

GOALDEN TIMES

LUDO ERGO SUM

TEAM PREVIEWS
DARK HORSES

HOST NATIONS
RISING STARS

EURO 2012 EDITION



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In this new feature, we look back at a particular incident in the history of football. This time it's the magnificent triumph of the Danes in Euro 1992.



First Whistle

This time last year Roberto Di Matteo was being touted as the potential manager of lowly Brentford after being sacked by West Brom. He was also interviewed for the job at newly-relegated Birmingham City – only to be rejected. And the 41-year old has now won the UEFA Champions League title long craved by the obsessive chairman of his beloved Chelsea, Roman Abramovich, after leading the club to the most unlikely of victories over FC Barcelona in the semi-final and the host Bayern Munich in the final. In between these two, Chelsea won the FA Cup, too.

Life's all about dealing with dramatic highs and abysmal lows like these that have turned the Italian into the cool, phlegmatic character who might yet stop Jose Mourinho returning to west London. Roberto Mancini, another Italian in England, stopped Sir Alex Ferguson to ensure that Manchester City wins the league after 44 years. Goalden Times congratulates both the clubs and their managers.

We also take the opportunity to congratulate Real Madrid, Juventus, Borussia Dortmund, Ajax Amsterdam, Montpellier, Celtic, Galatasaray, Dempo and others domestic league champions for their triumph. Armando Colaco, the manager of Dempo SC has now won the I-league (Indian Football League) for the fifth time with the same team, incredible feat by any standard. Napoli ended the unbeaten run of Juventus in the last match of the season by winning the Coppa Italia after 15 years and the first time since Diego Maradona left the club. The Copa del Rey final will be the last match for the Barcelona manager Josep Guardiola in his current role and the last opportunity for Marcelo Bielsa's Athletic Bilbao to win a trophy in a season in which they have played some of the most exciting football. In the final of UEFA Europa League though, they were clearly outplayed by Bielsa's fellow Argentine Diego Simeone's Atletico Madrid.

Eric Abidal has announced his retirement from football after his liver transplant earlier this month. We express our sincere regret and extend our best wishes to Eric. You will always symbolize courage and character.

The European national teams are now getting ready for the Euro 2012 to be played in Poland and Ukraine between June 8th and July 1st. The final squads will be announced on or before the UEFA deadline of May 29th. Goalden Times will bring you the preview of the key teams, analysis of all the groups, likely stars and more stories to keep you abreast. We will also provide live updates as the tournament starts through our [Facebook page](#) and [Twitter](#). Follow Euro 2012 with us.

In our spirit of celebrating the beautiful game, we are presenting 'Brain Kick' an exciting Football quiz in Kolkata, the football and quizzing capital of India. Spend the Sunday afternoon of June 3rd with fellow football lovers if you happen to be in the city of joy. Follow our pages for more details as the day gets closer and the event unfolds. Let football help us create a stronger bond.

Follow us, Follow football.

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UEFA Champions League Final Preview

The biggest club team honour has reached its finale. Get the showdown of the Final encounter with Debojyoti Chakraborty

	FC Bayern Munchen (GER) vs. Chelsea FC (ENG) Fußball Arena München, Munich (GER) May 19, 2012 14:45 ET 19:45 GMT 00:15 IST (May 20, 2012)	
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After two contrasting semi-final ties, we have the two finalists for UEFA Champions League 2012. Bayern Munich, playing at home, will take on the surprise opponent in Chelsea. Not a line-up many had expected, rather another *El Clasico* was being anticipated as soon as the road to final was clear following the quarter-final draw. Purists may argue that the best team in Europe, or possibly the best team ever, has not featured in this year's final. But one must remember that the finalists have come thus far by knocking out the so-called *best* teams. Chelsea have shown us what a strong, determined and organized defence can achieve even against the fearsome display of attacking football. The two matches of Chelsea against Barcelona, especially the away leg once their inspirational captain John Terry was sent off for an off-the-ball incident through a straight red card, showcased an amazing strength of character. It established the fact that defensive tactics can also be engrossing, a team can fight against all odds as well as the statistics if they can keep their shape. It also proved that there is no point having the lion's share of possession with more shots on target, during a match, if you fail to do the single most critical thing – score a Goal. Chelsea's interim manager Roberto Di Matteo had admitted that his side would require a bit of luck to upset Barcelona and there is no denying the fact that Chelsea have been fortunate. The Catalans hit the post four times over the two-legged tie besides missing lots of clear cut chances to add to the [penalty miss by Lionel Messi](#). But Chelsea took the opportunities when presented. Playing with 10 men away from home, in front of a buoyant *Camp Nou* crowd, they took the lead through an audacious Ramires chip – no mean feat that. They might have been criticised for sitting back and hoping for the best, but their tactics have worked and they are in the Final of the Champions League – who cares how!

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Stand up and be counted



Homecoming

Bayern Munich on the other hand continued their fine showing in the competition. They have picked up at the right time and have been lethal as the tournament reached its knock-out stages. One has to think deeply amidst the hue and cry surrounding the goal-scoring duel between Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo that how can a player possibly score 40+ goals in domestic league? Surely the league is not sound in defence; Bayern surely caught Real Madrid off guard there. The German team showed no mercy for any defensive lapses Real presented them with and kept a tight back line – something the Spaniards are not used to back home. Besides, the Bavarians were proactive and took the game to the opponent even

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when 0-2 down at the Bernabéu. The German determination prevailed and they got one goal back which took the game to the penalty shoot-out. It is irony of fate that in one semi-final the better team over the two legs had to wait till the lottery of spot kicks to go through whereas in the other, the clear cut underdogs won easily – at least as per the score books (3-2 on aggregate).

Pressure will be on Bayern Munich as they enter their home turf at *Fußball Arena München*, to lift the biggest club team honour. The last time this had happened was way back in 1957 when Bayern's semi-final opponents won the European Cup at the Bernabéu. Bayern's midfield is in superb shape and it is vindicated by the fact that even a bad day in office (Franck Ribery at the Bernabéu) did not deter their chances too much.



Bayern will like to play a familiar 4-2-3-1 formation which would change to 4-3-3 while not in possession of the ball. They have a makeshift centre-back pairing where Anatoliy Tymoshchuk is expected to start in the absence of suspended Holger Badstuber and injured Daniel van Buyten. This coupled with the suspension of David Alaba and Luiz Gustavo would make Toni Kroos to sit deeper as a safety valve in front of the back four. The lynchpin in the midfield will be the stalwart Bastian Schweinsteiger – he will

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be responsible for dictating the tempo of the game and supplying the ball forward. Thomas Muller will be the most advanced among the midfield trio and would like to pressurize the Chelsea defenders as much as possible. The lone striker upfront, Mario Gomez is in superb form flanked by two deadly wingers in Franck Ribery and Arjen Robben. The latter, in particular, has been lethal this season and the opposition wing-back will be in a dilemma to launch forward in presence of the Dutch assassin.

Chelsea will again enter the final on May 19 as underdogs – this might just suit them as there will hardly be any pressure to deal with. Following a season which has seen their domestic campaign fall apart, reaching the finals of the Champions League in itself is a massive achievement, that too under the supervision of a caretaker boss (Avram Grant, anyone!).



With Captain John Terry, Ivanovic, Raul Meireles and Ramires missing through suspension, it won't be surprising if Chelsea adopt a very defensive 4-5-1 approach once again. Garry Cahill is also a major doubt following his hamstring tear against Barcelona at the second leg of Champions League semi-final. If he fails to make it, Paulo Ferreira – with only one and a half Champions League games under his belt this season – might partner David Luiz, who is himself expected to be fit and available for the Bayern match.

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To shield the makeshift centre-halves, Michael Essien and John Obi Mikel would be deployed as the holding midfielders who will complement each other in a double pivot role. Frank Lampard would like to link up with the front men whenever possible. But owing to injuries and age not being on their side, the midfield duo of Frank Lampard and Michael Essien are not the same players they used to be. It is likely to be a misfit against the superb Bayern midfield even in the absence of suspended Luiz Gustavo. On the wide right, Juan Mata would like to exploit any possible weakness in the German armour in the absence of Gustavo (left-sided midfielder), Alaba (left-back) and Badstuber (left centre-back). The opposite flank would be a toss-up between Salomon Kalou and Florent Malouda. Up front, the work-horse Didier Drogba would be fighting for everything with Fernando Torres being used as an impact player. It will be very interesting to see how Chelsea can keep a clean sheet. And if they happen to concede – which if they do, won't raise many eyebrows as they are fitted against a well-oiled German horse – will they be more adventurous and push more bodies forward? If this happens, spectators will be in for a very open game of football.

Both Chelsea and Bayern have been in the headlines for all the wrong reasons throughout the season. Chelsea is still not sure if they would qualify for the next season's finals. There is a controversy over dominance of senior players in the dressing room which has allegedly led to the premature sacking of former manager André Villas Boas. In a strange turn of events, the club which was heavily criticized for trying to *buy* a trophy is drawing unparalleled sympathy – for their underdog sticker as well as suspension ragged squad – at this stage of the campaign.



The Boss

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Listen to me

Bayern Munich, on the other hand, have had to deal with egos of superstars for quite a while now. *Der Kaiser* has often criticized the current bunch for their failure at the bigger stages. In a way he was asserting the glorious achievements of his own playing days. The chairman, Karl-Heinz Rummenigge is not far behind in blowing his (full) trumpet and that is not helping the team any bit but bogging them down with enormous pressure. Things have gone worse for them after surrendering the Bundesliga for two consecutive years due to some indifferent form. Their players are also nothing close to being innocent – Franck Ribery was recently involved in a brawl with Arjen Robben over a free-kick during the half-time of a match – which does not augment good team spirit.

Bayern Munich	Status	Chelsea	Status
Holger Badstuber (DF)	Suspended	David Luiz (DF)	Injured
Daniel van Buyten (DF)	Injured	Branislav Ivanovic (DF)	Suspended
Breno (DF)	Injured	John Terry (DF)	Suspended
Luiz Gustavo (MF)	Suspended	Ramires (MF)	Suspended
David Alaba (DF / MF)	Suspended	Raul Meireles	Suspended

Absentee Table

As both the teams are hampered due to injuries and suspensions – mostly in the defence or defensive midfield position – goals are to be expected in the final showdown. With a compact and well organized midfield, supported by greater threat going forward, I would like to put my bet on Bayern to win the trophy at their backyard.

Europa League Final Preview

*The second tier club honour in Europe is coming to Spain. Get the showdown of the all Spaniard Final encounter with **Debojyoti Chakraborty***

	Athletic Club (ESP) vs. Club Atlético de Madrid (ESP) Arena Națională, Bucharest May 9, 2012 21: 45 EEST 19:45 GMT 00:15 IST (May 10, 2012)	
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This year the Europa League has been dominated by the reigning European and World Champions, Spain. The finalists, Athletic Club and Club Atlético de Madrid, have dominated the competition this time round – along with another semi-finalist from Spain, Valencia – and it is no surprise that we are set for an all Spanish Cup Final this year.

It will be a good time for the less fancied Spanish duo when their more illustrious compatriots failed in the Champions League during the same week. They came through two contrasting semi-final ties. The giant killing Athletic Club, which accounted for Manchester United earlier, had to dig deep to see off a stern Sporting Lisbon side en route to their second ever European Cup finals. On the other hand, 2010 Europa League winners, Club Atlético de Madrid cruised past Valencia for a ticket to the final on May 9, 2012 in Bucharest. Last time an all Spanish final took place was in 2007, at the finals of Europa League (then known as the UEFA Cup), when Sevilla edged past Espanyol on penalty shoot-out after a 2-2 deadlock.

It will be a huge occasion for the Marcelo Bielsa managed Bilbao side. Over and above their nail-biting semi-final tie which saw them through by virtue of a last gasp winner, it will be an emotional moment for the club which last made a European final appearance way back in 1977 only to be beaten by Juventus. Elsewhere, Club Atlético de Madrid had taken a huge step towards the final by virtue of a 4-2 first leg win. They merely finished the formalities by winning the return leg also by a solitary goal. They would like to repeat the performance of two years back when they won the competition.

The two teams have been locking horns even before the inception of Spanish championships (in 1929) as they met in the Copa del Rey finals in 1921 where the Madrid side was beaten 1-4. This season though, they have won one apiece in *La Liga*. They are difficult to separate in the league standings also as they lie side by side in sixth and eighth positions with only two points separating them.

One of the most striking features of the Basque club, Athletic Club or Athletic Bilbao, is that all of its players are either born or received their training in the Basque Country and its provinces, a culture it has upheld since its inception. Marcelo Bielsa has really done wonders since taking charge in the last year.

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Apart from reaching the finals of Europa League and fighting for a European spot in the league, Bilbao has set up a Copa del Rey final clash with Barcelona on May 25. Bielsa likes to start with a pressing 4-2-3-1 formation which is changed to 4-3-3 at times. Gorka Iraizoz starts in the goal with Fernando Amorebieta and World Cup winning midfielder Javi Martinez as centre-half pairing. The full-back positions are occupied by Andoni Iraola and Jon Aurtenetxe. The holding midfielder role is given to Ander Iturraspe who has formed a potent partnership with the tireless and versatile Oscar de Marcos, playing in a slightly advanced position and given the freedom to venture forward whenever the opportunity arises. Inspirational striker Fernando Llorente is the focal point of attack. With seven goals in 13 appearances, this competition has been a successful one for him and he would definitely like to finish it on a high. He is flanked by Iker Muniain and Markel Susaeta with playmaker Ander Herrera playing in the hole.



Bilbao pressing throughout

Club Atlético de Madrid is also helmed by an Argentine, Diego Simeone, and he favours a rather uncomplicated 4-5-1 formation. They have a 6'6" teenage Belgian shot-stopper in Thibaut Courtois, on loan from Chelsea, who has really impressed one and all. The defence is marshalled by Diego Godin and

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Joao Miranda. They have a versatile right-back in Juanfran who can also operate on the right side of midfield. Left-back is occupied by Filipe Luis. Mario Suarez and Gabriel Arenas like to anchor the midfield and complement each other in going forward. The right side of midfield has been made his own by Adrian Lopez through his marauding runs and goal-scoring knack. He is matched in the opposite flank by Arda Turan. Diego Ribas is the most advanced of this compact midfield and he supports the lone striker – the man with the golden touch, Radamel Falcao, a perfect #9. Besides netting twenty-three goals in the *La Liga* in 31 appearances in his debut season, Falcao has scored an amazing ten times in 14 appearances in this continental cup competition. One of his trademark weapons has been his incredible spot jump to add power in the air despite not being that tall. He is no stranger to this stage though, as he smashed a record 17 goals last time en route to winning the trophy for Porto.



Compact midfield of Atletico Madrid

With two dangerous strikers upfront from each side and to continue with the high scoring *La Liga* pattern, the final is expected to be a high-scoring affair. But stakes are high and it won't be wrong to predict the coaches to be slightly worried about venturing forward at will. Nevertheless, this should be a good spectacle with a slightly better defence giving the Madrid side an edge.

Euro 2012 – Hosting Problems

Debopam Roy looks at the hosts of the 2012 European Football Championship, their relations and how they have prepared for their first ever tournament of this scale

From a long turbulent relation and numerous wars fought over shared territories especially Galicia, Poland and Ukraine have now come to signify the best example of solidarity among the Slavic countries. They are the second and third largest Slavic countries, after Russia and both have aided each other in development and partnered successfully towards growth.



Figure 1: Victor Yushchenko (R), President of Ukraine, kisses Aleksander Kwaśniewski, President of Poland, Davos 2005

The Winning Bid

That bond of cooperation was sealed further when in 2004, Poland and Ukraine decided to bid for the 2012 European championship. A joint bid made sense as the new millennium had already seen a spate of joint bids – Belgium-Netherlands in 2000, Austria-Switzerland in 2008 and even the 2002 World Cup. This was one way for small nations to experience the pleasures of hosting a major football tournament. Though they were up against the might of Italy and Croatia-Hungary bids, but with favourites Italy beset by *Calciopoli* scandal and problems with football-related crowd trouble, the less fancied Polish-Ukrainian bid won through.



Figure 2: Poland-Ukraine bid beat the more fancied Italian one

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UEFA President Michel Platini while picking the bid remarked, “They are a worthy winner. However, there are no losers today, only bids that have not won this time round.” The Italians though cried foul and the ire towards Platini only intensified when they lost out the 2016 bidding process to Platini’s home country. But that is another story.

Indeed the solidarity of the hosts was evident in the slogan that they coined for the tournament – “Creating History Together” and it reflects the shared history that these two countries have had.

The Promise and the Failure

There were some valid doubts about the readiness of two nations which had never held a tournament of this stature. A look at the bid structure on the infrastructure level would show the concerns

City	Stadium	Status in 2007	Plan by 2010	2012 status
Gdansk, Poland	Baltic Arena	To Be Built	44,000 capacity	ready
Poznan, Poland	Municipal Stadium	24,166 capacity	46,500 capacity	ready
Warsaw, Poland	National Stadium	Not Yet Built	70,000 capacity	ready
Wroclaw, Poland	Olympic Stadium	10,000 capacity	45,000 capacity	ready
Chorzow, Poland	Slaski Stadium	47,202 capacity	60,000 capacity	scrapped
Krakov, Poland	Wisla Stadium	14,657 capacity	33,000 capacity	scrapped
Kiev, Ukraine	Olympic Stadium	84,000 capacity. FIFA and UEFA have threatened to withdraw permission to hold matches here over construction of a nearby shopping complex	Proposed final. Proposed reconstruction and upgrading would reduce capacity to 75,000	ready
Dnipropetrovsk, Ukraine		To Be Built	35,000 capacity	scrapped
Donetsk, Ukraine		To Be Built	40,000 capacity	ready
Lviv, Ukraine	Ukraina Stadium	40,000 capacity	Plans call for construction of a new stadium or reconstruction of the present facility	ready

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Odessa, Ukraine	Chornomorets stadium	35,000	Plans call for complete reconstruction	scrapped
Kharkiv, Ukraine	Metalist Stadium	30,000	Renovation	ready

There were many misgivings on the promises made in the bid and how the progress was going. Most of the issues were on the Ukrainian side. Even Igor Miroshnychenko from the Ukrainian FA conceded: "I have heard the story about the possibility of the championships being taken off us. I spoke with UEFA on Wednesday and they told me that they have no plans at the moment to move elsewhere. But it's not a good situation here at the moment. We have no main stadium and there are problems with the roads. It's not a good situation politically. People here feel there are too many problems to host this tournament. Can we host it? I really don't know."

UEFA did conduct an interim check in 2008 and even though there were countries like Scotland and Italy ready to take over the organizational role, UEFA kept faith in the nations though the UEFA Executive Committee's decision of May 13, 2009 expelled Odesa and Dnipropetrovsk from the list of Euro 2012 host cities. Similarly Krakow and Chorzow were dropped from the Polish side to leave a total of eight stadiums to do the honours. In September 2009, Platini announced that "Ukraine has made sudden progress in their efforts to stage the tournament", but even then doubts persisted on if Ukrainian facilities would match the standards required by the guidelines of UEFA.



Figure 3: The 8 cities to host matches

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The Stadia

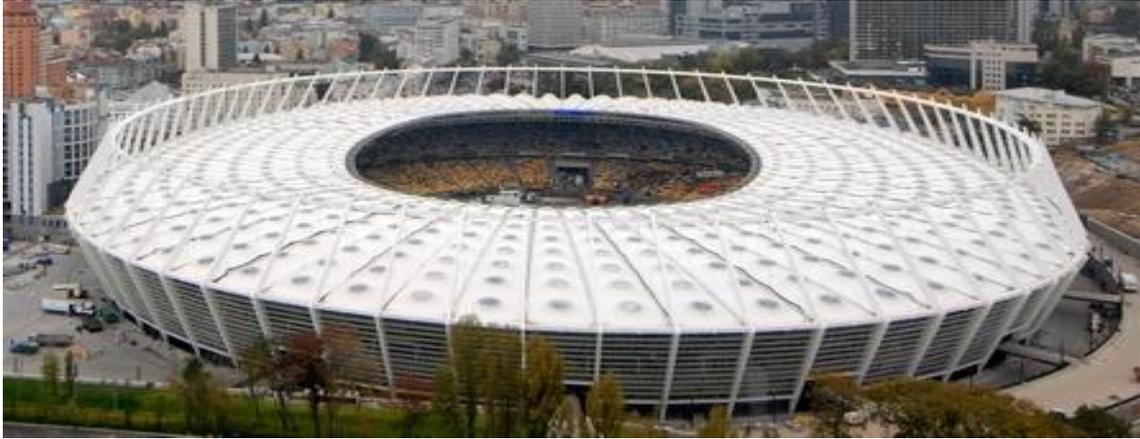


Figure 4: Olympic Stadium, Kiev

Interesting Fact: A hanging canopy made of a translucent synthetic membrane covers 100% of spectators seating.

Capacity: 60,000

Matches: June 11 – Ukraine v Sweden; June 15 – Sweden v England; June 19 – Sweden v France

June 24 – Quarter-Final; July 1 – Final



Figure 5: Arena Lviv Stadium, Lviv

Interesting Fact: Built for Euro 2012, a promenade separates streams of visitors between first and second tiers

Capacity: 30,000

Matches: June 9 – Germany v Portugal; June 13 – Denmark v Portugal; June 17 – Denmark v Germany

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Figure 6: Metalist Stadium, Kharkiv

Interesting Fact: 24 towers support the arena's roof, which is not attached to the stadium's main body

Capacity: 30,000

Matches: June 9 – Holland v Denmark; June 13 – Holland v Germany; June 17 – Portugal v Holland



Figure 7: Donbass Arena, Donetsk

Interesting Fact: Approximately 3,800 tonnes of steel were used for the roof structure

Capacity: 50,000

Matches: June 11 – France v England; June 15 – Ukraine v France; June 19 – England v Ukraine

June 23 – Quarter-Final; June 27 - Semi-Final

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Figure 8: National Stadium, Warsaw

Interesting Fact: A retractable roof can cover the roof's uncovered space.

Capacity: 50,000

Matches: June 8 – Poland v Greece; June 12 – Poland v Russia; June 16 – Greece v Russia; June 21 – Quarter-Final; June 28 – Semi-Final



Figure 9: PGE Arena, Gdansk

Interesting Fact: 18,000 tiles are used on the exterior, resembling the colour of amber, which has long been extracted along the Baltic Sea coast

Capacity: 40,000

Matches: June 10 – Spain v Italy; June 14 – Spain v Republic of Ireland; June 18 – Croatia v Spain; June 22 - Quarter-Final

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Figure 2: Municipal Stadium, Poznan

Interesting Fact: After the modernization, the stadium features a roof made of natural silk

Capacity: 40,000

Matches: June 10 – Republic of Ireland v Croatia; June 14 - Italy v Croatia; June 18 – Italy v Republic of Ireland



Figure 3: Municipal Stadium, Wroclaw

Interesting Fact: Built in the shape of a lantern, the stadium is screened with a mesh of glass fibre covered with Teflon

Capacity: 40,000

Matches: June 8 – Russia v Czech Republic; June 12 – Greece v Czech Republic; June 16 – Czech Republic v Poland

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The Other Issues

There still exist issues which are being tackled by the hosts. A huge infrastructural change is required in the transport system to cater to the number of visitors expected. New routes and destinations were created as well as metro and trains installed bilingual announcements in English language.

The other issues are the hotel prices when it was reported in German weekly Der Spiegel, that hotel prices in Ukraine's four host cities had rocketed. Even the UEFA President had to raise his voice. Platini lamented, "It's annoying to have made a lot of investment and then say to people that they can't come because there are bandits and crooks who want to make a lot of money during this Euro." Borys Kolesnikov, the Ukrainian deputy prime minister, said he would do his best. But the damage had been done. Markian Lubkivsky, head of the Euro 2012 organizing committee in Ukraine, pacified by saying hotel and hostel prices are no longer "critically" inflated. "Our strongest point was that if prices are sky high, then fans simply won't come here," Lubkivsky said. "And I think this point has worked."

Security is another issue and Bomb blasts on April 27, 2012 in Dnipropetrovsk, the city which lost its hosting rights, has sparked fresh fears that Ukraine is not ready for the games. UEFA put its weight behind Ukraine but the speculation is that if the political situation worsens, UEFA might consider moving the games to 2013.

Finally there was [this](#) tongue-firmly-out-of-cheek commercial by a Dutch energy company NLE which sparked a furore, for a change by Ukraine. The television commercial urges Dutch women not to let their husbands loose during Euro 2012, because of the beautiful women awaiting them in Ukraine. Ukrainian ambassador to the Netherlands, Olexander Horin was critical, "I'm anxious and dismayed that it could send the wrong image." But NEC obviously taking the spoof one step further opened a [site](#) which further accentuates the 'dangers' of Ukrainian women.

Some Ukrainian women's activists actually took it a step further and staged a [topless protest](#) in Kiev against UEFA's plans to turn their country into a destination for sex tourists from around the world.

Co-hosts Poland face a different but far more troubling issue – racism and anti-semitism. Patrons can buy scarves or stickers with the motto "Jews forbidden" and T-shirts that read "Burn the Czechs" and "Beat the Greeks" at one of the country's biggest club Widzew Łódź. When Polish team Legia Warsaw played Hapoel Tel Aviv in a European match, the locals held aloft a giant banner with "[Jihad Legia](#)" written in Arabic lettering.

The concerns regarding security have been strong and Polish deputy Interior Minister Michal Deskur said that "Complete readiness should be confirmed in mid-May, about three weeks before the first match." Whether that would be enough, is still a valid question.

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Conclusion

The tournament has not had the best of preparations. Controversies have still not died down and there are concerns that it may even be moved, however latent, those concerns are. The effort has been there to upgrade and renew, but more needs to be done. Ukraine, has bore the brunt of the issues and the games may not turn out to be as much an economic success as anticipated if visitors don't arrive. This may become more a reputational than an economic issue. Over 12 million ticket applications were received by UEFA, which is a 17% increase on 2008 championship and an all-time record for European Championships. The hosts have to ensure that these millions have a safe and enjoyable tournament experience.

Will Spain write History?

Indranath Mukherjee presents the case for the Spaniards who are trying to continue their European hegemony.

France won the Euro 2000 after winning the 1998 FIFA world cup. Germany had won the World Cup in 1974 after winning the Euro 1972. Spain will look to defend the Euro title and thus create history by winning Euro before and after World Cup championship.

Although the Spanish clubs have won the European club championship most number of times (14), the national team has been a perennial under-achiever until recently. With players like Alfredo Di Stefano, Luis Suarez and Ladislao Kubala, Spain was a fabulous side in the very first edition of Euro (1960). But General Franco decided to withdraw the team for political reasons before their match against the eventual champion Soviet Union. Earlier they had defeated Poland 4-2 away (Di Stefano 2, Suarez 2) and 3-0 at home (Di Stefano, Gensana, Gento). In the next edition, they went on to win the championship after beating Soviet Union 2-1 in the final. It had been a wait for 44 years after that to win the championship again in 2008 under Luis Aragonés. Vicente Del Bosque and his golden generation will certainly like to continue their dominance in the international scene now. King Juan Carlos gave the 61 year old manager the title of the 1st Marquis of Del Bosque last year in recognition of his achievements in leading La Roja to World Cup glory in South Africa. He has now gone public saying that he aims to follow in the footsteps of Helmut Schoen, the West German legend, to become only the second coach to win both the World Cup and the European Championship.

In the qualifiers for the 2012 campaign, Spain has won all of their eight games quite convincingly. However, in the international friendlies since the world cup, Spain has lost a few games, a 4-1 defeat to Argentina in September, 2010 in Buenos Aires followed by a 4-0 against Portugal in Lisbon in November, 2010 and a 2-1 against Italy in Bari in August, 2011. They have also drawn 2 international friendlies during this time, 1-1 against Mexico in August, 2010 and 2-2 against Costa Rica in November, 2011. But friendlies are friendlies, the teams typically play between their hectic club football schedule and the managers often use these games to try out new players and combinations.

The news of the knee surgery of Carles Puyol might be a little bit of dampener for Spain but the fact is Puyol is not getting any younger. And Spain has enough leadership mettle in the team in their captain Iker Casillas and the Barcelona talisman Xavi Hernández. Another big advantage is their manager; Del Bosque knows how to manage big stars in the dressing room since his days as the manager of Galacticos. He led the Madrid giants to seven titles, including two Champions Leagues and two domestic league crowns. As the manager of the national team, he not only has inherited a bunch of fantastic football players, he also grabbed the current playing style of Football Club Barcelona – "tiki-taka" (short passing, movement and keeping possession). The current Spanish side may not always look as sublime

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as Barcelona, Del Bosque's side plays extremely effective football as seen in the World Cup in South Africa.



The Barcelona trio may miss out going to Poland and Ukraine; Puyol for his knee surgery, Villa for lack of match practice and Pedro for his horrendous form

Del Bosque's bigger worry however will be the condition of David Villa who had fractured his left tibia in Barcelona's Club World Cup semi-final win over Al Sadd in Japan on December 15. 'King David' has not played any football since. He has recovered significantly but Del Bosque is in a serious selection dilemma: "We are on tenterhooks. We are worried because, of course, it is difficult for us to take someone who has not played one game." Del Bosque will wait until May 27, two days ahead of the UEFA deadline, to have a look at Villa's condition before announcing the final squad. It's not easy to venture out to write history without someone who has scored 51 goals in 82 internationals. It's even harder when Fernando Torres, in spite of scoring some goals off late, is not the same footballer any more. The form of Pedro Rodríguez has been so abysmal this season that he might not get picked up in the final squad by Del Bosque. In a situation like this, the striker who may emerge as the star of Spain and the Euro 2012 is Fernando Llorente. He scored critical goals for Spain in the qualifiers against Lithuania (2) and Scotland (1) and has been in good form this season scoring 28 goals in all competitions for Athletic Bilbao.

Spain got 2 friendlies coming up against Serbia (May 26) and South Korea (May 30) before the team travels to Poland and Ukraine and Del Bosque is planning to use these 2 games to try out some new faces like Juanfran Torres, Alvaro Dominguez, Adrián Lopez (all from the Europa League champions Atletico Madrid), Javi García (Benfica), Beñat (Betis), Bruno (Villarreal) and Isco (Malaga). Del Bosque hasn't called anyone from the clubs which still have finals to play (Copa del Rey and UEFA Champions League). From these clubs, Torres, Llorente and the Barcelona gang consisting of Xavi, Andres Iniesta, Cesc Febrigas, Sergio Busquets are almost certain to find their place to the final squad. Real Madrid

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already has five representatives in the list. Centre-back Raul Albiol may seem to be a surprise selection, but he will try to convince the boss that he can take the place of Puyol.



Fernando Llorente has the opportunity to become a star for Spain in Euro 2012

Spain will probably play with a 4-2-3-1 formation with Busquets and Xabi Alonso holding the midfield while Xavi, Iniesta and David Silva take more creative roles for someone like Llorente upfront. Febrigas could bring in further creativity in the mix with Silva going a bit forward. Add to this, the exemplary positional sense of Busquets and Alonso will ensure that Spain will never struggle to create opportunities; whether the likes of Llorente, Torres or Soldado grab them will be interesting to see. They will surely miss the experience of Puyol at the back but Del Bosque should be able to come up with the right combination from the likes of Gerard Piqué, Alvaro Arbeloa, Sergio Ramos, Raul Albiol and Jordi Alba, the young left back from Valencia.

The final 23-man squad is expected to get announced on May 27th and might have new faces but the starting 11 will mostly have the usual suspects. They have chosen the facility at Schruns in Austria to prepare from May 22 to 31, the same venue they used before the 2010 World Cup finals.

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Will Del Bosque be able to emulate his World Cup 2010 success in Euro 2012?

Spain will start their Euro 2012 campaign with the Group C match against Italy on June 10, before taking on Republic of Ireland and Croatia. If they can start in a winning note, topping the group will become a formality. Assuming that to be the case, they will face the runner up of group D in the quarter final. England or Sweden whoever it is should be an easy game for Spain. From semifinal we may expect to see a repeat of the 2010 FIFA World Cup fixture with Germany and Netherlands as the respective opponents. Spain would love to repeat the world cup performance against Germany in Poland and Ukraine and defend their Euro title. If they are able to do so, this will be the 3rd Euro trophy in the national team's cabinet, and they will become the first nation to win 3 straight major tournaments.

Die Mannschaft- Under the burden of expectations

Will the young German team fulfill what many say is in their destiny. Kinshuk Biswas reports their progress.



The most successful team in the history of Euro with three wins and two runners up finishes; One of the favourites in this Euro with an all win record in the qualifiers; Writing the preview for such a team should be easy! Still it is very difficult to write about the chances of Die Mannschaft or the German team for Euro 2012 finals. The German team has inherited the brilliant record of its West German predecessors who were dominant in the Euro in the 70s. West Germany first won the tournament in 1972 defeating Soviet Union in the final. West Germany became the first side to be European and World Champions together winning the World Cup in 1974. The team again won the trophy in 1980 defeating Belgium in the final. Only a penalty shoot-out loss to Czechoslovakia in 1976 prevented the team from being champions three consecutive times. The last triumph was in 1996 when they overcame a determined Czech Republic side by a golden goal. That tournament the team qualified very impressively with an all win record; they, however, had only the Turkish and Belgian teams as major opponents and not a team which was truly world-class. Then in the final tournament draw Germany was drawn into the potential group of death which was rather inevitable given that the host nations were relatively lower ranked. Germans are going to play all their matches in Ukraine. The team will take a lot of confidence in the fact that Bayern Munich played in the Champions league final and a lot of the squad are members of the national team.

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Jogi Löw

Tackling Tactics

German manager Joachim or Jogi Löw as he is popularly known has built upon Jurgen Klinsmann 's philosophy which was to bring the team out of their traditionally dour style of play to a more attractive and attacking style.

German teams of the past were well-known for their 'never say die' spirit and methodical play which, although not very pleasant to the aficionados' eyes, always got the results.. This German team is refreshingly attacking and seems to have a more fluid approach than the usual mechanical style. In their last two major tournaments they have lost to the same Spanish team by an identical 1-0 margin. In the last World Cup, the young German mid-field was outplayed by the tiki-taka style of Spain. This time, however, two German midfielders now play in the La Liga winning Real Madrid team and will have the experience of playing against similar opposition. The team will employ the 4-2-3-1 system against all teams which can be modified into a 4-3-3 or a 4-4-2 formation if required. The 4-2-3-1 may have two holding midfielders or a deep playmaker as the situation demands. The Germans should play a short passing game using their talented mid-fielders to dictate possession and control play. The creative midfielders should allow this team to create a lot of chances. The team will score a lot of goals but it is to be seen if their defence can prevent the opposition from scoring in key matches.

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Die Mannschaft

They who hold fort

The manager Joachim Löw has announced a provisional list of 27 players of which 23 will make the final selection. Manuel Neuer has strengthened his hold on the goalkeeping position with a superb performance in the champions' league semi final for Bayern against Real Madrid. Tim Wiese of Werder Bremen should be the second choice. Young Marc-André ter Stegen of Monchengladbach who is rumoured to be the next big German goalkeeping talent should be in the squad to gain valuable tournament experience.

The German defence has a very young look to it. Holger Badstuber of Bayern and Mats Hummels of Dortmund are both good defenders in the central areas. Benedikt Höwedes is also a likely choice. Captain Phillip Lahm is one of the best full-backs in the business and can play both on the left and right side of defence. Jerome Boateng can play both on the right and the centre of defence. Marcel Schmelzer of Dortmund in my opinion should be the first choice left back with Lahm on the right and Boateng on the bench. Löw has selected Mertesacker in his provisional list. He may just make the team because of his experience rather than form. The central defence is young and has to be seen if they can stand up to the challenge of world class forwards like Robin Van Persie and Cristiano Ronaldo whom they have to face in the group stages.

In midfield Löw has an embarrassment of riches. Bastian Schweinsteiger is the main lynchpin who can play as a holding midfielder as well as the deep playmaker. Sami Khedira will play the main holding role. Mesut Özil, Toni Kroos and Lukas Podolski will be the attacking midfield trio with Kroos at the centre. Podolski will play as a left sided midfielder who will be more like a winger who will play as the second striker in case the formation is changed to a 4-4-2. The flexibility of the German midfield is that very

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strong young players like Thomas Müller, the golden boot winner of the last world cup, Mario Götze-the German Messi, André Schürrle, Marco Reus and the Bender twins will be pushing the established names for positions in the starting line-up. A very exciting line-up which has a good mix of experience and youth.

Löew has chosen only three forwards in his provisional list. Mario Gomez who has been in outstanding form should be the first choice. The experienced Miroslav Klose will be always around in international tournaments and has had a good season with Lazio. Cacau is another player who will be in the squad for his trickery around the box. The reason for just three forwards is the huge number of young attacking mid-fielders who can all play as forwards giving the team a lot of variety.

Likely Squad

Goalkeepers: Manuel Neuer , Tim Wiese and Marc-André ter Stegen.

Defenders: Philipp Lahm, Per Mertesacker, Jérôme Boateng, Holger Badstuber, Mats Hummels, Benedikt Höwedes and Marcel Schmelzer.

Midfielders: Bastian Schweinsteiger, Lukas Podolski, Mesut Özil, Toni Kroos, Sami Khedira, Thomas Müller, Mario Götze, André Schürrle, Lars Bender and Sven Bender/Marco Reus.

Forwards: Mario Gomez, Miroslav Klose and Cacau.

Prediction

Germany invariably does well in international tournaments. This Euro should be no exception. The team should top the group ahead of the Netherlands. The quarterfinals should be an easier match against either Czech Republic or Greece. The semi finals would be against France or Italy who would be likely quarter-final opponents. It will be a difficult semi-final but Die Mannschaft should prevail and face Spain in the final possibly reversing the result of the last two international meetings between the sides to lift their first international trophy since 1996.

Oranje Look to Shed Underachiever Tag

Saumyajit Ray profiles the perennial bridesmaid, Holland and says this year may finally be time for a new chapter.



They come, they see, they enthral, they fight (sometimes among themselves), but they seldom conquer. They are the perennial bridesmaid of International tournaments. They are arguably the most popular 2nd team amongst football fans. They are known to produce the most colourful characters on the football field, and the most colourful support off it. Their football has been described as “neurotic genius”. They are the *Oranje*, and they will grace Poland and Ukraine this summer with their usual share of class, charisma and colour.

Form

The Dutch come into the tournament as one of the favourites along with Spain and Germany on the back of an impressive run of results over the last two years. They had an impressive World Cup 2010 where they missed out being champions by the finest of margins, losing out in the final to the current superpower of world football, Spain, in extra time. They carried that form into the Euro Qualifiers and waltzed through their group in style winning their first 9 matches with a goal difference of +30. But beneath the surface, there are a few doubts as to whether they are as good as their pre-tournament billing suggests. Although the loss to Sweden in the final qualifying game, a dead rubber, could be brushed aside as an aberration, the subsequent 3-0 friendly defeat to arch rivals Germany could not be. A 0-0 draw with Switzerland prior to the Germany game had sown seeds of doubt in the Dutch supporters’ minds, with Switzerland rendering the Dutch attacking threat impotent by mirroring the 4-2-

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3-1 formation favoured by the current manager, Bert van Marwijk. The Germans gave them a thorough schooling and raised questions as to whether this team could really cut the mustard against the very best, viz. Germany and Spain. Although a subsequent 3-2 friendly win over England at Wembley restored some confidence, it was not the most convincing of wins with victory being sealed only with an injury time winner.

Approach

Bert van Marwijk's side is not the traditional Holland team that plays an attacking 4-3-3 with frequent interchanging of positions. Nor is he, in some ways, the traditional Holland manager. Dutch managers have often been radical thinkers of the game; they also have frequently been charismatic, outspoken figures. Rinus Michel, Johan Cruyff, Luis van Gaal, Frank Rijkaard fit either one or both of the stereotypes. Bert in contrast is a much more understated, sedate character with a reputation for building disciplined, hard working, mentally strong teams that are tough to beat. As a successful manager at the topmost level it goes without saying that he knows his tactics, but his tactics are more often effective rather than radical and mind blowing.

Bert picked up Marco van Basten's 4-2-3-1 template from Euro 2008, gave it a more solid, reliable shape and surprised the world in World Cup 2010 with a Dutch side not as flamboyant, but more adept at getting the job done than some of their more illustrious predecessors. There was widespread argument among the Dutch about whether Bert was moving away from the Dutch philosophy with none other than Johan Cruyff declaring that their football was *"ugly, vulgar, hard, hermetic, hardly eye-catching, hardly football"*. However, what no one could dispute was the fact that Bert had brought the nation closer than ever before to winning the big cup.



Not Impressed

At present Bert uses two variants of the 4-2-3-1, one with two out and out holding midfielders typically used against strong sides and the other with one holding midfielder and one deep lying playmaker deployed against weak sides or when chasing a game. In the Euro qualifiers he has used the latter to notch up impressive wins against the likes of Moldova, Hungary and in the home match against Sweden. The former approach though, came unstuck against the Germans who were happy to sit back when not in possession, draw the Dutch out and exploit the spaces to devastating effect on turnovers. Having been drawn into the Group of Death, the Dutch will probably not play a single weak side in the tournament, so expect the defensive 4-2-3-1 to be the default formation, with Bert changing things only in a do or die situation. The friendly matches just ahead of the tournament will provide an interesting peek into any possible tactical adjustments Bert might make to his default 4-2-3-1 for the Euros.

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Personnel

Goalkeepers – The Dutch are well stocked in this department. Maarten Stekelenberg, one of the best keepers of World Cup 2010 and Bert's preferred choice for the Qualifiers should recover in time from a shoulder injury sustained recently and is the obvious pick. Tim Krul of Newcastle and Michel Vorm of Swansea will clinch the other two spots on the back of impressive seasons in the English Premier League. I would expect Stekelenberg to hold on to the number one position for the tournament with Krul just shading Vorm as the second choice.

Defenders – At the centre of defence the tried and tested pairing of John Heitinga and Joris Mathijsen is expected to be the first choice. Although not considered amongst the very best individually they have worked well as a pair under Bert. Ron Vlaar of Feyenoord should be the experienced back up; in the absence of standout options for this position, Bert may not opt for another out and out centre back but look to cover an injury crisis with versatile options selected primarily for other positions.

At Right Back Gregory van der Wiel should remain first choice in spite of a slightly underwhelming season with Ajax. The experienced Khalid Boulahrouz of Stuttgart, who can also double up in the centre of defence, should be his understudy.

The Left Back position poses a problem, with Bert's preferred choice, Erik Pieters of PSV, ruled out due to injury. In the absence of any other standout option in this position I would expect the versatile duo of Vurnon Anita of Ajax who can also operate as a winger, and Wilfred Bouma of PSV who can also cover for the centre back position to make the cut for the final 23. Young Jetro Willems of PSV, uncapped at this level, is likely to miss out.

The defence looks weak on paper, but unfortunately the current Dutch generation has not produced world class defenders. The unit as a whole needs to perform better than the sum of its parts.

Midfielders – With Bert expected to go with two holding midfielders as his default starting option, there should be four players in the squad for this position. Mark van Bommel, the captain, selects himself. Kevin Strootman of PSV should take up the starting spot alongside him. Nigel de Jong, having fallen out of favour since the World Cup 2010 where his showing was memorable for both the right and wrong reasons, should only be a back up along with Stijn Schaars, who can also double up as a defensive option at Left Back if needed.



Lynchpin

Although his stock has fallen a bit since his dream 2009-10 season including the World Cup, Wesley Sneijder will be the first choice at the tip of the midfield trio. Raafael van der Vaart picks himself as Sneijder's understudy, and should play the deep playmaker role in the variant of the default 4-2-3-1. Barcelona's Ibrahim Afellay should round off the midfield selection. The uncapped Adam Maher of AZ may have to wait for the World Cup qualifiers to get his first crack at international football.

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Forwards – On the back of his dream season for Arsenal, Robin van Persie is an obvious pick. Klaas-Jan



On a Hot Streak

Huntelaar, prolific for both Schalke and Holland, will also select himself. Robben is the obvious pick at right wing. Bert may be tempted to field his three most potent weapons together, in which case he may use Robin van Persie on the left wing to accommodate Huntelaar in the starting eleven along with Robben. Jeremain Lens of PSV should make the cut as the third centre forward providing a more pacy option as well as being an emergency winger. Uncapped Luciano Narsingh of Heerenveen should get on the plane as a surprise package for the opponents with his trickery and vision on the wings. For the remaining spot I expect Bert to keep faith in the reliability, versatility and experience of Dirk Kuyt for the tournament and have Anita provide emergency cover at

left wing with the de Jong siblings, Luuk of Twente and Siem of Ajax, making way.

Predicted Squad

Goalkeepers: Stekelenburg, Krul, Vorm

Defenders: Heitinga, Mathijsen, Van der Wiel, Vlaar, Boulahrouz, Anita, Bouma

Midfielders: Van Bommel, Strootman, Nigel de Jong, Schaars, Van der Vaart, Sneijder, Afellay,

Forwards: Huntelaar, Van Persie, Robben, Lens, Kuyt, Narsingh

Prediction

Now for the most interesting bit; looking into the crystal ball or feeding the octopus. But unfortunately I neither own a crystal ball nor an octopus; hence I would try to gaze into the future wearing my Optimist, Pessimist and Realist hats.

Holland has been drawn into the toughest of the Groups of Death in recent memory along with Germany, Portugal and Denmark. We all know about the pedigree of the current German side. Portugal have several top players including one of the best ever in Ronaldo and have been a bit of a bogey team for the Dutch in recent years. The Danes are no pushovers either having topped Portugal in Qualifying. The pessimist in me says that Holland may find the group tough to negotiate and might not qualify for the later stages.

However if they negotiate the group stages they will face one of Czech Republic, Greece, Poland or Russia in the quarters, which is a game they should be winning. The realist in me sees them qualify behind Germany, negotiate the easier Quarter Final to meet Spain in the Semis who will prove too strong for them.

The optimist in me of course can already see van Bommel lifting the cup in Kiev on July 1st having topped the group, beaten Italy in the Semis and laid to rest the ghost of 2010 by overwhelming Spain in the Final.

Azzurri hope to end 44-year draught

Rossella Marrai tries to find if the Azzurri's rebuilding from last world cup's disaster is enough yet to mount a challenge for the Euros

Italy will look to replicate their only Euro success from 1968, forty-four years later, when they kick off their tournament in Poland on June 10, against the defending European champions Spain. Drawn alongside the 2010 FIFA World Cup winners and the Azzurri in Group C, lies the tricky Croatia and Giovanni Trapattoni's Republic of Ireland; a group Cesare Prandelli was well conscious to the difficulty of the various tasks which lies ahead.

"It's a very difficult group. We didn't want to meet Trapattoni for many reasons. Plus we'll meet the world champions. We have to be well prepared in June [2012], because it will be a very tough tournament for us," Prandelli told *Rai* shortly after the Euro draw took place.



"I don't know who will be the worst opponent between Croatia and Ireland, it will depend on the physical shape in June.

"I know that Trapattoni will try to get the best results until the end. Trapattoni told me that he wanted to bring Ireland to train in Italy before the tournament,

but now he will change his plans. We will stay in Krakow."

There is little to be said about Spain that isn't already known to the football public but it is the remaining two teams where things can get complicated for the Azzurri. Hoping to progress past the first round, shockingly only managing to surpass once in the last three editions of the tournament, the Italian coach has his work cut out.

After the disaster of 2010 world cup under Marcello Lippi, Prandelli has built a squad which ensured a swift qualification and his players also became one of the first teams guaranteed to be travelling to Poland and Ukraine. Conceding the lowest amount of goals in the qualifiers out of all qualifying nations, with the ball beating Gianluigi Buffon on just two occasions, it is expected- especially given the several

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doubts on the opposite end of the field to have hit the squad- that the defence will once more play a huge part for Italy.



Undergoing a relatively smooth travel in the qualifiers, many are expecting a similar walk in the park from the former Fiorentina coach's men in June; however things have since changed in the turn of the New Year.

Giuseppe Rossi, who was capped seven times in the qualifiers, has since been ruled out of the Euro after he has to undergo further knee surgery to repair torn ligaments, while Antonio Cassano- who was the most capped forward for Italy with 10 appearances- will have little over two months action under his belt after suffering a surprising stroke in October.

Prandelli had previously stated that he would wait and save a spot for the two forwards, as they are 'best-suited to our style of play' but now it seems as if all hopes remain on the former Real Madrid man, who so inspiringly lead the four times World Champions in the group qualifiers.



Mario Balotelli is another character, whose future is in doubt after he was left out of the team's friendlies due to previous incidences of him breaking the 'code of ethics' Prandelli has so clearly laid out. It was against Arsenal where [SuperMario may have dug his grave](#) further following his dismissal for unsporting behavior.

Often the face of controversy, the big question falls on whether or not the 54-year-old should bend the rules for the former Inter player, or stick by them and leave behind another one of Italy's three strongest forwards.

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With no Rossi and a Cassano who will be lacking full season fitness, leaving behind the 21-year-old could prove to be Prandelli's biggest pitfall seeing that there is no other current striker who made waves in Serie A this season.

Unless some twist of unfortunate fate had to occur on Buffon, he will command from in between the sticks, while fellow Scudetto winners Giorgio Chiellini and Leonardo Bonucci are expected to be starters; having tallied up the most appearances out of the defensive unit. Andrea Barzagli, another Juventus defender, can legitimately claim to be the best of the trio in Serie A and two of these three would appear in Prandelli's backline.

Catenaccio has probably been Italy's most potent strategy against big guns and with little depth in the attacking front force; a Juventus-inspired backline is expected to conduct the way to any potential success.

The 2011/2012 Scudetto winning Champions will have an equal amount of inspiration in the midfield with Claudio Marchisio and Andrea Pirlo set to be the focal points of play. The Juventus duo paired up next to each other six and nine appearances respectively, in 2011-12 and are expected to do the same alongside the deep lying defensive midfielder of Roma's Daniele De Rossi.



Riccardo Montolivo was the second highest midfield player to make a showing in the qualifiers, falling one short of Pirlo's tally. Given his displays of having to independently steer Fiorentina to Serie A safety, the midfielder will prove to be equally fundamental, notching up a tally of three assists to his name in the qualifiers-more than any Azzurri player.

It has been suggested that the furthest the Azzurri may be able to progress is to a semi-final spot but the tactician has the utmost faith in his current crop of players and will not settle for anything less than the ultimate success.

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"I wouldn't be happy to accept fourth place at the European Championship. I want to dream and we will set off with that dream," noted Prandelli. "This side has performed above the expectations, but we have plenty of room to improve."

Room to improve there certainly is as the Azzurri have been far from impressive in their international friendly games coming into the tournament. Since then, Prandelli has made it clear- after trying several evolving formations- that he has come up with a set formation and he is planning to keep it rigid.

"I need to pick the players that suit it- not those who can adapt," he added.

The Orzinouvi-born coach underlined the failure that was the 2010 World Cup campaign in South Africa but what he should have done is to point out the only constant that Italy have had in the European championship - is their general lack of achievement. Yet it could be a pointer to the only time the Azzurri won the European Championship in 1968, they had come off a similar shameful exit in the previous world cup of 1966.

For being a dominant world powerhouse in football, the Azzurri have constantly proven to be underachievers in the Euro, bringing home the title just once. The Euro has often proven to be an unwanted distraction after a long domestic campaign, but this time it seems that Prandelli may have instilled more of a hunger for success in his current crop of players and without doubt he won't be taking players who feel more obligated to be there than willing.

Failing to meet the expectations of their doting 'tifosi' on so often an occasion, recent times it has become the norm that less is expected of the famous players who sport the famous Azzurri shirt. Nevertheless, the encouraging qualifying campaign has seemed to have left some sort of air of optimism before the final trip to Ukraine and Poland, with the players carrying the belief that the tides have turned since their disappointing run after the 2006 World Cup triumph.

One such player who thinks the four times World Champions are a work in progress is the Brazilian-born Italian midfielder Thiago Motta, and he believes his fellow colleagues' determination to give it their utmost will fall in favour of them in June.

"There is still something missing, but I don't think it's bad to arrive at EURO with high expectations," the PSG player told UEFA.com. "Teams like Spain, the Netherlands and Germany are the favourites, but our preparations are going really well, so that we will be 100% when we get there: that will be Italy's strength."

It is difficult to predict the often unpredictable nature of the Mediterranean outfit's mentality but should they manage to continue in the cohesive unit they created in the qualifying campaign. And should Prandelli manage to create a hunger pang for success in his boys, there is little doubt- with the quality in which 'La Nazionale' possesses- that the 23 selected players could bring home one more trophy to add to the cabinet.

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Les Bleus Looks to Turn It Around

*Can France do justice to the talent in their squad or is it going to self-destruct again - ponders **Ogo Sylla**.*

Much to my surprise, *Les Bleus* are coming into EURO 2012 without much fanfare. The French fans and media have become quite disillusioned about their team of late. There was the fiasco of the “bus of Naisna” during the World Cup in South Africa, when the team revolted against [former coach] Raymond Domenech. Laurent Blanc thus stepped in, after a successful three years with Bordeaux, when he brought *Les Girondins* to a second place finish in his first season, then to a first title since a decade as well as a *Coupe de la Ligue*, and capped it all off with a quarterfinal berth in the UEFA Champions League. More so than his successful CV in the early days of his managerial career – when he won the Ligue 1 manager of the year award – Laurent Blanc was a symbol of the much-adored '98 golden generation that had won the World Cup on home soil. As such, “Le President” (as Laurent Blanc came to be affectionately nicknamed during his stint with Olympique de Marseille) came into the France job with much credit in the bank.



What are France’s real expectations however for the upcoming EURO 2012? According to the French media, a quarterfinal berth and according to the French supporters, not even that much! Indeed such pessimism is baffling [at least to me] when you consider the quality of the squad on paper. In every department France has enough to rival the nations being touted as favorites for the EURO 2012.

The solidity & depth of France’s squad is probably best illustrated in its options both in the goalkeeping and fullback options. With Hugo Lloris as the no.1 choice and Steve Mandanda as the backup, *Les Bleus* possess two world-class custodians who both boast confidence, presence, and quality to single-handedly influence games. The pot is all the more sweetened when you consider that the third option could be Bordeaux’s Cedric Carasso, Saint-Etienne Stephane Ruffier, or even Rennes’ young Benoit Costil.

At the fullback area, it is sad to note that Bacary Sagna will miss out due to the recent leg-break the right-back has suffered. However Mathieu Debuchy has had a great season for Lille and proven to be one of Europe’s best fullbacks. Of course the loss of Sagna is a blow, but it does leave the door open to Anthony Reveillere (Lyon) and Christophe Jallet (PSG). The Lyon fullback has the experience over his PSG counterpart however, and so I expect Reveillere to get the nod as he is a safer bet. On the left, Patrice Evra and Gael Clichy remain strong choices despite the loss of Eric Abidal, with even Valencia’s Jeremy Mathieu as a wildcard candidate to make the list.

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The France midfield is an interesting one to look at as well. In that department, France is blessed with a plethora of great and promising holding midfielders. However, I suspect that Blanc will go with the usual men he picks and trusts. The first name on the list is sure to be his captain [when at Bordeaux], Alou Diarra. Diarra has had a difficult start of his season since his move to Olympique de Marseille. His performances have greatly improved but the 30-year-old is still some distance away from his Bordeaux form. Despite this, I believe Blanc will pick him, as he kept picking him even in his worst spell with Marseille when the whole of the French fans berated him for it. The other player to be picked is sure to be Yann M'Vila, another favorite of Blanc. Despite a really poor season by his standards, it is unlikely for M'Vila to miss out on the EUROS. M'Vila's dip in form has mostly been due to fatigue and being overplayed. And indeed it would almost be strange to pick M'Vila when you consider that Rio Mavuba is [on form but also certainly amongst them] the best holding midfielder in France, with Toulouse's Etienne Capoue another interesting option albeit much less experienced at international level.



Of course the midfield is not only going to be comprised with defensive midfielders and this is where France's issues are highlighted. Laurent Blanc likes/aims to play a possession-style game with a lot of movement and ball circulation. Yohan Cabaye and Marvin Martin are two players Blanc is quite fond of and who would be apt to implement his strategy. However Cabaye – despite the great seasons he has enjoyed with Lille and Newcastle – has never been able to carry that form for France and thus always been disappointing. Martin is the more alarming case. After a break-out season when he notched up 17 assists, he only has 5 this year. The dip in form correlating with a mooted transfer that never

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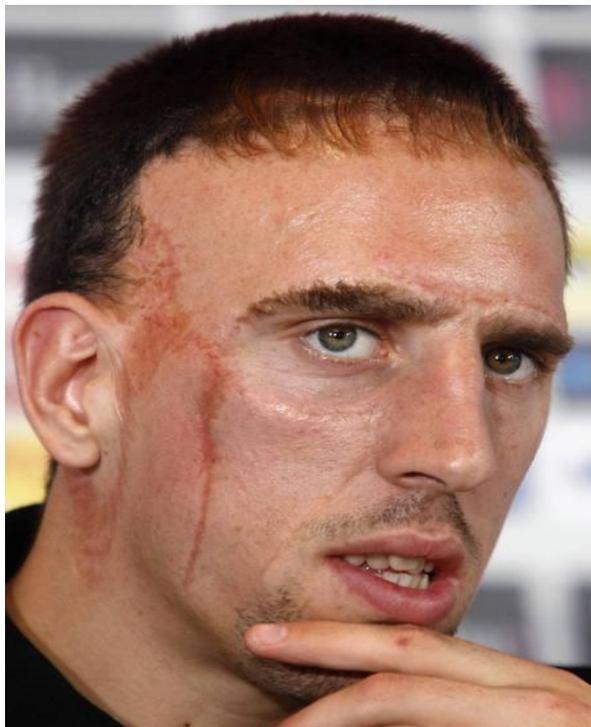
materialized, a coach he didn't rate, and so another case of player-power where Martin's lack of professionalism could have very easily cost him a place at this summer's EUROs.

You might have noticed that we have not yet discussed France's attack and central defense. The reason for that is simple, therein lay all the problems. In attack, only Karim Benzema really jumps out. Moreover, we must consider where to play Benzema who can play as a *neuf-et-demi* (nine-and-a-half) or as an out-and-out striker. If we were to opt for the latter, than who should be the striker ahead of Benzema? Montpellier's Olivier Giroud is the obvious choice today: Ligue 1 top-scorer with 19 goals and the skill-set and ability to do the job. However it is Giroud's lack of experience at this level that worries me. He only counts three caps for *Les Bleus*, albeit one in an impressive win against Germany when he really showed his class. Of course the problem remains that, if not Giroud then who? Kevin Gameiro has had a poor season for his new club PSG this year alongside Guillaume Hoarau, to the point that Carlo Ancelotti does not even line them up anymore (which is pertinent considering they are the only two strikers at the club). Loic Remy looked to have cemented his place, but inopportune hamstring injuries and poor morale [due to a disastrous season from Marseille this year] makes it difficult to justify his place in the starting eleven today.



The central defense is yet another issue France needs to sort out. However it seems strange to mention this when considering some of the candidates Blanc has to choose from: Adil Rami, Philippe Mexes, Laurent Koscielny, Mamadou Sakho among others. The problem with the aforementioned names is that they were all in line to be picked but have all suffered dips in form, especially Mexes and Rami. Mexes is no longer trusted by AC Milan coach Massimiliano Allegri and has effectively been phased out, with

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Mario Yepes taking his place in the pecking order. Rami had a blistering start to his Valencia career but has really fallen some ways since the rumors of an interest from Barcelona came about and destabilized him. Sakho's form is the most alarming of the three, having strung along a series of very poor performances that led to Ancelotti freezing him out of the lineup. Indeed Sakho's dip in form coincidentally manifested with the arrival of Ancelotti, as the French defender maybe failed to cope with the pressure of the Italian's expectations. Koscielny is by far the most secure of the three mentioned above. As such, we might see possible surprise inclusions of the young Montpellier captain, Mapou Yanga-Mbiwa, or even of Real Madrid's Raphael Varane.

In the end however, Blanc has lost much of the credit and indeed popularity he had when he took the France job. His contractual saga, when he more or less threatened to quit if he was not signed on, only created more critics amongst the French fans. What further irritates *Les Bleus* fans however are the unfulfilled promises regarding Blanc's *projet de jeu* (style of play). Indeed Blanc has often spoken of his admiration for the Spanish style and has made it his goal to emulate it with this team. However, France is quite some ways off from that and has not produced anything remotely close to it. Finally, but certainly not the least, is Blanc insistence to include Frank Ribery in the team. Indeed Ribery has a terrible reputation in France since the Naisna incident and many are simply calling for him not to be included in the EURO squad. In a way, an omission would be justified given that his performances for *Les Bleus* have always inexplicably been much poorer than for his club. But in another way as well, the Ribery case is one that applies to many of *Les Bleus'* players. Samir Nasri and Patrice Evra are but the more notable examples. This issue has polarized the fans from the players, with the French public labeling them as nothing more than overpaid superstars who don't care about playing for the shirt. This is France's biggest stumbling block and challenge for Blanc at the EUROS indeed, to turn the hearts of the French people.

In conclusion, Blanc has a tough battle ahead of him. *Le President* has to not only win the hearts of the French people but also perform on the pitch. But then again both are intrinsically linked and should follow through naturally. Blanc does boast of the ultimate ace-in-the-hole however: a transformed Benzema who possesses all the skills [and now] maturity and leadership to bring this team to a semifinal berth at this summer's EUROS.

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Will Hodgson be the ray of hope for the English?

The English have a new boss. But can he bring them the glory. Krishnendu Sanyal brings the details

Going into the Tournament

England's preparation for Europe's premier football tournament can be at best described as 'not ideal'. So the expectations from this English team to end their barren run of 46 years without a major trophy, is very low.

Add to that Fabio Capello's exit following FA's decision to strip John Terry of the England captaincy for allegedly racially abusing fellow England and QPR defender Anton Ferdinand. The pre-tournament hype was around who would take the Italian's job.

Roy Hodgson's appointment by the FA came as a surprise to most football experts of the British Isles. Tottenham manager Harry Redknapp was the overwhelming favourite and the British media was backing him to the hilt.



Roy Hodgson

Hodgson, who knows five languages and has coached in eight different countries, is a tactically astute coach and has a great reservoir of experience to draw from. What will suit Roy Hodgson this time is that nobody really expects England to do too well in the tournament, so the weight of expectations will be off his shoulders. He might not give sensational headlines for the British media to salivate about, but this is a coach who deserves this chance to manage the national team.

England's journey in the tournament is further protracted by Wayne Rooney's suspension for the first two games of the tournament for a red card he picked up against Montenegro during the qualifiers. He will miss the games against France and Sweden.

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Wayne Rooney being shown the red card against Montenegro

Capello, during the last stages of his reign, brought in an enthusiastic bunch of youngsters and promoted youth to the first team. Players like Joe Hart, Phil Jones, Chris Smalling, Jack Wilshere, Theo Walcott and Danny Welbeck flourished during this period. Hodgson will also look at the experienced stars like Terry, Steven Gerrard and Rooney, once back from his ban, to provide the much-needed steel to progress in the tournament.

Big Stage Fright

England has always been the 'enigma' team of Europe- filled with very good individual players but has rarely performed on the big stage. Their last notable performance came at the 1996 Euros, held in England. England gave one of its finest performances in the group stage by defeating the Netherlands 4-1, with Alan Shearer and Teddy Sheringham scoring 2 goals each. After beating Spain in the quarter-finals on penalties, England's journey came to a halt in the semi-finals. This time beaten on penalties.....you guessed it right..... by Germany (1990 World Cup semi-finals rings a bell?).

After the Euro 1996 euphoria came the 'Golden Generation' euphoria, which surprisingly didn't include Paul Scholes, possibly the best English mid-fielder of his generation. David Beckham, Steven Gerrard, Frank Lampard, John Terry, Rio Ferdinand, Sol Campbell, Ashley Cole and Wayne Rooney- it's a stellar star cast that has failed to give a single hit when playing together.

England has always failed in the big stages. From the World Cup to the Euros, they have lost them all – be it in the 1998 World Cup or Euro 2000 where they failed to qualify after Romania beat them. They have been beaten by eventual champions Brazil in the 2002 WC quarter-finals; they lost to Portugal in the penalty-shootout in Euro 2004 and were disappointing in the 2006 and 2010 World Cups.

Their big players have failed to rise to the big occasions when required. Ego clashes, wrong managerial appointments, wrong tactics, failure to adapt to the more continental style of football, bizarre team

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selections- England has a long history of problems that has led to the deteriorating state of the national team.

Squad

Goalkeepers: Joe Hart (Manchester City), Robert Green (West Ham United), Jack Butland (Birmingham City)

Defenders: Glen Johnson (Liverpool), Phil Jones (Manchester United), John Terry (Chelsea), Joleon Lescott (Manchester City), Gary Cahill (Chelsea), Ashley Cole (Chelsea), Leighton Baines (Everton)

Midfielders: Theo Walcott (Arsenal), Stewart Downing (Liverpool), Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain (Arsenal), Steven Gerrard (Liverpool), Gareth Barry (Manchester City), Frank Lampard (Chelsea), Scott Parker (Tottenham Hotspur), Ashley Young (Manchester United), James Milner (Manchester City)

Forwards: Wayne Rooney (Manchester United), Danny Welbeck (Manchester United), Andy Carroll (Liverpool), Jermain Defoe (Tottenham)

Probable Starting XI

Joe Hart

Glen Johnson Gary Cahill Joleon Lescott Ashley Cole

Scott Parker Gareth Barry

James Milner Steven Gerrard Ashley Young

Wayne Rooney/Danny Welbeck

Injury Problems

England would have loved to take Tottenham Hotspur's Kyle Walker, who was voted the PFA young player of the year, as their first choice right back, but he has been ruled out due to a toe injury. Glenn Johnson as the right-back will add something to the attack, but his defensive solidity is questionable.

Manchester United's Chris Smalling was a certainty as one of the centre-backs but for a groin injury, that has ruled him out of the tournament.

England is also sweating on Scott Parker's Achilles tendon, which might eventually rule him out. He is one of the first names on the team-sheet and will be a big miss if he is unable to travel with the squad to Krakow.

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Managerial Status

At the international level, Roy Hodgson has managed Switzerland, Finland and United Arab Emirates. He took Switzerland to the last 16 of the 1994 World Cup. Under him, Finland achieved its highest ever FIFA rankings of 33. He had a disastrous spell with Liverpool last season and was sacked after only 31 games. He managed to restore his reputation by taking over as manager at West Bromwich Albion and saving them from relegation.

Player to watch: Ashley Young

After signing for Manchester United from Aston Villa, Young had a strong first season and managed to replicate his domestic form in the International stage. One of the better performers of the Capello regime, the team will depend on him to provide creativity in the absence of Rooney, against France and Sweden. He has scored 4 goals for England in 2011 and netted against Holland in the friendly defeat in February at Wembley.



Young was one of the better performers under Capello's regime

Surprise Package: Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain

2011-12 was a breakthrough season for Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain. Signed from Southampton by Arsenal for a reported £ 10 million fee, the 18-year old didn't waste any time to become a fan favourite at the Emirates. With his purposeful play in the wings, delightful technique and an eye for goal, 'The Ox', as some Arsenal fans call him, has wowed fans and pundits alike. He is the rare teenager who can ignite [this kind of reaction](#) after being substituted, after all.

His numbers shouldn't startle you - 'The Ox' has scored 2 goals in 16 league appearances, scored once in the Carling Cup (against Shrewsbury) and Champion League (Olympiakos). But numbers don't actually tell the kind of impact that 'The Ox' has had on Arsenal's season.

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He was superb against Manchester United and [AC Milan](#), two of the greatest European Clubs. He [provided the assist](#) for Van Persie's goal that brought Arsenal back on level terms against United at the Emirates. It is this ability to perform at the biggest stage that suggests that this is talent that isn't fading out with time.

Alex might not get too many first team opportunities for England at the Euros, but he could be that impact substitute that England will need in tight matches and might bring that '[Owen 98](#)' moment to this year's Euro.



Group Matches

June 11, 2012 (Monday) v France (18:00 CET in Donetsk)

June 15, 2012 (Friday) v Sweden (20:45 CET in Kyiv)

June 19, 2012 (Tuesday) v Ukraine (20:45 CET in Donetsk)

Prediction: Quarter-finals

France has improved and has gained the required momentum under Laurent Blanc and are favourites to progress from this group. England's build up to this tournament has been marred by the uncertainty surrounding who will lead them into the Euros. That, compounded with Rooney's suspension for the first two games, means the best they can hope for is the second qualifying position in the group stages. That will most probably mean that they will face Spain in the quarter-finals and despite their shock win over them in the November friendly, Vicente Del Bosque's team is most likely to beat them and end the English hopes at the quarter-final stage, again.

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Home Team Decisions

Does Poland and Ukraine have any hope of actually winning the championship they host? Eoghan Mcmonagle runs the ruler through the hosts' chances



So the UEFA European Championship 2012 is fast approaching and it promises to be a very interesting competition. The favourites are well-known, with reigning champions Spain and a very strong Germany being mentioned along with perennial contenders Holland. Into that mix are thrown teams like Italy, England and France who may have fallen on hard times over the last few years but still have the players and the tradition to go all the way. But what of the joint-hosts, Poland and Ukraine? Are they there to simply make up the numbers or can (at least) either of these teams use home advantage to mount an unexpected challenge?

Poland

Poland have the honour of kicking-off the tournament when they face Greece on June 8th. So I shall start by looking at them. Drawn in Group A alongside Russia, the Czech Republic and the aforementioned Greece, they might just fancy their chances of making it to the quarter-finals. None of these teams are among the front line contenders for the title and this promises to be a very closely contested group.

Russia will be favourites to advance. They are, according to the latest FIFA rankings, the highest ranked team of the four and quite comfortably surpassed Ireland in the qualification group to top it. The Czech Republic are not quite the force they once were, having struggled in their qualification group but managed to clinch a play-off spot and dispatched Montenegro easily to reach the final tournament. The

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Greeks, however, will be very hard to beat and were highly impressive in qualifying – topping a group containing Croatia, that too remaining unbeaten.



As hosts, Poland did not have the rigours of a qualifying campaign to go through, being automatically seeded in Group A. They might have struggled to make it through as in the qualification campaign for the 2010 World Cup, Poland were truly awful. They finished 5th out of 6 teams with only lowly San Marino behind and Slovenia, Slovakia, the Czechs and even Northern Ireland ahead of them. Not exactly inspiring stuff! It begs the question as to whether Poland would actually have made it to Euro 2012 if they had had to qualify for it - the answer is probably not.

So can they turn their form of the last few years around and actually be competitive in front of their own people this summer? It will be interesting to find out – certainly the benefits of playing in front of a home crowd should lift a team, especially with the passionate support the Polish fans are known for. However, lack of competitive football during the qualification campaign for Euro 2012 may put Poland at a disadvantage. No amount of friendly matches can come close to the white-hot intensity of qualification for, or playing in, a major international tournament.

Much will depend on how Poland start the tournament – a result against Greece with the eyes of the footballing world on them in the first game will raise their confidence and really get the fans behind them. A point against Russia in the next game after 4 days would then put them in good shape for the final group game against the Czechs on June 16th. A tough ask but not impossible. Given how tight I expect this group to be one win may be good enough to go through. Poland's recent record may not be particularly impressive but this is a new start and it's a chance they might just take. In summary then, the Poles are a good outside bet to make it to the quarter-finals but there, I think, the adventure will end against the mighty Germany, Netherlands or Portugal.

Ukraine

So how about the Ukraine? They are still relative newcomers to international tournaments having only ever qualified for one – the 2006 World Cup. Their performance there was encouraging as they made it

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to the quarter-finals before being beaten by eventual champions, Italy. However, since then there has been very little progress – Ukraine failed to qualify for Euro 2008 and lost out to Greece in a play-off to get to the 2010 World Cup. The “Golden Generation” of the early to mid 2000’s, drawn from the excellent Dynamo Kiev team of the same period, never really fulfilled its potential – can the class of 2012 fare any better?



As joint hosts, Ukraine will have the same advantages and disadvantages as those mentioned above for Poland. The passionate and numerous local supporters may go some way to offsetting the lack of match sharpness due to the absence of competitive football over the qualifying campaign. I fear for Ukraine however, that they have some extra issues to deal with, chief among which is the quality of the group in which they find themselves in. Ukraine begin their campaign against Sweden on June 11th, they then face France before finishing the group against England on June 19th.

That is a really tough series of games – the Swedes nearly always perform well at international level and often punch above their weight. They are a seasoned and well balanced team and have the unpredictable, but potentially brilliant, Zlatan Ibrahimović up front. The Swedes came second to the Netherlands in their qualification group but actually managed to beat the highly fancied Dutch in their final group game. France have been through a couple of bad years at international level having gone out at the group stages of both Euro 2008 and the 2010 World Cup but topped their qualification group for Euro 2012, losing only one game in the process. There is a growing sense that France have straightened themselves out and with players like Karim Benzema and Franck Ribéry they could go a long way at Euro 2012. England always seem to be less than the sum of their parts and this is, I believe, a fairly weak England squad. That said, they still possess some excellent players and it is unfortunate for Ukraine that the only game of the group stages which Wayne Rooney will be eligible for is the final game against them (Rooney is suspended for England’s first two matches).

So how do Ukraine compete with these heavyweights? The short answer, from my point of view at least is, they can’t. I don’t see the quality in their squad to sustain a challenge in Group D. The team is almost exclusively based in the Ukrainian league, which I do not believe is providing the highest standard of

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football at the moment. The fact that they still rely so heavily on the 35 year old Andriy Shevchenko in attack is a serious concern. I hope for Ukraine's sake that they can raise their game and give a good account of themselves come June – but it will be very difficult for them and I wouldn't be surprised to see them come bottom of the group.

Being the hosts of a major tournament can and should provide a major boost to the chances of the home nations – but only if they have sufficient quality to take advantage. It would be good for the tournament as a whole if one or both of the host nations can do well - Poland may just have enough to emerge from their group but I think Ukraine are seriously up against it.

Prediction

Poland: 2nd in Group A behind Greece, eliminated in quarter-finals.

Ukraine: 4th in Group D.

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Daring Dark Horses at Euro 2012

While all the superpowers of Europe prepare for the mega stage, there are some smaller nations which have the power to cause a huge upset. Debojyoti Chakraborty looks at the possible contenders who can shock the pundits at the UEFA Euro 2012

Speaking of Dark Horses, we try to analyse the teams which may not be entering the tournament as favourites but can propel their way through to the knock-out stages and beyond. These teams have a realistic chance of progressing as they are, in a way, helped by the draw at the Group stages. All they need is a bit of determination, good strategy...and some luck! So let us look at our own set of Underdogs.



Russia

Russia has a very good record at the Euros since winning it (then Soviet Union) in the inaugural edition of 1960. After going through a re-building phase since the inception of the country in the early '90s, Russia did well last time when they reached the semis and lost out to eventual winners Spain. This time also, the men under Dick Advocaat look set for a strong run in to the tournament.

Russia topped their Group during qualifying stages with ease. Though their opponents are relative minnows in Europe, Russia did put up a good show – especially in defence which let in only four goals, second only to Italy – and gained some valuable places in the UEFA rankings. That helped them get into the easiest Group in the finals. Russia have some good players who put their best foot forward while playing for their country. Hence, though



Planning for an adieu on a high

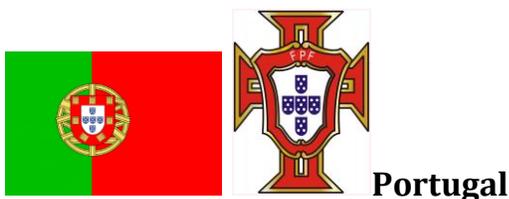
Andrei Arshavin and Roman Pavlyuchenko have struggled to break into the first team for their club teams in England, it will be no surprise if they turn the heat on in Euro 2012.

Advocaat is a shrewd tactician but there are quite a few challenges for him this time round. He is often criticised for favouring players from Zenit St. Petersburg, the club he coached previously. It will be

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interesting to see how he inducts the young and talented players like playmaker Alan Dzagoev and striker Pavel Pogrebnyak to the mix. Also, considering this could be the swansong for some key players such as defender Sergei Ignashevich, midfielders Konstantin Zyryanov and Igor Semshov, and possibly the dynamic duo of Andrei Arshavin and Roman Pavlyuchenko, Advocaat would surely like to motivate them for a final hurrah.

Russia is playing all its matches in Poland. Ukraine would have suited them more considering the large Russian contingent there. They start their campaign against Czech Republic and will look to set the tone for the tournament. Against Poland, the hosts, their second Group match will be the toughest one. Advocaat might have an eye on this match from the start of the campaign. By the time they take on Greece on the last match day, the Russians could find themselves in a position where they can dictate terms and choose their quarter-final opponents. And that could be it. With an opponent from the *Group of Death* their campaign looks all but over. But the Russians won't let it go so easy and they can look for inspiration in the Greek side of 2004. They should also benefit from the fact that half of the side plays for the Russian champion Zenit St. Petersburg.



Another Zenit player to feature in the Euro 2012 will be Portuguese defender Bruno Alves. His own country Portugal featured in the first ever Euro in 1960 but had to wait for a long 24 years for their next appearance where they reached the semis. They have done reasonably well since then with their best performance coming in the home turf as they reached the Final of Euro 2004 only to lose to Greece.

In the lead-up to Euro 2012, Portugal was stuttering with only one point from the first 2 matches of the qualifying competition, when Paulo Bento took over from Carlos Queiroz. Portugal scratched their way to the finals through a play-off against Bosnia and Herzegovina. They face an even uphill task being drawn in the *Group of Death*. But we have often seen teams which scratch their way into the tournament often go all the way beyond everyone's expectations. And they have it all – ambition, determination and belief – as put in by their talismanic captain Cristiano Ronaldo. At 27, the best player of the tournament is in the form of his life and he enters the competition as the highest scorer for Portugal in the qualifying campaign with seven goals to his credit. Champions League semi-final berth to go with his personal glory of scoring for fun in *La Liga*; 2012 has been a memorable year for CR7 and he would like to cap it up with the Euro glory. He has some creative players hugging the touchlines in the

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forms of João Moutinho and Nani. If they can influence the game and take a lead, the Real Madrid pairing of Pepe and Fábio Coentrão can organise the back four, keep a proper shape and defend well.

The Selecção das Quinas start their campaign against Germany and even a stalemate would suit them.



Will CR7 be able to do a 'Maradona '86'?

The second match against Denmark would be their big match as they not only would like to win it, but win it big to have a good goal difference. They will take a close look at the other match in the Group on the same match day as Germany and Netherlands lock horns. A bit of luck, results going their way and Portugal will feel they have a solid chance of progressing to the knock-out stages when they take on the Dutch side in their last Group match. Some records are yet to be set after the [Battle of Nuremberg in World Cup 2006 which saw only 18 men finish the match and a total of 16 yellow cards.](#) If Portugal can progress to the knock-out stages, they will face a much easier opponent in the form of Russia, Poland or Czech Republic. This is a definite winnable game and once you are into the semi-finals, anything can happen.



Croatia

Just like Portugal, Croatia also came through the pain and anxiety of play-offs and started the tournament as one of the well drilled teams. Croatia, as a part of Yugoslavia, had an impressive record at the Euro championships where they reached the Final of the tournaments twice in the first three editions. They have failed to emulate their form ever since and this time too they are entering the tournament as rank outsiders.

Croatia was widely tipped to top their Group in the qualifying campaigns where they were drawn against the likes of Greece, Israel, Latvia, Georgia and Malta. But they were beaten comprehensively by the Greek side at home and a shock defeat by Georgia led them to the qualification play-off. In that match though they regained their composure and thrashed a well drilled Turkey side to advance to the finals of Euro 2012. Under the supervision of coach Slaven Bilic, the Croats are well organized, tactically sound

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and they are expected to run their socks off for the whole 90 minutes. Amongst a group of strong and determined individuals, they have a lynchpin in Luca Modric, a rising star in Milan Badelj and a target



Modric will look to emulate his club form for his country

man in Ivica Olic.

It is their impressive run of form which sees them in the eighth place in UEFA rankings, one above their Group opponent Italy. They have been drawn in a difficult Group but one has to remember in major tournaments none can be termed as a pushover team. Croatia start their campaign against Ireland and they have to win this game for a realistic chance of progressing. They will also

keep a keen eye on another match on the same match day involving Spain and Italy. Spain is almost certain to progress but Croatia can target Italy for a possible berth in the quarter-finals. The draw also favours them as the Croats will next be against the *Azzuri* in what could decide the quarter-final berth. Once into the knock-outs, they are most likely to face England or France. Neither of them are quite threatening in their current forms. So, the big match is against the Italians on June 14 which could well seal Croatia's fate.



Sweden

The last team in this feature is Sweden, who defeated Croatia 3-1 in a friendly in February. Sweden boss Erik Hamren will be very pleased with his efforts so far steering Sweden into the finals of a major tournament in his very first assignment. He will take heart from the fact that Sweden have progressed through the Group stages from a very similar setup in 1992 – the Group featured England, France and Denmark – which was their first appearance in the Euro stage, that too as a host.

Sweden qualified for the finals behind Netherlands as the Group runner-up. But they put up a strong display at home in Stockholm to beat the formidable Dutch side. Hamren favours a defensive 4-2-3-1 formation and even if heavily criticized at home for this, he has delivered some good results in the run-up to the competition. Like any Scandinavian side, Sweden is well organized, tactically sound and their physical aspect of the game is a major strength. Their game will definitely revolve around the

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charismatic front man Zlatan Ibrahimovic. With some more potent weapon at disposal, Hamren might have considered adopting an attacking brand of football with the *mantra*: “Attack is the best form of defence”. But does not look like so!

Sweden are lucky to get their campaign rolling against Ukraine. This is one match where they would like to win handsomely. Following that is a match against England. The 3 Lions have been struggling for form and consistency; without much time for the newly appointed manager to stamp his authority and influential Wayne Rooney up front this is Sweden’s best chance to get one up against the disjointed English side. Even the last encounter against France is not a daunting one – the French are going through a transition phase and are nowhere close to their dominating best of the late ‘90s. So their recipe for success would be to thrash Ukraine and get at least 2 points from the remaining two matches. If Sweden can make it through to the quarter-finals, they could face the reigning European and World Champions Spain and that will be curtains for them. So there is added motivation for the Swedes to top the Group and a few games going their way can make their dream come true. If that happens, Swedes would be up against the struggling *Azzuri* or another underdog in the form of Croatia. This is quite a decent opportunity for them to feature in the last four and then, as they say, anything can happen.



Looking for support

Conclusion

So we are done with our own dark horses. Some of them face a trickier tie compared to others. While a dominant opponent from Group B - Germany, Netherlands or Portugal - might just be Russia’s hope for a last four berth, Portugal can spring in a surprise from the *Group of Death* and there is no reason why they cannot go all the way. Sweden seem to have the brightest chance of shining through as they are fitted against misfiring European giants whereas the Croats have to dig deep to salvage any pride out of this year’s competition.

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BEST XI

The Best XI is dedicated to heroes of Euros past.

With the European Championship being barely a month away, Goalden Times looks back at the previous editions in search of players who have performed exceptionally. There is no denying the fact that UEFA European Championships fall short of FIFA World Cup in terms of popularity and extravaganza. However, in terms of quality of football on display, it is no less than World Cup if not better. Given so little difference in quality of the competing nations the battle for supremacy have been of the highest order only to be decided by the brilliance of some gifted players. There have been performances by players which have caught the imagination of the audience and helped their country all the way to the glory. This month, Goalden Times tries to create a BEST XI out of all the players who have set the EURO alight with their performances as a tribute to them.

GOAL KEEPER: LEV YASHIN



Arguably the best goalkeeper the game has ever seen and the only custodian to win the Ballon d'Or, Yashin is the most apt choice for the Goal-keeper position. Always dressed in black and nicknamed The Black Spider, he was imposing and extraordinarily agile. Many critics even said he was ahead of his time in terms of goalkeeping skills. The 1960 UEFA European Championship contributed considerably to his legend and he was in especially brilliant form against Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia as the USSR won the inaugural title. Actually in the Final, Yugoslavia played better than the Soviets but only because of Yashin's heroics they had to settle with being the second best. In 1964, Yashin was again under the bar for the Soviets and they reached the final for the second straight time. But this time Yashin and his team were beaten by Spain.

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DEFENDER: GIACINTO FACCHETTI



Facchetti is remembered as one of the first truly great attacking-full backs, and one of the best ever in his position. Facchetti was the heart and soul of FC Internazionale Milano for almost half a century. He captained Italy to glory at the 1968 UEFA European Championship thus ending a 30 years trophy drought. He was in impeccable form throughout the tournament and just as the proverb says "Luck favours the brave", Facchetti was the man who made the right call on the toss of the coin after Italy's goalless draw with the Soviet Union, thus enabling the hosts to progress through to the final. In the final replay, Facchetti lead from the front, marshalled his defence well to keep a clean sheet and eventually helping his team to the glory

DEFENDER: FRANZ BECKENBAUER



One of the greatest players in the history of the game, Beckenbauer confirmed his presence on the international stage when he captained West Germany to their first UEFA European Championship title in 1972. Commanding matters from his new role of sweeper, his team dominated in 1972. They were in stupendous form, crowning an imperious run with a resounding 3-0 win against the Soviet Union, still the largest margin of victory in a UEFA European Championship final. Many regard the West German team, under Beckenbauer, as the greatest to grace the competition. Winners West Germany totally dominated the 1972 European Player of the Year poll with Beckenbauer occupying the top position. In

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the next championship also, Beckenbauer led his team to the final. However this time inspite of being favourites they came out second best to Czechoslovakia. Beckenbauer again was selected as the European Player of the Year.

DEFENDER: LAURENT BLANC



Blanc was voted into UEFA's Team of the Tournament in three successive UEFA European Championships, making the grade in 1992, 1996 and UEFA EURO 2000, where he bowed out with victory in the final – an honour cruelly denied of him through suspension at the 1998 FIFA World Cup. Nicknamed 'Le Président' on account of his authority, elegance and leadership, Blanc bowed out from the international scene after playing a big part in the 2-1 extra time victory over Italy. Even at the twilight of career, his efforts were herculean in 'Les Blues' road to glory.

DEFENDER: PAOLO MALDINI



One of the greatest ever defenders, Maldini played over 1,000 matches for club and country and made 126 appearances for Italy between 1988 and 2002. Maldini shone in several international tournaments, from his first (EURO '88) to his last (2002 FIFA World Cup), In the UEFA EURO 2000 final, where Italy came to whiskers of the Championship glory only to be denied by golden goal. In that tournament

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Maldini helped the Azzuris to keep the meanest defence in the tournament, Maldini won EURO Team of the Tournament places in 1988, 1996 and 2000 but he never could experience the Cup glory.

MIDFIELDER: MATTHIAS SAMMER



His Franz Beckenbauer-like performances as sweeper at EURO '96, where he played every minute of Germany's triumphant campaign and scored winning goals against Russia and Croatia was one of the highlight of the tournament. Being the captain, he led from the front and was inspirational throughout the tournament. Under Sammer, Euro 96 was a resounding success for Germany as they not only remained undefeated throughout but they scored a mammoth ten goals, while conceding a mere three. He was a revelation in the Libero role and Sammer was chosen as "The Most Important Player Of the Tournament" for his performance in the tournament.

MIDFIELDER: MICHEL PLATINI



Platini exceeded all expectation when he captained Les Blues to their first international trophy in 1984. He was talismanic for the Les Blues throughout the tournament scoring in all five matches, including back-to-back hat-tricks in group games against Belgium and Yugoslavia. His other three goals were all winners, including strikes in the semi-final and the final against Spain. Combining with Tigana, Platini

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formed such a deadly midfield combo which is rarely seen. Having top-scored in Serie A for Italian champions Juventus just before the tournament, Platini retained the Ballon d'Or and would become the first player to win it three years running.

MIDFIELDER: DRAGAN DZAJIC



Dragan Džajić is one of the most underrated footballers ever to play the game despite being one of the greatest left-wingers the world has ever produced. A dazzling dribbler, Džajić was named Yugoslavia's Golden Player to mark UEFA's Golden Jubilee in 2004. He saved his best for the UEFA European Championships. In 1968 he famously lobbed England goalkeeper Gordon Banks to score the late winner in the semi-final to give Yugoslavia a 1-0 victory against the defending world champion. He also opened the scoring in the final against Italy. The British press dubbed him "The Magic Dragan," in that year, Beckenbauer mentioned Džajić should win Ballon' Dor instead of George Best without doubt. He was also the top-scorer in 1968 edition. Again in 1976, Džajić was in his scintillating best making his way in "UEFA Team of the Tournament" for the 2nd time.

MIDFIELDER: ZINEDINE ZIDANE



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The finest footballer of his generation, Zidane's jour de gloire came when his two headers won the 1998 FIFA World Cup. Although crowned 1998 European and World Footballer of the Year, his performance at 1998 World Cup was sporadic. It was a different story two years later, he arguably played even better leading France to victory at UEFA EURO 2000, his late semi-final penalty against Portugal one of many highlights. He was the star of Euro 2000 as he was chosen as the 'Best Player' of the tournament. In Belgium and the Netherlands, Zidane dominated a major championship in a way no individual had managed since Diego Maradona in 1986. From the opening game against Denmark to the final against Italy, 'Zizou' shone brightly, casting a spell on his opponents with clever flicks, mesmerising stepovers, slaloming runs and masterful vision. The mark left by this footballing genius on the competition as a whole will never be forgotten.

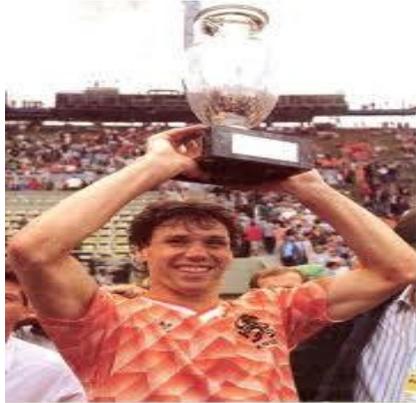
FORWARD: GERD MULLER



Should the word "legend" ever be used for sportsmen then it is one that is highly appropriate for this man, perhaps football's greatest goal-scorer. The centre forward was in top form at the UEFA European Football Championship 1972, which ended with the German team winning the competition for the first time. Der Bomber scored eleven during the 1972 UEFA European Championship campaign, including two in the final against the Soviet Union. Both were classic opportunist goals, or "kleine tore" as coach Helmut Schön often referred to Müller's predatory strikes. Muller finished behind Beckenbauer for the 1972 European Footballer of the Year award.

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FORWARD: MARCO VAN BASTEN



Van Basten led the charge of the Golden ORANJE generation to their first International Glory. Van Basten scored has many fabulous goals, but the one for which he will always be remembered is his volley against USSR goalkeeper Rinat Dasaev in the EURO '88 final. It was his fifth goal of the tournament, following a hat-trick against England and a late winner in the semi-final against West Germany. The Dutch marksman scooped the Golden Boot and would win the first of his three Ballon d'Or awards that year.



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Vintage Vignettes | How the Danes made it to Euro

1992

In this new feature, we look back at a particular incident in the history of football. This time it's the magnificent triumph of the Danes in Euro 1992.

Denmark's first appearance in FIFA World Cup was in 1986. However the Danish squad of the decade (1980-1990) was being christened as the 'Danish Dynamite' during their Euro 1984 campaign. In both the competitions they lost out to Spain but they had put on pretty strong performances. Preben Elkjær and Michael Laudrup emerged as one of the most exciting striking pairs of their time. The 1988 Euro was a disaster for them; they were in a difficult group and lost all their matches to Spain, Germany and Italy. Further, the team failed to qualify for the 1988 Olympics and 1990 World Cup. The manager of the national team Sepp Piontek decided to step down and his assistant Richard Nielsen took over.



This is just the backdrop of the (sur)real story of Denmark's finest hour in International football. Denmark started the Euro 1992 qualifiers with a 4-1 home win against Faroe Islands. The following game at Northern Ireland ended in a goalless draw. But the worst came next when Yugoslavia beat them 2-0 at home. Things got out of hands when the Laudrup brothers decided not to play for the national team

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following a tiff with the manager on his defensive tactics. Jan Mølby and Jan Heintze were sacked by Nielsen on disciplinary grounds. With the manager under tremendous pressure, the team bounced back by winning all of the remaining games. However they finished second in group behind Yugoslavia and failed to qualify for the finals.

How the team finally got a call to go to Sweden to play in Euro 1992 and ended up winning it is the stuff fairytales are made of. Because Denmark was not in the finals, quite a few teams were playing their last friendly games with them before reaching Sweden. It was May 31st, 1992, only 10 days before the Euro was to commence, the Danish team was in Brøndby, training for a game they had against the Commonwealth of Independent States. They were having lunch after the morning training sessions when they heard the rumour that Yugoslavia were expelled by UEFA due to international sanctions caused by the Yugoslav wars. But after they came back from their second training session, the rumour got confirmed and Denmark entered Euro 1992 as they had finished second in the qualifying group.



In the finals, Denmark was still defensive but thanks to Brian Laudrup's decision to come back and play for the national side gave them enough creative sparks to get past England, France, Netherlands and Germany and be crowned as the champions of Europe.

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