



gt

July, 2012 Edition

TACTICS ★ REVIEW ★ POST MORTEM

E U R O



0 7 2 2 1 2 G T 1 2

Ludo Ergo Sum ★

GOALDEN TIMES

GOALDEN TIMES

Declaration: The views and opinions expressed in this magazine are those of the authors of the respective articles and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of *Goalden Times*. All the logos and symbols of teams are the respective trademarks of the teams and national federations. The images are the sole property of the owners. However none of the materials published here can fully or partially be used without prior written permission from *Goalden Times*. If anyone finds any of the contents objectionable for any reasons, do reach out to us at editor@goaldentimes.org. We shall take necessary actions accordingly.

Website: www.goaldentimes.org

Email: editor@goaldentimes.org

Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/pages/GOALden-Times/160385524032953>

Twitter: <http://twitter.com/#!/goaldentimes>



Goalden Times

| *Edition XII* |

Starting Line Up

First Whistle5

Goalden Times marks the completion of its first year and looks ahead

Spain Writes History 7

Indranath Mukherjee sketches their glorious journey of Spain

Azzurri Surpasses Expectation 11

Rossella Marrai traces the journey for the Azzurri

Portugal – Bright Future Ahead19

Debojyoti Chakraborty shows how Portugal's performance vindicates Goalden Times' calling them the dark horses of Euro 2012

Die Mannschaft: Retrospection Required..... 23

Kinshuk Biswas analyses Germany's run in the tournament that they thought they were destined to win

Three Lions - Much Ado About Nothing 27

Krishnendu Sanyal takes us through England's usual non-performance at the big stage

The Journey Continues for France 31

Laurent Blanc becomes one more casualty at the altar of moulding a temperamental bunch of Les Bleus. *Ogo Sylla* reports on what failed him

The Dutch Debacle: Possible Solutions 35

Subhashis Biswas looks into the life of the Dutch beyond Euro 2012

Tactical Evolution at Euro 2012 42

Debojyoti Chakraborty analyses some new tactical trends that might just pave the way for future of football

Scouting Network 46

*Euro 2012 has thrown up many stars of the future. **Goalden Times** profiles JetroWillems*

Best XI 48

***Goalden Times'** selection of Europe's Best XI for the 2011-2012 Season*



First Whistle

"On life's vast ocean diversely we sail. Reasons the card, but passion the gale."

As this edition marks the completion of its first year of e-publication, it is with passion that Goalden Times forges forward in its mission to unite every football lover across nations in their vision to support evolution of freedom of expression and attain the goal of knowledge sharing across generations; finally, living its dream to fruition.

For the editors and all the staff of this periodical it has been a valuable and satisfying 12 months.

The magazine is intended as a medium by which everything under the sun surrounding the 'beautiful game' is conveyed in all humility, and a forum for debate on issues which are likely to shape the future of football.

When our first issue appeared, we did not know how much of a response we would enjoy. In the event, site views have risen slowly but surely with each subsequent issue and we are now attracting over 7000 hits per month. We could not have made this headway without your constant support.

Our aim is to offer a variety of genuinely different ideas and we have never made any attempt to impose editorial uniformity where the views of our contributors are concerned. We heartily encourage our readers to provide feedback as much as they can. Your contributions, whether formal or informal, are very welcome. We may be contacted via e-mail at editor@goaldentimes.org. Our home page address on the internet is: www.goaldentimes.org.

Goalden Times was conceived at a time when there was no football following Copa America. This year, the scene is a little different though. After the domestic leagues in Europe, we had Euro and now football in Olympics will nicely take us through the beginning of the European leagues.

Olympic football has kicked off with a stunner from Japan as they beat the European and World champions Spain. This naturally leads people to question how good Spain really is. Do they belong to the same league as the other great sides in international football like the Uruguayan team of the 1920s, the Italian side of the 30s, the Argentina team of the 40s, the Brazilian team of late 50s and 60s or even the French team of late 90s? Spain has always produced supremely talented football players who played with their contemporary international football greats, thanks to the high standard of the domestic league in Spain. However, before Euro 2008, Spain was tagged as the serial underachievers and rightfully so; but since then they have won everything that they have played for. Right after the Euro 2012 triumph, their under-19 team won the UEFA European championship.

Coming back to Euro 2012 - a tournament played across two time zones, two languages - two currencies, our team followed the game closely and brought insights before and after the game for our readers. In this issue we have done a team by team post-mortem of the big names in Europe.

The football transfer market has been simmering with Paris Saint-Germain leading the battle; they have already bagged Thiago Silva and Zlatan Ibrahimovic from AC Milan, Ezequiel Lavezzi from

GOALDEN TIMES

Napoli among others and are looking to strengthen their squad further by bringing in the likes of Luka Modrić. UEFA Champions league winner Chelsea has signed on three talented midfielders: the Brazilian wonder kid Oscar, Marko Marin of Germany and Eden Hazard of Belgium. We shall no longer see Park Ji-Sung donning a Manchester United jersey this year, but he will still be seen in English league playing for Queens Park Rangers. United's new signing Shinji Kagawa has already made an impact and will be the Asian prospect in England. Ballon D'Or winner Ricardo Kakà is facing an uncertain future as the Real Madrid boss José Mourinho has made it clear that Kakà will not be a part of his plan A next season. Kakà, however, is desperately seeking to return to regular football. Can he get back to his old club AC Milan and restore the glory days for him and the club?

We shall bring you more transfer stories and football news from the Olympics while stepping into Year Two of Goalden Times, looking for the same love and encouragement that we have received so far.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone, especially those who contributed articles and ideas, for helping us in our work over the last year. Working together with you all has been a most fruitful and rewarding partnership for us. We look forward to continuing our collaboration in future issues. May football unite us.

Follow football, follow us!

Spain Writes History

*Rarely is there a team that lives up to expectations on a sustained basis. Spain can be easily counted among them as they continue their domination in world football. **Indranath Mukherjee** sketches their glorious journey in Euro 2012*

Vicente Del Bosque's Spain became the first European nation to win the World Cup outside European soil when they triumphed in South Africa in 2008. Euro 2012 pre-tournament big question was whether they will be the first ever nation to successfully defend the Henri Delaunay trophy. They had a 100% record in the qualification with eight wins from as many games and followed it up with a 5-0 thrashing of Venezuela in a friendly. However, in other friendlies post World Cup 2010, Spain did show glimpses of doubt – losing 4-1 to Argentina, 4-0 to Portugal, 2-1 to Italy and 1-0 to England. But in the matches that matter, Spain's record under Del Bosque is almost flawless. Although the 61-year old modest and unassuming man as always shun the limelight by giving it to his players: *"I feel very privileged to have coincided with a generation of such brilliance"*.

Spain came to Euro 2012 as the clear favourites although Juan Castro of Marca thought that *"Germany is in a strong position to end the Spanish era."* Netherlands also came to the tournament with a near perfect qualifying round scoring an impressive 38 goals in 10 games with nine wins. Italy also had a terrific run in the qualification campaign and the curious (or spurious) correlation between scandals in their domestic football leagues and success in international tournaments (World Cups 1982 and 2006) had ominous signs for other teams.

Spain had their share of problems with Carlos Puyol and David Villa missing the tournament owing to injury and all the experts thought that due to the indifferent form of talismanic front man Fernando Torres, the Athletic Bilbao target man Fernando Llorente will be at the receiving end of all the chances that the fluent Spanish midfield would create. But Del Bosque preferred *tiki-taka* over being more direct; as a result Jesus Navas got very little playing time and Llorente did not get any.



Vicente Del Bosque, the soft-spoken football genius did something which none had done before, twice

GOALDEN TIMES

Spain's first group match was against Italy and Del Bosque started with a headless formation. The team started playing a version of *tiki-taka* which was more about passing the ball to wear the opposition out than creating chances for them. Two numbers from the 2010 World Cup semi-final between Spain and Germany sum up the result of this strategy – Spain had produced 160 passes more and Germany ran 1.2 miles more. The Italians, however, were up for the challenge and played a surprisingly attacking brand of football. The first goal of the match came in the 61st minute when Antonio Di Natale, who came from the bench in place of Mario Balotelli, first touched the ball. Spain was quick to react to get the equaliser through Cesc Fàbregas. The match finished 1-1 with the Italian side a tad more impressive.

Spain approached the second game against Republic of Ireland little differently with scorer of the first game Fàbregas giving way to Fernando Torres in the starting line-up. The impact was immediate; Torres scored his first of the two in the game in the fourth minute. Spain went on to win the match 4-0.

Spain was back to six midfielders and no striker in the final group game against Croatia and played their brand of offensive yet defensive football. Navas who came in as a substitute scored the only goal of the match in the 88th minute.

The quarter-final between Spain and France turned out to be one of the most underwhelming matches of the tournament. Spain continued to play without any striker and Laurent Blanc's French side looked overcautious to stop Andrés Iniesta while Xabi Alonso celebrated his century of international caps with a goal in either half of the game.



Xabi Alonso celebrated his 100th international cap with a brace

The semi-final between Spain and Portugal was a much awaited affair with the Portuguese captain Cristiano Ronaldo looking to drag his team to the peak. Del Bosque gave a surprise start to the

GOALDEN TIMES

Sevilla front man Álvaro Negredo who remained anonymous until replaced by Fàbregas in the 54th minute. After a not-so-inspiring 90 minutes, Spain did show some flair in the extra time and finally won the game 4-2 on penalties. Del Bosque later revealed that Cesc wanted to take the fifth penalty to be able to take the winner whereas Cristiano Ronaldo who was to take Portugal's fifth one did not get to take his as the match was already decided.

The penalty of the tournament until this game was the atrocious Panenka by Andrea Pirlo against England in the quarter-final. Sergio Ramos, whose penalty in the Champions League semi-final against Bayern Munich had reached outer space as per rumour, did a Panenka with élan.



The Panenka by Sergio Ramos was more than a penalty; it was about making a statement

The final was all where it started in Group C. By then not everyone was convinced about Spain and Italy looked solid as ever with a complete demolition of the Germans in the semi-final where even the postman celebrated. Italy started the game well and before David Silva scored the first goal in the 14th minute, they actually looked almost equal to Spain, if not marginally better. Spain started with the now usual headless formation but their football was sharper, more attacking version of *tiki-taka* with an interesting mix of direct football. Jordi Alba's brilliant strike in the 41st minute came from a brilliant Xavi Hernández through and by that time Italy was completely down and out. Spain added further assault when the substitute Torres scored in the 84th minute and finally Juan Mata, who came in as a substitute in the 87th minute, scored with his first touch. The final result 4-0 is an ample testimony of Spain's supremacy in international football today.



The victory parade in Madrid after writing a new chapter in international football

The current Spain side shows that success indeed breeds success. Up until Euro 2008, they were tagged as the serial underachievers of international football. But with the golden generation of footballers and a strong belief in their brand of football, Spain became the second team to win three successive major tournaments after Argentina who had won the Copa America (then called the South American Championships) in 1945, 1946 and 1947. As Juan Mata put it succinctly, *“There’s a real faith in the approach now; the legacy of victory is a confidence for the future too”*.

What is even bad news for other footballing powerhouses worldwide is that the current Spanish team does not show any sign of slowing down. Barring Xavi, no one’s on the wrong side of 30 and we may well find the same bunch of players in the forthcoming World Cup 2014 in Brazil, unless they get replaced by even better ones – only to make them a more unbeatable lot. Although the possibility is not an overtly optimistic one, the Spanish supply line is in full throttle. Their Under-19 team just won the UEFA European championship barely a week ago.

Azzurri Surpasses Expectation

*Euro 2012 once again showed how Italy can rise from the darkest depths of controversy. **Rossella Marrai** traces that journey for the Azzurri*

Prandelli Pride in Azzurri Voyage of Discovery

In the words of Vincent del Bosque, ‘everyone loses sometimes’ and it was Italy’s time to lose on Sunday July 1, against the mighty, and quite possibly the greatest teams of all time, Spain. Having gone through the Euro 2012 campaign undefeated up until the final game, *Azzurri* coach, Cesare Prandelli bowed out in a dignified manner.

“It has been an extraordinary championship. Now we have to grow over the next two years. We went through some hard times by staying united. We also showed that we can lose with dignity. I’ve complimented the players.”



Prandelli: It has been an extraordinary championship

A highly impressive qualification campaign instilled some hope in the hearts of the nation of a possible semi-final berth. However, the final weeks of build-up was far from fruitful than that of the yellow brick road they would surprisingly discover.

Calcioscommesse, Earthquakes and Potholed Build-up

In 1982, a betting scandal shook Italy, but astoundingly the *Azzurri* managed to keep their wits about them to be crowned FIFA World Champions for the third time. Similarly, in 2006, a match-fixing

GOALDEN TIMES

scandal erupted across The Boot, which involved big teams like Milan and Juventus, and this time it was Marcello Lippi who instilled serenity inside the squad while everything crumbled in league football.

That year Fabio Cannavaro hoisted the highly sought-after prize and six years later it was no different. Another betting scandal broke out and it left a tremor of fear when fellow Italian defender Domenico Criscito was hauled up for questioning.



Police raided the camp at dawn

Once all the players were at the disposition of the coach at the famous training camp of Coverciano, the squad was assigned two official friendlies, against Luxembourg and Russia. Undeniably not enough time to iron out any possible formation and tactical doubts that hung over Prandelli.

The first pothole they encountered was on May 29, 2012. Not only did it affect the former Fiorentina tactician's preparation but it was a nationwide tragedy, in the shape of a 5.9 magnitude earthquake that hit Emilia-Romagna -- the region in which Italy were set to face Luxembourg.



The earthquake hit northern Italy

With the death toll rising, there was no option but to cancel the game; leaving just one friendly match against Russia to get things right. Worlds away from the impressive form of the qualifiers, the *Azzurri* stooped to a 3-0 loss to Group A contenders. It was a loss which immediately resulted in numerous pundits writing off *La Nazionale*.

Voyage of Discovery and Avoiding the *Biscotto*

Little did they know that a sweet and sour voyage of discovery would lie ahead for Captain Gigi Buffon and his boys! *Alla stile Italiano* (in Italian style) the *Azzurri* would get off to a slow start in their Group C matches.

As the football gods of fate would have it, Italy's opening and closing game would be against Spain. Andrea Pirlo and company managed to hold their own against Andres Iniesta and his colleagues in the opener, where they grabbed the breakthrough in the game.

Fortune always favours the brave and it did so, although for all of three minutes, for Italy and Antonio Di Natale. The Udinese front-man boldly replaced an anonymous Mario Balotelli, and rightly so, as he pitched in the first goal of Group C with his first touch.

Since he wasn't part of the Euro qualifiers, it would be a memorable first touch in 2012 for him after having not featured in a competitive game for Italy since their 3-2 loss to Slovakia, in South Africa in 2010. A bitter memory of thus having hit the final missed penalty in 2008 quarter-finals against the same adversary was also laid to rest.



Antonio di Natale exorcised a demon from 2008 scoring with his first touch

That impressive 1-1 draw with Spain was followed by a barrage of wasted chances against Croatia. Failure to make the most of opportunities created, Italy's only incision was Andrea Pirlo's stunner of a free-kick and that was cancelled out by the newly-anointed household name of Mario Mandzukic.

Back-to-back 1-1 draws were far from what Prandelli had in mind, as nothing but maximum points would be accepted in the final match against the already eliminated Republic of Ireland, all while hoping Croatia wouldn't hand them the famous *biscotto* which so famously haunted Italy in their 2004 elimination in the Euro against Sweden.

"No, I'm not angry," the 54-year-old tactician said after the match against the Croats. *"Of course we are a bit annoyed because a side that plays football and creates chances needs to kill off the game."*

"Football is rather unique in that way, because just one cross can ruin everything you have built up over the course of a game, so we have a lot of regrets."

Nevertheless, the best way to get over regret is to eclipse it with the better part of what it could have been and that is exactly what they did against their ally-turned-enemy, Giovanni Trapattoni. Capitalizing on two openings directed at goal, Antonio Cassano and Mario Balotelli gave Italy their first win of the tournament, marking a turning point in their attitude. With Croatia having lost 1-0 to Spain, the *Azzurri* had managed to dodge the potholes and reach the yellow brick road.

Progress continued by eliminating England in a 4-2 penalty shoot-out, which saw Pirlo, or rather 'Twinkle Toes', effortlessly graze the ball past Joe Hart to perform the famous *cucchiaio* or Panenka penalty.



Pirlo's perfect Panenka

Whilst fortune, or perhaps destiny, may have played a hand in Italy's rise, few would have favoured the chances against Joachim Löw's men; few, except the highly criticized Mario Balotelli.

More often than not it is dangerous to make a bad boy angry and even more so when he is in the public eye. Balotelli let his feet silence the critics who were all but crucifying him for not living up to expectations. *That* 'Balotelli moment' came with a header and an unstoppable diagonal shot clocked in at 128km per hour which sent Italy through to the final of the European Championship. And 'Balo' lived up to the tag of 'SuperMario'.



Balotelli's Bulldozer

It was indeed a special moment for him and the *Azzuri*, one they would cherish as: "*The most beautiful day of my life. I have waited for this moment for so long, especially with my mum here, I wanted to make her happy.*" It was like this one act had united the squad, Prandelli was getting the recognition he deserved, and an air of belief had restored itself in the training camp.

"We came here with lots of non-football related problems, and also the friendlies we played during our preparation went pretty badly," Gigi Buffon told UEFA.com before the climatic event. *"So that's why we were a bit afraid of playing a bad tournament. But along with the coach we managed to find the right atmosphere within the team, so we could make it here."*

Italy feel *La Furia Roja*

Spain, the defending European Champions and World Cup winners, were up next and they were on a daunting unbeaten run, of competitive matches, stretching back to their 1-0 loss to Switzerland in their opening match of the 2010 World Cup. Since they had already played Vincent Del Bosque's 'false nine' side to a draw in the opening Group C encounter, the Italians had the confidence but lacked fitness.

The Italians had already played thirty minutes longer than the Spanish, excluding the penalties taken, and were subjected to less rest than their counterparts. Fatigue and injuries were so rife that Andrea Barzagli and Daniele De Rossi could not train the day before the final, Claudio Marchisio was struggling to get into full fitness. Giorgio Chiellini and Thiago Motta were both not 100% fit from their injuries picked up in the course of the tournament and it evidently took its toll.

Chiellini was replaced in the opening 21 minutes due to injury, while Thiago Motta reduced the side to 10 men, due to injury, after just three minutes of coming on. There was little the game changers such as Pirlo and Balotelli could have done during the 4-0 drubbing which left Prandelli awestruck.

"When we fly over Kyiv and see the stadium lights I will have pangs of disappointment but I leave proud," Prandelli said after the game.

Testa Alta, Heroes and Cassano's Victory

Despite the monstrous defeat, the *Azzurri* returned winners, for having restored faith in their fans and above all, themselves. Like the papers printed: *Testa Alta*- Heads held high.

With a shining squad comes a group of star players and Buffon, Pirlo and De Rossi were undoubtedly Italy's best trio. Having only conceded three goals up until the final, the skipper proved once more why he became one of the highest-priced goalkeepers on the transfer market. Not only did he control his Juve-inspired backline, but his passion and belief in the squad carried Prandelli's men through the nerviest of moments.

Pirlo's poise, elegance and grace were stupendous to watch. With each touch of the ball the former Milan man proved he was a dictator of play, from the backline right to the front. The midfielder's vision was in a class of its own and his goal against Croatia remained the only goal scored directly off a free kick in the tournament. It was a strike which embodied everything that is Andrea Pirlo.

GOALDEN TIMES

De Rossi proved to all why he hails from the Eternal City. With one hand in bandage and a sciatic nerve problem, De Rossi fought like a true gladiator through the pain barrier. Breaking up play and clearing balls, the Roma player was a class act from the boy which famously elbowed Brian McBride during the 2006 World Cup. His selflessness to help the team even saw him step into the centre of defence, where he intercepted play as if he had played there his whole life.



A story of triumph of human spirit

And although Italy may have left Ukraine with the silver medals, one person walked away with much more than the medal and a runners-up tag. That man was Antonio Cassano. Having suffered a stroke last November, it was initially feared that the Milan striker would never get on to the field again. But not only did the braveheart overcome a heart operation, he even made it to Prandelli's hand-picked team for the Euros. His eagerness to return paid off and he managed to score a goal and bag two assists, a stellar victory in itself.

While the players may have been fighting off their tears of disappointment after the final whistle, Cassano had one thing to celebrate and that was the most important thing of all: *life*.

Prandelli Project

The Orzinuovi-born tactician can exude so much humility and joy for he has had his baptism by fire and come out a proud man. Just two years after taking charge from some great predecessors, Cesare Claudio Prandelli took the brave step to change an ultimately successful set-up. The dynamics and outlook of the game were changed. The Italians were playing with passion and hunger once more; they were managing to control the majority of the game and poked around the goal post a lot more.

Formation adaptations from a back-three and back-four were done with ease and the stereotype of the famous *catenaccio* play was dropped. All this was done with success, while keeping the identity of Italian football intact. They turned out to be the most alarming, yet highly positive dimensions in the Italian squad.

Light criticism may have been thrown in the direction of the coach for the underuse of youngsters such as Angelo Ogbonna, Sebastian Giovinco and Fabio Borini. But with a long future ahead under the eye of the youth development king, Prandelli has provided them with an experience like no other and one they can only build upon.

The 'Prandelli Project' will continue to grow during next year's Confederation Cup tournament, a prelude to the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil, and if this year's tournament is anything to go by, *I TreColori* (The Three Colours) will be favouring their chances of success.

"As long as we play football we are a good side. So long as we try to take supremacy in midfield we are a good side, but if we try to protect a result we become a side with a thousand fears. I have to compliment my team because they really played an excellent tournament," said the master tactician, appreciating his team.

Portugal – Bright Future Ahead

Goaldden Times had classified Portugal as one of the dark horses of Euro 2012. Their performance in the tournament vindicates that. **Debojyoti Chakraborty** reports

Pitted against two star-studded sides in the group stages, not many in Portugal were that much optimistic of a good campaign at the Euro 2012. A few decent players and quite a few completely unknown to the vast majority of football fans worldwide; looking up to ‘*The One*’ aka Cristiano Ronaldo for inspiration – it was not a script that looked rosy before the tournament started. Moreover, Portugal had not fared well at the 2010 World Cup. More than their results, what disappointed fans the most was their pathetic football which lacked any sort of ambition and imagination under Carlos Queiroz.

The current manager Paulo Bento was not having a happy time either. Defender duo of Ricardo Carvalho and Jose Bosingwa refused to play for the *Seleccao* under him during the build-up of the tournament. Over-reliance on CR7 for goals was heavily criticised. But Bento had a vision and he stuck to it. He did not hesitate to start with Rui Patricio ahead of established shot stopper Eduardo and Patricio paid back his manager’s faith by having a brilliant tournament.

Things started pretty badly for Portugal. Not many eyebrows were raised to see Germany beating them 1-0 on match day 1. But Denmark’s victory over the Dutch made life very difficult for the *Seleccao* in the *Group of Death*. In the second match, Portugal made life difficult for themselves against the Danes and had to rely on a last gasp winner from Silvestre Varela to clinch a 3-2 thriller. In the final group match against Netherlands, Portugal needed to at least match Denmark’s result against Germany to progress through. Things looked gloomy for them as Rafael van der Vaart put Netherlands ahead in a must-win-and-hope-for-other-results match for the *Oranje*. This is when Cristiano Ronaldo, who had been heavily criticized and mimicked for his performance so far in the tournament, came on to his own. His scintillating performance, capped with a brace, put Portugal through to the knockout stages of Euro 2012.



Punching above their weight

GOALDEN TIMES

The best footballer in the continent put up another brilliant display to seal a berth for the semis as his goal was the difference between Portugal and Czech Republic in the quarter-final match. They were unfortunate to bow out against Spain in the penalty shoot-out in the semi-final, but nevertheless they have left a lasting impression. Ronaldo may ponder over his whole life what might have been had he not held himself back for the last penalty kick (which was not required!). But he certainly had a very good tournament to be proud of, both as an individual and as the captain of a young and ambitious team.



Can hardly watch it

The results were encouraging and Portugal impressed one and all. Ronaldo took the responsibility and besides his goals and hitting the framework numerous times, charmed football lovers with his play. Joao Moutinho emerged as the star performer for them and looks set to improve as time passes by. Among youngsters, Patricio and defender Fabio Coentrao stood out and they should be nurtured with care for future development.

The core of this team is expected to remain the same for the next few years. Captain charismatic Cristiano Ronaldo does not look like slowing down – why should he, he is only 27 after all – and he will be motivated to win a silverware for his country after winning all-there-is-to-be-won at the club level. Pepe at the back and the midfield trio of Moutinho, Miguel Veloso and Raul Meireles will also be around in full throttle for some more years to come. Few players may come in and go out as part of natural footballing cycle but the team seems to be on the right track.



Not anymore a one-man team

One man looking certain to remain with the team is Paulo Bento. Amidst all the controversies before the start of the campaign, he has shown that he knows how to handle pressure. He has stuck to his principles – not selecting disinterested players - and decisions – starting with second choice goalkeeper – and has taken full responsibility for the outcome. He has galvanized the team well and has brought back an attacking flair to the team’s play. This is a commendable impact considering he only took over in the qualifying stages when things did not look all that bright.



Bento has earned the respect of his team

He, though, has plenty of work to do. His work list ought to start with finding a decent central striker. Ronaldo seems more effective if given a free roaming role. He can start wide but would naturally drift in, drop back and can create havoc in the opponent camp more often than not. For that to happen, Portugal badly needs a world class target man up front but the options are not that great. One only hopes some youngsters would develop in the next couple of years to bolster the Samba party. Portugal team seems comfortable playing a traditional 4-3-3 formation. But as the modern trends unfold, this strategy may lose out to the midfield battle against a strong team playing 4-2-3-1 (as seen against the Germans). But Bento cannot try out this new look, at least for now, as he does not have a *Number 10* to dictate the game (a la Rui Costa).



Hopes flying high

In back-to-back major tournaments, Spain has proved to be the nemesis for Portugal. But the similarity ends here. If World Cup 2010 was a horror show, Euro 2012 has been the complete opposite. Fans back home and across the globe should not be disheartened with the showings from a young team. They started and ended their campaign with defeats – not too bad considering they were playing against the two top ranked teams in the tournament – but they sandwiched some praiseworthy performances in between. It was good till it lasted; Portugal will certainly hope to make it better next time.

Die Mannschaft: Retrospection Required

*The German team thought this was their tournament; they thought they were destined to win it. At the end it was another semi-final exit. **Kinshuk Biswas** analyses their performance in Euro 2012*

Germany, one of the pre-tournament favourites of Euro 2012, finished as one of the losing semi-finalists. A great result for other teams but not for the *Mannschaft*. After losing the final of the 2008 edition and World Cup semi-final to Spain, this team was considered the closest challengers to the Spanish. Eventually the team lost to their old nemesis Italy yet again in the latter stages of a major tournament.

Bright Start

Germany was the only team to qualify with a 100% record in the group stages. In the first match against Portugal they were lucky to come away with a win. They dominated possession and controlled the play but the defence did not look solid with Jérôme Boateng, a converted centre-back playing at right-back, looking shaky. The midfield looked solid but not spectacular. Mario Gomez scored the only goal of the match with a clinical header. Portugal created some good chances with a Pepe shot bouncing on the goal-line after hitting the underside of the bar. However, Germany did look the better team with a more positive outlook in the first match.

The second match, a mouth-watering meeting against the Dutch, was a bit of an anti-climax as the Germans were in a different league outplaying their opponents. The final score of 2-1 was flattering to the Dutch due the plethora of chances missed by Thomas Mueller and Mario Gomez. Gomez looked very sharp scoring two more goals. The defence was better but there was a feeling that goals could be scored against Germany with Robin van Persie scoring a nice goal for Holland.

Going into the last match, Germany was in a situation that a win against Denmark would guarantee them the top spot in the group. The manager was forced to make changes in defence, with Boateng suspended, playing Lars Bender at right-back. Lukas Podolski, playing in his 100th match, scored for the Germans. Again Germany conceded a poor goal from a corner kick-off, a Nicklas Bendtner header. The team created chances in the second half before eventually winning by a goal scored by Bender.

The 'Debt Derby' and Old Nemesis

The quarter-final match against Greece was the most dominant match played by the German team. The manager had made three changes bringing in the young Marco Reus, Andre Schurrle and the evergreen Miroslav Klose. The Germans finally breached the Greek defence with a superb Philipp Lahm goal. The team conceded a silly goal against the run of play. Stung by the equaliser, the Germans lifted their play to a different level scoring three goals. This was the best the Germans had played in the tournament and looked as the only team which could possibly challenge the Spanish.

GOALDEN TIMES

The semi-final was against old opponent Italy who had been reborn from the ashes of their disastrous World Cup campaign of 2010. Germany has never beaten Italy in a major tournament losing out on three occasions and drawing thrice in European competitions and World Cups. This time Germans were overwhelming favourites but there was always a sense of *déjà vu* against the *Azzurri*. The Germans started brightly with Gianluigi Buffon having to make some spectacular saves in the opening stages. Then Italy took control and Antonio Cassano easily got past the defence in the left wing to provide a perfect cross for Mario Balotelli to score. Balotelli scored a magnificent second goal to give the Italians a comfortable lead. The Germans tried their best to score an early goal in the second half but did not succeed and eventually scored off a penalty in injury time.



He needs introspection

Tactics and Retrospection

The tactics of Joachim Löw was not under the scanner as the team was winning. His idea was simple - score goals by attacking play and if we concede goals we can score more. This idea was fine till they played a side with a good defence like Italy who do not concede goals easily. Of course there are days like the final when Italy concede four goals, but those are few and far between. Jerome Boateng, a centre-back being used as a full-back, was a major problem which was brutally exposed against Italy. Löw further got his team selection wrong against Italy. He was moving away from his attacking system which did not work. He selected Toni Kroos as a defensive measure against Andrea Pirlo. Kroos was deployed on the right side of midfield which was again not his normal position. Löw

GOALDEN TIMES

should introspect and understand that for a good team like Germany, reactive tactics and selections based on opponents' strengths are not a most effective method. Germans should have played to their own strengths rather than worry about the strength of the opposition. The man, who tactically decimated the English and the Argentines in the last World Cup, blundered in a very uncharacteristic manner. At the end it was just one match in which Germany was defeated and they can be reasonably pleased with their performance.



Mats Hummels: a new star

Stars and Looking Ahead

Löw has been retained by DFB (German Football Association) as the manager till the next World Cup. He should get his team selection correct. He has the advantage of having a large pool of young players. Mats Hummels was very good and his partnership with Holger Badstuber should continue for a long period, as both of them are only 23 years of age. The team needs to look at Jérôme Boateng's role as a full-back which was not successful in the tournament. Philipp Lahm may need to play right-back as he does for Bayern and Marcel Schmelzer should be given an opportunity at left-back. Lars Bender can also be made right-back with Lahm continuing his left-back role. Lahm was more effective at right-back for his club than his role as left-back for the national team. Bastian Schweinsteiger was not his usual attacking self in this tournament although his injuries may have played a part. Germany could start using Kroos in his role more as is the practice at Bayern Munich. Podolski looked a shadow of the player he was and with young guns like Schurrle and Reus,

GOALDEN TIMES

impressing his days in the starting XI maybe numbered. Mesut Özil and Sami Khedira both had a good tournament and both being relatively young will figure a lot in the future. Mario Goetze, the German Messi, did not get too many opportunities but should feature more in the coming years. Germany has to look beyond Klose for a second striker as an alternative to Mario Gomez but they can also go the way of using a lot of their attacking midfielders as forwards. The future is looking bright as there is a large number of exciting young talents who will break through. It is all about the team selection and tactics which the Germans should concentrate on and the results will definitely be there.



Marco Reus



Mario Goetze

Three Lions - Much Ado About Nothing¹

Another big tournament, another failure. England's non-performance at the big stage continues. Krishnendu Sanyal takes you through the agony of watching England's abject surrender and another penalty shoot-out failure

Familiarity, so they say, breeds contempt. England can relate.

England has been there before, to the extent that it seemed quite inevitable. England is out of another tournament on penalty shoot-outs and again failed to beat a 'major' football nation.



The kick that finished it all

This quarter-final was different to the other quarter-final exits that preceded it. At least against Portugal (2006 World Cup) and Brazil (2002 World Cup), England gave their opponents a decent run for their money. Against the Italians, England were by far the second best team. The Azzurri created more chances, had better possession and Roy Hodgson's two banks of four was clearly intending to park the bus and winning the lottery via a set-piece.

This doesn't mean England had a bad tournament. There were a few positives to take away from Poland-Ukraine and was definitely an improvement on the disaster that was Germany 2006.

¹Title courtesy: Souvik Basu

Roy Hodgson: Deserves more time



Deserves time

Roy Hodgson's tactics were considered negative by many and the possession statistics clearly second that thought process. On the other hand, we can say Hodgson was building a base from which he can start his work and was using the resources that were available to him.

We mustn't forget that for varying reasons England were unable to call on John Ruddy, Chris Smalling, Gary Cahill, Kyle Walker, Micah Richards, Gareth Barry, Jack Wilshere, Tom Cleverly, Frank Lampard, Michael Carrick and Darren Bent. At some point all of them would have been considered for selection for the tournament.

Who knows what would have happened if Hodgson had a Jack Wilshere and a Michael Carrick at his disposal. We should also remember he had only a month to prepare the team for the tournament and come 2014 World Cup qualifiers, when he will have had more time, his tactics might not be as rigid and defensive as it was during the tournament. The Fulham and West Brom teams of Roy Hodgson were an organized bunch but were not as defensive as the England team, so he deserves more time to work with the team and with better players at his disposal, he might make a difference to the England set-up.

As I earlier said, Hodgson built a good base. While defending, the back four together with Scoot Parker and Steven Gerrard conceded only 3 goals in four games plus an extra half hour and 2 of

GOALDEN TIMES

them came against Ukraine. The defence was rigid and organized and rarely lost its shape and together with the midfield, were a difficult structure to break down. That is an extremely good record and something that the team can definitely build on, especially with the manager having more time and players becoming available after recovering from injury.

Truth Be Told

There were negatives though. A number of players had a poor tournament. Ashley Young flattered to deceive and was nowhere close to replicating his club form with Manchester United. To be fair to him, he spent most of the time in his own half and was running into blind alleys when with the ball, due to the rigid tactics of play that England adopted. Wayne Rooney was banned for the first two games, came back and scored a goal against Ukraine but was largely anonymous against Italy. He looked off the space and England should really contemplate on whether they should take a player to a tournament if he is unavailable for the whole duration or look for his alternatives who could be a part of playing eleven from the start of the competition.



Unimpressive duo

But England's greatest problem is their woeful passing. The ball seemed to bounce off every England player straight to the opponent and many passes were strayed and pointless. The most ridiculous statistic that showed England's problem was that the best pass conversion for England players in the quarter-final was between Joe Hart and Andy Carroll. The problem is both technical and tactical. If you put on a passing drill, I don't think any England player of the squad will hit 10/20/30/40 passes and that is due to the British way of playing football. The tactical side is that England players are very rigid when it comes to positioning, they rarely create enough room or space to create an opportunity for pass to be made, and opponents find it easy to read the game and get the ball back under their possession.

Moving Forward

England will have to progress. Functional football such as this is good as short-term fix, but wholly unacceptable in the grand scheme of things. For some such as John Terry and Frank Lampard (who was injured here), they will need to be phased out. Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain can expect a bigger role in the future; Jack Wilshere's return from injury will be met with great anticipation.



Wilshere - Hope for the future

So there we have it, positives and negatives. A disappointing exit to a tournament where England did better than expected, there is hope for the future and certainly some good elements to build on but, and it may be a cliché, the hard work really does start now for Roy Hodgson and his men.

The Journey Continues for France

Laurent Blanc becomes one more casualty at the altar of moulding a temperamental bunch of Les Bleus. Ogo Sylla reports on what failed him

It has been six years now since the World Cup 2006 final and France still seem to be struggling to make any real headway in international tournaments. Of course, this may be a harsh view, and a more clement judge might offer some kudos to Laurent Blanc's side for being the first to have progressed beyond the group stages of an international competition since that fated final in Germany. Beyond such a raw analysis, however, *Les Bleus* have made very little headway as a team, given their image at home.

Les Bleus under Laurent Blanc played as a completely different outfit from when Raymond Domenech was in charge. Blanc did away with the double-pivot midfield and switched to a 4-3-3 which looked to impose itself technically and open up the pitch. Blanc had often openly expressed his admiration for the Spanish style of play, which was the platform of his discourse upon his appointment and the cornerstone of his *projet de jeu* (project/style of play).

France opened their Euro 2012 campaign against England, where after completely dominating the match, they could only manage a 1-1 draw. They went on to perform much better though in their second match against tournament hosts, Ukraine, handily brushing them aside in the second half-scoring two quality goals. With four points in the group, it would have taken a miracle for France to get out of the groups and a win against Sweden would secure them top spot. It was perhaps that complacency which saw them fall 2-0 to an inspired and spirited Swedish team. This defeat did not prevent France from securing a quarter-final berth although it did allow England to top the group putting an end to its 23-match unbeaten run under Blanc's reign. A defeat, ill-timed indeed, as *Les Bleus* would find themselves pitted against the defending champions, Spain in the next round.



Lax defending cost France the top spot with a defeat against Sweden

GOALDEN TIMES

Though France had not been the most convincing of teams so far, it certainly showed that Blanc's *projet de jeu* had taken hold. Yohan Cabaye was the surprise package and standout player of this French side, as well as symbol of Blanc's vision: technically gifted, good range of passing, and generous in his contributions on the pitch in terms of team ethics. Franck Ribéry went through a bit of a metamorphosis throughout this Euro. The Bayern München winger had become a prominent hate figure amongst many French fans following his involvement in the Knysna 'bus of shame' incident at the 2010 World Cup in South Africa. However, he entered this competition with an irreproachable attitude. Ribéry worked hard for the team and was one of the few consistent and dangerous players on the team. The one individual, who really disappointed both Blanc and the fans, was unquestionably France's star player: Karim Benzema. The French striker was coming off his best season with Real Madrid and had really matured as a player under Jose Mourinho. However, he showed none of that during the EURO, with only two assists (against Ukraine) to his name.



Ribery and Benzema hardly fired together. Giroud was not utilised

Besides the players though, we also have to assess Blanc and how he managed the team during the Euro. This was Blanc's first international competition in a young coaching career and this was always going to be a great challenge for the Frenchman. We already mentioned the impressive 23-match unbeaten run Blanc oversaw and how his vision seemed to be finally taking root. Irrespective of the many positives about Blanc's tenure, there were some negatives as well that many a fan found it difficult to come to terms with. One of them was his deployment of Benzema as a no.9 and his refusal to partner him with Ligue 1 top-scorer, Olivier Giroud. One of Benzema's main issues as a striker is that he often evacuates the penalty area to link up deeper in midfield. In fact, the striker is

GOALDEN TIMES

more of a *neuf-et-demi* (nine-and-a-half) and benefits from the presence of a certain Cristiano Ronaldo (in Real Madrid) who fills that space up front when Benzema drops deeper. So Blanc's system with Benzema operating as a no.9 left the penalty area unguarded. The issue is all the more aberrant when we consider how simply the solution could have been implemented with Giroud or even Jeremy Menez who could have emulated Cristiano Ronaldo's movement in the final third (when we consider that Carlo Ancelotti played him as a no.9 in the final stages of his season with PSG).



Much of Euro was spent like this

Blanc's greatest failing, however, came during the fated quarter-final against Spain. The problem is not so much the loss to the most dominant international side of our generation, but Blanc's decisions during this penultimate game. Against Spain, Blanc attempted to counteract the Andres Iniesta threat down *La Roja's* left flank by playing with two right-backs: Mathieu Debuchy and Anthony Réveillère. Now there's nothing too scandalous about this except when we consider the fact that Blanc also stationed a defensive midfielder, YannM'Vila, slightly to the right of midfield for further reinforcement. It became all the more ironic when both full-backs were beaten and found themselves unable to stop Jordi Alba's cross from the left which Xabi Alonso turned in for the opening goal.

The more pertinent point though, besides Blanc's over-cautiousness in his fixation to seal Iniesta, was what his choices on the day let transpire. It had nothing to do with sending the wrong message to his team. It had more to do with going completely counter to his whole *projet de jeu*. After berating the English for having refused to play and defending throughout the game against France, Blanc turned around and did just the same. After stating that he wanted a team that imposed its

style and that did not react or change its style regardless of the opponent, Blanc did just the opposite. Two years at the helm of *Les Bleus*, yet it was this incoherence which made Blanc's entire work come to naught. In fact, in this single game against Spain, Blanc willingly and effectively threw away his entire *projet de jeu* and was unceremoniously thrown out of the Euro for it.

It's difficult to come away with many positives regarding *Les Bleus'* exit from Euro 2012. Besides the 23-match unbeaten run and France managing to come out of the group stages of an international competition, we are really left grasping at straws. One could point out that France did also manage to win its first match in an international competition (France 2-0 Ukraine) since the 2006 World Cup, but at this point it somewhat sounds like a backhanded compliment.

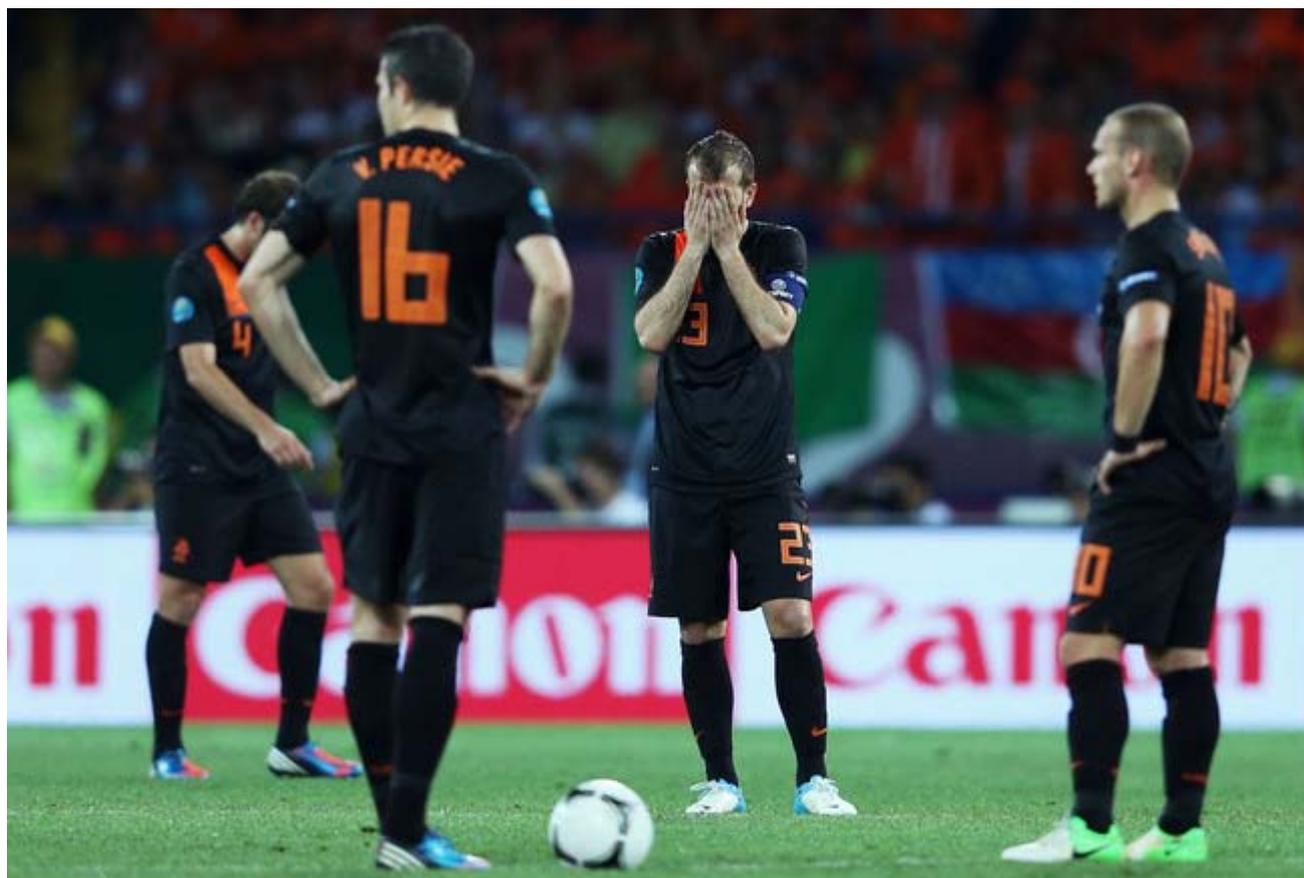
One of the alarming things from it all is that Blanc has failed in his operation to bring the team any closer to the hearts of the supporters. Whether it was the team's performance against Spain or off-field incidences like Samir Nasri along with a few others publicly taking on the media and causing a rift in the dressing room, there has been a clear disconnect. Nasri, Jérémy Menez, Yann M'Vila, and Hatem Ben Arfa have all been summoned before a disciplinary commission of the French Football Federation (FFF). Blanc even stepped down from his post following a strained relationship with FFF president, Noël LeGraët. Didier Deschamps is in Le Graët's line of sight but the former Marseille coach has reportedly temporarily rebuffed the FFF president's feelers. Of course, Deschamps' agent, Jean-Pierre Bernès – who is also Blanc's agent – could become a sticking point in any negotiation knowing Le Graët's apprehension of the super agent's closeness to the FFF organization.

Today France finds itself without a coach, is out of another major competition and has sullied their public image before their own fans and the international public. Despite all the talk about Domenech having been a national pariah and Blanc the supposed saviour of French football, the *Les Bleus* haven't really climbed out of the trough in the past two years.

The Dutch Debacle: Possible Solutions

History repeats itself as favourites Netherlands self-destroy themselves in yet another major tournament. Subhashis Biswas looks into the life of the Dutch beyond Euro 2012

When the final whistle blew at Metalist Stadium, Kharkiv on Sunday, June 17, the expressions on the faces of the Dutch players on the pitch were almost the same as they were two years ago at Johannesburg. Arjen Robben, Rafael van der Vart, Robin van Persie and others were all either looking blankly at the turf or to the sky!



No place to hide faces

The difference? In Jo'burg, they had failed to win a World Cup final in their third attempt. In Kharkiv, they lost three competitive matches in a row in a major tournament for the first time in their footballing history, and thus bowed out of Euro 2012 empty-handed.

We have all seen what happened on the pitch with Dutch football in this Euro, so shall not deep dive into it. It will suffice to say that they simply did not finish effectively. The story could have been a whole lot different had they scored goals in the first match. They had created many chances, and going by the calibre of their goal scorers, they should have won that match at least 3-1.

GOALDEN TIMES

Unfortunately, that did not happen, and nothing did happen for them afterwards. Their match with Germany was reminiscent of the Italia 1990 round of 16 match-up, sans the Voeller-Rijkaard saga. Holland was almost non-existent in that match, and some poor finishing by the Germans saved them from further blushes. The movements, the penetrations, the punching finish, were all quite evidently lacking. Could be players like Giovanni van Bronckhorst were being missed considerably.

Anyway, as there is no way to turn the clock back, at least in the real world, let us move on. It is important to think, how the Dutch should move forward, because within three months the World Cup qualifiers will be here.

A lot of people may think that this crack in the Dutch scenario is nothing much to worry about. Every possible good player is available at various positions. Maarten Stekelenburg has done his best and he is a worthy torchbearer for the likes of Edwin van der Saar. He can be nurtured into the future captain of Holland. Over the years we have seen their goalkeepers uniting a football squad short of spirit. Dutch football need not entertain the thought of a complete overhaul. Their football association must conduct a root cause analysis of Dutch failure. Not only in this Euro, but time and again, the Dutch players have been to big tournaments with plenty of dressing room problems.

Most of the Dutch star players play in separate teams, where they are indispensable for their club sides. Come national team scenario, there is bound to be some omissions from the starting eleven, and that's where the problem begins. Having too many talented, but egoistic players vying for the same position is recipe for disaster. That is what happens with them most of the times. There were problems regarding different types of players and camps within the Dutch squad in earlier days. The Dutch team that won Euro 1988 was a tough one, and such was the stature of Ruud Gullit at the time, that other players got united under him and delivered the best performance by a Dutch side, recorded till date. But almost the same set of Dutch players then lost to Denmark in a penalty shoot-out at Euro 1992 semi-final, and stories of rift in the squad started pouring in. Before delving into the rift theory, let's take a quick look at the current Spanish squad. Most of the players in the Spanish national team play their club football in Real Madrid and Barcelona - two of the fiercest rivals of club football, or for that matter any form of football, and the rivalry stretches much beyond the football ground. Yet when the time comes, all men playing under the *La Furia Roja* banner unite like they are part of one body, and deliver like there is only one goal in their life. That's how professionals ought to play. Different individuals may have diverse upbringings, opinions and egos. But on the pitch, there should be only one goal- to put the ball inside the opponent's goal, and protect it from entering your own.

Football is a simple game, but players tend to complicate it. Bert van Merwijk created problems by his poor reading and judgment of the squad. Mark van Bommel, alas, is no longer one of the great holding midfielders to have donned the orange jersey. Making him the captain,, when some other worthy players are warming the bench, does not look like a wise idea. Wesley Sneijder and Rafael van der Vaart are both creative players and to accommodate them in the squad, Bert van Merwijk could have employed Robin van Persie as wide-left out to partner Klaas-Jan Huntelaar. The

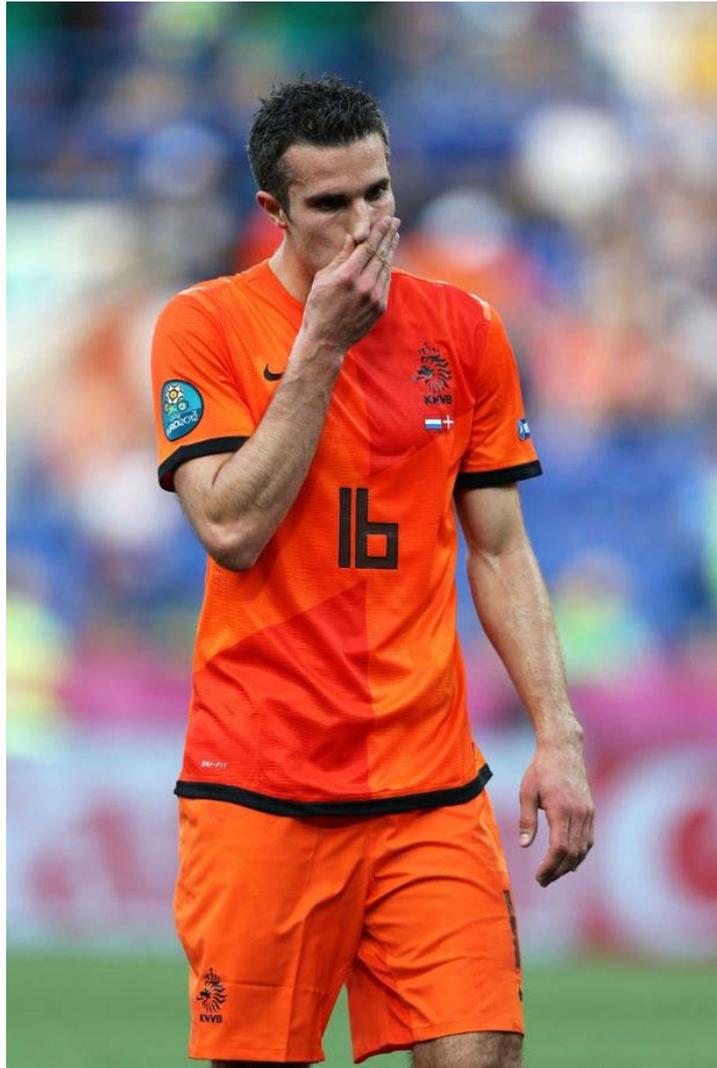
formation would have been 4-3-3, and Holland could have looked more effective in that scenario. But that meant son-in-law Mark van Bommel sitting on the bench. The coach's daughter probably would not have liked that!



Unimpressive, clueless

Rafael van der Vaart had a relatively good season at Spurs, and was expected in the starting line-up for the *Oranje*. But he ended up on the bench more often than not. Same with Huntelaar. Recently Johan Cruyff billed him as the 'next best thing' in Dutch football. After rather poor stints at AC Milan and Real Madrid, Hunteelar has settled in Schalke 04 for the last couple of seasons and found his goal-scoring touch. He wasn't too pleased at not seeing his name in the starting XI. And those who were in the starting eleven did not live up to expectations.

Robin van Persie has scored a plethora of goals in EPL this season and carried the Gunners almost single-footedly to the next season's Champions League. Yet, he failed to deliver in the Euro. In the first match against the Danes, he wasted a fairly simple chance of scoring at the start of the match, shooting the ball well over the bar from a relatively close range. He never was allowed a free shot at the goal in the rest of the match. Sometimes the Danish defenders suffocated the Dutch forward line at the edge of the penalty area and the Dutch players were forced to shoot from a long range, albeit ineffectively.



Was it him or his clone?

That 0-1 loss to Denmark probably took all the steam out of the Dutch team. What everybody termed as the match of the Euro, after the draw, the Germany-Netherlands encounter turned out to be a badly one-sided affair. Thanks to some missed chances by Thomas Muller and Mario Gomez, the score-line looked a respectable 2-1. Something similar happened against Portugal as well. A bright start, a superb Rafael van der Vaart goal, and then Ronaldo stole the show, and the Dutch slowly but surely faded out of the tournament, registering three losses in a competitive tournament for the first time in history.

Robben jumped out of the ground from the far side and was not seen in the bench after being substituted in one match. He never looked like a team player. Sneijder admitted that the Dutch dressing room was not a place where people treat each other as friends. As long as the common goal of winning trophies remained intact, he did not have any issues with it. But the problem persisted. All the big players with their self-proclaimed superiority over the others, wanted to increase their price in the club football market. After all, the previous Euro had given rise to the likes of Andre Arshavin and Luca Modric. One could barely see the pride of playing for the country. Mark van

GOALDEN TIMES

Bommel was saying a lot of things to his previous club mate Bastian Schweinsteiger after the Holland-Germany match. Bastian was consoling him. Consolations do not heal wounds. Unless you feel the depth and pain of the wound, you will never be able to heal it. I have seen the blank faces of Dutch players after the match against Portugal, but that pain was missing. They have to feel the agony of losing, in order to succeed in the future.

What

next?

What lies ahead for Dutch football? First step: out goes Bert van Merwijk, enter Louis van Gaal. Yes, Louis van Gaal. Last time when he was the coach for a substantial period of time with the Holland national team, they failed to qualify for 2002 World Cup; their only failure to qualify for a major tournament in recent times. He tasted some success with Ajax, followed by Barca, and his last big assignment was with Bayern Munich. Overall, as the football world recognizes him, he is a decent coach. But here, old wine is served in an old bottle. The Royal Dutch Football Association (KNVB) thinks this is the right step forward. Although, quite a few people have doubts regarding his appointment.

Coming to players, who are the new bloods in Dutch football? First thing that popped up in my mind after the debacle in Euro, is that I missed a player named Giovanni van Bronckhorst. The ex-Arsenal and Barcelona player was a link between defence, midfield and wing players. He changed positions along the flanks frequently, and sometimes used to cut back inside effectively to create scoring opportunity. Holland lacked versatility in Euro. Same old left flank runs by Robben or powerful shooters by van Persie were no more a threat to opponents who were well prepared this time.



Ron Vlaar: there is promise

Ron Vlaar is creating some excitement in EPL. Some of the mid-table EPL clubs are after him. Names like John Heitinga, Joris Mathijsen and Gregory van der Wiel are common in football circle by now.

GOALDEN TIMES

The problem is players like Nigel de Jong have not evolved in the last few years. Holland is getting stuck in the midfield, no supply line, not many players who can orchestrate a game from the midfield. Wesley Sneijder needs to change his approach. He will have to get back to the level of the second half of 2010 World Cup match against Brazil. He is becoming more of a dead-ball player nowadays.

Patrick van Aanholt has been on loan in various clubs after 2009, and played just a couple of matches for Chelsea. He is a young speedy defender. Good coaching can help him cut down juvenile mistakes, based on which he can have a bright future. Jetro Willems is a strong defender, who can play in centre back along with his usual left back position. These two should be good prospects as full-backs. They also have Erik Pieters, Alexander Buttner and Urby Emanuelson to consider for the full-back positions. Urby is rather an experienced player, having played seven seasons for Ajax and currently with AC Milan.

In central defence, Daley Blind, son of Danny Blind, is a good prospect. He needs a strong marker as assistant, and some names that can pop up there are Ryan Donk, Jeffrey Bruma and Nick Viergever. Jeff Bruma has played a few games for Chelsea, and then was on loan to Leicester City and Hamburger SV. His height and presence in central defence makes him an intimidating player. Jeffrey Gouweleeuw can be another choice, though he is short on experience, and need some more playing time at the club level before he can be tested in national team. But the man who will rise strong in the central defence and counter opponent attacks both on the field and air, is Douglas Franco Teixeira. He is a sure choice for the Dutch in Brazil 2014. The defence needs to be built around him.

As holding midfielders, Dutch playing style allow only one player in that role. Kevin Strootman did not get a look-in although he was in the Euro 2012 squad. Nigel de Jong is still there, but if freshening up the squad is the agenda then Kevin is definitely a choice. He can be used as a sweeper too. Another option is Stijn Schaars. Schaars is an experienced campaigner, having played most of his club football at AZ Alkmaar, and moved to Sporting Club de Portugal last season. Some other names in this position are Jordy Clasie, Leroy Fer and Vurnon Anita. Vernon Anita came through Ajax youth ranks and has been a consistent performer for Ajax in the last few years. He was also selected in the preliminary squad for 2010 World Cup, but was not picked for the final squad. Martin Jol introduced him as left-back, but later he was more successful as defensive midfielder.

In the more creative role as a midfielder, Netherlands is well set. Wesley Sneijder and Rafael van der Vart should play together to open up the field in a more effective way. They will need some support in the upper half of the field. Marco van Genkel and Adam Maher can both be their support and backup.

Up front, Luuk de Jong is creating headlines. He had three fairly reasonable seasons with Twente, and several clubs from EPL and other leagues are looking to sign him. He recognizes the goal. He has a sense of where the opponent's goal is, and his effectiveness in putting the ball inside the net is admirable. Dutch Eredivisie generally consists of good big defenders and Luuk de Jong showed promise by scoring goals against those defenders.

GOALDEN TIMES

Bas Dost has been the top-scorer of Dutch Eredivisie in the 2011-12 season. He scored 32 goals in Eredivisie last season for SC Heerenveen and will be playing for Bundesliga club VfL Wolfsburg in the coming season. Under the guidance of Marco van Basten, who knows a thing or two about goal-scoring, Dost learnt the art well and can be a great prospect for the national team. He has the looks and movements of a striker. KNVB will do well to nurture him.

So the talents are there. Dutch Eredivisie has always been the place from where some spectacular world beaters came up, played the game in an artistic, passionate yet steadfast way, and achieved glory through the years, though mainly at the club level. The current group playing inside the Netherlands boundary is also capable of doing great things in future. Holland is like an emotional and unpredictable pop singer - creative minded, passionate, sometimes beautiful yet sometimes straightforward. And, like we all know, a pop singer's life will always be eventful. Sometimes their shows are a complete sell-out, while at other times you won't find many followers. Sometimes they might disappoint you, but can leave you spellbound too.

We cannot revisit the past and alter the course of history. Also, old habits die hard. However, what Holland need now is stability. They are due to catch the plane to Rio de Janeiro come summer of 2014. Other than Turkey, they will not have much competition to face in their World Cup qualifying round group. How they will fare in Brazil, depends a lot on the next few months. Will the artistic pop star rise again? As football lovers, we await the return of "*Rhythm Total*".

Tactical Evolution at Euro 2012

With the UEFA Euro 2012 having drawn to a close, pundits decipher the new trends in football. While some tactical displays have caught the eyes and might just pave the way for future of football, some strategies simply did not work and will pass on like a fad. **DebojyotiChakraborty** brings it all under one roof here

Azzurri turn the clock with a three-man backline

The Azzurri started the tournament with an abandoned 3-5-2 formation. Their three-central-defender ploy worked to an extent as they were able to hold on to a hard-fought draw against the mighty Spanish team. They must have been influenced by Juventus and Napoli, who deployed a pure three-back system successfully last season in Serie A. [Such was their influence, 16 other teams had experimented with this strategy sometime or other in the last season.](#) Elsewhere, Barcelona also plays with a lop-sided 4-3-3 where Dani Alvez pushes further up the flank to make it similar to 3-4-3. Major criticism of this system has been its tactical deficiency especially playing against a solo forward. One of the central defenders marks the lone striker when another one covers him. The third member of the back trio now becomes redundant and hence the opponent gets a man advantage. This is exactly what happened when Spain had a focal point in attack in the form of Fernando Torres as he exploited the high line of Italy. Yet Cesare Prandelli used the system well as a shock element and bamboozled his opponents. It allowed the strikers to play further up the pitch and their interlinking with the advanced central midfielder duo became more dangerous. As the tournament went on, Prandelli reverted to a traditional back four but the opposition teams were always guessing which strategy they will be up against in the next match.



Three Lions deploy two banks of four

Roy Hodgson, the newly appointed England coach admitted before the tournament started that they do not quite belong to the group of big boys at this moment. Also, he made no secret of the fact that England lack a midfield maestro who can influence the game like an Andres Iniesta or Andrea Pirlo. So he thought, *"If I cannot play a free flowing attacking game, let me stop the opponent from doing so."* In came the (in)famous Chelsea model – implement two rows of four men to counter the attacking threat of the opponent. To start with, it was a 4-4-1-1 but the midfielders dropped back without fail when England lost possession. The graphic blow was a regular occurrence for the *Three Lions* when the midfielders provided an extra shield to their defenders. The front men also tucked in as Hodgson was keen to keep the shape. No English player was caught offside in the group stages - a statistic which shows their lack of desire and ambition. This is a model which is used for smaller teams playing against more accomplished opponents, but they invariably get broken down due to superior skill of the stronger team or as the fatigue creeps in due to humongous work rate during the closing stages of the match. Once in a while, this defensive strategy might just work, but do not expect this system to appeal much to the football lovers.



German counter punch to the flavour of the season

With the beginning of this century, holding midfielders have grown in importance in world football. With the commencement of this decade, teams have started using two of them to counter attack threat of opposition and thus 4-2-3-1 seems to be a favoured option for most of the teams. Having two men anchoring the midfield in the form of destroyers frees up the full-backs to venture forward. It also allows the coaches having to find only one decent striker in the starting line-up as they have been an endangered species of late. Some teams look to play a midfield diamond but very rarely have we seen any team starting without a defensive midfielder. Joachim Löw figured out if he starts with two proper box-to-box midfielders, then it will be very difficult for the opponent to mark them. Thus if Samir Khedira lunges forward to join the likes of Mesut Ozil, Mario Gomez, Lucas Podolski et al, Bastian Schweinsteiger will stay back. If the opportunity comes, he can join the attack and

Khedira will automatically drift back. This kind of strategy works brilliantly as the midfielders will have a roaming role and neither of them is being restricted to merely hold the fort.



I'll have them all – La Espanyol style

Spain is undoubtedly the team of this generation, if not the greatest national team ever to have embraced the game. So powerful is their current squad that Vicente Del Bosque can easily field two teams against each other and it will be very difficult to say which team will emerge victorious. Well, Spain did use their squad depth to some extent when they had as many as six midfielders in their starting line-up. Playing Cesc Fabregas in a 'false nine' role was a decision tempted by the injury of David Villa, indifferent form of Fernando Torres and inexperience at the highest stage for others around. This was the toast of the season with all the teams baffled by this striker-less formation. It will be interesting to see if teams worldwide can reproduce this system – having a strong team where each player can play different roles will be a must – but Spain did come up with a master class as they went on to lift another major trophy with some ease.



Passing Thought

Teams have become more fluid now. *Micro Tactics*, as they call it, defines the minutes of movements of a player during the course of any particular match. This may sound like making the

GOALDEN TIMES

game more mechanical which prevents the creative players from showcasing a moment of magic. Of course not! Top class players like Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo will roam around the pitch to influence the game as much as possible. But it will then be the responsibility of others around to fill in different roles to augment their main playmaker's movement. This allows coaches to change shape during a match without bringing in any substitute. Sometimes this can be done to create an impact in the match – as Real Madrid tinkers around from 4-3-3 to 4-2-3-1 – or to exploit any susceptible weakness of the opposition – as Joachim Löw assesses the match to shift from one formation to another. This is exactly how a football manager game is played – players will have a starting position but their role will keep on changing continuously.

Scouting Network - Jetro Willems

Goalден Times brings you the stars of tomorrow – 20 years or under, promising players from across the world



Date of Birth: March 30, 1994

Height: 1.70m

Position: Left-back

Nationality: Dutch

Club: PSV

Market Value: €1.5 mn



This Scouting Network™ is based on Euro 2012 and no one deserves to be featured more than the boy-man - Jetro Willems, who broke a 28-year-old record to become the youngest ever player in the history of Euro Championships. It is an honour that was not just held by a random player but one of the national legends of Belgium - Vincenzo 'Enzo' Daniele Scifo. Scifo had audacious skills as a youngster and was compared to Pelé but he never rose to such heights. Scifo though, was capable enough to be only one of three Belgians to play in four FIFA World Cups. Willems would do well to emulate that record.

The rise of Willems is not sudden. He has been breaking the age group records all along his development. But his big break came in 2011 when he was part of the Dutch U-17 team that won the European U-17 tournament for the first time in its history. Even more sweet was the fact that Holland didn't concede a single goal up until the final, where they thrashed the Germans 5-2. That was an amazing 368 minutes of goalless journey and Willems was one of two defenders, chosen along with the goalkeeper in the team of the tournament for that.

A transfer move was inevitable after that. Willems, who had begun his career at Spartaan '20 and then moved to Sparta Rotterdam in 2010. The big clubs were already aware of him and Sir Alex Ferguson wanted to bring him to Manchester United. Arsene Wenger was interested in him too. But Willems ultimately remained in Eredivisie by moving to PSV for a sum of € 800,000.

GOALDEN TIMES

The season with PSV was eventful. He started 20 matches in the league, scoring a goal and assisting two. That goal made him the youngest goal-scorer in the Eredivisie for the season. He made his European debut in a UEFA Cup match with Hapoel Tel Aviv and this made him the youngest Dutchman ever to appear in a European contest. Amidst transfer speculation in the winter window, PSV quickly extended his contract till 2016.

When Dutch national coach Bert van Martwijk included him in the 32-man list, it was a signal of great progress. When he was included in the 23-man squad, it was thought to give him some exposure with the team and nothing more. Vurnon Anita would have been the chosen left-back. But come the opening fixture, Martwijk kept faith in the young 18-year-old, who had only made his debut for Holland two weeks before the opening fixture in Euro. It was a baptism by fire. Holland in a *Group of Death* crashed out without a point. The defence didn't hold on well. Willems though only missed 24 minutes of action, as he was substituted in the final group game for a desperate goal.

From the season he has had in the Euros, it is evident that Willems is more comfortable going forward than defending at the back. He made 5 tackles and four intercepts while fouling 5 times in those three matches. But he made many run ins down the left, crossing eight times. He also had a pass completion percentage of 90.8%. He needs to work on his positional skills and anticipation better. Defensively, he still requires tightening up and with age on his side that should not be a problem. His physicality and technique will hold him in good stead though. With the dearth of quality left-backs in the European game, Willems is a guy worth keeping your eyes on.

Europe's Best XI for 2011-2012 Season

Best XI is a compilation of interesting events or snippets from the football world across different locations that we share with you. Best XI will seek to be about topics you are interested in and want explored. You may mail your requests to editor@goaldentimes.org

The Champions League Final on May 19 at the Allianz Arena marked an end to the latest European season. With its fair share of drama, controversies on and off the pitch and above all footballing brilliance, it has been quite an enthralling season. Let's take this opportunity to look back at the season that is gone to decide upon a team of eleven players that can be put across as the Europe's Best XI.

Goalkeeper: Manuel Neuer



The Bavarian shot-stopper in his first season at the club has been in imperious form. He set the club record of maximum time without conceding a goal bettering the previous record of Oliver Kahn. Bayern Munich has been sort of unlucky as they ended the season trophy-less but they went on to play the final of Champions League, the DFB-Pokal Cup and finishing runners-up behind Borussia Dortmund in the Bundesliga. During the course of the season, Neuer was hugely influential for his team as Bayern conceded the least number of goals in the domestic league. In the Champions League semi-final against Real Madrid, he saved penalties from Kaka and Cristiano Ronaldo to take his side through to the final. So probably there is no other candidate who could stake his claim as the keeper of the team more than Neuer.

Defender: Branislav Ivanovic

The Serbian defender was probably the most consistent performer of the Champions League winning Chelsea backline. He is not a traditional right-back but was preferred in the position ahead of the inconsistent Jose Bosingwa. Ivanovic always provided security at the back with his no-nonsense approach, at the same time he was never shy of going forward and helping out his strikers. Chipping in with a few goals added further dimension to Ivanovic's repertoire (five goals, which includes the winning goal against Napoli, from a defender in a season is an asset to any team). Chelsea's topsyturvy season took a complete U-turn under their care-taker manager Roberto Di Matteo and it was his defensive organisation that won plaudits. Ivanovic's virtuoso performance in the way to the final, especially against Barcelona in two legs of semi-final, deserves special mention.

Defender: Mats Hummels



It can be safely said that Mats Hummels is the most talented upcoming defender in Europe. At such a tender age, the maturity shown by this lad is tremendous. His game-reading, positioning, tackling is top-notch and in spite of being a centre-back, his ability to bring the ball out of the defence to initiate attacks marks him special. His vision and eye for a pass is quite exceptional unlike other rugged German defenders of recent times. For the last two seasons, his partnership with Neven Subotic has been a hallmark of the brilliant *Die Borussia* side and when Subotic was absent for a period last season due to injury, Hummels single-handedly marshalled the defence to see his side through that difficult phase. Keep an eye out for Hummels as he will continue to develop as one of the finest modern defenders.

Defender: Vincent Kompany

It has been quite a fairy tale season for Vincent Kompany, the captain of the Manchester City side that reclaimed the League after a gap of 44 years. Kompany was a true leader of the side in every sense of the term. He led from the front with his solid displays right through the season. It is hard to remember a single match where he took a wrong step. With the experienced Kolo Toure absent at

the start of the season, he took up the responsibility to settle City's defence. Kompany was so important to Roberto Mancini's plan that when he was absent in City's line-up due to injury and suspension, his team's performance clearly suffered and coincided with a slump in their form. Along with this, Kompany's ability to chip in with important goals was crucial in City's success. City fans will fondly remember his header against their archrival Manchester United in probably the championship deciding match.

Defender: Giorgio Chiellini

The Italian defender who is considered by many as a suitable successor to Fabio Cannavaro, Alessandro Nesta and Paolo Maldini was a standout performer of the unbeaten Juventus side. In what has been a standout season for the *bianconeri*, the side only let in a staggering 20 goals throughout the season. Chiellini who is strong in the air and never hesitates to go in for tackles stood up for the challenge every time and together with his fellow defenders formed a defence which was nothing short of a rock wall. At the same time it is interesting to note that Chiellini had one of the highest conversion rates in terms of accurate passes which shows how he helped his team to build up attacks from the back, thus providing a solid foundation on which the team's success was built.

Midfielder: Yaya Toure

What a buy this Ivorian midfielder has proven to be for the newly crowned English champions! For the last two seasons, he has justified every penny that has been spent after him. This season he has gone from strength to strength and has responded every time City has looked to him to get out of a crisis situation. There are opinions that bench strength of City is what that makes them stronger than their closest opponents, but Toure is probably one of the few players who can't be replaced in this brilliant City side. When he was away on duty for his national side in AFCON, City was visibly short of options to replace this midfield dynamo. What makes Toure special is his ability to adjust his game according to his team's need and situation. Mancini has preferably used him as a deep-lying midfielder but whenever required pushed him up to create havoc in the opponent box. His consistency throughout the season was a treat to watch.

Midfielder: Xavi Hernandez

It's sometimes very difficult to assess the level of impact of this midfield maestro's contribution to the all-conquering Barcelona side. May be a few statistics will make clear the high level of standard that Xavi maintains week-in and week-out. He made an incredible average of more than 100 passes per game with an ability to find his teammate at 92.6% accuracy. In terms of creating goal-scoring opportunities, Xavi plays second highest number of key passes in the team behind the one and only Lionel Messi. Make no mistake, he is the man who makes this genius Barcelona side tick. His contribution will only be felt properly once he decides to hang up his boots.

Midfielder: Andrea Pirlo (C)



The best masterstroke of Juve coach Antonio Conte was signing of this midfield general. The way Pirlo inspired the Turin giants to their dream season is quite exceptional. In the opening game of the season that saw Juve demolish Parma 4-1, Pirlo created two goals and completed 110 passes! Gigi Buffon later told *La Repubblica*: *"It's the bargain of the century for us. Seeing him play in front of my back line, it made me realize that God does exist."* Pirlo carried this form throughout the season and lived up to his nickname of *l'architetto* (the architect) . On the field, his poise, control and vision was remarkable to say the least, he played the second most number of passes after Xavi in the continent and conjured up the maximum number of assists (13) in Serie A. Along with these, his class, composure and leadership skills helped Juve to its record-breaking season.

Forward: Cristiano Ronaldo



GOALDEN TIMES

Just look at Cristiano Ronaldo's statistics for the season (60 goals in fifty-five games!); except the genius of Leo Messi, it is difficult to see which other present day footballer can scale those heights. He led Madrid to their 32nd *La Liga* title last season thereby ending Barca's reign for the last three seasons. Ronaldo scored the winning goal in the season's last *El Clasico* derby at Nou Camp which literally ended Barca's hopes of a consecutive fourth *La Liga* title. It was also a big response from Ronaldo who has been previously criticized for his lack of match-winning performances in the *El Clasicos*. It will be interesting to see whether Ronaldo manages to win his second *Ballon D'Or* this year.

Forward: Lionel Messi



The boy wonder has continued to amaze the football world with his exceptional talent this season too. He managed a staggering 73 goals this season, by far the highest ever scored by a player in a single season. In terms of assists, he is second highest behind Mesut Ozil. In terms of trophies, he and his Barcelona team may have ended the season on a disappointing note but on the personal front, he has pushed the level higher and higher - the highlight of his season being the scoring of five goals in a single match against Bayer Leverkusen. The Messi magic has continued to startle us for the last four seasons and words are no longer sufficient to describe his achievements.

Forward: Sergio Aguero

Last season was his first in English football and what a special one it turned out to be for Sergio 'Kun' Aguero. He scored quite a few crucial goals that helped Manchester City to their title after 44 years. Every City faithful will probably remember for years the goal Kun scored in the stoppage time against QPR that ultimately clinched their title from the grasp of their fiercest neighbour Manchester United. He became the talisman for City as the season progressed and scored goals when it mattered

GOALDEN TIMES

the most. His partnership with David Silva was quite exciting at times and besides scoring goals, Kun helped his team with some assists too.

So that's the team selected as representative of Europe's Best XI for the season 2011-2012. There is no denying the fact that some wonderful players had to be left out of this team in spite of their brilliant individual performances throughout the season. Special mention must be made of Robin Van Persie, Zlatan Ibrahimovic, Mesut Ozil, David Silva, Joe Hart, Mario Gomez, Franck Ribery and Antonio Valencia who were brilliant last season. However, it doesn't matter whether these gifted players get into a team or not, they will continue to perform at top level for coming seasons and mesmerize every football fan.

