

THE TECHNICIAN

FUTSAL

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**NEWSLETTER
FOR COACHES**
SUPPLEMENT No. 4
FEBRUARY 2008

IMPRESSUM

EDITORIAL GROUP

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PRODUCTION

André Vieli • Dominique Maurer
Atema Communication SA • Printed by Cavin SA

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Hélène Fors • Laurent Morel



Portugal qualified for the semi-finals for the first time, but were defeated by Spain.

COVER

Javier Eserverri (Spain), in the foreground, up against Vinicius Bacaro (Italy) in the final of the 2007 European Futsal Championship which Spain won.

(Photo: Sportfile)

FLOURISHING FUTSAL

EDITORIAL

BY ANDY ROXBURGH,
UEFA TECHNICAL DIRECTOR

As I sat in the impressive Pavilhão de Gondomar on the outskirts of Porto watching the semi-final of the 5th European Futsal Championship between the hosts Portugal and the reigning champions Spain, I couldn't help reflecting on the changes which have taken place since UEFA's first futsal finals for national teams back in January 1996 in the Spanish city of Córdoba.

That inaugural event was classed as a tournament and not an official championship because only 17 associations took part in the qualification process and UEFA was unwilling to provide full recognition until at least 50% of its members registered for the competition. (Three years later, the target was reached and championship status was conferred.) In just over a decade, since the 1996 launch, national team futsal has evolved from a low-key, unofficial tournament into a spectacular, heavily branded championship, with a massive TV audience and playing squads full of top-level professionals.

The rise in television viewing figures has been dramatic. In 1996 there was only local coverage, while in 2001, the futsal EURO attracted a modest pan-European audience of 13,000 on Eurosport. Compare these numbers with Portugal 2007 when 11.7 million tuned into Eurosport's coverage and another 4.4 million watched on Portuguese TV – two channels and an aggregate of 16.1 million futsal fans. The top-rated broadcast on Eurosport was the final between Spain and Italy, which generated an audience of 1.4 million viewers, a 53% higher audience than the European Under-21 final at the end of June 2007. In tandem with TV exposure, or because of it, the market-

ing/commercial side has blossomed. In Porto, we had giant screens, electronic advertising boards and a man-of-the-match award sponsored by Carlsberg. The new, seamless ball was specially produced by adidas for the finals and the state-of-the-art blue floor provided the perfect futsal surface. Also, in contrast to Córdoba 1996, the goals were fixed and not liable to move, either accidentally or deliberately.

While the packaging has been subject to a revolution, the game itself has evolved gradually. The top players have become futsal athletes and the speed of the game has increased dramatically. Technical/tactical quality has improved, and in this context it must be noted that a growing number of teams get their inspiration from players with Brazilian roots. Not surprisingly, the combination of increased fitness levels, professional attitudes and tactical know-how has made it more difficult to produce creative attacking play and high levels of goalscoring. The semi-finals and the final in 1996 produced a total of 21 goals (Spain beat Russia 5-3 in the final), while in Portugal 2007, ten goals were scored in the corresponding three matches (Spain winning the title again, this time by three goals to one). Remarkably, the opening game in Porto between Portugal and Italy ended in a 0-0 stalemate – something unthinkable back in 1996.

Since the Córdoba experience, the developments in futsal have been almost breathtaking. A record 36 associations

entered the last European Futsal Championship and many new futsal converts are preparing to join the action. To reflect this expansion, the final round in 2009 will involve 12 teams. In addition, the Futsal Cup for clubs has become a big favourite since Playas de Castellón of Spain won the initial title in 2002. Professional leagues have become popular in many countries – in Spain 30,000 fans watch on a weekly basis and in Russia there is a professional league with 33 teams and many matches are live on TV. Futsal referees are now trained by UEFA and courses and conferences are held for the technicians and administrators.

Overall progress in futsal can be seen in the competitions, the TV interest, marketing/commercial activities, environmental improvements and better equipment. The players, the coaches and the referees have become more detailed in their preparations and in their approach to competitive play, and this professional mentality will surely continue. The development of players has also gained more attention and Javier Lozano, Spain's futsal world champion coach, made the priority clear when he said: "The main aspect to development is tactics. Teach the young players to think – speed and decision-making are crucial." Undoubtedly, it is the technical wizardry, allied to the speed of action and decision-making, that makes futsal a special branch of football and something which fascinates the indoor fans. Fast, spectacular play is therefore the aim, and that hasn't changed since UEFA embraced futsal in Córdoba in 1996.



Russia and Spain met in the final in Córdoba in 1996.

INTERVIEW

BY GRAHAM TURNER



IT WAS A BRAND-NEW TROPHY BUT THE TEAM TO LIFT IT WAS THE SAME. THERE WAS, HOWEVER, A SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE. AFTER SPAIN'S CAPTAIN, JAVI RODRÍGUEZ, HAD BEEN PRESENTED WITH THE 2007 EUROPEAN FUTSAL CHAMPIONSHIP TROPHY, THE MAN THE PLAYERS THREW INTO THE AIR WAS NOT JAVIER LOZANO. A COUPLE OF MONTHS BEFORE THE FINAL ROUND HAD KICKED OFF IN PORTUGAL, HE HAD PUT AN END TO A 15-YEAR PERIOD OF UNPARALLELED SUCCESS AND HAD TAKEN ON A TOTALLY DIFFERENT ROLE (THOUGH TEAM-BUILDING CONTINUES TO BE ONE OF HIS TOP PRIORITIES) IN THE DRESSING ROOM AT REAL MADRID CF. THE MAN CHOSEN TO STEP INTO HIS FUTSAL SHOES WAS A FORMER ASSISTANT AND FRIEND, ENROLLED FROM SPANISH LEAGUE CLUB AUTOS LOBELLE DE SANTIAGO ON A TIME-SHARE BASIS UNTIL HE TAKES OVER AS FULL-TIME NATIONAL TEAM COACH NEXT SUMMER. THE IDEA BEHIND THIS INTERVIEW WAS NOT SO MUCH TO REVIEW SPAIN'S LATEST SUCCESS BUT TO FOCUS ON THE OTHER TEAMS AND THE TRENDS HE HAD DETECTED DURING THE FINAL TOURNAMENT. THESE ARE THE RESPONSES FROM THE NEW EUROPEAN CHAMPION

José Venancio

José, the obvious start is to congratulate you on successfully taking the baton from Javier Lozano and winning the last final tournament to be played with eight teams. Looking to the future, what's your view on the expansion to 12 finalists?

"I think the important thing about increasing the finals to 12 teams is the motivation among countries which have been on the fringe. At the next finals, we might end up with the usual teams at the top of the tree. But there will be extra opportunities to qualify and my hope is that this will translate into more effort and resources being put into futsal, along with more improvements in coach education. In other words, it could give the sport

a really big push. In that respect, I suspect that within a couple of championships we could have six or seven serious candidates fighting for the European title. I think the move will, in the medium term, lead to much greater equality."

Do you see it as a 'halfway house' on the route towards a 16-team final round?

"My view is that we should play at least two final rounds with 12 teams before asking to move up to 16. The next one, with 12, will provide motivation and I think the following one will be stronger in terms of competitiveness. Then it will be the moment to ask ourselves whether we're ready to go to 16. But I think we have to take things slowly."

Talking about UEFA competitions, how do you see the role of the UEFA Futsal Cup?

"The UEFA club competition is an important element in the development of futsal because it offers opportunities to compete in Europe. That might sound obvious, but the knock-on effect is that it provides motivation for more clubs to improve and to invest more resources at national level. To be in Europe, you need to win your domestic league – and that is why teams are improving all the time. Since the UEFA Futsal Cup started, there has been evident improvement. At the outset, it was always about the same clubs. But you can see new teams coming to the fore and different clubs getting into the elite round or the final four."



José Venancio is thrown in the air by his players after winning the European title in Porto.

In my view, the next step forward could be to make the cup winners' cup an official UEFA tournament."

How important is the introduction of the Under-21 competition?

"I know some of my colleagues would like to have an Under-19 competition, but it has to be regarded as a highly positive step in terms of player develop-

ment. People obviously look at us as role models and the growth of futsal in Spain has been based on youth development work. At lower levels, futsal plays a basic part in football – in the education of players who might stay in futsal or go on to the outdoor game. It's important. From a tactical point of view because they are obliged to take more decisions. And from a technical

point of view because they have much more contact with the ball. That's why football clubs have become aware of the value of futsal in youth development. We have futsal teams from early ages and a national league at youth level as well as regional competitions, from which the champions go on to dispute the Spanish championship. At all age levels. In terms of representative selections, there's a similar situation, as teams from all the autonomous regions compete for the national title. In every age bracket right down to Under-10s."



A large and enthusiastic crowd attended the final of the European Futsal Championship.

You mention 'role models' and observers will have tracked the progress made by the debutants – Romania and Serbia – and the more established powers like Portugal, who have broken into the elite in a short space of time. How did you see them?

"Serbia have made considerable progress. They have players with great technical ability and they've improved various tactical aspects of their game. But I think they can improve even further. In Portugal, they defended very



THE COACHES OF THE FINALISTS:

ALESSANDRO NUCCORINI (ITALY, LEFT)

AND JOSÉ VENANCIO (SPAIN).

close to their own goal, which meant that they gave the opposition a lot of space and a lot of the ball. If they can improve their upfield defending and keep working hard in training, I think they can become a real power in the game. They have certainly got enough technical ability to do so."

Romania have been playing futsal for only about four years...

"They are also in a period of very rapid growth. I was surprised by the way they performed in the qualifying phase because they've been in futsal for such a short time. But they're developing a very modern futsal playing style and they came to Portugal with the idea of coming out and playing. That's important because it's the best way to learn and improve. It was a very intelligent approach without illusions of grandeur. They realised that it was a great opportunity to learn and they simply went for it, instead of aiming to lose by fewer goals – and learning less. I had the impression that they learned a lot. And if they carry on with this philosophy and this way of working, I'm convinced that they'll be climbing a lot of places in the rankings."

Portugal came very close to beating you in the semi-finals...

"Don't remind me! Portugal is a country which has grown a great deal in recent years. They've been helped by some players emigrating to the Spanish league – and by Joël taking Portuguese nationality along with Iván and Leitão. Playing at home also helped them to play at a very high level. To describe them as 'worthy opponents' against us in the semi-final is a bit of an under-



Spain v Ukraine
in action
in Group B.

statement because they produced a great performance for 34 or 35 minutes. They have a clear philosophy about how they want to play, they operate at very high speed, they can perform well in 4-0 formation and with an attacking pivot, they can press very aggressively and they can launch dangerous counter-attacks... a very dynamic team and a good one for people to take as an example."

Portugal, Italy, Russia and Spain in the semi-finals: 'business as usual'?

"Not really, because the Russian team has changed completely – mainly because of the introduction of Cirilo and Pelé Junior. They have gained in attacking power but maybe at the price of some collective defending spirit. The result is a team based on two very different quartets – and, over-simplifying it a bit – you can tell which style to expect as soon as you know whether the Dinamo quartet or the VIZ-Sinara quartet is on the pitch. I liked the Russian team, not only because of this variety but also because they always went for it, they always tried to play spectacular futsal. In my opinion, Russia has to be at every major tournament because they make such an attacking contribution to the event. By contrast, Ukraine came to the tournament

during a period of reconstruction yet without changing their playing style. They've lost some key players in terms of quality and have brought in some young players with a great future. They're still rotating their quartets every two minutes or so, they have the same defensive system and the same counter-attacking ability, and they still base their game on very fast players equipped for rapid transitions. I know they lost their three games in Portugal but we saw a team with a competitive mentality that, I'm sure, will be a lot more dangerous at the next European Championship. Much the same applies to the Czechs. I got the feeling that they would benefit from playing more high-level games. Their team had enough quality to spring a surprise against anybody but not enough intensity about their game to sustain a successful campaign."

You were the only coach to include three goalkeepers in your list of 14. By the way, would you like to have all 14 available rather than sending two to the stand?

"No. I think that a 12-man squad for games is ideal. OK, having all 14 available would give the coach more options. At the same time, I think it would be excessive. If only five can

JOSÉ VENANCIO
DURING THE SEMI-FINAL
AGAINST PORTUGAL.



Photos: Sportfile

be on the pitch, having nine on the bench is too many and I think the outcome would be for some to sit out the game anyway. So I go along with the current format of 14 in the squad and 12 on the team sheet."

There was a general feeling that the standards of refereeing had improved. Would you go along with that?

"Standards have improved dramatically. You could see that in Portugal. But there are still some rules – or interpretations of rules – where we need to clarify and unify criteria. For example, people didn't realise why I was protesting very strongly at one point during the semi-final. I had to explain it to the media the following day. I was frustrated because I don't think the Laws of the Game can permit something that is illegal. I won't go into detail but it was to do with the way flying substitutions were being made. I think the time has come for us to use this type of tournament as a pretext for staging workshops or seminars for referees so that officials from as many countries as possible can observe what is going on. I think this would be a positive step in terms of

educating match officials and helping them to unify criteria. I would invite two or three referees from each country with a view to them returning home and acting as instructors to the other officials in their countries."

It was surprising in Portugal that the coaches called so few time-outs...

"I don't understand why. Every coach has his way of working but, frankly, I think it's important to make use of the opportunities we have. The way you use them depends on your needs at a specific time. In the semi-final against Portugal, I used both time-outs. I felt obliged to call them. The second one was an extreme situation because we were losing 2-0 and it was absolutely essential to change the face of the game. In the first half we were still drawing 0-0 but we also needed to change. We had started the game defending from the halfway line and the moment had come to press further upfield. We really needed to change our defensive formation. There is also a theory that, even if there is no serious tactical situation to resolve, a one-minute time-out can be useful in terms of giving players a breather. During the game against

Serbia, I didn't call a time-out during the second half. We were leading 1-0 and I thought that giving them a one-minute rest could be negative for us. Then they equalised during the last minute and, afterwards, I wondered whether I should have used the time-out after all. You can't guarantee that it would have changed the result but maybe we would have controlled possession of the ball much better during those final moments. I was genuinely surprised to hear that only half of the possibilities to call time-out during the tournament were used."

You turned round the semi-final against Portugal by using the flying goalkeeper. But this was something we hardly saw during the tournament. Why?

"I was also surprised by the minimal use of the flying goalkeeper. I saw situations where I thought the Czech Republic, Romania, Serbia or Ukraine would have used this option. It was a major surprise – especially as, in Spain, we are very much accustomed to seeing this strategy. In our league, almost all matches end with one team using five outfield players – unless it's a draw that suits both teams. Otherwise, the losing team always takes off the goalkeeper and sends on the extra outfielder. It's a facet of the game that we focus on a great deal during training. We are aware that it's an important element within the game and that we're talking about handling potentially decisive phases of play. It's a very important option and a key element in futsal. That is why I was totally surprised to see it used so infrequently in Portugal."



Russia v Spain
in the group
matches.



THERE WAS ONLY ONE DOUBLE PENALTY DURING THE TOURNAMENT IN PORTUGAL, AWARDED TO ROMANIA.

AS DUTCH NATIONAL TEAM COACH, VIC HERMANS WAS UNHAPPY TO BE ABSENT FROM THE EUROPEAN FUTSAL CHAMPIONSHIP FINALS. BUT HE WAS HAPPY TO BE PRESENT AS ONE OF UEFA'S TECHNICAL OBSERVERS, ALONGSIDE HIS CROATIAN COUNTERPART, MICO MARTIC. TO FUTSAL PEOPLE, VIC NEEDS NO INTRODUCTION. HE REPRESENTED HIS COUNTRY 45 TIMES AND WAS ELECTED MVP AT THE INAUGURAL FIFA FUTSAL WORLD CUP WHEN THE DUTCH HOSTED THE EVENT IN 1989. AS A COACH, HE HAS MIXED THE OUTDOOR AND INDOOR GAMES AND, AFTER SPELLS AS THE NATIONAL FUTSAL COACH IN HONG KONG, MALAYSIA AND IRAN, TOOK OVER THE DUTCH NATIONAL TEAM IN 2001. IN THE TECHNICAL REPORT ON THE 2007 FINALS (CURRENTLY IN PRODUCTION) ONE PAGE IS, AS USUAL, DEDICATED TO TALKING POINTS. AND THOSE WHO KNOW VIC WILL FIND IT EASY TO BELIEVE THAT HE HAD ENOUGH VIEWPOINTS TO FILL THE ENTIRE PUBLICATION. RATHER THAN SWEEP HIS OBSERVATIONS UNDER THE PROVERBIAL CARPET, THE FUTSAL TECHNICIAN HAS GATHERED THEM TOGETHER WITH THE AIM OF SPARKING OFF FURTHER DISCUSSION ON THE GAME AND ITS FUTURE. HERE ARE SOME OF HIS COMMENTS ON

THE STATE OF THE GAME



Sergiy Taranchuk (Ukraine) surrounded by two Russian opponents.

"I was in Caserta for the 2003 finals as technical observer and the Dutch team qualified for the 2005 finals, so I went to Ostrava to do my favourite job – to coach. So my first impression at the 2007 finals was that the teams were physically prepared as never before. In that respect, we are taking futsal to a higher level. At the same time, you could argue that we are creating ourselves a problem. We have to address the issue of how we can best continue to create scoring situations and score the goals the public wants to see in a period when levels of physical condition have risen so sharply and teams are equipped to defend extremely well."

FUTSAL: QUO VADIS?

"In my opinion, we have reached a position where we need to ask ourselves some serious questions. First of all, which direction do we want futsal to take? Do we want to maintain its image as a free-scoring TV and spectator sport? Or do we head in the direction of making futsal all about winning and tactical expertise?"

I recall that previous decisions have been based on developing futsal as a sport that's attractive for spectators and television viewers. So, in our role as coaches, we have to stand

DO THE FUTSAL LAWS NEED TO BE CHANGED?



back and be as objective as possible. It's tempting to think that if the game is technically interesting for us, then it must be interesting for the spectators. I'm not sure that's the case. The game is not for us. We have to think of the people who come to watch it. Futsal might be more sophisticated in coaching terms but we have to beware that the fans go away thinking that they haven't seen as many solo skills or scoring chances that they associate with futsal. That's dangerous. So I think that everybody within the game should really begin to think about the direction we want the sport to take."

The Penalty Clause

"Let me think back to some examples. Some years ago, we brought in a new ball and we wrote the rule about the double penalty from a distance of 12 metres. Then, after watching World Cups and European Championships, we decided that not enough of the double penalties were going in. So we reduced the distance to 10 metres. In Portugal, that was completely irrelevant because we only had one double penalty in the entire tournament."

Fair and Foul?

"Let's carry on thinking. Double penalties are about teams committing more than five fouls in one half of a match. So it's a question of what prompts the referee to blow his whistle and signal a foul. At the same time, the game has become much more physical, much more about strength. You would expect more free kicks and double penalties to be awarded. But that's not the case. So you begin to wonder whether the moment has come for serious talk about the way we would like referees to handle the game – and that obviously entails dialogue with the referees themselves. We have to get our heads together and decide which path we want to take. I'm not a referee so I would like to talk to them and see if anything should be done about modifying the Laws of the Game or the way we are applying them. Can we help

to orientate referees by helping to draw up guidelines or instructions?"

Don't Do Nothing!

At this juncture, I think the worst thing we can do is to do nothing. Or to think that we can do nothing. We can be lulled into a false sense of security by looking at the goals scored during qualifying tournaments and so on, whereas the public perception of the game is based largely on what they see the elite teams doing at the major events. It's not much use having wonderful TV audiences if we're not projecting the best possible image."

Time to Change?

Talking about a spectator sport, there was another detail that irritated me a bit in Portugal. There were times when a

team was awarded a corner kick and it took 12 to 15 seconds for the ball to be placed and the player to roll the ball into play. That, for the TV spectator, sows the seeds of boredom. And the same applied to kick-ins. The referee might start counting seconds once the ball is placed – but how long did it take to place the ball? If we give them four seconds to get the ball into play, should we give them a maximum of six seconds preparation time? I think a total of ten seconds is reasonable in a sport which is renowned for the speed of its match action. I know we are guaranteed 40 minutes of play but, if you look at the statistics for real playing time in Portugal, you can easily calculate how much time was lost. In some cases, it was so much that the teams playing the second match of



Romania v Czech Republic in action in Group A.



THE TOURNAMENT IN PORTO RECEIVED WIDE TV COVERAGE.

the day didn't have time to do a proper warming-up session on the pitch."

Days of the Round Table

"It was positive to have the coaches together for a roundtable session in Portugal – and it was good that some of them stressed that we should carry on reviewing the Laws of the Game. But we shouldn't mislead ourselves by continually asking for a ball that 'makes goalscoring easier'. I'm not sure such a thing exists. And we need to think very carefully before we pursue proposals to make goals bigger. That would mean futsal not fitting in with most of the sports halls in Europe. It's all too easy for the technicians to come up with this sort of suggestion, but we need to look at ourselves as well. As coaches, what can we do to promote an attacking, free-scoring game?"

Help!

"It was significant, in my opinion, that when we held the round table, there were requests for greater assistance from UEFA in terms of coach education and development. That made a big impact on me because we're talking about a tournament involving the top eight in Europe. If they still feel that

they need more support, then it's easy to imagine the requirements among the younger members of the futsal family. In Dutch futsal, I have my visions and I try to implement them – right the way through from school projects. So I appreciate the need for support and I think it's important that we provide it. Otherwise we could go another 10 or 15 years and still have the same five countries head and shoulders above the rest. I think we have an obligation to help develop futsal in other countries so that the sport becomes more competitive."

Home and Away?

"Another point that I believe in very strongly received great support at the round table. I realise that there are economic factors but I think that, as far as possible, we should try to move away from playing qualifiers as mini-tournaments where you play all your games in one week. I believe in playing qualifiers on a home-and-away basis so that international activity is spread over a greater time span and so that international futsal can be offered to fans in each competing country – not just the countries where the mini-tournaments are staged. These fixtures would also be much more attractive for the media,

for sponsors and, in consequence, much better for the promotion of the game. As a coach and former player, I also feel strongly about situations where a top player can be injured for ten days and miss an entire qualifying phase! It's not fair! With a home-and-away fixture list, players have a chance to recover and take part."

Non-Stop Progress

"I hope all of this doesn't sound negative because the fact is that the tournament in Portugal attracted very big television audiences. So futsal is on the right track, there's no doubt about that. But I prefer to have a restless mind and to keep trying to think of ways to improve still further. I want futsal to be a sport that keeps the fans on the edge of their seats and I think it's risky to allow too much of a 'rest and recovery' element to creep into matches. We have enough players in the squad and we have enough physical fitness to maintain futsal as an intensive, exciting, non-stop spectacle."

AGENDA 2008

23 February – 2 March
Futsal World Cup – qualifying round

10 – 14 March, Prague
UEFA Futsal Conference

31 March – 2 April
Futsal World Cup – play-offs (first legs)

7 – 13 April
European Under-21 Futsal Tournament – qualifying round

14 – 16 April
Futsal World Cup – play-offs (return legs)

24 – 26 April, Moscow
UEFA Futsal Cup – final round



Photos: Sportfile

Marcelo (Spain) scores against Ukraine.

**THE DRAW WAS MADE IN NYON
FOR THE FIRST EUROPEAN UNDER-21
FUTSAL TOURNAMENT.**



THE LAST WORD

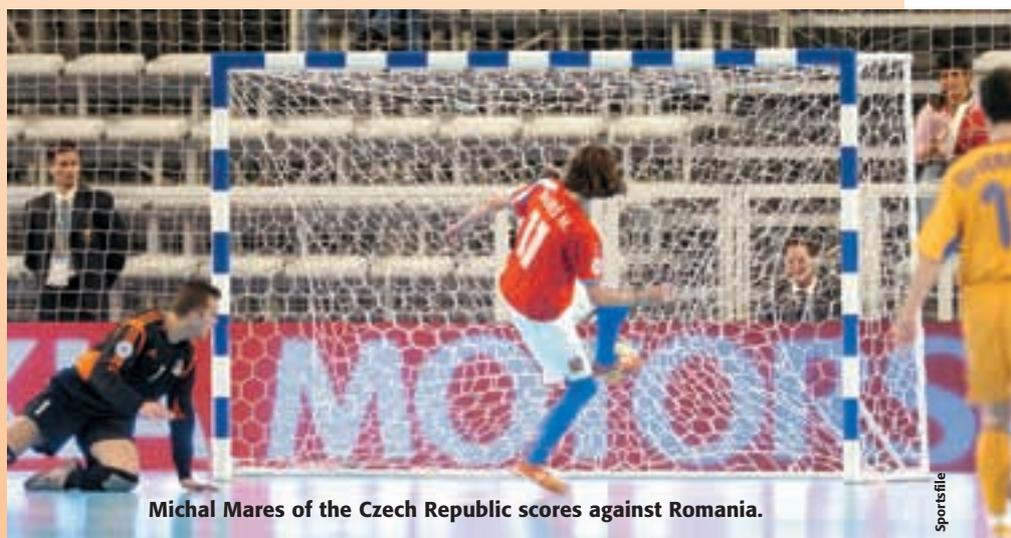
●● The European Under-21 Futsal Tournament has been successfully launched, with no fewer than 29 national associations going in to the inaugural draw ceremony in December – even though Portugal decided that they were not yet ready to take part. This is only nine fewer than the number of participants in the senior competition.

●● The final round of the Under-21 competition will round off a 'Russian Year'. It will be staged in St Petersburg in December 2008. Eight months earlier, Moscow will be the venue for the Final Four competition in the UEFA Futsal Cup. MFK Dynamo Moskva's home ground, the 5,000-seater Krylatskoe sports palace, is the scenario where the defending champions will take on fellow Russians MFK Viz-Sinara, Kazakhstan's Kairat Almaty and last season's bronze medallists ElPozo Murcia from Spain. The two Russian clubs jointly provided 10 of the 14-man squad which earned the Russian national team the bronze medal at the 2007 European Futsal Championship in Portugal.

●● The development of futsal referees is struggling to keep pace with the explosive growth of the game. But technicians may be glad to know that UEFA is addressing this issue and has set up a specific futsal referee sub-committee under the auspices of the main Referees Committee, chaired by Angel María Villar Llona, who travelled to Portugal during the European Championship finals to preside over the first meeting of the sub-committee. Russia's Sergey Zuev, a member of the UEFA Referees Committee, was joined by specialists Pedro Galán of Spain and Andrea Lastrucci of Italy.

●● The sub-committee's immediate objectives are to establish structures in line with the parameters of the outdoor game – and this applies to instructors and observers as well as the referees themselves. The first step will be to build a network of contact persons (one at each national association) who can take responsibility for futsal refereeing issues. As futsal is a relatively young sport, there is currently a shortage of specialised referee observers – and

even specific futsal-orientated observer reports. One of the possibilities discussed by the sub-committee was to make full use of mini-tournaments as convenient venues for instruction programmes aimed at referees, instructors and observers. These issues will almost certainly be on the debating table when the 3rd UEFA Futsal Referee Course is staged in Helsinki at the end of March.



Michal Mares of the Czech Republic scores against Romania.

●● A study conducted in the Republic of Ireland has unveiled compelling evidence to support the value of futsal as a development tool. Tests involving the same youngsters playing seven-a-side outdoor games and futsal for the same amount of time revealed 300% or 400% increases in the number of ball-control operations successfully completed, the same ratio in terms of passing, increases of up to 1000% in attempts to dribble in 1 v 1 situations, and equally dramatic comparisons when it came to measuring goal attempts, scoring patterns and tackles/interceptions. The reduced dimensions of the futsal pitch obviously allowed players to close down opponents more rapidly and oblige them to look for skilful solutions, while the ability to contribute to the team effort by scoring goals led to palpable gains in confidence and self-esteem. Interestingly, the only data which emerged as similar from the futsal/seven-a-side comparison were those related to loss of possession. The survey concluded that futsal offers significant benefits through constant, direct involvement in play; the need for continual decision-making; and the requirements in terms of sustained concentration.

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