



Figo has been galvanised by the home crowd's support and after a shaky start against the underdogs Greece, has led the younger players, such as Cristiano Ronaldo and Deco, to victory

King Figo leads crusade

Portugal have made the most of home advantage to reach the final as the players surf the crowd's enthusiasm

MICHAEL BUNN

After the initial reality check that saw their team lose to Greece, Portugal fans now obviously consider themselves favourites to win Euro 2004, and nothing has encapsulated their renewed hopes more than a banner being flourished during Wednesday's victory over Holland. It read: "Figo = King Sebastian returned!" King Sebastian of Portugal disappeared in the crusades in 1578 and ever since then there has been an Arthurian-type legend that he would magically return in Portu-

gal's hour of need. Clearly some think that time has come, and Figo and his merry men bear the nation's hopes on their shoulders.

Many national sides have benefited from playing a World Cup or Euro championship in their home country. England and France won the World Cup in 1966 and 1998, respectively, while South Korea proved that if a modicum of talent and a superhuman work rate is backed up by the sheer willpower of millions of your fellow countrymen, then there are virtually no limits to

what a team can achieve.

The fact that Portugal are playing on home turf has been enormously important for the team, as instead of simply imploding with Iberian fearfulness after the minor disaster of the first match, they made an instant recovery to win their next four matches against Russia, Spain, England and Holland. No doubt part of their incentive was the nagging thought that if they - the host side for the 2004 championship - didn't shape up quick then they would not be able to show their faces in Lisbon for

months without being showered with abuse. But then once they had started playing well - against England - it was clear that the team had begun surfing on the home crowd's encouragement rather than being driven on by the threat of national opprobrium, and none of the players showed this more than the ur-hero of Portuguese football, Figo.

This hugely talented player has not only been the heart and soul of the Portuguese team for years, he is also a marketing dream with his stern matinee-idol looks. Although

he was the only one of Madrid's "galacticos" who wasn't embarrassingly bad during the last weeks of the league, he was not at his best, and it was heartening to see that the cheering of his fellow Portuguese in the Holland match galvanised Figo.

Now for the first time, Portugal have reached the final of a European Championship, which will be played at the Stadium of Light in Lisbon where, way back in 1991, two young men called Figo and Rui Costa won the under-21 World Championship for Portugal.

"Wise men" pick Aragonés as new Spain national coach

Luis Aragonés, until now the coach of Mallorca, has been unanimously chosen by the so-called "committee of wise men" as the new Spain coach, replacing Iñaki Sáez, who resigned last week. Ángel María Villar, president of the Spanish Football Federation, described Aragonés as "a magnificent coach, with a tremendous track record who is very excited at the prospect of being the national coach". Aragonés has previously coached Atlético Madrid, Barcelona, Betis and Oviedo. His new contract will last at least until the 2006 World Cup.



Should he stay or should he go? Morientes show reopens with rumours of move to Chelsea

MICHAEL BUNN

The Morientes saga seems to be nearing its end, after a protracted period in which this year's Champions League top scorer has been kept on tenterhooks as to his possible future at Madrid. Florentino Pérez, the Real president, patently did not want him back, but when ex-Madrid hero José Antonio Camacho was named as the new team coach, trouble was expected, as Camacho is known to rate Morientes highly from his days as Spain's national coach. However, Pérez, who possesses all the suavity of a James Bond arch-villain, moved quickly to quash any rumours of a disagree-

ment between himself and Camacho. But then yesterday's *Marca* reported that Madrid were waiting for a call from Chelsea, who are very interested in signing the striker from Extremadura. Curiously, Camacho was reported to be in agreement with the sale. Camacho is the chalk to Pérez's cheese - it would be hard to find two men who are more different. Pérez's icy correctness is the very opposite to the blunt, speaky-mind approach of Camacho, whose everyday conversation is hilariously littered with effing and blinding. If these two mismatched titans do fall out during the season, it will make interesting viewing.

Miami debut for Catalan basketball player

The Catalan basketball player Albert Miralles will play for the Miami Heats in the summer league in Orlando, Florida, in a series of games to be played next week. Miralles, a 22-year-old wing-pivot, will make his debut in the game against the Washington Wizards and will go on to play the New Jersey Nets, the Boston Celtics, Orlando Magics and Cleveland Cavaliers. Miralles was picked last week in the National Basketball Draft by the Toronto Raptors and was immediately transferred to Miami, where he will be under trainer Stan van Gundy.