

MISFIRING RONALDO: PORTUGAL FOILED BY MEDIOCRE AUSTRIA

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PARIS: Cristiano Ronaldo missed a second-half penalty as Portugal stumbled to a second straight draw at Euro 2016 on Saturday after a frustrating 0-0 stalemate against Group F rivals Austria in Paris. Ronaldo set a new Portuguese record with his 128th international cap, surpassing the mark previously shared with Luis Figo, but the occasion will be better remembered for the Real Madrid superstar hitting the post with a 79th-minute spot-kick. Hungary, who salvaged a point in a 1-1 draw with Iceland, are the surprise group leaders with a game to play, while Austria must win their final match to avoid exiting prematurely.

"This is not the result we wanted. It's not fair, it's not deserved but that's football," said Portugal coach Fernando Santos. "It's no use crying over spilt milk, it's not the time to have regrets. "We have another point and we have a 'final' to play on the 22nd (against Hungary), we have to focus on winning the next match." Santos sought to reinvigorate his team after a disappointing 1-1 draw with Iceland, drafting in Ricardo Quaresma to form an attacking trident with Ronaldo and Nani.

William Carvalho was handed a start in central midfield, while Austria coach Marcel Koller made three changes, two enforced, with Sebastian Prodl, Stefan Ilsanker and Marcel Sabitzer all coming into the side beaten 2-0 by Hungary on Tuesday.

Portuguese authority

Austria showed early signs of promise, much like in their opener against Hungary, carving out a chance when a leaping Martin Harnik nodded Sabitzer's whipped cross just wide. But Portugal settled quickly, with Nani denied his second goal of the tournament by the outstretched leg of Austria goalkeeper Robert Almer after breaking in behind centre-back Prodl.

Almer tipped a long-range strike from Vieirinha behind, while Ronaldo spurned a glorious opportunity to write his name into the history books on 22 minutes as he steered wide from Raphael Guerreiro's cut-back inside the area.

Portugal remained the dominant side and nearly reaped their reward just before the half-hour, only for Nani's header from Andre Gomes' left-wing cross to



PARIS: Portugal's forward Cristiano Ronaldo reacts after missing an opportunity on goal during the Euro 2016 group F football match between Portugal and Austria at the Parc des Princes. — AFP

crash back off the post with Joao Moutinho drilling the rebound over. Ronaldo then helped on a Quaresma header straight at Almer, but Vieirinha needed to make an important clearance to keep David Alaba's driven free-kick from finding Harnik at the far post.

Portugal goalkeeper Rui Patricio parried away a stinging drive from Ilsanker within seconds of the restart, although Portugal soon reasserted their authority with Ronaldo leading the charge. His thunderous left-footed strike from the edge of the area was turned behind by Almer, and the ensuing corner produced a similar result with the Austria keeper beating

away Ronaldo's downward header. Koller hauled off Alaba on 65 minutes, replacing the Bayern Munich star with Schalke midfielder Alessandro Schopf, but it failed to stem the flow of Portuguese attacks.

And with 11 minutes to go it appeared Portugal would get the goal their display merited when they were awarded a penalty after Martin Hinteregger wrestled Ronaldo to the ground.

But the three-time World Player of the Year was left shaking his head in disbelief as he smacked the ball against the base of the post to ensure his wait for a goal at a record fourth European Championship finals goes on. — AFP

CRUCIAL PENALTY MISFIRE EXPOSES RONALDO'S SET-PIECE OBSESSION

PARIS: One question stands out after Portugal's 0-0 draw with Austria on Saturday—does Cristiano Ronaldo have to take every single free kick and penalty? If Portugal were to at least contemplate an alternative, they might not be ruling yet another failure to translate their dominance into three points.

But, rather like a playground kickabout where the owner of the ball always gets his own way, there is only ever one possible option and it has reached the stage where it is costing them crucial points in major tournaments.

The headlines will tell how Ronaldo missed a penalty late in the game on his record-breaking 128th appearance for his country, striking his effort against the post, but the two free kicks which he took, and wasted, were also significant. The first was about 40 meters from goal and, even though scoring did not look like a reasonable possibility, Ronaldo insisted on having a crack. It went straight into the wall.

The second was on the edge of the penalty area, slightly to the right of goal and better suited to left-footed Raphael Guerreiro than right-footed Ronaldo. Guerreiro stood over the ball long side Ronaldo, more in hope than anything else. But, almost inevitably, it was the Real Madrid player who took the kick and curled it on to the roof of the net.

Warning signs

The warning signs had already come during a friendly against Bulgaria last March which Portugal also dominated, but lost 1-0 with Ronaldo missing another penalty.

They won four free kicks in possible scoring positions and Ronaldo took them all, hitting the wall twice and forcing saves from the goalkeeper with the other two.

Portugal coach Fernando Santos, perhaps understandably, did not want to discuss Ronaldo after the game. "I understand you and I don't talk about Cristiano," he said. Overall, it was another frustrating night for 31-year-old Ronaldo, who has already been criticized for negative comments he made about Iceland's tactics following a 1-1 draw in their opening Group F match.

Always in the thick of the action, Portugal's immaculately-groomed all-time leading scorer also sidefooted wide from an excellent position in the first half and forced two good saves from Austria goalkeeper Robert Almer after halftime. Often labeled as self-obsessed, Ronaldo showed another side to his character at the end of the game, when a supporter ran on to the pitch, evaded security, approached the number seven and asked for a selfie.

Ronaldo gestured to the security officials to leave the fan alone and patiently posed for the picture.

He will be hoping the cameras capture him scoring in Portugal's final group game against leaders Hungary on Wednesday when qualification for the last 16 is on the line. — Reuters



DINARD: Wales' forward Gareth Bale arrives for a press conference in Dinard, Western France, on June 18, 2016, during the Euro 2016 football tournament. — AFP

WALES READY TO QUALIFY FOR LAST 16, SAYS BALE

TOULOUSE: Gareth Bale said Wales' Euro 2016 fate is in their own hands as they look to qualify for the last 16 in a potentially high-risk match against Russia in Toulouse. Real Madrid forward Bale has been inspirational in Wales' European Championship debut, hitting the net in a 2-1 win over Slovakia and again in the 2-1 defeat to England in Lens.

Wales lie second in Group B, one point behind leaders England but firmly in contention for a historic place in the last 16. A win in Toulouse, where security is set to be tight following shocking scenes of fan violence between England and Russia supporters in Marseille last week, would see Wales guarantee direct qualification—although even defeat could see Wales go through as one of the four best third-placed group finishers.

Bale, who scored trademark free kicks against Slovakia and England to sit among the tournament's top scorers after two games, admitted defeat to England through Daniel Sturridge's injury-time goal was hard to digest. But the 26-year-old said Wales' "close group" of players are in high spirits and ready to keep their dream alive. "Obviously after the (England)

game we were very disappointed, especially to lose in that manner," Bale said Saturday. "But we have to forget about it. It's over. Our fate is in our own hands, and if you'd given us this at the start of the tournament we would have taken it. "We're so excited for our last game. Everything's to play for, the nation's behind us, as normal, and we will be looking forward to it. "We'll try to embrace the occasion and qualify."

Russian woes

With only one point to their name, following Vasili Berezutski's last-gasp equaliser against England, Leonid Slutsky's embattled Russia would be forgiven for wishing their tournament was over following a crushing 2-1 defeat to Slovakia. It has left them bottom of the table and needing to beat Wales to have any chance of adding some optimism to their campaign after what has been a controversial week for the team and its supporters. Yet their campaign was compounded even before they kicked a ball in anger in Marseille, as Russian ultras attacked England fans in the port city hours before kick-off. — AFP

ICELAND FANS PREFER HUGS TO HOOLIGANISM

MARSEILLE: A week after England and Russia supporters clashed and while flare-throwing and fighting have marred games elsewhere, fans of tiny Iceland say they prefer hugs to hooliganism at Euro 2016. Having the time of their lives, Icelanders told AFP in Marseille they have come to their first ever European Championships to have fun and feel part of Europe.

"I'm not sure life can get any better, it's historic, great to be here," Louise Ragnarsdottir told AFP on the seafloor of the southern city. "All my life I watched the tournaments on TV, now we are part of Europe's party!" said the 28-year-old accountant from Reykjavik. Some 27,000 Iceland fans have travelled to France, almost 10 percent of the Nordic island's 330,000-strong population. No smaller country has ever featured at a Euro finals. "We live on a faraway island, just to go abroad at all is an experience," said Ragnarsdottir.

After the Group F tie with Hungary on Saturday pockets of Iceland fans gathered in Marseille's Vieux Port district to chant "Boom-Boom-Hoooo!", leaping in unison on the "Hoooo!". "It's our Viking song, synchronized and terrifying," laughed Arni Gardar, an IT consultant from Reykjavik. "But we don't mean to be scary, we

are good Vikings not marauders, actually very nice, we come in peace," he said. "Iceland is N-Iceland!" cried another fan, Jonina Unnur Gunnarsdottir.

'Best fans yet'

"They are the best fans we have seen yet," said Karim, a cafe owner watching the revelry on the Quai des Belges. "It was different last week," he recalled. Nearly a week ago England and Russia fans conducted pitched battles in the worst violence at a football tournament since the 1998 World Cup, prompting police to respond with tear gas and baton charges.

For fans of the Nordic minnows the Euro 2016 violence has been an eye-opening experience. "We are a peaceful nation, we have no army, no guns, we're just not into fighting," Atli Gudmundsson told AFP. "At home families go to football, no-one dreams of ever causing trouble." The 29-year-old attended the Croatia-Czech Republic tie in Saint Etienne on Friday where Croatian fans fought among themselves and lit flares, forcing a temporary stoppage in play. "Torches on the pitch, fighting in the stands, that kind of thing is new to us, it was quite shocking to see," he said. — AFP



Matches on TV

(Local Timings)

UEFA EUROPEAN CHAMPIONSHIP
Russia v Wales 22:00
beIN MAX 2 HD

Slovakia v England 22:00
beIN MAX 3 HD EN
beIN MAX 1 HD