

QUARTERFINAL AGAINST ITALY Spain up against everything

AGENCIES, Vienna

Italy go into Sunday's Euro 2008 quarterfinal against Spain knowing that their group stage form has made the world champions look like underdogs.

Spain go into the Vienna match on a roll, looking to extend their unbeaten run to 20 games after winning all three group matches -- albeit with decreasing authority -- and with their first team raring to go after a week's rest.

In contrast, 2006 World Cup winners Italy limped over the line having been on the brink of an early exit against Romania after their introductory 3-0 thrashing by Netherlands.

But that all counts for nothing now as, apart from a couple of Italy suspensions, the teams start again with a clean slate.

Spain certainly will not be making any assumptions after so often looking the business in the group stage only to quickly fall away in the knockout rounds.

Besides, the Spaniards are wary of the fact that "squadra azzurra", who beat them in quarterfinals of the World Cup in 1994 and have not lost to them in a major competition in 88 years.

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.

But Spain are desperate to turn the table around this time against their old enemies.

"This team have learned a lot since the World Cup," said midfielder Xabi Alonso in reference to their charge through the early stages in 2006 that ended abruptly with defeat by France.

"We were a young side then and now we know what these competitions are like."

A team tagged as "perennial under-achievers" have looked good so far. Their neat-passing midfielders have created chance after chance for strikers David Villa and Fernando Torres, who took plenty of them in a 4-1 win over Russia and a last-gasp 2-1 success against Sweden.

The reserves then stepped in to beat Greece 2-1 in their final game.

Italy, who rounded off the group stage with a 2-0 win over France, make something of a habit of starting slowly but coming to the boil when it really matters.

Like Germany, who shrugged off a group stage defeat by Croatia to beat Group A winners Portugal on

Thursday, Italy will wipe from their minds that Dutch drubbing and the Romania draw, when only Gianluigi Buffon's late penalty save kept them in the tournament.

Their pedigree demands that they reach the knockout stages and, unlike the nervous Spaniards who get nose bleeds at the mere mention of the last four, once there they settle comfortably and plan for the final.

The tough route in, however, has cost them heavily with suspensions for midfielders Gennaro Gattuso and Andrea Pirlo.

Experienced pair Massimo Ambrosini and Mauro Camoranesi should replace them and though neither has the relentless destructive appetite of Gattuso nor the class of Pirlo they are both more ambitious in getting forward.

Antonio Cassano is likely to start alongside Luca Toni up front but though it is not a pairing to strike fear into the heart of a top international defence, Toni does carry an aerial threat against a relatively small Spanish back four.

Italy's defence has sorely missed injured captain Fabio Cannavaro, for his organisation as much as his talent.

On Sunday, their reshuffled, makeshift rearguard will have to be 100 per cent concentrated to deal with the movement and probing runs of Spain's midfield and attack.



Spanish forward David Villa plays with a ball during a training session in Neustift on Friday. The striker with four goals under his belt will be the key when his side attempts to beat Italy in Sunday's quarterfinal.

Contrasting fortunes

AFP, Paris

When Spanish fans ask how a side which has produced attacking talents such as Raul and Emilio Butragueno and goalkeepers of the calibre of Iker Casillas and Abdon Zubizarreta never wins anything they often end up blaming their Latin cousins Italy.

And with good reason. The Spanish are past masters of shooting out of the blocks at World Cups and European Championships.

Then around the quarterfinals it usually ends in tears.

The Italians, in contrast start slowly, apparently indifferent as to whether they even make it out of the opening group phase.

They invariably do -- and having done so have a habit of then speeding up all the way to the final day of an event -- witness four World Cups and one European title, in 1968.

"Slow and steady wins the race," as Aesop's fable of the tortoise besting the hare would have it.

Spanish coach Luis Aragones insists that Spain must win the match in their minds as well as on the pitch, where La Furia Roja have only ever captured one trophy -- the 1964 European Championship.

They did reach the 1984 final but lost to France and since then appear to have developed a quarterfinal complex.

"A team which wants to win has to be convinced of its ability to do so and work on achieving that."

"We will try to ensure they do not hit us on the counter-attack," added the "Wise Man of Hortaleta."

Striker Fernando Torres says Italy are favourites because "Italy are the current world champions and that's not an accident. Their history makes them favourites."

And just like his coach, he urged his compatriots to beware the counter-attack.

Aragones' stress on the psychological side of winning hits a nerve in Spain as they have been here before.

The Italians came off best in the 1994 World Cup quarters, an ugly affair in which Spanish midfielder Enrique had his nose broken by an elbow jab from Italian defender Mauro Tassotti as Spain lost 2-1.

beaten Italy at a major competition for 88 years.

Sunday's date of June 22 is additionally particularly inauspicious for Spanish football following three exits by the national team in quarterfinals of international competitions on that date.

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

But they can take some comfort from the fact that Italy will be without suspended key midfielders Andrea Pirlo and Gennaro Gattuso

Hamit relishes Germany tie

AFP, Vienna

Hamit Altintop, who drove in Turkey's winning penalty in the quarterfinal shoot-out win over Croatia, is relishing taking on some of his Bayern Munich teammates in Wednesday's semifinal against Germany.

The Gelsenkirchen-born midfielder, who picked up the man of the match award in Vienna on Friday, could face as many as five Bayern colleagues in Basel.

Given his insider knowledge the 25-year-old will play a pivotal part in discussions as Turkey coach Fatih Terim plots to undo Die Mannschaft.

"It's important that we rest first and then we can analyse Germany with our coach."

"We can beat anybody if we prepare ourselves properly. All the team showed tonight that it's important to believe in ourselves, in what's right, and in what our coach tells us. If we continue like this we shouldn't fear any team."

Reflecting on the 3-1 spot-kick win he added: "It's vital to be cold-blooded in shoot-outs - you mustn't show nerves in football."

"If we carry on this way, and believe in ourselves, we can win the tournament."

Coach Fatih Terim praised the former FC Schalke 04 star who joined Bayern last season, saying: "When you have footballers like this, you don't lose."

Veira backs Domenech

AFP, Paris

France midfielder Patrick Veira on Friday said he backed under-fire coach Raymond Domenech to stay on but added he did not know if he would continue his own international career.

"I am essentially for stability," said the 31-year-old France skipper and Inter Milan midfielder, who has been capped 105 times.

Pressed on Domenech, whose side crashed out of Euro 2008 in the Group phase, he said: "You shouldn't throw everything out of the window and start again from zero."

He added that "responsibility rests with the players. Perhaps we were too calm, sure of ourselves."

"We understand the criticism as we were mediocre."

Veira, a member of the 1998 World Cup and Euro 2000 winning sides, himself did not feature in the event as he failed to recover from a thigh injury.

But he said it was not necessarily the end of his international career as it has been for Lilian Thuram and Claude Makelele, who both announced their retirement after the 2-0 defeat to Italy in their final group game.

"I don't know. I am not asking myself if I wish to continue in the France team or not (but) 2010 (the next World Cup) is a bit far away."

"A young generation is emerging," Veira noted, adding that perhaps his experienced presence might help.

"But whether I will have the physical means (to keep playing) is another thing."

'Turkey will conquer Vienna'

AFP, Ankara

The Turkish football team are destined to win Euro 2008 in Vienna and make up for the failure of their compatriots to take the city by force in the 17th century, was one of the takes by the Turkish press on their astonishing quarterfinal victory over Croatia.

The Turks levelled at 1-1 with the final kick of the game in Vienna on Friday and then won 3-1 on penalties in the shootout to reach the last four for the first time in their history sparking wild celebrations round the country.

"Step by step towards the Cup," was the headline in the daily news-

paper Aksam, which like several of its fellow papers recalled the siege of Vienna in the 17th century by the Ottomans which ultimately failed.

This time, though, according to Aksam the Turkish assault will result in the "first conquest of Vienna".

Other headlines went "The miracle is our business", "Going around Germany (in reference to their semifinal in Basel, Switzerland, next Wednesday)", and "Towards the Cup" as the Turkish press eulogised about their team's achievements.

"We will be there (in the final), there remains nothing to oppose us", was splashed on the front page of Hurriyet, which was also certain

that the Turks were up to beating Germany.

For the popular selling Sabah, the Turkish team had pulled off a 'true miracle' in not so much winning on penalties but in levelling in the final seconds of extra-time, the Croats having taken the lead only a minute from the final whistle.

However, the newspapers also acknowledged that coach Fatih Terim faces the unenviable task of selecting a team for the Germany clash as he has four players suspended and several injury worries, including outstanding striker Nihat Kahveci, who came off three minutes from the end of extra-time clutching his groin.

Zidane to watch Italy-Spain clash

AFP, Vienna

Former French football star Zinedine Zidane will hold a football clinic for children Sunday in Vienna, before taking in the Euro 2008 quarterfinal between Spain and Italy, his sponsors said Saturday.

Zidane will teach children some of his skills in a so-called "Predator Clinic" in the city-centre fan zone around noon, as part of an event organised by his sponsor, German sportswear maker Adidas.

The Frenchman, who famously head-butted Italy defender Marco Materazzi during the 2006 World Cup final in Berlin, was then to attend the Euro 2008 quarterfinal at the Ernst Happel stadium, Adidas spokesman Gregor Almassy said.

Celebratory shots wounds two

AFP, Istanbul

Turkish football fans couldn't restrain themselves on Friday as they fired celebratory shots into the air despite pleas from Turkey coach Fatih Terim not to after their team reached the Euro 2008 semifinals for the first time.

The fans could not believe that their side had once again come from behind to win -- this time scoring in time added on to tie the Croats at 1-1 and then winning 3-1 on penalties.

"It is important not to transform victory into tragedy," Terim, otherwise known as 'The Emperor', had said after two people including a 10-year-old girl were wounded by bullets following their remarkable 3-2 group win over the Czechs, which saw them come back from 2-0 down.

Victory was greeted in the Istanbul quarter of Besiktas, which is home to one of the three great clubs of the city, by such a noise that it made the windows tremble.

"Turkey is the greatest," "Red? White! (the colours of the national flag)," yelled the crowd amidst a cacophony of noise of car horns and klaxons, while the night sky was lit up by lights shining from giant projectors.

Thousands of supporters continued to make their way to Taksim square, the centre of Istanbul's nightlife, on the European bank of the Bosphorus, which was clouded in smoke emanating from torches and fireworks.

Similar scenes of joyous celebration -- probably not seen in a sporting context since the 2002 World Cup when Turkey reached the semifinals -- were seen all round the major towns and cities in the country.

In Ankara, a huge crowd, a lot of them draped in the national flag descended on Kizilay Square -- in the centre of the city -- and danced the 'halay', a traditional Turkish dance, toasting the success of Terim and his players.

TODAY'S MATCH		
Teams	Time	Venue
Spain v Italy	12:45am (Monday)	Vienna

The Squadra Azzurra also won the 1934 World Cup meet at the same stage.

Midfielder David Silva picks out the Italians' Bayern Munich striker Luca Toni as the man they must keep on a leash.

"We know defensively Italy are very good and have a dangerman up front in Luca Toni. We must try to move the ball around as quickly as possible," says Silva, recognising that to play the Italians at their own slow-burning game could "really cost us."

Crucially, although Spain are on a run of nine straight wins -- ten would be a record -- they have not

while the Azzurri must make do and mend at the back with Andrea Barzagli out of action as he faces knee surgery.

As Spain look to win a match that could go a long way to shredding their underachievers' tag Italy defender Christian Panucci believes his side have the mental edge amid reports that most Spanish fans fear they will fall by the wayside once more.

"I can understand why the Spanish people don't want to play against Italy because in the past it has not been easy for Spain to play against Italy in these big competitions," he said.



Croatian fans are dejected as they see their national team's Euro 2008 quarterfinal exit on a TV-screen at Korzo street in Rijeka on Friday.



Turkish fans play drums as they celebrate their national team's dramatic progress to the Euro 2008 semifinals at Taksim square in Istanbul on Friday.

Bilic can't believe it

AFP, Vienna

Croatia coach Slaven Bilic said the defeat and more particularly the manner in which it was inflicted in Friday's Euro 2008 quarterfinal loss to Turkey will haunt him and his players forever.

But the 39-year-old who has created such an impression at these championships insisted that his young side would return stronger in time for the upcoming 2010 World Cup qualifiers.

"This is not the sort of match you play on a regular basis, this is something we'll never forget -- it will haunt us for the rest of our lives."

"We'll probably weep for a few days but such is life -- things like this happen."

"We have to go on, I've got a young team, qualification for the World Cup is imminent."

"Tomorrow is a new day, the sun will rise, and my players have a strong character and will be back even stronger."

After large periods of domination Croatia took a 119th minute

lead through kidney transplant patient Ivan Klasnic only for Turkey to strike back in the 122nd minute through Semih Senturk.

After that hammer blow Croatia, who turned up at this quarterfinal after sailing through their group with wins over Germany, Austria and Poland, folded in the penalty shoot-out.

"Penalties were a shock to us. It looked as if it was over, then to concede a goal and for penalties was a psychological advantage to the Turks."

He paid tribute to all his players, including new Tottenham signing Luca Modric who sent Croatia's first spot-kick wide.

"Luca played phenomenally well and didn't deserve to miss that penalty."

"Throughout the tournament he's played fantastic but to be honest none of the players deserved to miss their penalties."

Bilic, who was part of the Croatia team that beat Turkey at Euro 96, the only time the two countries have met previously in competition, said

he was finding it hard to put his thoughts on the last two dramatic minutes into words.

"I can't describe those last minutes -- both our goal and then theirs and then penalties."

"It was something else. I have no misgivings towards my players, I'm proud of them but at the same time sorry and unhappy because I thought we could play on until the end of the tournament."

"I congratulate the Turkey team but still believe that we didn't deserve to lose."

"We have beaten better opponents."

"The pain of this defeat will stay with me for a long time."

"It will haunt us forever."

"This is the third match they've won in an extreme fashion. If they continue to be lucky and don't give up they might even reach the final -- they have quality and they have that something else which you need in football."

With that he left the room, to unusually for a press conference, a round of applause.