



Dutch forward Robin van Persie (R) fires home the second goal against Romania during their Euro 2008 match at the Stade de Suisse Wankdorf in Berne on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

PORTUGAL V GERMANY

C'Ron targets Ballack hattrick

AFP, Basel

Cristiano Ronaldo is backing Portugal's superior skill levels to overcome Germany's strength and organisation as he seeks to complete a hat-trick of victories over Michael Ballack.

The 42 goals Ronaldo plundered for Manchester United last season were the main reason Ballack's Chelsea had to settle for runners-up spots in both the English Premier League and the Champions League, and the winger is determined to inflict more pain on Germany's captain in Wednesday's Euro 2008 quarterfinal here.

"Germany are a very mature team and it will be tough, but every team has weaknesses," Ronaldo said. "Both teams are good. The way Portugal play is perhaps more about technique and Germany have more physically strong players."

"But it's not a problem for us because we have a lot of experience in our squad and we know what we have to do on the pitch."

"Of course I've thought about getting to the final. We are going very well at the moment in training and confidence is high, but we know that first of all we have to get the job done against Germany."

Ballack's tears after Chelsea lost the Champions League final to

United on penalties have enhanced his reputation as a player who is condemned to always miss out on the biggest prizes.

But he denies being haunted by memories of Moscow, his 2000/01 season with Bayer Leverkusen (who threw away the Bundesliga title and lost in both the German Cup and Champions League finals) or the 2002 World Cup, where he missed the final defeat by Brazil through suspension.

"It is not something that worries me. I've already won enough trophies in my career," said Ballack.

"Of course I still want to win more but it is not something that I'm obsessed with."

The two countries last met in the 3rd-4th play-off match at the 2006 World Cup with Germany emerging 3-1 winners.

Two years on, Portugal are undoubtedly stronger as a result of Ronaldo's evolution into arguably the best player on the planet and the increased experience of what is a mature defensive unit.

Germany, in contrast, have failed to live up to their pre-tournament status as the book-

makers' favourites to lift the trophy and it required a free-kick special from Ballack to sink Austria in their final group game and clinch their place in the last eight.

The Austrian clash left experienced midfielder Torsten Frings nursing cracked ribs and he is set to miss Wednesday's match, although striker Lukas Podolski, who has scored three of Germany's four goals so far, should have recovered sufficiently from a calf injury to play.

The injury to Frings increases the likelihood that German coach Joachim Loew will hand Bastian Schweinsteiger the opportunity to atone for the red card he received in the defeat by Croatia, which ruled the Bayern Munich midfielder out of the Austria match.

Schweinsteiger believes he can provide the dynamism that has been missing from Germany's play so far, although he acknowledges that Portugal are a better team than they were when he scored twice against them in the 2006 encounter. "It's a star-studded team of players at top clubs, Ronaldo is a superb player, Deco is very good, they are stronger than they were two years ago," Schweinsteiger said.

"They are the top team of the tournament, it will be difficult to beat them, but we know what we can do."



MICHAEL BALLACK

CRISTIANO RONALDO

Loew to sit in the stands

AFP, Vienna

Germany coach Joachim Loew will have to sit in the stands for Germany's Euro 2008 quarterfinal with Portugal on Thursday after he lost his appeal against his sending-off during the final group match with Austria.

According to German news agency SID the UEFA Disciplinary Commission confirmed his and Austrian counterpart Josef Hickersberger's automatic one match ban, after both of them were sent to the stands by Spanish referee Manuel Gonzalez in the 41st minute of the match after arguing with the fourth official.

Whilst Hickersberger's ban will be for the Austrians next international as they are out of Euro following the 1-0 defeat by Germany, Loew will not be allowed any contact with his players once they get to the stadium at Basel, Switzerland, on Thursday.

He will not be able to go into the dressing room before the match, nor at half-time and will not be allowed to communicate with the dugout during the match.

After both coaches were dismissed, they both shook hands with each other before climbing the stairs.

Loew went to sit close to German chancellor Angela Merkel, who offered him a sympathetic hand shake.

Makelele, Thuram retire

AFP, Paris

Veteran France international midfielder Claude Makelele confirmed his international retirement on Tuesday following the 2006 World Cup finalists first round exit from Euro 2008.

The 35-year-old Chelsea star rounded off his 71-cap career in the 2-0 defeat by world champions Italy which left the French bottom of

Group C and an early plane home.

"I always said this would be my final competition," said Makelele, who also played for Nantes and Marseille in France.

"I have no regrets at finishing now. Most of the decisions I have taken I have always taken 100 per cent."

"I have sweated for this shirt and it has brought me 100 per cent happiness, so there are no regrets. A new generation can take the

reins and come together. I am totally with them," added Makelele, whose international highlight would have been as part of the 2006 World Cup final side that lost on penalties to Italy.

Makelele was not the last to announce his retirement in the aftermath of the match as 36-year-old Lilian Thuram, France's record caps holder with 142 caps, also announced he was calling it a day.

"This elimination is very difficult to take, it is even more difficult for me because it is my last match with France," said Thuram, who was left on the bench for the Italy match having been exposed during the 4-1 defeat by Holland.

"As for my future, I would like to continue to play but I don't know if a club wants me," added Thuram, who is wanted by ailing French giants Paris Saint Germain but is thought to be keen on a political career.

Others such as Patrick Vieira and goalkeeper Gregory Coupet are thought to be considering retiring.

However, Thierry Henry, France's record goalscorer with 45 in 102 matches, said he wasn't going to take an instant decision.

"Yes, of course, I want to continue," said the 30-year-old, who had a miserable first season with Barcelona.

"I had already said that it had crossed my mind (of retiring) but I am here."

"I don't know what is going to happen but I am going to reflect on what I am going to do."

FACTFILES

LILIAN THURAM

Born: January 1 1972
Birthplace: Pointe-a-Pitre
Clubs: Monaco (1990-1996), Parma (ITA/1996-2001), Juventus (ITA/2001-2006), FC Barcelona (ESP/since 2006)
Titles:
UEFA Cup: 1999
Serie A: 2003, 2002
Italian Cup: 1999
Italian Supercup: 1999, 2003, 2002
Spanish Supercup: 2006
France
142 caps (record), 2 goals - 1998 World Cup semifinal in 2-1 win over Croatia
1st cap: France v Czech Republic (2-2), August 17 1994
Final cap: France v Holland (1-4), June 13 2008
Titles:
World Cup: 1998 (runners-up 2006)
European championship: 2000
Confederation Cup: 2003

CLAUDE MAKELELE

Born: February 18 1973
Birthplace: Kinshasa
Clubs: Nantes (1992-1997), Marseille (1997-1998), Celta Vigo (ESP/1998-2000), Real Madrid (ESP/2000-2003), Chelsea (ENG/since 2003)
Titles:
Champions League: 2002
Intercontinental Cup: 2002
French champion: 1995 (Nantes)
Premiership: 2006, 2005
Spanish championship: 2003, 2001
European Supercup: 2002
Spanish Supercup: 2003, 2001
FA Cup: 2007
English League Cup: 2007, 2005
Community Shield: 2005
France
71 caps
1st cap: Norway v France (0-0), July 22 1995
Final appearance: France v Italy (0-2), June 17 2008

'Orange train steams ahead'

AFP, The Hague

The Dutch press celebrated Wednesday the national team's rolling into the quarterfinals of Euro 2008 by dispatching Romania 2-0.

"The Orange train steams ahead," wrote the daily De Telegraaf after Holland kept its perfect record in its third and final Group C match.

"Oranje continues its triumphant march," screamed the headline of the daily Trouw.

"It wasn't the exuberant victory like the first two games. But the 2-0 victory in the last group match was won by a team," it wrote.

Holland had already secured its quarterfinal berth with stunning wins over Italy and France, and coach Marco van Basten rested a number of his top players in Tuesday's match against Romanian Berne.

"After two performances worthy of a football Oscar, van Basten's second squad also stepped up to the podium..." said the De Volkskrant.

"The Dutch B side only occasionally showed the attractive playing of the matches against Italy and France. But by winning 2-0, Oranje has completed its sporting homework and maintains the euphoric atmosphere," wrote the NRC daily.

Ribery suffers twisted ankle

AFP, Chatel Saint Denis

France attacking midfielder Franck Ribery suffered a seriously twisted ankle in the 2-0 defeat by Italy on Tuesday announced coach Raymond Domenech.

The 25-year-old Bayern Munich dynamo had to go off after just eight minutes of the crucial match after fouling Italy defender Gianluca Zambrotta.

"He has suffered a seriously twisted ankle," said Domenech, who replaced him with former Marseille teammate Samir Nasri.

"He is on crutches and cannot put any weight on his foot." Nasri lasted just 16 minutes himself as he was sacrificed - central defender Jean-Alain Boumsong coming on - when Eric Abidal was red carded by Slovakian referee Lubos Michel.

The 2-0 defeat ended France's interest in the competition, having garnered just one point and scored one goal to finish bottom of the group.

Pitch ready for use

REUTERS, Basel

Euro 2008 organisers said on Wednesday the new Basel pitch had been laid successfully and would be ready for Portugal to train on later in the day ahead of Thursday's quarterfinal against Germany.

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

Back to square one

AFP, Berne

Marco van Basten has warned his rampant Holland squad they must start all over again after completing a glorious romp through the group stage of Euro 2008 by sending Romania home.

Second-half goals from Ajax striker Klaas Jan Huntelaar and man-of-the-match Robin van Persie secured a 2-0 win and ensured the Oranje topped group C with maximum points.

Their reward was a quarterfinal meeting with either Sweden or Russia in Basel on Saturday, and van Basten was justifiably proud of the professional job his second-string side he sent out had done, albeit against opponents who displayed an almost inexplicable lack of ambition.

"We have to be very proud, and happy that we have won the group and the three games," said van Basten. "We have made a great start. But Saturday is another match altogether and we have to start again from zero."

"We will be in front of our television screens watching the Sweden v Russia match and we will try to do a good analysis of whoever it is we have to play."

The defeat of the Romanians ensured van Basten's squad did a huge favour to Italy coach Roberto Donadoni, his old friend and AC Milan teammate.

Italy joined the Dutch in the quarterfinals after beating France 2-0 and van Basten denied reports that Donadoni had been in touch with him before the final round of

group matches.

"I know him very well but I also know in a situation like that it is not good to have contact with each other," van Basten said. "In the end, I'm happy for him, happy for Italy."

Van Basten made no apology for fielding a weakened side for the final group match. "I had a very simple reasoning," he said. "We were already qualified, and had two difficult matches, physically and mentally."

"Hopefully we will be able to play more matches in the tournament and it is going to require a lot of mental and physical exertion so it was an ideal opportunity to put other players into the team."

Van Basten now believes his side can go on to emulate the squad he inspired to victory in the 1998 European Championships.

"The atmosphere is good. The players are working well together and having a good time. If we continue playing like this I don't know where exactly we are going to end but I hope it is going to take a long time," van Basten said.

Although needing to win to be sure of staying in the competition, Romania's only concern appeared to be to avoid the kind of mauling the Dutch had handed out to France and Italy in their first two group matches.

That was never on the cards with only rightback Khalid Boulahrouz and the defensive midfielder Orlando Engelaar surviving from the Dutch side that had started the 4-1 demolition of

France.

But van Basten's side were always in control and would have ended the contest much earlier if Huntelaar and Arjen Robben, who was withdrawn after an hour, had taken their first-half chances.

Romania coach Victor Piturca admitted the Dutch had been "better and fresher" than his side, who he felt had paid a high price for their efforts in securing draws with France and Italy.

"Not losing the first two matches against the world champions and the vice champions has been an achievement for our team. But we could not change the players who played in those matches and they took a lot out of us. Maybe we were a bit tired."

After Huntelaar and Robben had wasted good chances before the break, Holland's breakthrough finally came when Ibrahim Afellay's cross from the right was flicked on by Orlando Engelaar.

Huntelaar demonstrated his predatory instincts remain intact by prodding in his eighth goal in 13 international appearances.

Romania's only real chance of the entire match came a minute from the break. Razvan Rat made it to the byline and cut the ball back for Paul Codrea, who blasted his free shot over from just inside the box.

The Romanians also had a brief flurry of pressure in the closing minutes but it was to be van Persie who had the final word, holding off Cosmin Contra's challenge before firing home.

Spain wary of Italy

AFP, Madrid

The prospect of facing Italy in Euro 2008 is causing unease in the Spanish camp, which would have preferred almost any other team if it wants to overcome its "curse of the quarterfinals."

The Spanish press Wednesday also voiced alarm at the prospect of facing the "squadra azzura", who beat them in quarterfinals of the World Cup in 1994 and have not lost to Spain in a major competition in 88 years.

"Oh Mamma Mia!" headlined

that Spain is in form -- it beat the World Cup winners 1-0 in a friendly this year -- and that Italy will be below their best without the suspended Andrea Pirlo and Gennaro Gattuso.

However, the nervousness is also being felt among Spanish supporters, 60 per cent of whom believe Italy will win, according to an Internet poll published by the newspaper El Pais.

Adding to the anxiety is the fact that the match will be played on June 22, viewed as particularly "cursed" in Spain following three exits by the national team in quarterfinals of international competitions on that date.

Spain was eliminated on June 22 in a penalty shootout against Belgium in the World Cup in 1986, against England in Euro 1996 and against South Korea at the 2002 World Cup.

| TODAY'S MATCH | | |
|--------------------|------------------|-------|
| Teams | Time | Venue |
| Portugal v Germany | 12:45am (Friday) | Basel |

"It is not the team that I would have most liked for the quarterfinal, it's a very complicated team," said Spanish coach Luis Aragones after Italy's 2-0 win over France that sent the World Cup champions into the next round.

the newspaper El Mundo.

"They are an invincible enemy," said Publico, while ABC pointed to the problems in overcoming a team that is in the ascendancy after a difficult start to Euro 2008.

But commentators also note

Press praises Azzurri

AFP, Rome

Italian newspapers were lavish in their praise of the national side on Wednesday following the 2-0 win over France which took them into the last eight at Euro 2008.

Whereas there was anger following the defeat to the Dutch, worry after drawing with Romania, there was unashamed joy and excitement about Sunday's quarterfinal with Spain.

"Too Beautiful" was how La Gazzetta dello Sport reported the match, with particular praise for scorer of the opening goal Andrea Pirlo, who the paper rated as man of the match.

On the inside cover the paper headlined: "An Italian Miracle, Thank You Holland and now for Spain."

Pirlo, who will be suspended for the Spain clash along with club colleague Gennaro Gattuso,

was the centre of attention saying: "it was said, it was done."

The joy of qualifying was tempered for the Italian press by the knowledge that next up are Spain, a team in great form and one who beat Italy 1-0 when they met in a friendly in March.

In particular La Gazzetta was concerned about taking on their strikers Fernando Torres and David Villa, warning Roberto Donadoni's men, "Keep an eye on those two -- On Sunday we're playing a team in better form and their strikers should scare us."

Italy and Spain's head-to-head record gets examined, with the world champions slightly ahead with nine wins to Spain's eight.

They point out that the last time the sides met in a tournament, two goals from Roberto Baggio gave Italy a 2-1 victory at the 1994 World Cup.

Corriere dello Sport was even

more effusive in its praise, leading on its front cover with: "Viva Italia -- In Zurich a great night for the Azzurri."

"Applause for Italy," declared Daniele De Rossi, scorer of the second goal and official man of the match, who played down his achievement insisting that: "Everyone deserved this award."

The paper also reports comments from Spain captain Carlos Puyol, who in a text to Italy team manager Demitrio Albertini an ex-colleague at Barcelona, said: "Come on brothers, we are ready for you."

La Repubblica saw elements of Italy's victorious 2006 World Cup team in the victory over France.

"Italy return to greatness, beat France 2-0," the paper said, adding that Spain was already casting nervous glances ahead to their quarterfinal in Vienna.



Italian supporters celebrate in central Rome after their national team's progress into the Euro 2008 quarterfinals with a 2-0 win over France on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP