

We were lucky, says Casillas

AFP, Vienna

Spain hero Iker Casillas admitted his team had been lucky in progressing to the Euro 2008 semifinals following their penalty shoot-out victory over world champions Italy.

Casillas stopped penalties from Daniele De Rossi and Antonio Di Natale as Spain won the shoot-out 4-2 after a dire goalless draw over 120 minutes.

But he admitted that penalties are a lottery and he struggled to remember the last time he had been on the winning side during the sudden death drama.

"The last time, if I remember, was in Japan in the second round of the 2002 World Cup (against Ireland) and then in the quarterfinals Korea knocked us out," he said.

Casillas admitted it had been a cagey affair but he also denies that Spain have shed the albatross that weighed heavily around their necks having never previously beaten Italy at either the World Cup or European championships.

Their other hoodoo was in not getting past the last eight of a competition since the 1984 European Championships.

"As the match went on against Italy we had a lot of respect for each other during the 90 minutes and extra-time and in the end it went to penalties," he added.

"It's true that we had this inner war concerning the quarterfinals but in the end we've made it to the semis but it's a lottery and we're lucky to get over that barrier."

But we would be naive to think that because we beat Russia 4-1 we'll be able to easily make the final.

"They showed what a great team they are against Sweden, Greece and the Netherlands and regardless of what happened before, this is a new match."

Coach Luis Aragones was not impressed with the way his team played, claiming they lacked urgency in their football.

"I'm happy as is the whole group

because we've gone through but we've only won a small battle," he said.

"We didn't play great football but neither did Italy. We should've played at a higher tempo but we didn't do that."

"But Italy could only threaten us with high balls and we had maybe three clear chances," said the 69-year-old.

"The rhythm of our passing wasn't quite there and when you're in the quarter-finals that's important."

"The pace of the game was slow and if we'd played with more pace we would've created more chances."

Italy coach Roberto Donadoni, on the other hand, said he was proud of his team, who were missing players such as Andrea Pirlo, Fabio Cannavaro and Gennaro Gattuso.

"I can say that they've given their all, they've done their best so I'm proud of them, what they've done and the football they played," he said.

"There was no more energy left in any of them. The ones that didn't play tried to encourage their teammates and that was a result of the great bonding among the players in the group."

"I'm sorry and sad for them because I think they've done really well. I'm happy with the way they played and the result doesn't matter."

The result continued a miserable sequence of penalty shoot-out defeats for Donadoni, who was part of the Italy team beaten that way by Brazil in the World Cup final in 1994 and who himself missed a penalty in the 1990 World Cup semi-final shootout defeat by Argentina.

"As I've said before and in the dressing room, in general I've not been very lucky with penalties."

"I lost an under 21s European Championships semi-final, a semi-final and final in the World Cup."

"Sometimes you win on penalties and sometimes you lose but we can hold our heads up high because what we've done is a source of great pride."



WE'VE DONE IT: Spanish goalkeeper Iker Casillas (L), who made two saves in the tiebreaker, celebrates with midfielder Cesc Fabregas (C) who has just scored the winner in their quarterfinal against Italy at Ernst Happel Stadium in Vienna on Sunday.

PHOTO: AFP

Ballack exudes confidence

AFP, Basel

Germany captain Michael Ballack says his side must use the confidence generated from their 3-2 quarterfinal win over Portugal to knock-out come-back kings Turkey on Wednesday to reach the Euro 2008 final.

Germany play Turkey in Basel's semifinal on Wednesday at the St Jakob-Park Stadium where Chelsea midfielder Ballack scored the crucial third goal last Thursday which knocked Luiz Felipe Scolari's Portugal out of the tournament.

Ballack says the impressive win has given his side a huge shot of confidence, especially since their shock 2-1 group stage defeat at the hands of Croatia, and Germany must take advantage of the injury-hit Turks on Wednesday.

"You always grow into the opponent and the task," said Ballack. "Portugal had been acting like the top favourites."

"So if you can throw a team like them out of the tournament, it gives you enormous confidence."

"It is exactly what we need at this stage of the tournament."

"And we have to take our chance against Turkey."

But Ballack is all too aware of Turkey's never-say-die spirit which has removed Switzerland, the Czech Republic and Croatia so far from the tournament in spectacularly late style.

"This team (Turkey) has a very German mentality," Ballack told daily newspaper Die Welt.

"They will be a very difficult adversary, very, very difficult who have nothing to lose because reaching the semifinals is already an enormous success for them and anything else will be a bonus."

"What they have done already, to believe always and score goals at the end of their matches, is something that only Germany does normally."

Fatih Terim's side have made

last-gasp wins their speciality here at Euro 2008.

Having scored in injury-time to beat Switzerland 2-1 on June 11, Turkey then scored two goals in two minutes at the death four days later against the Czech Republic to snatch a dramatic 3-2 win which put them in the last eight.

Then with virtually the last kick of the game in extra time, Semih Senturk equalised against Croatia to take the quarterfinal to penalties in Vienna last Friday and Turkey held their nerve to win the shoot-out 3-1.

But key Striker Nihat Kahveci, who scored both late goals to knock out the Czechs, is just one of nine first-team players who are either injured or suspended for Wednesday's semifinal.

The Villarreal forward, who picked up the injury against Croatia, has a thigh injury and left the squad on Sunday having played a pivotal role in getting Turkey this far in the competition.

Terim faces an injury crisis with only 13 out-field players fit or available.

But, owing to their amazing battling spirit, for German-born Turkey midfielder Hamit Altintop, Wednesday's semifinal is rated as "50-50".

"Of course Germany are favourites, but there's no reason why we can't beat them," said the Bayern Munich midfielder.

"I'm not worried at all, our strength is our collective spirit, I'm sure we can progress to the final."

History favours the Germans. In 17 games between the sides since 1951, Germany have 11 victories and just three defeats with three draws, but the Germans have scored 40 goals and conceded just ten.

But in the three meetings between the sides in the last ten years, the Germans have failed to beat Turkey and were beaten 2-1 in Istanbul in 2005 in a friendly and they have to go back to 1992 for their last win over the Turks.

Lehmann ready for anything

AFP, Berlin

Veteran German goalkeeper Jens Lehmann said on Monday he was prepared to put his life on the line in Wednesday's Euro 2008 semifinal against Turkey.

The 38-year-old - who should win his 60th cap on Wednesday in Basel, Switzerland - added that he would not make up his mind about his international future until later in the summer unlike his previous bitter rival Oliver Kahn, who hung up his gloves after the 2006 World Cup.

"I am ready to give everything against Turkey, even my life," said the former Arsenal guardian, who will play for Bundesliga side VfB Stuttgart next season after signing a one-year contract.

Lehmann, who replaced Kahn as number one just prior to the 2006 World Cup finals where Germany finished third, said he would not make an impulsive decision over his international future.

"I am focussing on Wednesday's match. Afterwards if we get to Sunday's final, I don't believe that I am going to announce what I am going to do just after it," said Lehmann, whose retention as number one by coach Joachim Loew for Euro was criticised because he had not played enough first team football for Arsenal last season.

Psychiatrist to disconsolate Croat fans

AFP, Zagreb

Croatian football fans who are finding it hard to come to terms with their side's traumatic defeat in the Euro 2008 quarterfinal by Turkey have help at hand - a newspaper has enrolled the services of a psychiatrist.

Daily newspaper Jutarnji List called on Mirela Vlastelica to give some sound medical advice to their readers, who were left shattered after Turkey levelled with the last kick of the match - Croatia having scored a minute from the end of extra-time - and then won 3-1 on penalties.

Jutarnji List recalled that the 'difficult and unexpected defeat had thrown the whole country into a depression', citing one supporter who said the defeat had been as painful as 'losing someone close to one'.

Thus the paper called up Vlastelica to get her to give some advice.

"The country must look to the future," advised Vlastelica.

"The supporters must think of September when the 2010 World Cup qualifiers begin."

A modest Aragones

AFP, Vienna

Coach Luis Aragones, unlike the rest of his fellow countrymen, was keeping his feet firmly on the ground after watching Spain finally confront their demons and defeat Italy to clinch a semifinal spot at Euro 2008.

The veteran manager, attributed with producing the most successful Spanish team in over two decades, was putting a modest face on his achievement following the 4-2 penalty shoot-out, defeat over the Azzurri in Vienna on Sunday.

That was the Spaniard's first win over Italy since 1920 and the first time they've made it past the quarterfinals at a major finals since 1984.

Aragones said: "I'm doing my job - as coach I'm here to win. It's important for Spain. I'm not

depressed when I lose, I'm not euphoric in victory."

"I'm happy for my country, happy for my players and also for me, we're qualified and there's still a small step to go before the final."

That 'small step' comes in the guise of Guus Hiddink's remarkable Russia, who booked their semifinal slot with a rousing 3-1 extra time win over classy Holland.

Spain routed Hiddink's young team 4-1 in the group phase, David Villa scoring a hat-trick, but Aragones predicted an entirely different style of match compared to that first round win.

"This is a great time for Russian football, because at this stage of their season they are at their peak. Many say we've beaten them before so it will be easy but it's much more complicated."

"They have a very fine team with

one of the best attacks around."

"Why do we have to meet them again?"

"My team is committed to reaching the final, in the final anything can happen."

Aragones, who is reportedly stepping down after the Euro to return to club management, dismissed the notion that he'd devise a plan to stop Russian playmaker Andrei Arshavin, who shone against the Dutch.

"We have a style of play but no special plan. We won't be changing our football (for him)."

Spanish captain and keeper Iker Casillas saved two Italian penalties from Daniele De Rossi and Antonio Di Natale, prompting Aragones to say: "I had confidence in him. He has good coaches and he watched videos (of Italians taking penalties)."

Press calls for his head

AFP, Rome

Roberto Donadoni's short reign as Italy coach will shortly be brought to an end paving the way for the return of 2006 World Cup winning coach Marcello Lippi, was the opinion of the Italian press in the wake of Italy's disappointing exit from Euro 2008.

There was little in the way of sympathy for either 44-year-old Donadoni or the team, whose negative tactics got them within a penalty shootout victory over Spain, but instead saw them lose 4-2 on penalties - the dull match having finished 0-0 - and leave Euro with just one victory in four matches.

"Donadoni is the perfect scapegoat," wrote La Stampa.

"He accepted a thankless task, to reinvigorate a world champion team."

Like all their fellow newspapers it predicted the departure of Donadoni - who it is believed will pick up over 500,000 euros in compensation as he signed an extension to his present contract taking him up to 2010 just before the tournament started - especially after Italian federation president Giancarlo Abete patently refused to give him his backing after the defeat on Sunday.

"He (Abete) is preparing for the return of Lippi," was La Stampa's opinion.

"Spain killed us in the penalty shoot-out."

"Spain confirmed that it was a better side than the Italian team and was more courageous. Italy were too withdrawn and too slow against Spain, with no-one in attack."

La Repubblica preferred some dark humour for its appraisal of the limp exit of the Italians, whose only victory came against 10-man France in their final group game.

"We were not able to make it (past the Spanish). Because we were missing (Marco) Materazzi, (Zinedine) Zidane and Zidane's sister," remarked La Repubblica, referring to the pivotal moment in the World Cup final when Zidane headbutted Materazzi for making lewd comments about his sister and was sent off in the second-half of extra-time.

"The chapter on the Berlin heroes is closed," added the journal, while declaring that Marcello Lippi "is getting closer and closer to the dugout".

The left leaning paper also aimed its fire at striker Luca Toni, without naming him directly, after he failed to find the net in four matches with his 'best friend' as he likes to call the football.

"When a striker doesn't score once in four matches, there is really nothing to say".

"One very restrained part of the team is the future, the other has arrived at the terminus," added La Repubblica.

The sports newspapers also heralded the end of Donadoni.

"Everything is finished", was La Gazzetta dello Sport's headline while its rival "Il Corriere dello Sport" called on the Italian team "to become itself again".



German inspirational captain Michael Ballack (L) runs with the ball while striker Lukas Podolski looks on during a training session in Tenero, Switzerland yesterday. Germany will play Turkey in the first semifinal in Basel tomorrow.

PHOTO: AFP



Italy coach Roberto Donadoni speaks during a press conference in Oberwaltersdorf near Vienna on Sunday after his side's quarterfinal defeat against Spain.

PHOTO: AFP