

Note: This is the original version in English of the blog Prof. Markovits wrote during the European UEFA European Championship for ESPN Deportes. The commentaries were edited, fact-checked, and translated into Spanish for posting on the ESPN Deportes Web site. The Spanish versions of the commentaries are therefore the only authoritative versions, and they can be found at:

http://espndeportes.espn.go.com/blogs/index?entryID=695610&name=andrei_markovits.

Viennese Soccer: A Personal Memoir

June 1, 2008

Dedicated to the memory of my father, Ludwig Markovits, and to that of Daphne Scheer.

The very first time that I came into contact with Viennese soccer was as a little boy in my birthplace of Timisoara, perhaps better known by its Hungarian name of Temesvar. My father was – as many Central European Jewish men of his era – a huge football fan. His dream was to leave his native Satu Mare (Szatmar) and travel to Vienna to pursue his studies at the Hochschule für Welthandel (School of Business and Economics). He only made it as far as Budapest where he enrolled in 1930 to study business administration, concluding with a doctorate in late 1937.

In Budapest, he became a rabid fan of the blue-and-white-clad MTK with which most Jews identified at the time – and still identify to this day. Enemy number one were Ferencvaros, sporting green and white as their club's colors. MTK had a bourgeois, center-city and – thus – disproportionately Jewish following, Ferencvaros – or Fradi for short – attracted fans that were decidedly proletarian, from the industrial suburbs of Budapest, non-Jewish and often virulently anti-Semitic, in their chants if not always in their deeds.

As a little boy, I heard many stories of numerous MTK – Fradi derbies which my father attended during his student days. During one particular heated clash between these fierce rivals, he was beaten up by Fradi fans and denounced as a “dirty Jew”. I could still feel his rage twenty years later, his sense of humiliation undimmed by time.

Budapest and its football world – so similar in many ways to Vienna's – became a reality to me in the early 1950s from my father's stories. And then there was Vienna – the distant place, the place that my father never reached even though he always wished he had. Vienna was the home of the football clubs AUSTRIA and RAPID: one purple (close enough for me to MTK's blue), decidedly urban, middle class, coffee-house connected, and supported by many of the city's middle class Jews; the other green, working class, decidedly un-Jewish with a clear tinge of anti-Semitism.

And AUSTRIA had a star, Matthias Sindelar, arguably one of the greatest players that Austrian football ever produced and surely one of the great players of his time. My father had seen Sindelar play in Budapest, for the legendary WUNDERTEAM managed by Hugo Meisl.

Sindelar's phenomenal skill enchanted my father, perhaps as much as anything for the “Papierene's” (Sindelar's iconic sobriquet) persona as a sort of honorary Jew. His antipathy for the Nazis was legend and he committed suicide in 1939 with his half-Jewish Italian girlfriend. And although more recent Sindelar historiography seems to have shed some doubt on Sindelar's anti-Nazi feelings being a key reason for his suicide, my father knew nothing of that during his lifetime and it would decidedly not had mattered to him anyway. Nothing would have dimmed his unbounded admiration of this great player.

And then there was HAKOAH WIEN, the Jewish sports club that, with its attaining the Austrian championship in 1924/25 and the very first European club to beat an English side on its home pitch (in this case WEST HAM UNITED), attained a near-divine stature to my father's Central European Jewish contemporaries. But unlike AUSTRIA, HAKOAH had long since disappeared, part of an extolled past that – for me, at least – bore no reality.

And then there was the radio, my sole link to the world of soccer beyond Stinta Timisoara. Via the voice of Hungarian broadcaster Gyoergy Szepesi, I listened to a number of derbies between the Hungarian “golden team” and the Austrians among whom I became familiar with players such as Walter Zehmann, Robert Dienst, Ernst Happel and – of course – Dipl. Ingeuneur Gerhard Hanappi. I remember being as stunned as a boy in Romania, just as I am as an adult in the United States, that the Austrian obsession with titles did not stop at the edge of the soccer pitch. And it was most certainly by virtue of the academic title that my father admired Hanappi and saw him as a kind of faux RAPID player, a cultured middle class man who somehow – almost by mistake – stumbled into this proletarian club with its thuggish and anti-Semitic fans.

In early September of 1958, my father and I arrived in Vienna with two suitcases in hand. My mother had died in May, and Vienna was going to be a way-station on our journey to America. So here we were, totally dislocated, in no man's land, waiting to leave for the “Promised Land.” Of course, we decided to go to the Wiener Stadion – for the first time in our lives – to see the legendary JUVENTUS TURIN featuring world-class players like Omar Sivori, and Giampiero Boniperti play the Wiener SPORTCLUB in the European Champions Cup tournament. We had never heard of SPORTCLUB, but we would never forget how they destroyed the Italians 7 – 0.

On that fall evening in the Wiener Stadion, my very first game under floodlights, I became an instant SPORTCLUB fan.

A few weeks later, my father and I had dinner with some Hungarian Jews who had arrived in Vienna in the wake of the 1956 Revolution and were “veterans” of local football culture. When I told them about SPORTCLUB, the man of the house informed me quite sternly of SPORTCLUB’S NAZI past. Thus, a Jew had absolutely no business rooting for such a team. I was crushed.

Of course I was always aware of being a Jew on Vienna’s football grounds and always ready to experience some expression of anti-Semitism. With the exception of a few unpleasant moments at RAPID’S home ground in Huetteldorf during some particularly heated duels with AUSTRIA, I experienced nothing close to what my uncle had been regularly subjected to in the late 1920s and early 30s when he studied medicine in Vienna. Nor what Michael John and Matthias Marschik describe in their fine study of anti-Semitism in the contemporary Austrian sport scene.

But then, Austrian football is no different from other countries in Europe and perhaps even a bit less explicitly racist, sexist, anti-Semitic, and violent than its counterparts in Italy, Germany, Holland, Poland, Croatia, Hungary, and England, many of which I have experienced myself. Such behavior has become the rule in European football, the dark side of Europe’s allegedly cosmopolitan outlook. To be sure, I frequented Vienna’s football grounds when – barely 15 years after the Holocaust – Jews still enjoyed a kind of protected era in European discourse, which was to disappear most decidedly by the mid 1980s at the latest.

The Praterstadion furnished for me a welcome space of internationalism – at least on the playing field, if not among the spectators. Even then I was struck by a fascinating juxtaposition – even contradiction – in sport, where the world of the game and the players was more open, international and cosmopolitan than the world of the fans, which emphasized the tribal, local and atavistic as it does to this very day.

Here I will only mention a few instances. I remember attending a match between Austria and Italy in the 1960s at which my father’s and my eyes caught the talent of a young Italian player named Gianni Rivera. Still a teenager at the time, Rivera’s football genius was readily visible to anybody caring to notice. From that moment, Rivera remained one of my all-time favorite footballers of all time.

An avid collector of autographs, I also admired the great Didi and recall waiting in line for the players of a visiting Botafogo team from Rio de Janeiro where he was featured along with the magician Garincha, the only player with an even greater amount of improvisational genius and aesthetic panache than the great George Best of my beloved MANCHESTER UNITED. In fact, I still have my Didi autograph which – for some odd reason – appears on the page directly facing the opera singer Hilde Gueden’s.

And then there were two unforgettable games at the Praterstadion: The first was in May 1961 between RAPID and the Bela-Guttman-led Portuguese champion BENFICA LISBON in the return leg of the European Championship semifinals. BENFICA had easily defeated RAPID 3 – 0 at home at the Estadio da Luz and was heavily favored to advance. But RAPID – egged on by its fanatic fans – used football’s immeasurable asset, the home field with its “twelfth man” (the cheering supporters) to its advantage and scored an equalizer at the very beginning of the famed RAPID “Viertelstunde”, the last fifteen minutes of every game in which the fans came to exhort their team with increased zeal. The crowd went wild and when the referee gave BENFICA a penalty following a controversial call, the place exploded and the game ended before regulation time. I remember rooting with terrible intensity for BENFICA against RAPID and was probably the only person who left that cauldron of a stadium elated that evening.

Lastly, I fondly remember attending the first European Club Championship final ever held in Austria on May 27, 1964 between INTER MILAN, led by the iron-fisted Helenio Herrera, possessing the dubious distinction of having invented the efficient but far from attractive defensive-oriented “catenaccio” style of football and a declining but still potent REAL MADRID featuring such football Gods as Alfredo di Stefano, Francisco Gento and that old major of the Hungarian army Ferenc “Oecsi” Puskas. REAL was the holder – already then – of five European championships and playing in its seventh title game having lost its sixth to Guttman’s BENFICA in 1962.

With the help of two fabulous Sandro Mazzolla goals, the “Nerazzurri” from Milan won the game quite easily by the score of 3 – 1 and thus followed in the footsteps of their hated cross-town rivals AC – the “Rossoneri” – who, led by Gianni Rivera, had won the championship one year before by beating BENFICA in the final.

A major event in Vienna’s postwar sports history, this game was also the first – and only – match which I did not attend with my father. I went with Daphne Scheer, the first serious romance of my life. After having taken her to the Forum Kino in the Stadiongasse to watch “Lawrence of Arabia,” I had hoped that going to this pedigreed match would prove the depth of my affection – which I think she appreciated even though the fine points of the game seemed to pass her by. Long after our romance had ended, we remained friends until her untimely death at the age of 50.

It was in the spring of 1967 that I last went to a football match in Vienna. After my permanent departure in the summer of 1967, I somehow never made it back to any games during my rare visits from America. Perhaps it was the association with my father and the hundreds of hours spent on those fabulous grounds so long gone, as well as the intense pre-game anticipation followed by the incessant post-game analyses, that provided me with an emotional closeness and serenity in my relations with my father that were never to be replicated anyplace and anytime else.

Vienna and its Preparations for the EURO

June 3, 2008

EURO 2008 has transformed this beautiful city like I have never ever seen it in my life. All trams and buses on the famed RINGSTRASSE have stopped running as of yesterday and much of this huge area has been transformed into a city of its own ONLY for EURO 2008. Thousands of food stands, of spots to watch the games, of walking around, of mingling -- a whole new public space has been created that will be dominating the city from now until Sunday evening, June 30th. There are literally thousands of events that accompany the tournament, an entire segment of the city -- the KARLSPLATZ -- devoted to exhibits and activities that are there for the NON-FOOTBALL person. There are lots of children-related spaces.

It is amazing!!!!

As to the guests that will appear in Vienna during the EURO -- here is just a random list of major stars: in the world of piano playing, the Chinese genius LANG LANG, the great old man ALFRED BRENDEL, the brilliant MAURIZIO POLLINI, and -- in a different genre -- Sir Elton John.

OF course PLACIDO DOMINGO will be here, as will BOB DYLAN. The SQUADRA AZZURRA arrived yesterday from Italy and will be staying in nearby BADEN. Everybody has been analyzing the warm up games that Germany, Greece, Austria, Croatia, Poland, Portugal etc. played recently to see what can be concluded from them. The consensus is that these games hid more than they revealed, that all the teams held back and did not play full throttle. The Austrians, arguably far and away the weakest team of the whole tournament, and the lowest ranked, hope that the HOME FIELD advantage will somehow work its miracles and that they will make it into the next round. They hope to advance there probably as second to the Germans by beating Croatia and tying Poland or vice versa. I am sceptical whether they can beat Croatia in their opening game this Sunday but stranger things have happened in sports, and football.

Preliminary Considerations: the First Scandal

June 7, 2008

Sure enough, even before the first kick off, and after the true tragedy of the tournament-ending injury of FABIO CANNAVARRO which will most likely rob the SQUADRA AZZURRA of any chances of winning the tournament, we have had the first scandal of the tournament.

Some Polish tabloids published a manipulated picture of LEO BEENHAKKER, the DUTCH coach of the POLISH team, holding the dismembered heads of the German team's coach JOACHIM LOEW and its captain MICHAEL BALLACK. The tabloid SUPER EXPRESS had the picture with the following caption: "LEO, give us their heads."

This tasteless picture wanted to express the POLES's certainly legitimate and major desire to FINALLY beat the German national team, which they have never done. And to do so at such an important tournament, and in the first game for both teams which will be played tomorrow -- Sunday evening, June 8th -- in the southern Austrian city of KLAGENFURT. Clearly, this picture was not only in terrible taste, but it also riled up continued raw feelings between Germans and Poles who have had a very bitter and violent history over many centuries. Add to this other invocations of historic issues in which one paper mentioned the defeat of TEUTONIC knights at the hands of Polish lords in the 15th century. Such images had been constants in the British yellow press -- particularly in EURO 1996 played in England -- when England faced Spain and there were constant references to the Spanish ARMADA beaten by the swifter and smaller British navy led by Sir Francis Drake. Preceding the game against France, the same British press constantly invoked French defeats at the hands of the British, from Joan of Arc's days to the Napoleonic times, and even beyond. And the game against Germany was constantly accompanied by all kinds of unfavorable images of Germans and German military icons invoking World Wars One and Two.

But even the British tabloids did not lower themselves to such a tasteless depiction as did their Polish counterparts by depicting the BEHEADING of two living human beings representing the German team. Sure enough, the German tabloids in turn -- as well as some German politicians -- used this occasion to stoke the fires and utter some tasteless repartees of their own. Thank God that Leo Beenhakker and the Polish team issued an immediate statement denouncing the picture in the most emphatic tones. Beenhakker issued an apology by calling the picture an "awful thing" that was done by "weird and dirty and sick people."

The German coach Loew also played down the affair and told the media that he had more important things to worry about than this tasteless cartoon. As is often the case, the bad blood and the stoking of fanaticism does NOT hail from the REAL activists, the actual producers of these wonderful events, namely the players and the coaching staffs, but from the media, the fans, the consumers of these events.

On another note: Here in Vienna, the Austrian police are REALLY worried about hooliganism and fan violence, not so much at the stadiums but in the streets and other public spaces. We shall soon see.

**SWITZERLAND – CZECH REPUBLIC, and
PORTUGAL – TURKEY**

June 8, 2008

The opening game SWITZERLAND - CZECH REPUBLIC proved a total nightmare for the Swiss team. Not only were they CLEARLY the better side, not only did they have more chances, not only did they hit the post once, but they lost their FAR-AND AWAY best player in ALEXANDER FREI. His injury looked very serious and the color commentator for the GERMAN television station ZDF, who will be the new coach for BORUSSIA DORTMUND in the coming season, the team for whom FREI plays, mentioned after the game that he had talked to the Swiss team's doctor and was told that FREI will be out for a minimum of 12 weeks. So end of EURO 2008 for FREI and he will not be there for the beginning of the BUNDESLIGA season in August.

To top off the tragic evening for the Swiss, the Czechs had ONE chance and they fully capitalized on it winning the match by 1 - 0. The match's overall quality was not very good, mediocre at best. But then came the second match in GROUP A which pitted PORTUGAL against TURKEY. Wow, was this one fabulous game. Up and down the field, wonderfully attacking football with the Portuguese side CLEARLY the FAR superior one winning decisively 2 - 0 which was very flattering to the Turks since the Portuguese hit the crossbar and the sidebars THREE times and had a totally regular and legal goal annulled for alleged

OFFSIDE.

If the Portuguese play the way they did in their opener, they must be considered major favorites to win the tournament on June 29th. And once again it became clear throughout the match HOW and WHY Cristiano Ronaldo is currently WITHOUT ANY DOUBT the world's most superior and most brilliant and most dazzling and most dangerous footballer. EVERY single time that he touched the ball, on the right wing in the first half, on the left wing in the second half, and as a center forward towards the end of the game, the man was DANGEROUS!!!! Clearly, his flirtations with going to REAL MADRID and leaving MANCHESTER UNITED did not have ANY bearing on his game. (Personal confession: As a HUGE Manchester United fan, I surely hope that he will stay with my team and not desert us for the MADRILLENOS. But I fear that he will not only because of the HUGE amount of money, but also because he has attained EVERYTHING there is to attain with UNITED and I am sure that he sees it as a challenge to do the same with REAL.) One more note: As I have written and argued for years, the NATIONALISM at all these country-based tournaments really sickens me. This is one of the two reasons, why I SO much prefer CLUB football to COUNTRY football: No sickening nationalism in the former; and -- of course -- club football is so much better in quality. Yes, Ronaldo was great with Portugal, yes, Portugal was wonderful last night. But the team -- and Ronaldo -- did not come near to playing the quality of football produced by Manchester United or any of the top 15 clubs in Europe. Ronaldo with United is by two classes better than Ronaldo with the SELECAO PORTUGUESA.

And the nationalism goes way beyond the teams. I was watching GERMAN TELEVISION broadcasting the PORTUGAL - TURKEY game and the commentator could not stop himself from mentioning every two minutes how wonderful the GERMAN referee HERBERT FANDEL was: what a great job he was doing, how he was the NUMBER TWO referee in the world, following his now retired countryman MARKUS MERK whom FANDEL wanted to replace as NUMERO UNO.

It was RIDICULOUS!!!! FANDEL here, FANDEL there, FANDEL everywhere -- SIMPLY and ONLY because he was German. I could not take it anymore, so I switched to the Austrian broadcast where the main topic was the two teams playing and NOT the referee -- as it should be. The Germans and their television broadcasters are not unique in this. Every single country goes overboard about CONSTANTLY mentioning what IT has representing it at the tournament: the beer, the lighting, the grass. This nationalism is really terrible and bothersome. Never mind the ugly nationalism of some fans, like some of the Polish and German fans who in anticipation of tonight as game between the two sides in the Austrian city of KLAGENFURT, have already conducted pitched battles against each other and against the Austrian police. Alas, this nationalism is the ugly side of international football.

**AUSTRIA – CROATIA, and
GERMANY – POLAND**

June 9, 2008

Yesterday I went to my first game of this EURO right here in Vienna at the ERNST-HAPPEL-STADIUM named after the great CENTER BACK of the 1950s and early 1960s, ERNST HAPPEL, from one of Austria's -- which really means VIENNA's -- two GREAT teams, this being RAPID, the green and whites; the other being AUSTRIA, the violet and whites.

HAPPEL played more than 70 times for the Austrian national team and became much more famous as a coach when he led the HAMBURGER SPORTVEREIN, better known as HSV, to the German Bundesliga championship and to that club's ONLY European Champions Cup. He also led FEYERNOORD Rotterdam to the Dutch EERE

DIVISIE championship AND a European Champions Cup AND led the Dutch national team -- the ORANJE -- to their second place finish at the World Cup in Argentina in 1978. Happel died a few years ago and the former PRATER STADION, which only denoted the AREA in which the stadium was located, meaning in the PRATER section of VIENNA, was renamed HAPPEL STADION. In my days as a young boy in the city and when I went to all those games that I described in my first contribution to this ESPN DEPORTES series, the stadium held nearly 90,000 people. Today it holds barely 53,000.

I could BARELY recognize the place from my previous days: much cleaner, much more HIGH TECH, only seats, no more standing room terraces, in other words a kind of BOUTIQUE venue instead of a MASS stadium. The place was totally packed with Austrian fans -- the home crowd, of course -- and thousands of Croatians who had come to Vienna in more than 500 buses and whose number was allegedly more than 50,000 in the entire city, though surely not in the stadium.

The game itself was a terrible disappointment. I mean we all knew that AUSTRIA had a terrible team that had NEVER EVER qualified for a European Championship, that was ranked 99th in the world and only climbed to "that height" because it had beaten MALTA recently by the score of 5 - 1 whilst it was somewhere in the low 100s before, and that the AUSTRIAN TEAM only made this tournament because it was one of the two host countries. But knowing full well how IMMENSELY important HOME FIELD advantage is in ASSOCIATION FOOTBALL (meaning soccer) and how repeated studies have demonstrated that among ALL the major team sports home field advantage is far and away the most important in soccer, I actually thought that the AUSTRIANS could pull some kind of MEGA upset a la the GREEKS four years ago and go DEEP into the tournament if not win it, like the Greeks did.

Well, following yesterday's game, I have my doubts. They played a lousy game and lost 1 - 0 to an only SLIGHTLY better Croatian team that also played poorly and very boring football. It was a terrible game just like the night before when the other host country, SWITZERLAND, also lost in a relatively poor game to the CZECH REPUBLIC also by a score of 1 - 0.

But then, just like on Saturday, the second game was much better. Though not quite as brilliant as the PORTUGAL - TURKEY game the night before, the GERMANY - POLAND game was also quite good. Above all, the Germans played inspiring football which was very attractive. Give it to the great JUERGEN KLINSMANN: he did not get the WORLD CUP for the Germans two years ago and had to make do with a THIRD PLACE finish, but he surely changed the aesthetics of their game. Just wonderful!!!! And just like the night before, on Sunday, too, the second game's result was a 2 - 0, this time for Germany, just like for Portugal. And just like Portugal dominated the Turks, so, too, did the Germans dominate the Poles. The Poles have NEVER EVER beaten the Germans, not even tied them, in now 16 attempts. Quite sad!!!!

So we now have had FOUR games: Two leading to a 1 - 0 defeat of the host countries, two leading to 2 - 0 victories by major favorites of the tournament.

One more important note: The departure from the HAPPEL STADIUM back to the center of VIENNA was a total disaster and nightmare. The city had JUST completed a totally new SUBWAY line to the STADIUM which looked gorgeous and modern and state of the art. Well, it surely failed its DEBUT miserably. It took hours for people to leave the place. I hope that this will improve for the second game which will be on Thursday between AUSTRIA and POLAND, a DO OR DIE affair for both sides.

FRANCE – ROMANIA

HOLLAND – ITALY

June 10, 2008

LAST night we had a superb example how ALL team sports -- FOOTBALL included -- can have SO many faces, SO many personalities, SO many characteristics. So much so that one is truly HARD PUT to see these as the same game.

First, there was the 0 - 0 by FRANCE and ROMANIA.

Here are two EXCELLENT sides with some WORLD-CLASS players who produced a game of such boredom and such low quality that I would have asked for my money back had I been in the stadium attending the game. It was truly PATHETIC!!!!

And then, barely one hour later -- a GEM!!!!

One for the ages: HOLLAND beating ITALY in an INSTANT classic 3 - 0.

What made this game SO wonderful to watch is how both teams played superb football with one difference: The Dutch converted their chances and the Italians did not.

But make no mistake here. The Italians were actually VERY good in the field. What really made me love the Dutch though is that UNLIKE the Czechs and UNLIKE the Croats and UNLIKE so many sides in the world who basically build bunkers to defend a 1 - 0 lead and do EVERYTHING to just protect that lead with ugly defense, the Dutch continued to attack even when they were ahead 3 - 0.

FORZA HOLLAND, but also FORZA ITALIA!!!!

The Italians are far from dead yet.

The Dutch reminded me of the TOTAL FOOTBALL and BRILLIANT ORANGE day of the great JOHAN CRUYFF led teams of the early 1970s.

Just an esthetic marvel!!!!

I hope they continue to play like that and go DEEP into the tournament.

TURKEY – SWITZERLAND

June 12, 2008

Last night I was in the FAN ZONE here in Vienna when the TURKS went CRAZY about their come-from-behind victory against the SWISS who are now out of the tournament -- as the first country to be so AND one of the two co-hosts.

VERY embarassing indeed!!!!!!

The Turks played a fine second half in a game that -- everybody agreed -- would have NEVER been allowed to continue had it not been a game of SUCH magnitude and at such an important GLOBAL event where TV dictates everything and where there would have never been any time in this tightly packed schedule for a REMATCH. I wonder what would have happened if there had been seriously dangerous lightning instead of just that awful rain that made the field TOTALLY unplayable in the first half and rendered a football match into a water polo contest. In any case, the TURKISH fans went nuts because they REALLY have a chip on their shoulder. Europe in the form of the EUROPEAN UNION is constantly playing coy in its ON AGAIN OFF AGAIN game about allowing Turkey to join this fancy club called EU. And the Turks are getting tired of this back and forth, and they know full well that the European populations and publics do not want them "in Europe". So a victory against rich Switzerland which, of course, is NOT a member of the EU but SO much part -- indeed the heart -- of Europe, really felt great for the Turks. If the Turks want to join Europe because they look up to this exclusive rich club that treats them so shabbily, then the Swiss do not want to join Europe because they look down on this club that is actually STILL poorer than they are. So the Turks want to join the club, whereas the Swiss want to stay out of it.

The Turkey - Switzerland game had all kinds of overtones because of that TERRIBLE brawl in Istanbul between the two teams three years ago when UEFA banned Turkey from playing three of its home games in ISTANBUL having to play them in FRANKFURT in Germany instead. So LOTS of bad blood between the teams, between the countries, between everybody.

So it is in THIS context that one has to place the Turkish fans' exultation last night in the VIENNA FAN ZONE where they celebrated their team's victory in the downpour rain in BASEL. This evening I will be in the HAPPEL STADIUM in VIENNA attending the match between AUSTRIA -- the other host of the tournament -- and POLAND. This is a must game for both.

I am sure that the atmosphere will be charged, electric and potentially quite ugly. These two countries DO NOT like each other.

Come to think of it: Which European country likes any of its neighbors, immediate and distant????

When one spends even one day at one of these EURO 2008 sites, it is clear that the concept and idea of a united and unified EUROPE is -- at best -- a concept BY and FOR the elites but not for the people.

NOBODY feels EUROPEAN, they ALL feel their countries' identity -- and with a vengeance. Alas, the people-tying dimension of FOOTBALL is totally displaced by its people-dividing aspects.

AUSTRIA – POLAND, and RUSSIA – GREECE

June 15, 2008

The organizers here in VIENNA obviously are immensely quick learners. After the SUBWAY fiasco on the first game day here -- the match between AUSTRIA and CROATIA -- they REALLY revamped things so wonderfully that the second game, AUSTRIA vs. POLAND, was a charm. The subway trains were filled efficiently, the people well directed, everything was superb.

BRAVISSIMI -- and BRAVISSIMAE, of course -- to the organizers to having made such major improvements in such a short time.

I am also impressed -- as I was during the WORLD CUP in Germany -- how EVERY announcement BEFORE, DURING and AFTER the games in all the stadia are made in ENGLISH, and in the languages of the teams that are playing: so in Greek and Russian at last night's game in SALZBURG, in Spanish and Swedish last night in Innsbruck, and in POLISH and GERMAN (in this case, quite naturally) in VIENNA, on and on.

The speakers are invariably NATIVE speakers of each of the languages which makes them sound totally authentic. Such announcers are also everywhere in front of every stadium and are directing traffic to all the SUBWAY stations and trains and all public transportation.

The atmosphere at the AUSTRIA - POLAND game was excellent: Half the stadium filled with POLES, the other half with AUSTRILIANS. It is quite clear that the whole tournament is COMPLETELY dominated by the nationalities of the teams that are in action: In Salzburg it was ALL Greeks and Russians, in Innsbruck ALL Spaniards and Swedes. Very few "neutrals" -- other than little me -- seem to be keen on going to these games. The so called FAN ZONES in the Swiss cities of Zurich, Basel and Bern are half deserted because the Swiss are out of the tournament. Their game tonight against Portugal is meaningless. If ANYBODY were to come to these cities and events and the whole thing, they would be rightly wondering: Where is EUROPE? What is EUROPE? Especially after the debacle of the PRO-EUROPE vote this past Thursday in IRELAND, it is totally evident that while EUROPE and the EUROPEAN UNION are crucial bureaucratic and economic and even political constructs, they are most certainly NOWHERE to be found in the hearts and minds and souls of regular Europeans on the street. NOBODY at this tournament is European. They are ALL their nationalities and that to a hilt that continues to make me uncomfortable. National flags everywhere, national anthems shouted in the stadiums by the players and the fans. This OBLIGATORY singing of all national anthems is very new in the world of international football. I know for a fact that FRANZ BECKENBAUER demanded that his 1990 World Cup team which won the tournament sing the anthem. But when exactly did it become SO ubiquitous? And why has it become so mandatory? Give me CLUB SOCCER all the time, the grandiose and qualitatively MUCH better CHAMPIONS LEAGUE in which the teams line up for the UEFA anthem, the players are from all over the world, and there is none of this blatant nationalism which -- MOSTLY -- seems harmless but also is quite atavistic and ugly to me. AUSTRIA was given a draw by the English referee WEBB who -- some suggested -- should now become an honorary and life-long Austrian citizen. AUSTRIA was dead in the water when in extra time, a Polish defender was jostling and tugging and pulling on an AUSTRIAN attacker in the penalty box. This kind of behavior has become totally de rigueur in all of soccer over the past five or so years. Whether this is good or bad is a totally different question, but it has become the NORM of the game. And thus to whistle a foul in the last two minutes of a CRUCIAL game and thus award the HOME TEAM a penalty and thus a draw and thus at least the hope to remain in the tournament is truly odd and worrisome to me. What a cheap "homer" call as one would label such a behavior in American sports when the referee makes a call to please the home team. In any case, this just underlines how random and how arbitrary ALL refereeing is in ALL major sports. Now clearly, some of this will ALWAYS remain the case because -- thank God -- these games are still run by and for HUMAN BEINGS and not machines. But still, FIFA and UEFA could make SOME strides to reduce the most egregious mistakes, if not completely eliminate them which, as I already said, will NEVER EVER be possible no matter how great the technology or how changed the rules of refereeing become precisely because this is still run by HUMAN BEINGS. But I just do not see why in this day and age certain VERY close OFFSIDE calls that DECIDE a game -- like last night's game between RUSSIA and GREECE in which a completely solid and fine goal for the Greeks was annulled because of an alleged offside violation -- could not be subject to review and, if necessary, overruled. This procedure would NOT eliminate the AUTHORITY of the referees, it would NOT diminish the standing of the officials, it would only add clarity and closure which currently does not exist. These reviews could -- and would -- be done so quickly that the argument that too much time would be wasted, that the flow of the game would be interrupted, just do not hold. Consider the time lost when the disadvantaged team protests and berates the referee to change his mind, which virtually NEVER happens. So there SHOULD be some kind of review system that is used BY the referee and his assistant precisely to AUGMENT and ENHANCE and SUPPORT their authority not to undermine it. It should be the referees and their assistants who JOINTLY ask for a very unclear situation to be reviewed. And if they are the ones who do this, why should they lose authority in the eyes of the players and the spectators? Quite the contrary would be the case. The refereeing would GAIN in legitimacy and in authority. One more reform worthy of discussion: These players are SO good, SO athletic, SO fast, and the field is SO big, that one roaming referee with his two sideline assistants is simply not able to have a correct overview of the entire match and the field. Why not introduce a second referee and have each of the referees in charge of one half of the field each, with the respective halves switched at half-time, like the teams do? Just some food for thought and discussion because there are CLEARLY major problems in the current refereeing that are growing and whose mistakes decide major games and thus championships. Last point: Listening to German and Austrian and Swiss television commentary last night, it was SO clear to me how DELIGHTED the speakers all were that the GREEKS had been eliminated from the tournament -- and for being the very first CHAMPION to get eliminated so early in a tournament. Basically, it was clear that all these experts never took the Greeks' championship of 2004 seriously, that they never took the Greek players seriously, that they saw the whole thing as a fluke and almost as a fake, and were delighted that -- FINALLY -- the Greeks arrived where they really belonged: namely at the bottom of European football rather than its top.

Background to Upcoming AUSTRIA – GERMANY Game

June 15, 2008

All public opinion polls in Austria show that among Austria's eight neighboring countries -- Germany, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, Italy, Switzerland and Lichtenstein -- Germans are the most liked by the Austrian population and it is to the Germans that Austrians feel closest to. But what these data do not show so

clearly, is just how AMBIVALENT this relationship for Austrians is to Germany and Germans. Yes, they like them but they also feel as the little brother in this relationship: Always obsessing about Germany and Germans with the opposite simply untrue. Germans either do not much care or know about Austrians, or if they do, they think of them as a wonderful little country with lots of lovely music, good cakes and fine mountains and lakes where Germans can vacation. In other words, while to AUSTRIANS Germany and Germans are a daily presence and obsession, to Germans Austria and Austrians are just like little brothers who are unimportant. This, of course, is known to Austrians and makes them even more angry at the Germans. The Austria - Germany relationship is completely analogous to the Canada - US relationship: Very close, almost identical in culture and language, very similar but PRECISELY because of this similarity also OH SO far and away and OH SO different, especially in the eyes of the LITTLE brother, meaning the Austrians and Canadians, who JEALOUSLY guard their distinction vis-a-vis their BIG brother. Do not EVER call an Austrian a German -- he will be offended. Do not EVER call an Anglo-Canadian an American -- he, too, will be offended. This is what the GREAT SIGMUND FREUD, perhaps one of the greatest sons of this city in which I now am, namely VIENNA, and who is STILL much better known and respected and loved all over the world and NOT in his native Vienna and Austria -- so brilliantly called THE NARCISSISM OF SMALL DIFFERENCES. These differences seem totally ridiculous to outsiders, they are almost invisible and meaningless to third parties, but BOY are these differences TOTALLY essential to the LITTLE BROTHER of such a relationship. Indeed, it is THESE differences that define their very identities. Austrians HAVE to emphasize their differences in order to create an identity that is NOT German, ditto with Canadians vis-a-vis Americans. I am told that in Latin America, ARGENTINA has this hated BIG BROTHER relationship to other countries, but you, my dear readers, will have to judge that and inform me of better analogies and more appropriate parallels. Of course, EVERYBODY hates Mr. BIG whoever that happens to be. Everybody hates The New York Yankees -- other than their own fans -- and when a score is announced in any ball park in America and the Yankees are losing, people cheer. Ditto with BAYERN MUNICH. Whenever the scores are announced in the BUNDESLIGA stadiums every Saturday afternoon, and Bayern happens to be losing, a HUGE cheer goes through the crowd. Hating Mr. Big is a state of mind. And to Austrians there can be no more evil Mr. Big -- especially in football -- than the Germans. Hating Germany in football is essential to having an Austrian FOOTBALL but also POLITICAL identity. Ditto in German-speaking Switzerland. When I was giving a lecture at the University of Basel in 2006 on the eve of the great ARGENTINA - GERMANY quarterfinal game in Berlin, I was struck by all the Argentinian flags all over town. When I asked my host professor whether there happen to be so many Argentinians in Basel, he reminded me, of course, what I had known all along but what I had suddenly forgotten: that people in the German-speaking Swiss city of BASEL right on the German border had to define themselves as being NOT German by hoisting Argentinian flags. Once again, the power of identity politics, the power of the narcissism of small differences.

Germany and Austria have had a conflicting relationship throughout much of the history of the GERMAN LANDS. Through much of the Middle Ages and the early modern period, it was the CATHOLIC HABSBURGS of Austria (as well as of SPAIN, of course, and thus the so called NEW WORLD as well), who were THE most important German political entity and state. As of the 18th century things shifted from CATHOLIC AUSTRIA with its imperial capital of VIENNA to PROTESTANT PRUSSIA with its capital BERLIN. In 1866 and 1871, GERMANY and AUSTRIA went their own separate ways in terms of state formation and politics, with AUSTRIA excluded from the new GERMAN REICH.

But as of March 1938, HITLER "annexed" Austria in what has come to be known in the world as ANSCHLUSS, which, of course, means both: ANNEXATION but also JOINING and LINKING. Nazi Germany surely occupied Austria and obliterated it politically. AUSTRIA as such ceased to exist. But it is also clear that millions of Austrians were delighted by this ANNEXATION and were delighted to have been swallowed up by this newly-constituted strong NAZI-led German state. Suffice it to say that after the war, the Austrians successfully convinced the world that they were not only guiltless in the singular crimes committed by the Nazis but they actually were NAZI Germany's first victim. Or as has been so beautifully put, the Austrian convinced the world that BEETHOVEN was an AUSTRIAN and HITLER a GERMAN (whereas in fact it, of course, was the other way around).

And this VERY difficult relationship has also existed in the world of soccer.

The Austrians were the very first continental European country to introduce professionalism in football in 1925. The Germans, the NAZIS in particular, hated this and saw it as an English and Jewish ploy to ruin football. The Austrians under the brilliant Jewish football genius HUGO MEISL constructed the so called WUNDERTEAM, the "wonder team" that in the 1930s was arguably THE very best national team in the world, certainly outside of the British Isles. It beat everybody convincingly and with regularity, above all the GERMANS.

Indeed, on April 3, 1938, literally three weeks after the ANSCHLUSS had happened, the AUSTRIAN team beat the Germans 2-0 which the Nazi leadership in Berlin saw as an affront. Then, on June 22, 1941, literally the very day that the Nazi war machine commenced its unprovoked and brutal war of destruction against the Soviet Union, the prominent Viennese club RAPID defeated the prominent German club SCHALKE 04 in Berlin's Olympic Stadium in front of 100,000 spectators to claim the GERMAN FOOTBALL CHAMPIONSHIP (Remember, there was no Austria anymore as of the spring of 1938. Austria, under the NAZI terminology of OSTMARK, had become a German province.) The Nazi leadership was SO upset about RAPID becoming champion instead of the Nazis' most beloved club SCHALKE 04, that shortly after this victory all the RAPID players were deployed for military service on the Russian front.

After World War II, the rivalry continued between the politically reborn AUSTRIA and the newly constituted FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY, also known as WEST GERMANY. The Austrians continued their dominance of the Germans in football but during the WORLD CUP in Switzerland in 1954 which the Germans would eventually win in arguably one of the greatest upsets in international football history by beating a MUCH better and more prominent Hungarian team, the so called ARANY CSAPAT or golden team, in the final of that amazing tournament, the Germans beat the still better Austrians on June 30th by the devastating score of 6 - 1. The tide had turned. The Germans from that day onward would dominate the Austrians in football to this very day -- and in a convincing manner.

But there was one exception which is invoked literally by EVERY Austrian I have met since my arrival in Vienna for the tournament and which is CONSTANTLY shown on television and is sold on DVD: The Austrians call it the MIRACLE OF CORDOBA. On June 21, 1978, the Austrian national team beat the Germans in the Argentine city of Cordoba by the score of 3 - 2. The Austrian radio reporter, a certain EDY FINGER, screamed into the microphone repeatedly "I am going nuts, I am going nuts, I am going nuts ('I waer narrisch' in Austrian dialect)" when the Austrian player KRANKL scored Austria's third and winning goal a few minutes before the game's end. This line -- I waer narrisch, I am going nuts -- has become THE most quoted and best known expression in Austria bar none. EVERY person in Austria, young, old, female, male, football fan, non football fan, knows this expression.

And the Austrians -- of course -- are now CONSTANTLY speaking of a repeat of THE MIRACLE OF CORDOBA from 30 years ago, this time in the form of a MIRACLE OF VIENNA.

In addition to the game in Cordoba, which the Austrians continue to call THE MIRACLE OF CORDOBA, there is one more key game in this rivalry that actually has had MAJOR implications for global football. In the Spanish city of GIJON, Austria met Germany during the first-round round-robin phase of the 1982 WORLD CUP on June 25 of that year. The situation was as follows: Austria which led Germany by points, COULD lose and still qualify for the next round provided the loss was by less than 3 goals. Germany HAD to win to make it into the next round. If none of these events were going to occur, ALGERIA was going to advance to the next round, most likely together with Austria who was not going to lose by a score of 3-0 or more. HORST HRUBESCH, the tall German center forward scored Germany's first goal with a forceful headers in the 11th minute of the game. The two teams suddenly realized that this was a perfect score for both: that the Germans AND the Austrians would advance with this score. And the two teams proceeded to pass the ball around meaninglessly for 79 minutes, kicking it back and forth between the two penalty boxes with neither team attacking. It was one of the WORST disgraces in the history of international football. TOTALLY shameful and TOTALLY corrupt. The Poor Algerian delegation and players had no other recourse than to run around in the viewing area brandishing wads of money to demonstrate how they felt about this totally corrupt behavior on the part of the Germans and Austrians. Rapidly dubbed "the scandal of GIJON" (as opposed to the "miracle of Cordoba") and also as the "ANSCHLUSS GAME", a game incidentally that neither country ever talks about, this game more than any other led FIFA and UEFA to implement the reform which since then demands that the last games in the first round be played SIMULTANEOUSLY lest such scandalous behavior occur once again mocking the integrity of the tournament and the sport.

AUSTRIA – GERMANY

June 16, 2008

NO MIRACLE OF VIENNA AFTER ALL!!!!

Just back home from the HAPPEL STADIUM in VIENNA where a far superior German team beat the hyped Austrians by a solid 1-0 which could have -- should have -- been a lot higher had the Germans realized even half the chances that they had.

It was clear from the get-go that the Germans were far superior to the Austrians in pretty much every phase of the game. I mean, the German players play for clubs like BAYERN MUNICH, REAL MADRID, ARSENAL LONDON, CHELSEA LONDON, while the VERY best Austrians play for Greek clubs like PANATHENAIKOS and AEK Athens and MIDDLESBOROUGH in England.

Surely, anything can happen in one game and home field in football is the most powerful of any team sports, but the chance of the Austrians beating the Germans was slim to none.

But the locals here REALLY believed that they had a good team that will perform another MIRACLE -- this time the MIRACLE OF VIENNA -- exactly thirty years after CORDOBA.

It was not to be.

Michael Ballack's PHENOMENAL free kick was a goal for the ages. One of the most beautiful and powerful free kick goals I have ever seen in my fifty years of having followed football in Europe, the Americas and pretty much everywhere in the world. BRAVISSIMO!!!!

Now the Austrians will join their Swiss co-hosts in sitting out the tournament having been fine hosts and organizers of the tournament but mediocre football players at best.

There was a WHO'S WHO of Austrian and German politics and celebrity at the game: The Austrian prime minister and president of the Republic, Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany, Boris Becker and on and on.

Amazing hype for a game that the Austrians called THE GAME OF ALL GAMES and that was merely the third match in the first round of a tournament that is the third most important sporting event of the globe but still no World Cup which, of course, is NUMERO UNO followed by the OLYMPICS.

The Germans will play PORTUGAL on Thursday in Switzerland and I would not at all be surprised if they beat the Portuguese who rested all their major players last night in a meaningless defeat to Switzerland. But I am not a great believer in resting an entire team. REST, of course, is GREAT but very quickly RUST settles in and a team can EASILY lose its rhythm. I hope that this will not be the case because I am really supporting the Portuguese who have played beautifully until last night and have clearly been the second most exciting team after the GLORIOUS Dutch who will play ROMANIA tomorrow, Tuesday, alongside a CLASSICO between France and Italy both of whom are in real danger of not making it out of the first round.

First Round Post-Mortem

June 18, 2008

BEWARE of FAULTY conclusions!

So here we are, with the first round all but over, with only one important game remaining, the one between SWEDEN and RUSSIA that will determine who will play HOLLAND in the quarterfinals.

The rest of the pairings all stand:

Germany - Portugal tomorrow evening in Switzerland

Turkey - Croatia on Friday evening Vienna (which I will attend, of course)

Holland - Russia or Sweden in Switzerland on Saturday night

And

Italy - Spain on Sunday evening in Vienna (which I will attend as well).

One is tempted to conclude from the performances in the first round to see HOLLAND as far and way the best team of the tournament -- a goal-producing machine of total offensive brilliance, the revival of BRILLIANT ORANGE and the TOTAL FOOTBALL ecstasy of the RINUS MICHELS teams of the 1970s led by the legendary JOHAN CRUYFF. Then, one would place Portugal as number two with Spain following in quick order as number three.

The rest seem to be distant ALSO-RANS.

Germany and Italy have disappointed, and Turkey and Croatia are solid but not great. But be careful!!!!

Germany and Italy ALWAYS start out slowly and well under their abilities but then both of these sensationally efficient tournament teams just grow and grow and become better with every game, not necessarily prettier and playing dazzling football -- leave that to the Dutch and the Portuguese --but ultimately attaining the ONLY thing that really matters, namely win!!!!

Thus, I would not at all be surprised if both Germany and Italy defeated their coming opponents, the two Iberian teams Portugal and Spain respectively, and meet in the semifinal or even the final. The biggest disappointment in the tournament thus far has been FRANCE!!!!

A mere shadow of itself, of its heydays as WORLD champions in 1998 and EUROPEAN champions in 2000, this team needs a MAJOR overhaul and a MAJOR rejuvenation. THIERRY HENRY should have NEVER left ARSENAL where he flourished and go to BARCA where he struggled. This subpar performance carried over into the EURO tournament where he scored a typically beautiful HENRY-style goal against the DUTCH only to be outperformed literally 30 seconds later by that brilliant sharp-angle goal scored by ARJEN ROBBEN and putting the game out of reach for the French with the score 3-1.

The Swiss and the Austrians -- well, what is there to say: OK teams, but simply well over their heads. This will be the very first time in the history of the EURO tournament that both hosts have been eliminated in the first round: In 2000, Belgium fell but Holland advanced.

And the former champs, the Greeks, again, no real surprise there though --as I said in my previous blog -- there is simply no need for the blatant SCHADENFREUDE (the delight in somebody else's pain, yet another of those wonderful FREUDIAN expressions totally apt for events in Vienna) that many experts and commentators have in store for the Greeks whose championship on 2004 they seem to regard as a total fluke, as an undeserved stroke of luck which has now -- thankfully -- come to pass and has been exposed for what it really was, namely a fraud.

This is silly and wrong and totally ill-willed. Nobody handed the 2004 championship in Portugal to the Greeks. They had to win it, which they did. And now their reign as champions is over. That is fine and good but there is no need to gloat in their loss.

GERMANY – PORTUGAL

June 19, 2008

SEBASTIAN SCHWEINSTEIGER should CONSTANTLY play against Portugal.

He scored two fabulous goals against the Portuguese in the match in Stuttgart for 3rd place at the World Cup in 2004 and was instrumental in the third goal as well. DITTO this evening: He scored a sensational goal which gave GERMANY the lead, a goal which surely was one of the tournament's finest: amazing DOUBLE give and go between Ballack and Podolski on the left wing, great centering pass by Podolski and Schweinsteiger slid into the ball and scored a wonderful goal. And then he kicked BOTH free kicks that KLOSE headed into the net for the 2-0 and then Ballack headed into the net in the second half for the 3-1.

The latter was CLEARLY a foul by Ballack who pushed off the defender to score his header, but no matter. Schweinsteiger was the best player on the field. Really impressive!!!!

What is so interesting is the fact that SCHWEINSTEIGER is not even a real regular in the BAYERN MUNICH line up. But against PORTUGAL, the man plays like he is possessed. The four BAYERN players were superb: Klose, Schweinsteiger, Lahm, Podolski. Had Podolski's shot from more than 30 meters gone into the net, which it ALMOST did, it would have become one of the most legendary goals in the history of global football. The man has a sensational shot with his left and his right feet. Very impressive!!!

The Germans did what they almost ALWAYS do: Rise to the occasion at a crucial game and outperform an opponent that -- most likely -- has better players, technically more skilled players at every position but is simply not as good as a TEAM!!!!

With the Germans the adage is clear: The whole is ALWAYS more than the sum of its parts. This is why I predicted in my previous blog that the Germans will defeat the Portuguese who are superior football players but proved to be the inferior team. Even with Ballack's goal resulting from a foul, the Germans deserved to win. I am very sorry to say that because I was DESPERATELY hoping and rooting for the Portuguese but it was not to be. The Germans will defeat the winner of tomorrow's game between Croatia and Turkey and will reach the final in Vienna on June 29th in which they will -- quite likely -- meet their nemesis, the Italians to whom they will, as happens so often, lose.

Once again, the German victory tonight showed us that -- just like in the NBA -- regular round-robin games, meaning regular early games that are part of the group stage and are like the regular season in basketball -- are TOTALLY different from single elimination games, meaning the play offs. The Germans underperform in the former and overperform in the latter, when it REALLY counts. That makes them such a superior tournament team.

More tomorrow night after my visit to the ERNST HAPPEL STADIUM in Vienna for TURKEY vs. CROATIA, which could be an ugly scene with the two countries' populations not exactly the best of friends. I hope for the best but fear the worst. We shall soon see.

CROATIA – TURKEY

June 21, 2008

The Civilizing Agency of Women and Internationalism (or Globalization)

Last night I visited the ERNST-HAPPEL-STADIUM here in Vienna for the fourth time this tournament for a game between CROATIA and TURKEY, two countries whose people are surely not the closest of friends and who were DESPERATE rivals in last night's single-elimination match.

There were well over 200,000 Croatian fans in the city of Vienna, and -- together with the city's regular Turkish inhabitants, particularly in the city's 16th district -- there were surely that many Turks as well.

Inside the stadium the relation between CROATS and TURKS was something like 3-1.

The metro ride was PACKED with Croats and Turks and there were countless occasions where and when things could have gotten ugly between these two fan groups. But they did not.

And the two main reasons for this were clear:

1. The presence of MANY women -- possibly 40 percent of the attending audience.

And

2. The complete internationalization of the entire atmosphere in every aspect of the city's life well beyond the stadium and football in its immediate sense.

Neither of these things happen in regular games, even regular international club games, or regular international games between national sides, and thus the violence and aggression is much higher in those.

In the presence of girlfriends, wives, sisters, mothers, aunts, men just do not behave as badly as they do regularly when left alone. I noticed one concrete example: When, after the game, the JUBILANT Turkish players circled the field and came to the corner where I had my seat to greet their supporters, two CROATIAN men next to me booed the Turkish players and made all kinds of internationally well known obscene gestures. The men were angry and disappointed and quite aggressive right next to Turkish fans. And then, out of nowhere, their wives, or girlfriends, or sisters -- in short women -- grabbed hold of their arms and hands and just cooled these guys down. And that was that!!!!

I am sure that many similar occurrences happened all over the stadium and all over Vienna last night in the many FAN ZONES and viewing areas of the city's squares and public parks.

And then to internationalization:

Everything is announced in English, German AND the languages of the teams participating in the particular matches -- and ALWAYS by native speakers.

So last night, EVERYTHING happened in Turkish and in Croatian. Even well away from the stadium. My wife was on a bus in a completely different part of Vienna from the stadium and football, and the public announcing system on the bus -- like on all metros and street tramways -- was constantly updating the score of the game in TURKISH and CROATIAN.

I never thought that I would experience the day that two languages of two peoples whom the Viennese dislike intensely, would enter the public space of the city with such prominence and such vigor. Leave it to football and its internationalization. A truly enlightening moment for me.

As to the game, what can one say: The Turks are TRULY the CINDERELLA team of this tournament: They came from behind to beat Switzerland, the Czech Republic AND Croatia. In the latter two games, the TURKS were all but dead. But they came back from the brink of the grave. Amazing!!!! But Cinderella will meet MIDNIGHT in the form of the GERMANS this coming Wednesday. The Turks's ride is finished, their Hollywood tournament over. The Germans WILL WIN THAT GAME. One addendum that I would like to alert the reader to and that I wrote about in one of my contributions but did not see in its Spanish translation: I was quite upset about the open joy and delight in the GREEKS' departure from the tournament. The Germans have a great term for such joy: It is called SCHADENFREUDE, the joy in somebody else's pain.

Many football experts and journalists seemed delighted to have the Greeks "exposed" as some sort of fraud, some sort of imposters, as if they had somehow won the championship in Portugal in 2004 in a deviant way. Nobody seems to have granted this outsider the legitimation of being a true and deserving champion. Especially the commentators of the big boys, like the Germans, the Italians and the Dutch were delighted to get rid of these GREEK impostors whom they simply viewed as undeserving PARVENUES to what rightfully always belongs to the inside circle of football aristocracy.

HOLLAND – RUSSIA

June 22, 2008

From BRILLIANT ORANGE to ROTTEN ORANGE.

One of the best football books of all times is called BRILLIANT ORANGE and is dedicated to the genius of Dutch football, particularly that of the great JOHAN CRUYFF and his crew, coached by the inimitable RINUS MICHELS. But even after the CRUYFF era of the 1970s, the Dutch produced some great teams centered around the current (but soon to resign) coach of the ORANJE national team MARCO VAN BASTEN and, of course, the great RRUD GULLIT, both the hearts and soul of those AC MILAN teams of the 1980s that won a number of SCUDETTI in SERIE A, and, of course, a number of European Champion Championships, the precursor of the current CHAMPIONS LEAGUE. Ruud Gullit is, of course, now coach of our MLS's Los Angeles Galaxy where, I hope, he will make his mark as a coach the way he did with NEWCASTLE UNITED and other teams in England. As I wrote in one of my earlier contributions to this series of blogs, the Dutch victories against such pedigreed teams as the current world champion ITALIANS and the World Cup finalists FRANCE, were SO impressive, SO beautiful, SO amazing, that I was not the only one to invoke the beauty and brilliance of the BRILLIANT ORANGE era of total football. The Dutch team did not beat Italy and France, they DESTROYED them. And then came yesterday's total debacle. It is not THAT the Dutch lost to the Russians but HOW they lost to them. In the 30-minute overtime, the Dutch simply could not run, could not move, it seemed as if they were logging around 20 KILO led in their boots. What had happened? I mean, here were the Dutch who had NO injuries, who had an extra day of rest over the Russians, who had an easy 5-1 advantage in terms of the fan presence at St. Jakobs Park in Basel which was a sea of orange, whose grass on the field was even imported from Holland because the rain in Basel had ruined the Swiss lawn and UEFA did not trust the Swiss to furnish the proper lawn which UEFA insisted had to be imported from a special company in Holland to the tremendous chagrin of the Swiss who felt insulted by this, in other words, here were the Dutch with TOTAL advantage and they performed pitifully. Losing is acceptable to anybody at such a level of football. But not being able to move, not being able to run, to compete????? What was going on???? To be sure, the Dutch team was quite upset about the loss of KHALID BOULAHROUZ's baby girl two days after her birth in the course of the week. BOULAHROUZ decided to play at his usual position of right back and all the Dutch players wore black armbands in solidarity with their team-mate and in honor of the little girl's memory. But still, the team's performance was pitiful. I have no explanation for this sub-par performance other than these two hypotheses which might be incorrect upon further research, but still: 1. Having been an avid follower of football, but also of basketball, American football, ice hockey and baseball, I have noticed an interesting pattern in all of them: When a team wins a series early and rests its players, it inevitably and quite often loses to its next opponent who did not have such a luxury and kept playing at a high level. In other words, I do not think that it is an accident that ALL three first-place teams in this quarterfinal -- the Portuguese, the Croatians, the Dutch, and who knows, maybe the Spaniards later tonight -- have lost to second place teams -- the Germans, the Turks, the Russians and maybe tonight the Italians -- after having rested their entire team in meaningless third games of their respective groups. The Portuguese rested

their team against the Swiss, the Croatians against the Poles, the Dutch against the Romanians. This is not good. Football at such an immense high level requires rhythm and flow and total acquaintance, and these teams have so little of this anyway because -- unlike club teams -- their players meet each other sporadically and at the last minute to forge a team whose only commonality is that all the players share the same nationality. So I think that it is totally counterproductive to "rest" players for an entire game and have them lose the flow and rhythm and trust and interaction that they so copiously established in the first two games of the tournament which they won. I am absolutely convinced -- to use an important and relevant example from American football -- that the reason the New York Giants won the SUPERBOWL this past February and beat the massively favored and totally perfect New England Patriots had everything to do with coach Coughlin's firm decision to play the last game of the season which was totally meaningless to the Giants because they could not improve nor lower their 5th place in the play off position with full commitment and full power as if everything did depend on that game. There, too, many wanted the Giants to rest their entire team and not play the regular players and their stars. But Coughlin resisted it and the victorious results are well known. So my hypothesis is that the extra rest of not playing a meaningless game hurt the Dutch team, just like it hurt the Croatian and the Portuguese. It might quite possibly hurt the Spanish team tonight as well, we shall see. I will be in the ERNST HAPPEN STADIUM tonight for the ITALY-SPAIN game and will report on it in my next contribution. 2. The second hypothesis rests with the person of GUUS HIDDINK, the genius coach of many an international side and the discoverer of many of the Dutch players who played on this Dutch team. I mean, he weaned and nurtured IBRAHIM AFFELAY from the current Dutch champion PSV EINDHOVEN when Hiddink was coach of PSV EINDHOVEN. As a Dutch commentator on Austrian television said before the game, there was not one nerve, not one muscle, not one idea on the part of any of the Dutch players that the Dutchman and genius coach GUUS HIDDINK did not know intimately. That surely must have helped him devise a proper strategy for the Russians to bother the Dutch team's game in every one of its phases. Guus Hiddink is global football's equivalent to the legendary LARRY BROWN in American basketball. Both of them are constantly on the go, restless like the FLYING DUTCHMAN in the opera, who must sail the stormy seas and can never come to rest: Like Brown, Hiddink, too, has been crowned with much success: He led the Dutch team to a fourth place finish at the WORLD CUP in 1998 in France; he led the South Korean team to a fourth place finish at the World Cup 2002 in South Korea and Japan; and he led Australia to the quarterfinal in Germany in 2006 when his team lost to Italy, the eventual world champion, following a VERY questionable and VERY dubious and arguably totally unjust penalty which the Italians converted in the last minute of the game. I am sure that Hiddink's coaching the Russian national team hurt the Netherlands and their star ensemble. One last word: The Russians have two absolutely top and world class attackers in ANDREI ARSHAVIN from the current UEFA Cup winner and Russian league champion ZENITH ST. PETERSBURG and PAVEL YUTSHENKO from SPARTAK MOSCOW. I would have said two years ago with 1,000 percent certainty that following this tournament, both of these guys would find themselves with one of the absolutely top clubs in one of the best leagues in Western Europe, Premiership or Serie A or La Liga. But given the new riches in Russia and with billions of petrodollars flowing into the coffin of teams such as ZENITH that is sponsored by the petro giant GAZPROM, it might very well be the case that these stars will remain at home and not travel to Barcelona, Madrid, Manchester, London or Milan.

GERMANY – TURKEY

June 25, 2008

ALL HAIL TO GARY LINNEKER!!!!

In what still is arguably the funniest but also the most poignant and most powerful definition of football, Gary Linneker, the great former EVERTON star and ENGLAND international and now distinguished BBC football commentator, once offered the following insight: Football is a game in which 22 men chase a ball on a large field for 90 minutes -- and in the end the GERMANS ALWAYS WIN!!!!

Has this been ever true in the past and was this EVER true this evening in Basel where a decidedly inferior German team defeated a brilliantly playing Turkish team by the score of 3-2 in what was arguably among the top three games of the tournament. Up and down the teams went, with ELAN and VERVE and FINESSE and POWER!!!!

The Turks were sensational. This was far and away the best effort of their fascinating performance in this tournament and when they scored the equalizer in the 87th minute, I was sure that they would once again pull off a miracle like they had against the Swiss, against the Czechs AND against the Croats. But then I realized that the Turks were playing the Germans whom Linneker had so aptly characterized -- and I immediately came to my senses and knew that the Turks were not going to win this time. And sure enough, Philip Lahm runs down the left side of the field and scores a phenomenal goal in the 91st minute, the first minute of extra time.

What can one say!!!!

Once again, the Germans were not the better team on the pitch, and once again the Germans won!!!!

At some point, I guess, one has to give them credit for pulling off these feats for decades now. As I have repeatedly stated for years and even in one of these blogs, I am sure, the Germans are the greatest tournament

team in the history of football, meaning that their tournament successes have consistently been far more numerous and far superior to the actual quality of their players, both as individuals and perhaps even as a team. But at the end of the day, all of this is irrelevant.

The Dutch may have dazzled, so did the Portuguese, the Turks have won our hearts, but come Sunday evening, Michael Ballack will lift the trophy into the dark air of a crisp Vienna night representing Germany's fourth EUROPEAN CHAMPIONSHIP title.

I just do not believe that either SPAIN or RUSSIA -- tomorrow's contestants -- will have the wherewithal to beat the Germans.

More about tomorrow night's game which I will attend in the HAPPEL STADIUM in Vienna.

RUSSIA – SPAIN

June 26, 2008

BRAVA ESPANA!!!!

The second half of the RUSSIA - SPAIN semifinal was truly a TOUR DE FORCE on the part of the SPANISH SELECTION. Wonderful passing, superb usage of the entire field, great wing play, fine runs, good shooting -- just a perfect 45 minutes in the pouring rain and some serious lightening and thunder in the HAPPEL STADIUM in Vienna.

I was thrilled for SPAIN and dare hope, and even make the prediction that WERE Spain to play on Sunday for 90 minutes the way it played tonight for 45 minutes, the team DOES have a realistic chance of beating the Germans.

Even though I would love to see this happen and will be rooting mightily for the SPANISH team, I still doubt it very much that it can beat the Germans in this very context and on this very stage not because the Spaniards are lesser players than the Germans, far from it; but because we all know how the Germans have arguably been THE very best tournament team in football, perhaps of all time, and how they will not fold under pressure but -- on the contrary -- rise to new heights.

But this is SPAIN's chance to redeem itself FINALLY, after all these decades and decades of utter disappointment and total failure, including at home during the MUNDIAL in 1982 in which the team attained one of the worst records ever recorded by a host side.

Other than winning the EUROPEAN CHAMPIONSHIP in 1964, when this was a totally unimportant and very recent tournament whose debut, incidentally, in 1960, was won by the team of the former Soviet Union, the Spanish national team has NEVER won a meaningful title in any international competition at any level. Second to winning the World Cup, the unique and unparalleled MUNDIAL, winning the European Championship this coming Sunday would be a close second in terms of accomplishing a MAJOR achievement and FINALLY banning the ghosts of utter failure and constant disappointment. The stakes are high for the Spanish team.

I hope that Luis Aragonés's boys can live up to this challenge and task.

GERMANY – SPAIN

June 29, 2008

GLORIOUS SPAIN!!!!

The very best team of the tournament won the championship!!!!

Portugal played better games initially, Holland dazzled us at the beginning, the Turks won our hearts with their deeds -- but Spain won all its games and REALLY shone brilliantly in the second half against Russia and all game against Germany in the final.

Germany was EXTREMELY lucky to have lost only by ONE goal. A final result of 3-0 for Spain, possibly 4-0, would not have been unfair.

The monkey is off Spain's back. No more explanations for all the failures will be needed, no more excuses.

A MAJOR title has FINALLY been won -- and in what a convincing manner. This was a masterful performance which will go down as one of the most convincing in a EUROPEAN CHAMPIONSHIP final.

And the Spanish team is REALLY young, so there is a fine chance that this team will -- or certainly SHOULD -- be one of the top favorites for the WORLD CUP in 2010.

As to the Germans, well, Michael Ballack's bad luck and final jinx continues.

The story started when he and his team BAYER LEVERKUSEN lost the final of the UEFA Champions League to REAL MADRID in 2002. In that same season his team lost the Bundesliga championship and the German Cup final. To cap it all he could not play in the WORLD CUP final that year because he had accumulated too many yellow cards. No matter, the Germans lost to Brazil.

With Bayern Munich he could quench his thirst for titles, but since he joined CHELSEA, except for a League Cup, the draught started again.

The year 2008 has been disastrous for Ballack. CHELSEA ended up second after MANCHESTER UNITED in both the Premier League and the Champions League, after losing the League Cup final to TOTTENHAM HOTSPUR. The silver medal with Germany at the European Championship thus becomes his fourth this year.

All in all, this was a terrific tournament on every possible level: Well organized, well-played games, enthusiastic but peaceful fans. Three splendid weeks for me, during which I could write on an almost daily basis on this blog -- my second for ESPN Deportes after having covered the 2006 World Cup as well. I hope you enjoyed it as much as I did. With best wishes, until next time!