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Heartbroken Italians have much to be proud of

By Gideon Long

ROTTERDAM, July 3 (Reuters) - The summer will be long gone before the Italians come to terms with the magnitude and above all the manner of their 2-1 defeat by France in the European Championship final.

As Dino Zoff's players trooped out of the Feyernoord Stadium on Sunday night, their eyes bloodshot from tears, there was little talk of pride and achievement.

There was only disbelief.

But once the pain has eased and memories of Sylvain Wiltord's late French equaliser have started to fade, Italy will surely look back on Euro 2000 with satisfaction.

They have beaten both tournament co-hosts in their own capital cities, proved they have the world's best defence and partially exorcised the ghost of their penalty shootout defeats at the last three World Cups.

And above all, they came within seconds of beating World Champions France to take the title.

Nothing too much was expected of the Italians when they arrived in Belgium a month ago. They had just lost four of their previous seven matches in one of the worst runs in their 90-year-history as a footballing nation.

Even Zoff said only that his squad were capable of reaching the last four. He never mentioned the final or, in public at least, entertained the possibility of winning it.

But as soon as they kicked off their opening group match against Turkey it was clear Zoff's Italy meant business.

They produced a blistering opening 30 minutes en route to a 2-1 victory and then beat Belgium 2-0 in Brussels.

They were the first team into the quarter-finals, where they swept past Romania with another efficient, calculated if unspectacular 2-0 win.

Then came the "catenaccio" (the bolt).

In keeping with the best traditions of Italian defensive football they sat back against the Dutch in the semifinal and defended heroically with 10 men to take the match to penalties.

Their victory was their first in a shootout in five attempts dating back to 1980.

This has been a tournament of little-known players for the Italians and so it proved in the final.

Marco Delvecchio, making his first start of the tournament and winning only his fifth cap, gave them their lead with his first international goal.

It appeared to be enough until Wiltord's dramatic equaliser. After that, Italy's resistance crumbled and David Trezeguet's "golden goal" winner for the French came as little surprise.

On a tactical level, Zoff's dogged determination to keep faith with his own ideas has invariably paid off.

He ignored fans who begged him to name crowd-pleaser Alessandro Del Piero in his starting line-ups and played Francesco Totti instead in a two-man attack supported from midfield by Udinese's Stefano Fiore.

This has been the coach's biggest tactical triumph.

Totti was brilliant in the final and although Fiore was less so, his bustling performances behind the strikers in the earlier rounds were outstanding.

His curling right foot strike against Belgium will be remembered as Italy's goal of the tournament.

Zoff's other great achievement has been to make do with what he has at his disposal.

Italy's leading striker Christian Vieri and first choice goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon both pulled out with injuries on the eve of Euro 2000.

Francesco Toldo has proved more than an adequate replacement for Buffon and his three penalty saves against the Dutch will have earned him the number one jersey for the 2002 World Cup qualifiers.

But Vieri's absence was more keenly felt, leaving Italy with a featherweight if talented attack.

Del Piero squandered two wonderful chances to seal an Italian victory in the second half against the French.

As the Italians try to come to terms with their defeat, many will perhaps wonder what might have been if those chances had fallen to an in-form Vieri instead.

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