

Iberian foes' decisive match

Sunday's game will be a crucial one for both Spain and Portugal

Once again Spain's football pundits throw up their collective hands in despair as the Spanish team shows signs of going wobbly in only their second match of Euro 2004, against Greece, who seem to have a habit of disconcerting the bigger national teams. Last Saturday, the Spanish sports press was quietly confident after Spain's victory against a subdued Russian side. Much of this confidence was inspired by Spanish coach Iñaki Saez's jammiest-ever piece of luck when he brought on Juan Carlos Valerón and the substitute scored after only 42.3 seconds (yes, they really do like their sporting statistics here in Spain).

But the fact is, Spain didn't have a great game, and everyone was expecting an improvement against Greece. But they were doomed to disappointment. The El Periódico headline was "Same old story" - or rather, here they go again - getting our hopes up with a fine goal in the first half hour and then collapsing in defence and conceding a soft goal from the unmarked Charistreas.

This means that Sunday's match against Portugal is crucial for Spain - they have to win or draw to pass into the next round, assuming that group leaders Greece beat the totally demoralised, Mostovoi-less Russian side. For Portugal, it's a win or nothing.

And that is a problem for Raul's boys, because Portugal's fortunes have been going in the opposite direction to Spain's. Last Wednesday against Russia Portugal showed why they have been placed among the favourites to win Euro 2004 on their home turf. Scolari astutely replaced Couto with the erratically brilliant Deco, and sure enough, the coach had an Iñaki Saez moment in the first ten minutes when his decision



England beat Switzerland 3-0 in a lacklustre display

The 3-0 scoreline was a flattering one for the English team considering the dire performance that they gave yesterday evening in Coimbra. Goals came from Rooney, Stiel (own goal) and Gerrard, though they proved to be the only high points in a game that was hampered

by the scorching heat - over 35 degrees celsius when the players took to the pitch.

But it was a welcome victory for the English team after Sunday's nightmare game. Also, Rooney became the youngest-ever European championship scorer.

brought the first goal. Deco's first shot at goal rebounded to Maniche, who thumped the ball home past the static Russian defence. Portugal, who went on to score a second goal, looked a completely different side to the disorganised mob they were in the opening game of the tournament against Greece.

And so the stage is set for what promises to be a fascinating duel between the two teams of Iberia - one with their star on the ascendant, while the other team's star - Raúl González - is still badly off form.



Morientes' goal against Greece had Spain popping open the cava too soon



Javier De Pedro finalises move to Blackburn

After several months of speculation about his future, the ex-Real Sociedad player Javier de Pedro is set to move to the English club Blackburn Rovers for next season.

Graeme Souness, the manager of Blackburn, was delighted when he heard the news yesterday. "De Pedro is an excellent player, and our fans will be proud to see him wearing the Blackburn strip".

He added, "He is a winger with great experience, and he is bound to bring us lots of goals".

ITALY Totti faces ban

Francesco Totti, Italy's star forward, could end up missing most of the Euro 2004 championship after he was captured by Danish TV cameras spitting in the face of Denmark's Christian Poulsen during the Italy-Denmark game last Monday. The Uefa disciplinary committee was due to meet last night to decide on Totti's punishment, which could entail a four-match ban. However, the incident went unnoticed by the Spanish referees. Rafael Guerrero, one of the assistant referees, said: "This kind of behaviour is clearly unacceptable."



The veteran Dutch midfielder Edgar Davids - he's just a boy who can't say no - or yes, for that matter\Juanma Ramos

Exasperating Edgar tries Barça's patience

What is Edgar Davids playing at? The 31-year old midfielder whose arrival sparked Barcelona's return to form last season is fast turning from hero to villain at Barça after negotiations to prolong his stay there have ground to a halt.

Three weeks ago everything looked rosy when Davids' agent stated that his client wanted to stay on at Barça, and a week later the club accepted a deal whereby the Dutchman would stay on for another three seasons. But then only five days ago,

"Dame" Edgar (as the Dutch call him because of his exotic Edna Everage glasses) suddenly said he wouldn't decide anything until after the game between Holland and Germany. Laporta must have taken a deep breath on hearing this - and an even deeper one two days later when Davids changed his mind yet again and said he would make his decision after Euro 2004. Since then, he has lapsed into silence. Come on, Edgar, make up your mind, you're not getting any younger, you know.