me about my decision, after that everything went fine, in my opinion there is no problem."

"He is a 100 per cent professional player, he knows what he has to do."

Lagerback, though, was still uncertain as to whether the former Ajax and Juventus star could play the full 90 minutes against Russia in their final Group D match on Wednesday where the Swedes need just a draw to make the quarterfinals.

"I can't say if he is fit enough to play 90 minutes," said Lagerback.

AFP, Basel

Portugal boss Luiz Felipe Scolari is stealing himself for a Euro 2008 quarterfinal showdown with Germany here on Thursday.

Although the Portuguese could also face Austria or Poland, Scolari made it clear he expected the Germans to bounce back from a below par display in their defeat by Croatia to clinch second place in group B.

That would put them into a last eight meeting with the Portuguese, who were already sure of topping Group A before a second string side was beaten 2-0 by Switzerland here on Sunday night.

Asked if he felt, Germany were no longer to be feared, Scolari replied: "Not at all, I like the way Germany plays. I like their tactics, the way the players perform."

"You should not forget that even

in the hardest moments the Germans defend their pride and make a huge effort and manage to recover in matches where they are under pressure."

"The Croatia game was not a typical match for Germany. We know that, if we have to face Germany, we are going to have a very tough time."

Portugal will definitely have the advantage of fresher legs whoever they face with Scolari having made eight changes to the side that beat the Czech Republic 3-1 in midweek to clinch top spot in the group.

After seeing his side beaten by Hakan Yakin's second-half double, Scolari said he wished he had changed the entire line-up.

"They played normally and we had a few opportunities but we did not score the goal we wanted and later on we saw the consequences of that," Scolari said.

'We can go all the way'

AFP, Geneva

Turkey coach Fatih Terim said he wants his side to beat Croatia in Friday's Euro 2008 quarterfinal in Vienna and then go all the way to the final in the Austrian capital on June 29.

Turkey again showed why they are the come-back kings with a stunning late win over the Czech Republic on Sunday by turning a 2-0 deficit with 15 minutes left into a 3-2 win to reach the last eight as Group A runners-up.

Turkish captain Nihat Kahveci's brace with just minutes left in the winner-takes-all game booked a quarterfinal tie against Group B winners and Germany-slayers Croatia in Vienna.

And now Terim, nicknamed the Emperor by Turkish fans, wants to go all the way to the final.

"Croatia are a good side, they

beat Germany, but we are a good team too and we will get better as each day passes," said Terim,

whose side also stunned Switzerland last week 2-1 when they scored the winning goal in extra time.

"They have a young team, they play well, but as far as we are concerned we will go to Vienna and let's hope we stay there, it is winner takes all now."

"We respect all teams, but we fear none."

Terim said his team's stunning late comeback against the Czechs was testament to their ability to fight until the end.

"I'm proud that I have players who know that the match ends with the referee's whistle," said the 54-year-old former AC Milan boss.

"We showed the whole world what kind of a team we are."

"We came here to play to the end. We're working to make that

goal come true."

With the scores level on 2-2 with just over a minute remaining, the match looked set to be decided by an historic penalty shoot-out with both sides having identical records in the Group A table.

But Kahveci's winner sent Turkey into seventh heaven and broke Czech hearts.

"Just as we were preparing for penalty kicks I signalled to score a third goal if the chance came up and it worked," said Terim.

"In my career, I never ever thought of giving up on a game."

"I am a person who never loses hope I have seen many things happen in the last minutes of game, that is the beauty of football."

"I am aware of what our team can do and I think our team likes dramatic finishes, let's hope we can win matches a little sooner next time."

goalkeeper Ricardo.

Then, with seven minutes left, Tranquillo Barnetta was pulled down by Fernando Meira and Hakan slotted in the penalty to make sure Swiss coach Jakob Kuhn's international career ended with a victory.

"I'm very pleased that we were able to give this gift to the fans," Kuhn said. "But of course there is a bit of sadness because we deserved to take at least a point from both of our first two games and it now looks as if that would have been enough to qualify us for the quarterfinals."

In the absence of Cristiano Ronaldo and Deco, Ricardo Quaresma seized the opportunity to show that Portugal's reserves of skill run deep with an outrageous piece of trickery to create his side's first chance, in the 8th minute.

Shaping to cross from the left of area, the Porto winger swung his right boot around the back of his left leg to deliver the ball, with astonishing accuracy, to the near post. Sadly Helder Postiga's finishing was not of the same standard and the striker's header comfortably cleared the bar.

Pascal Zuberbuhler was making his last international appearance in the Swiss goal and he was given the opportunity to demonstrate his reflexes remain sharp at the age of 37 when he turned Nani's freekick onto the bar after it had taken a wicked late deflection off Pepe.

Switzerland went close with a long-range effort from Gokhan Inler and a Hakan header before the break.

Portugal's best chances fell to Postiga, who had a first-half shot from 12 yards blocked by Philippe Senderos, and Nani, who struck the post after he had been left with only the goalkeeper to beat seven minutes after the restart.

Basel pitch will be ready on time

REUTERS, Vienna

Euro 2008 organisers said on Monday they were confident a new pitch being laid at Basel's St Jakob Park, after heavy rain had damaged the previous turf, would be ready in time to stage Thursday's quarterfinal.

A torrential downpour during last Wednesday's Group A match between co-hosts Switzerland and Turkey, and further rain during the Swiss match with Portugal on Sunday night, left the pitch badly damaged, prompting the unusual decision by UEFA.

Netherlands coach Marco van Basten, whose side will meet either Sweden or Russia in the second quarterfinal there on Saturday, told reporters in Lausanne on Monday that he was surprised by the decision to replace the pitch.

"They seem to be replacing pitches quite easily these days, but look at what happened in the Champions League final when they put in a new pitch just before the game and the players were sliding on it. It bothered players of the best two teams in Europe. This is just not good for football."

A UEFA spokeswoman said this was the first time a whole pitch needed replacing during a European Championship or World Cup tournament, although in the past sections of pitches had been re-laid.

"The rainfall seen during the downpour last Wednesday amounted to an hourly rate of about 180 litres of water per square-metre of pitch, whereas the drainage system can absorb only about 100 litres of water an hour," she said.



A Turkish fan waves the national flag as she celebrates her team's dramatic progress into the quarterfinals of Euro 2008 in Frankfurt on Sunday.