



Russian star Andrei Arshavin (2nd from L) jogs with teammates during a training session in Basel on Monday. Russia play Spain in the Euro 2008 semifinal in Vienna today.

SPAIN V RUSSIA SEMIFINAL Underachievers versus adventurers

AFP, Vienna

Spain are hoping to continue undoing their underachievement of the past as they aim to get past Russia in Thursday's Euro 2008 semifinal here.

The term 'perennial underachievers' has become so synonymous with Spain that it seemed to have become a permanent prefix and the name Spain without it looks naked.

But the talented Iberians went some way to shedding that unwanted tag in the quarterfinals with their nervy penalty shoot-out victory over Italy.

Not only was it their first ever victory over the Italians in a major tournament but it was also the first time they progressed beyond the last eight of a competition since 1984.

And midfield playmaker Xavi of Barcelona believes that this team is finally ready to put that hoodoo to bed once and for all.

"I am very happy as we have already taken a big step towards making history. But we still aren't there yet. We want to get to the final and win it - and this team is ready to do so," he said.

"We are not going to lose our (playing) philosophy against the Russians. We will keep on playing an attacking game. Possession will be the key."

Spain have of course already beaten Russia in this tournament

and it will not be the first time that teams who meet in the group stages meet later on in the competition - although previously that could only happen in the final.

Four years ago Greece beat Portugal in the group stage and again in the final, as Germany did to the Czech Republic in 1996.

However, Xavi and Spain are not going to make the mistake of underestimating Russia.

"Now, they have more confidence and their self-esteem is on the rise, beating opponents who were favourites to do well in the Euros," he added.

"The rival we will now face will not be the same one we faced in the opening game. Their morale is on the up."

"Against them we had a little luck in going 2-0 ahead and then we made use of the counter-attack."

"This one will now be more difficult, firstly, because it is a semi-final after all."

"We must get ourselves mentally ready for reaching the final and not just content ourselves with having finally got past the quarters."

Of the four semifinalists Spain are the only ones not to have lost a match and have been the most impressive team so far.

Their quick, incisive interplay around the box proved too much for Russia in the opening game although once Spain led 2-0 the game opened up and they could freely hit the

Russians on the counter-attack.

Russia, though, were without their star striker Andrei Arshavin and he is hoping to make a big impression against the Spaniards as he tries to secure a move to their homeland.

The 27-year-old Zenit St Petersburg player has said that now is the right time for him to leave Russia and seek a lucrative move abroad, with Spain his preferred destination.

"I know that I have offers from England and Germany, but what I really want is to play in the Primera Liga," he said.

"It's the championship that I have always followed. I like how football is played there. But for now, I have no offers from Spain."

Victory for Russia and a European Championships final appearance would cap a fine season for Arshavin whose club side won the UEFA Cup in May.

Spain coach Luis Aragones is aware of the threat posed by quick forward but he tried to avoid singling him out for special attention.

"He's a good player but not the only danger for Russia who are a team who have progressed and have gained confidence," said Aragones.

"We will have to play in a way which stops them playing and prevents them from counter attacking. We need to keep at them and give them less space."

Guus plots Spanish fall

AFP, Vienna

Russia coach Guus Hiddink has already dashed Spanish hopes of World Cup glory in 2002 as South Korea coach and now he is plotting their downfall here at Euro 2008 - several years after three unhappy spells as a club coach there.

The 61-year-old Dutchman has enjoyed success at club level - win-

ning the 1988 European Cup with PSV Eindhoven - but he was unable to repeat that in Spain despite three bites at the cherry.

And it is not as if he has had mediocre clubs as he has been in charge of Valencia (1991-1993), Real Madrid (1998-February 1999) and Real Betis (February-May 2000).

Valencia was probably his happiest time in Spain as twice he guided

them to fourth in the championship, but he also experienced one of his heaviest ever defeats in the first round of the UEFA Cup in the 1992-93 campaign.

Indeed humiliation would be a better term for it, walloped 5-1 at home, with Uruguayan striker Daniel Fonseca scoring all five, and then losing 1-0 away.

In between his time with Valencia and Real he took charge of the Dutch national side and managed to escape the sack despite a desperate Euro '96 which saw the fiery Edgar Davids storm out alleging racial discord, and the federation's faith was repaid two years later as he took the 'Oranje' to within a penalty shootout of the World Cup final.

It was on that basis that Real signed him up but a club notorious for its fickleness with coaches gave him his red card after just 23 matches when Real - who he did guide to the world club championship - were horror of horrors seven points adrift of bitter rivals Barcelona.

Hiddink is never one to brook an argument with and the suspicion is that he is more at ease with players without an ego than those who earn multi-millions.

To select a team is a painful decision for players who have an ego," Hiddink said shortly before he was shown the door by Real.

"If they climb into their Porsche without having touched the ball, they spend a very bad afternoon. The stars rarely are able to come down from the sky and integrate properly in the squad."

With a straight-talking attitude like that he was not going to last long at a club like Real but it was more of a surprise that he only went 13 matches with Real Betis, who are more patient as their expectations are lower.

However, even their patience was tested to the limit as he recorded just one win in 13 matches and was on the dole just three months later.

Hiddink, though, was to rid himself of any frustration or bitterness he may have had in his system at the 2002 World Cup as he and his South Korean team ended Spain's dreams in a penalty shootout in the quarterfinals - revenge is a dish best tasted cold? For Hiddink Thursday's match can bring him one of the hottest tickets in football.

No alcohol in Moscow

AFP, Moscow

No alcohol will be on sale in the centre of Moscow on Thursday, the day of the Euro 2008 semifinal the mayor revealed on Wednesday.

"The sale of alcohol will be forbidden on Thursday in the centre of Moscow," Piotr Arakcheev, spokesperson for the Moscow town hall consumption department, told AFP.

"The drinking out of a glass bottle will also be banned."

The restrictions will not be lifted until Friday morning.

The Moscow authorities have taken the decision in the wake of what happened after Russia exited in the first round of the 2002 World Cup co-hosted by Japan and South Korea, when some supporters went on the rampage breaking shop windows, turning over cars and resulting in one dead and over 100 injured.

"We have learnt how to win European matches," wrote Komsomolskaya Pravda.

"However, we still need to learn how to party like in Europe, in a civilised fashion."

Donadoni will be sacked

AFP, Rome

Italy coach Roberto Donadoni is going to be sacked and replaced by reigning World Cup-winning coach Marcello Lippi, the Italian press reported on Tuesday.

The fate of 44-year-old Donadoni will be decided early next week, Ansa news agency reported, following Italy's elimination from the Euro 2008 quarterfinals by Spain, 4-2 on penalties after the match ended goalless.

Italian federation (FIGC) president Giancarlo Abete is expected to meet Donadoni on Monday June 30 or Tuesday July 1 in Rome.

Donadoni's contract was extended until 2010 just before the June 7-29, 16-nation tournament co-hosted by Austria and Switzerland.

Italy's 2006 World Cup victory in Germany, with Lippi at the helm, heralded the start of Donadoni's stint in the post. Donadoni's record reads 13 victories, five draws and five defeats, with 35 goals scored and 22 conceded.

Italy's next match is a friendly against Austria in Nice, France, on August 20.

Fans to shave heads if Spain win Euro

AFP, Madrid

Thousands of supporters of the Spanish national team have vowed to shave their heads if their side win the Euro 2008 football championship.

Spanish sports daily Marca has been urging fans to sign an online petition promising to go bald if Spain win the title and as of Tuesday night just over 10,000 people have made the pledge, the newspaper said on its website.

"I, an unrepentant lifelong fan, solemnly commit myself before Marca, the fans and the national team, to shave every last hair on my Spanish head if our team win Euro 2008," the online pledge reads.

Russian gem confident

AFP, Vienna

Andrei Arshavin's two virtuoso performances for Russia have stamped the slight forward as the player of Euro 2008 ahead of the likes of Portugal's Cristiano Ronaldo and Holland's Wesley Sneijder.

The 27-year-old was forced to sit out Russia's opening two games against Spain and Greece but once free of his ban he has left an indelible mark on this tournament.

Russia held a training session at a local stadium in Vienna on Tuesday to prepare for Thursday's semifinal rematch with Spain and every photographer's lens was trained on him.

Arshavin may not have been a household name outside Russia up to now but that has changed after he led Russia to victory over Sweden and in the quarterfinals against Holland.

His starring role gloriously vindicated coach Guus Hiddink's decision to keep him in the squad despite his two-match ban picked up when he was sent off in the final Euro 2008 qualifier against Andorra.

"I came here hoping I'd get a chance to play at such a big tournament," the Zenit St Petersburg star told euro2008.com.

"I've never been to an event like this before. We had some very tough training sessions and it was difficult for me to be training a lot knowing I wouldn't be playing."

"It was an unusual feeling. Even so I'm happy Guus Hiddink brought me here despite the ban and let me become a part of the tournament."

With a touch of Russian modesty he played down his role in getting the country to their first European semifinal.

"I've played better games, so many times. It's just that the team is winning."

"I'm not doing anything out of the ordinary. Sometimes I score, sometimes I provide a pass. When you do it in the World Cup or European Championship, in front of a lot of people, there are bigger repercussions, so to speak."

Repercussions that look set to lead him west in the perhaps not too distant future away from St

Petersburg to one of the major European clubs, with Barcelona very much in his mind.

"I have supported Barcelona all my life. Barcelona are my dream. I never thought I would have a genuine chance to play for the club. Let's see how the situation unfolds."

"For now I can't say anything for sure. At the moment I'm a player of team Russia and I'm only thinking

about doing well in the semifinals."

Assessing the task facing Hiddink's team in that semifinal he believes that opening 4-1 rout by the Spaniards had no bearing on Thursday's rematch.

"For me the first game has no meaning any more. This is a semifinal and things can be decided by a single mistake."

Reflecting on the lop-sided result

against Spain, Arshavin said: "We committed tactical and individual mistakes."

"If you give a shadow of a chance to a striker like David Villa or Fernando Torres, they will put you in trouble. These guys can easily beat a defender one-on-one then score. That's exactly what they did."

He insisted Russia had to stick to their exciting attacking style on Thursday, explaining: "We don't play defensive football, we like to attack."

"But it doesn't all depend on us. Let's see how the Spaniards do. Maybe it makes it harder for us that we play such an open kind of football, because our opponent knows how to counter-attack and they have some fast players."

"But we need to play our way instead of adapting to the opposition."

Hiddink has once again proved himself a master at getting results from unheralded sides as he did with South Korea at the 2002 World Cup and Australia four years later.

And Arshavin paid tribute to the man the Russian media have dubbed 'the wizard'.

"When he came two years ago it was the most important decision made by our FA president (Football Union of Russia chief Vitaly Mutko)."

"Everyone in Russia is envious he makes so much money and enjoys so much power. But for him it's not as easy to work as it seems."

"This is a big event for us, the players. He gave us more freedom, he believes in us, he trusts us and that's why we play better. I'm very happy to work with one of the best coaches in the world. To be part of his team is a real pleasure."

Russia's explosion in their last three games has surprised even their key players.

"To be honest, I wouldn't have believed it. I can't say we were playing good football in the friendlies, but things change quickly in life. Now we have beaten the Dutch, who were perhaps the strongest team in the tournament, so it's natural we are more confident."



PHOTO: AFP

A man walks past a giant advertising billboard showing Dutchman Guus Hiddink, the coach of the Russian national football team, in central Moscow on Wednesday.

Matthaeus's dream team

INTERNET, undated

Euro 2008 has seen many fine individual performances so far but with three games remaining, which players have been the cream of the crop?

Eurosport pundit and former Germany captain Lothar Matthaeus presents his very own dream team of the tournament so far.

TEAM

Formation: 3-1-3-3

Iker Casillas (Spain) - "Usually you pick players who go very far in the competition, so for me Casillas is the goalkeeper of the tournament."

Philip Lahm (Germany) - "Lahm has played well consistently. He puts a lot of pressure on opponents and embodies everything that a modern full-back should be in a successful team."

Ricardo Carvalho (Portugal)

"Carvalho is a very good central defender who has gained a lot of international experience with Chelsea."

Carles Puyol (Spain) - "The Spaniard has been very strong in the centre of defence."

Sergei Semak (Russia) - "I've included the captain of Russia because he is a team player and gives everything for his team. He plays the ball quickly, closes down space and controls the game from his defensive midfield position."

Cristiano Ronaldo (Portugal) - "Ronaldo gets the nod, even though he was eliminated in the quarterfinal. He's the best player in the world, a very good dribbler and a real goal threat."

Wesley Sneijder (Netherlands) - "Sneijder is a smart player and always looks for goals."

Bastian Schweinsteiger (Germany)

"When Schweinsteiger plays like

he did against Portugal, he's as good as some of the greats who have played that position."

Andrei Arshavin (Russia) - "Arshavin is a fast player who takes part in every attack and is dangerous in front of goal."

Roman Pavlyuchenko (Russia) - "Pavlyuchenko is a player who is on the move for the entire 90 minutes. He's very fast and finds his way through into dangerous positions."

David Villa (Spain) - "Spain have two kinds of strikers - one is tall and big, the other one is mobile and clever. Villa, the latter, has already proved his instinct for goal with a hat-trick in the first game against Russia."

Manager: Guus Hiddink (Russia) - "I think Hiddink's side have played some good football so far and he has been the coach of the tournament so far."

Wenger tips Germany

REUTERS, Basel

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger, who knows a thing or two about winning trophies, tipped Germany to win Euro 2008 on Tuesday, predicting they would beat Spain in Sunday's final in Vienna.

He also said that Michael Ballack, who plays for Arsenal's London rivals Chelsea, had been the most consistent player in the tournament so far, although he also praised Russian forward Andrei Arshavin who has inspired his team after being suspended for the opening two matches.

Wenger told reporters that Germany had a mental toughness other teams lacked and believed "they would edge" Spain in the final. Germany face Turkey in their semifinal in Basel on Wednesday while Spain meet Russia in Vienna on Thursday.

"Germany always appear to have unrest in the camp, but when they go into a match they are united. They are one of the few countries I know whose players can have a go against each other in the newspapers two days before a game, but they go into a game united and very strong."

"They always have a kind of simplicity in their collective game. They never use too many touches, they keep it simple and they play as a team, and in the final third they are very efficient."

He singled out captain Ballack as their main inspiration.

"I believe that he has brought a new dimension to his game and is the undoubtedly leader of the team."

"Lukas Podolski is also having a great tournament, but if you look at Michael Ballack, he makes his team play, he is efficient, he can score goals. He has been the most consistent player in the tournament since the opening day."

"I think Germany will edge Spain in the final. They have a

belief that comes from their history and that history gives them strength."

"Spain's biggest handicap is that they haven't won anything for more than 30 years, play two or three games and then go home. Germany have massive belief and you saw that in the quarterfinals. All the teams were at the same level technically. What made the difference was their mental aspect."

Wenger also praised Russia and said they had "improved dramatically" since he saw them lose to Israel in the qualifiers, and agreed that Arshavin had made an enormous impact in Russia's last two matches.

Despite tipping Spain to beat Russia in the semifinal on Thursday, Wenger said: "Russia have the best movement on and off the ball, and they use space better than any other team."

Superstitious Aragones

AFP, Neustift

Spanish coach Luis Aragones will have to grin and bear it as Spain must wear their golden-yellow away strip in Thursday's Euro 2008 semifinal against Russia.

The Spanish beat the Russians 4-1 in their opening group game clad in their usual red and blue with their rivals wearing white - but second time round the Russians get their first choice of colours.

The problem for the superstitious Aragones is that he detests yellow and once demanded that Raul, whom he dropped from this summer's squad, go and change after the Real Madrid man once joined up with the team at the 2006 World Cup wearing a yellow t-shirt.

Nonetheless, the Spanish did beat France in a February friendly wearing the kit and now hope they have a generation of stars 'golden' enough to land their first trophy since Euro 64.



PHOTO: AFP

Spanish star David Villa controls the ball during a training session in Neustift on Tuesday.