

Underdogs set to have last laugh on superstars

The big surprise is that only one of the Euro 2004's semi-finalists is ranked in Fifa's top ten

MICHAEL BUNN

No international football tournament would be complete without its surprises; it is all part of the fun to watch the occasional "minnows" dump out more illustrious opponents, as South Korea did to Italy and Spain in 2002. However, giant-killing has always been the exception rather than the rule - until Euro 2004, that is, which has seen so many surprises that the people who draw up Fifa's world ranking system must be in a state of shock. Of the four semi-finalists, only one is in the Fifa top 10 Holland (5th). Below them there are the Czech Republic (11th), Portugal (22nd), while Greece come a lowly 35th.

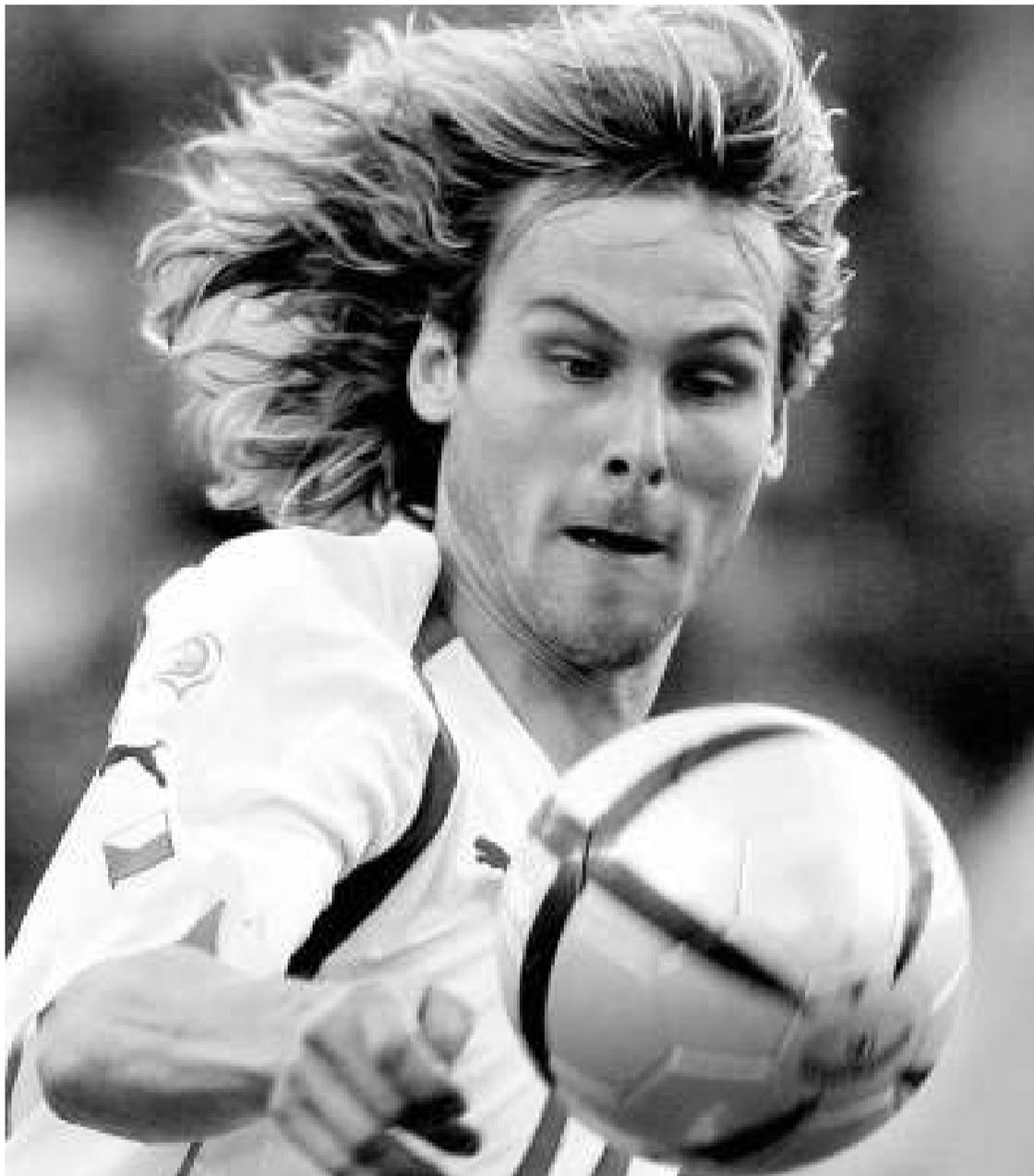
Thus at half-time we will have the curious experience of watching Coca-Cola ads featuring stars like Raúl, Beckham and Oliver Kahn, none of whom are left in the competition. While this is obviously a total marketing disaster, the football press has also been left with egg on its face, and journalists are now casting around trying to find explanations for this strange turn of events. The obvious excuse is that the footballing stars from bigger nations arrived in Portugal already exhausted after having given their all for the big clubs. However, that argument falls apart when one considers that many of the major names in the Portuguese side are from Porto, who put in lots of extra work last year to win the Champions League.

Nor are the Dutch looking weary,

though many of them play for some of Europe's mightiest clubs. The reason for this upset may well be the fact that all this year's semi-finalists are sides comprised of players drawn from clubs all over Europe, and travel has doubtless enriched their footballing knowledge and helped them to mature. Meanwhile, the German and Italian sides comprise players taken entirely from their domestic leagues, England only has two players who play abroad (Beckham and Hargreaves), while Spanish footballers are notoriously travel-phobic, with only Morientes playing outside the country.

Obviously France is the exception, but their poor showing is more than likely due to the pressure of being favourites, as well as to their age - the French players' average age is almost 29, which is fairly elderly in footballing terms, and no matter how talented they might be, age does tell in the withering heat of a Portuguese summer. Another problem was that Zidane finished last season in terrible form, not having been rested enough during the year, and as we saw in the last World Cup, when their inspirational figurehead is below par, the French team tends to lose its way on the pitch. And so all bets are off with this surprise semi-final line-up.

Any of the four teams could win on Saturday, though perhaps the ideal result (for football romantics, anyway) would be a victory for the



Czech star Pavel Nedved will want to avoid another yellow card in the semi-final match against Greece tonight / EPAPHOTO

Czech Republic, because that would see a real football fairy tale come true. One of the most important members of the dynamic Czech side (the only team to have steamrollered their way to victory in all four matches) - has been 32-year-old Karel Poborsky, who a year ago was not expecting to play in Euro 2004, and he only agreed to do so when the team qualified for the champion-

ships. However, through a curious twist of fate, tonight's match against Greece will be his 99th appearance for his country, and a Czech victory would mean that he would play his 100th game for his country in the final, after which he plans to retire.

Poborsky is very much on form at the moment, playing a vital role in the goals against Latvia, Holland and Denmark. He was also in the

1996 squad that lost in the final, and he knows this is his last chance for the championship. However, coach Karel Bruckner is concerned that he will not be able to field the injured Jiranek, while centre half Bolf is also doubtful. The great Czech star Nedved picked up a yellow card in his last match, and wants to avoid what happened in last year's Champions League final, which he missed.

Gené behind the wheel in French Grand Prix

AGENCIES

Catalan test driver Marc Gené is set to replace the injured Ralf Schumacher for this weekend's French Grand Prix at Magny-Cours. Gené will drive the Williams car, after the Schumacher was injured driving in the U.S. Grand Prix. Tests showed he suffered two spinal fractures and may be out of action for three months. His car spun and crashed heavily into a concrete wall during the race on 20 June. Gené is a veteran

of 34 Grand Prix, and has raced at Magny-Cours twice in the past. He has completed 13,000km of testing for the Williams team this season. "It is a shame that opportunities only come along when one of my colleagues is injured, but it is my job to make the best of such circumstance and ensure the team is not compromised by Ralf's absence," said Gené. Team boss Frank Williams is relieved. "We are fortunate to have a driver of Marc's calibre," he said.

Brazil's team plans to play peace game in Haiti to help ease tensions

MICHAEL BUNN

In this cynical age when football clubs appear as often in the business section of our newspapers as they do on the sports pages, when the hopes and dreams of millions of soccer-mad youngsters have become so comprehensively co-opted by advertising companies, the news that the Brazil national football team plans to play a friendly match in Haiti in August to promote peace in the civil war-stricken country is as

amazing as it is refreshing. However, it will not just be a charity match - the idea is that Haitians who want to see stars such as Ronaldo and Ronaldinho play will only be offered tickets in exchange for guns.

This novel idea is an attempt to reduce the number of weapons in what is the poorest state in Latin America, and where a brief but bloody civil conflict in February when elected president Jean-Bertrand Aristide was ousted in a U.S.-

backed coup - left around 200 Haitians dead.

The idea for a game to "alleviate tensions" came from current Haitian Prime Minister Gerard Lator-tue when he spoke to Brazilian journalists in May. He was quoted as saying "a few Brazilian soccer stars could do more to disarm warring militias than thousands of peace-keeping troops". In fact, Brazil is currently heading U.N. peacekeeping forces in Haiti.