



Poland midfielder Jakub Blaszczykowski juggles the ball during a training session at the Polonia Stadium in Warsaw on Thursday ahead of their must-win Euro 2012 Group A match against Czech Republic.

PHOTO: AFP

Win or bust for Poles

HEAD TO HEAD

Played: 5
Draws 0

CZECH REP
2 WINS



POLAND
3 WINS



AFP, Wroclaw

It is win or bust for co-hosts Poland as they take on the Czech Republic here on Saturday knowing that any other result would see them exit the European Championship.

Poland may have played well in their opening two Group A matches but they failed to win either and currently sit third with just two points.

The Czech Republic have three points and failure to win would mean that the Poles could overtake neither the Czechs nor group leaders Russia, who have four points.

It means the co-hosts find themselves in a situation that looked highly unlikely after 45 minutes of their opening game against Greece.

A goal and a man to the good and playing vibrant attacking football, Franciszek Smuda's team looked to be fulfilling the pre-tournament promise that a 2-2 friendly draw with Germany in September had started to foment.

That all looked to be disintegrating as

Greece stormed back to snatch a 1-1 draw and could even have won after Polish goalkeeper Wojciech Szczesny was sent off, giving away a penalty to boot.

Substitute goalkeeper Przemyslaw Tyton was the hero as he saved Giorgos Karagounis's spot-kick and kept the Poles from defeat.

Szczesny has served his one-match suspension and Smuda must now decide whether to recall the Arsenal stopper or stick with PSV Eindhoven's Tyton.

Smuda said he will decide only 24 hours before the game but Szczesny believes the competition is good for them both.

"Whether I play in the last game or not, that's up to the manager. I'm available, I feel confident, I'm ready to play, so I'm hoping I'll be in the starting lineup," he said.

"This is what football's about. You want to fight for your spot. That can only help the team, people fighting for their places."

Things could have been worse for Poland as they trailed 1-0 to Alan Dzagoev's goal for Russia in the next group game but captain Jakub Blaszczykowski's superb equaliser maintained their unbeaten run and kept them in with a shot at qualification.

The hosts have some injury worries, though, with defender Damien Perquis

and midfielders Eugen Polanski and Dariusz Dudka all doubts having suffered injuries against Russia on Tuesday.

An abdominal strain has made Dudka the most doubtful of the three while Perquis is recovering from a gashed shin and Polanski is suffering from a bruised knee.

While Poland have injury concerns and need to win, the Czechs are in almost exactly the same boat.

They could qualify with a draw but only if Greece don't beat Russia, otherwise they will be out.

It means they too need to win to be sure of progressing but they have concerns over two crucial players, captain Tomas Rosicky and goalkeeper Petr Cech.

Arsenal midfielder Rosicky is the bigger doubt after what he believes is a recurrence of a calf injury he suffered in the final Premier League game of the season forced him to miss the second half of their 2-1 win over Greece.

Chelsea goalkeeper Cech has a sore shoulder and is desperate to play to make up for his gaffe that allowed the Greeks a route back into a match in which the Czechs had established an early two-goal lead.

Both Rosicky and Cech were due to

Russia eye last 8



RUSSIA
4 WINS

HEAD TO HEAD
Played: 10
Draws 5

UKRAINE
1 WIN



AFP, Warsaw

Russia will aim to storm into the Euro 2012 quarterfinals here on Saturday when they face bottom of the table Greece, after missing the chance to pop the champagne by drawing 1-1 with co-hosts Poland.

But Group A underdogs the Greeks will not be content to play the role of extras in the Russians' movie, aiming to bring some cheer to a homeland locked in a political and economic crisis.

A draw will suffice to clinch Dutch veteran Dick Advocaat's Russia a berth in the last eight, but they aim to display the form that enabled them to demolish the Czech Republic 4-1 in their tournament opener last Friday.

"We need to forget that a draw will also put us into the knockout stage and score. Once, twice... as much as we can," said goalkeeper Vyacheslav Malafeev, one of seven Zenit St Petersburg players who have started both of Russia's Euro 2012 matches.

"Our fate is still in our own hands," he said. The picture is very different for Greece, who know it is do or die.

"We are going after one result," under-

lined their Portuguese coach Fernando Santos.

"My faith in my team is total.

"There is a chance and we have to focus and believe that it is possible," he added.

But the Euro 2004 champions will be painfully aware that they are not masters of their destiny, even if they take three points on Saturday.

Russia currently top the group on four points, while the Czechs have three, Poland two and Greece one.

In the night's other match, between the Czech Republic and Poland in the southwestern city of Wroclaw, a draw or a win for either would sink Greek hopes.

Against Poland last Friday in the opening game of Euro 2012, Greece, down to 10 men, battled back to draw 1-1 and only a penalty save by the Poles prevented a Greek victory.

They come into the Russia match on the back of a 2-1 defeat to the Czechs on Tuesday.

Advocaat, who took over from compatriot Guus Hiddink in May 2010, has won plaudits for building a side with attractive, free-flowing play and bleeding young talent such as CSKA Moscow's Alan Dzagoev.

Superstitious Czechs

AFP, Wroclaw

Czech players are refusing to shave during Euro 2012 in the hope that it will bring them luck, a source close to the team told AFP on Friday, as Michal Bilek's men gear up for a must-win match against Poland.

The team of 11 increasingly hairy Czechs beat Greece 2-1 on Tuesday, keeping their hopes of advancing to the quarterfinals alive, despite a not-so-lucky 4-1 defeat to Russia in their opening match.

The Czechs play their final Group A clash on Saturday against co-hosts Poland in Wroclaw, southwestern Poland.

Reserve goalkeepers Jaroslav Drobný and Jan Lastuvka came up with the idea of eschewing razors in the run-up to the competition.

"It's meant to cement morale on the team," the source said.

Polish fan Podolski

AFP, Gdansk

Polish-born Germany forward Lukas Podolski has said he will be cheering on Poland in their bid to beat the Czech Republic on Saturday, but then hopes to knock them out of Euro 2012.

Co-hosts Poland take on the Czechs in Group A at Municipal Stadium, Wroclaw, with Poland needing to win to reach the quarterfinals.

Likewise, Germany, who have already beaten Portugal and Holland in Group B, need a point against Denmark in Lviv, Ukraine, on Sunday to be sure of reaching the last eight.

Victory over the Danes would confirm Germany as group winners and set up a quarterfinal clash in Gdansk against the Group A runners-up and Podolski said he is hoping the Germans meet, then beat, Poland.

"From all the teams, I have watched Poland the most as they are closest to my heart and I want them to go through to the quarterfinal stage," said Podolski, who is set to win his 100th cap for Germany against the Danes.

"I saw the Poland v Russia game (which finished 1-1) and it was a superb fight, I will cross my fingers for them in the Czech

Republic game.

"They could meet us in the quarterfinals, but that will be their final destination, unfortunately."

Having come to Germany as a child, Podolski's 27th birthday fell on June 4, the day Germany arrived at their Euro 2012 base, and at their first training session in Gdansk, around 8,000 fans sang "Happy Birthday" to him in Polish.

Despite his strong ties to Poland, the Arsenal-bound forward insists he is focused solely on Germany as Joachim Loew's team aim to win their fourth European crown in the Euro 2012 final in Kiev on July 1.

Having lost the Euro 2008 final to champions Spain and finished third at the last two World Cups, Podolski says the Germans need to win a major title to confirm their growing reputation as one of the world's best teams.

"We are amongst the favourites, we have great potential, but there are two or three other teams who could be in the final just as well," he said.

"We have caught up in the last few years to be amongst the top three teams, all we need to confirm this is a title so we can lift the trophy."

Italian press fear *biscotto*

AFP, Rome

Italy's press on Friday feared that Spain and Croatia would conspire to draw their final Group C match in Euro 2012, recalling a similar situation eight years ago that saw the Azzurri eliminated from the competition.

"The return of nightmare scheming," the Gazzetta dello sport said in its headline. "With 2-2 we're out," it said.

Italy are two points behind Spain and Croatia but if they win their final match against Ireland and the other game ends in a draw, three teams will finish on five points.

Qualification would then be decided by their head-to-head meetings.

Italy have drawn both their games so far 1-1, so a 2-2 draw between Spain and Croatia would give them both more goals than Italy and would see the Azzurri eliminated.

In Euro 2004, Italy were knocked out by a 2-2 draw between Sweden and Denmark, prompting speculation in Italy - who face an Ireland side coached ironically by their handler at the 2004 finals Giovanni Trapattoni - the Scandinavians conspired to ensure qualification.

Tuttosport played on a widely-used term to describe Italy's Euro 2004 exit -- "biscotto" or stitch-up -- calling Spain coach Vicente Del Bosque "Vicente Del Biscotto".

"Let's hope there's no 'biscotto' between Spain and the Croats," said La Repubblica, adding that in its opinion, Italy striker Mario Balotelli should still play, despite failing to shine in the first two matches.



Balotelli racially abused

AFP, Poznan

Mario Balotelli was racially abused during Italy's 1-1 Euro 2012 Group C match with Croatia in Poznan, Poland, an AFP photographer at the game said on Friday.

The photographer was situated in the corner where the majority of Croatian fans were sitting during Thursday's match and said he heard monkey noises being directed at the Italy striker.

At one point, he also saw a steward picking up a banana that had been thrown onto the pitch.

European football's governing body made no immediate comment and said only that they were awaiting the report from English referee Howard Webb from the match.

A spokesman for the Italian football federation meanwhile said that neither Balotelli nor any other player had mentioned either being abused or the throwing of a banana.

The official, however, said the federation was unhappy about booing during the national anthem.

UEFA has said it was investigating claims Balotelli, who is of Ghanaian origin, was racially abused during Italy's 1-1 draw with Spain in Gdansk Sunday as well as similar allegations involving Russian fans and Czech player Theodor Gebre Selassie.

Selassie is of Ethiopian origin.

Italy coach Cesare Prandelli, though, had strongly rejected the claims in a

number of British newspapers that Balotelli was subject to racist taunts against Spain.

"That's absolutely untrue," the Azzurri coach said at a news conference on Monday.

Manchester City forward Balotelli, 21, has previously said that he would walk off the pitch if he were racially abused by fans.

UEFA president Michel Platini said at a pre-tournament news conference in Warsaw that if Balotelli did that, he would receive a yellow card, advising him instead to alert the match referee, who can now stop matches in the event of racist abuse.

Although UEFA has said it has opened an inquiry into the claims against Balotelli and Gebre Selassie, it has not started any formal disciplinary proceedings.

Racism has become a major issue for tournament co-hosts Poland and Ukraine after claims that far-right extremist gangs were rife at football grounds in both countries.

Warsaw and particularly Kiev have strongly denied the allegations, with both they and UEFA maintaining that racism is a problem across European society and not just at football grounds in the two eastern European countries.

Croatia are already facing possible sanction after their fans lit flares and let off smoke bombs to celebrate two first-half goals in their opening Euro 2012 match against the Republic of Ireland, also held in Poznan, UEFA said on Tuesday.

Shenhua in final Drogba talks

AFP, Shanghai

Shanghai Shenhua have entered the "final round" of negotiations to bring former Chelsea striker Didier Drogba to China, the official Shanghai Daily newspaper said Friday.

The Chinese Super League club have reportedly been in talks for months with Ivory Coast's Drogba, who would join his former Chelsea team-mate striker Nicolas Anelka if the deal goes through.

"A top Shenhua official left for Ivory Coast for the final round of negotiations to sign star striker Didier Drogba," the report said.

The newspaper said a Shenhua board member, Zhou Jun, would hold direct talks with the 34-year-old player.

Speaking on Thursday, Shenhua's new manager Sergio Batista boosted hopes Drogba might join the club.

"The possibility of Drogba coming is still relatively large," Batista told a news conference, a transcript of which was posted on a Shanghai media website.

"I believe the club's management is still in contact with Drogba," he said, adding he did not expect news until after June 30.

Shenhua declined to comment on Friday.

Drogba left Chelsea after helping the English Premier League club to their first ever Champions League triumph

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