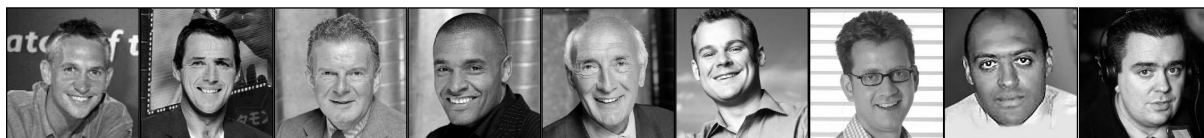


The experts' verdicts on Euro 2004

We assembled some of the finest brains in football to give them a grilling on the likely stars and results at Euro 2004. This is their verdict...



Okay – who's going to win Euro 2004, and what makes them the strongest team?

Gary Lineker (GL): France. They have the strongest squad, a number of the world's best players and it is hard to see a weakness.

Alan Hansen (AH): France. They have the best players.

John Motson (JM): Italy. They will be determined to make up for Euro 2000 (beaten in the final) and Japan 2002 (disappointing).

Barry Davies (BD): Either Portugal (as hosts) or France (as holders and probably the best).

Mark Bright (MB): France – they have the best players.

Steve Wilson (SW): Spain. They have experience, flair and hunger. It is, after all, about time they won something.

Mark Pougatch (MP): France – all-round skill and strength, and motivation after their World Cup fiasco.

Damian Johnson (DJ): France – the best players, in the best form and a peerless qualification. Japan 2002 should become a distant bad memory.

Simon Brotherton (SB): Italy – they went very close four years ago and now seem prepared to give a freer reign to their attacking talents. A more positive Italy could mean trouble for everyone else.

How do you think England will fare in the tournament?

GL: Through to the knockout stage; it depends how fit and fresh we are. We have not got the strength or depth of France, but if we

keep fit, after France and Italy, I would put us in the next group of winners.

AH: Semi final.

JM: Quarter final at the very least; semi final possibly.

BD: Anything better than quarter finals a bonus; 2006 more promising.

MB: Hopefully the final.

SW: Semi finals.

MP: Quarter finals.

DJ: Quarter finalists for sure – from there hard to get hopes up too high on previous experience.

SB: If everyone is fit England could go all the way. With a couple of players missing – quarter or semis.

Who's likely to be the top striker?

GL: Thierry Henry.

AH: Henry.

JM: Filippo Inzaghi (Italy).

BD: If it's Henry, the French will certainly win. If it's Pauleta? If it's Owen?..

MB: Henry.

SW: If Spain do well, Raúl.

MP: David Trezeguet.

DJ: Thierry Henry.

SB: Henry.

Which player(s) do you think will be the most influential?

GL: Zidane, Figo and Beckham.

AH: Zidane, Henry.

JM: David Beckham (hopefully), Pavel Nedved (Czech Republic), any of the French players.



The experts' views

BD: The usual suspects: Zidane, Henry, Nedved, Beckham, etc.

MB: Zidane obviously, Couto/Figo of Portugal.

SW: Steven Gerrard, Zinedine Zidane.

MP: Totti and Zidane.

DJ: The usual suspects: Henry, Pires, Zidane, Figo, Beckham.

SB: Nedved, Zidane, Totti. For England Beckham, Owen, Gerrard (the obvious!)

Anyone we may not have heard much of so far likely to make a name for themselves?

GL: Pauleta – he could do well. Rosicky (Czech Republic) and Mr Rooney.

AH: No.

JM: Petr Cech (Czech Republic goal keeper), Kevin Kuranyi (German striker).

BD: Quaresma of Portugal.

MB: Portugal's young midfielder Ricardo Quaresma if he plays.

SW: Any Latvian who scores against Germany, possibly Milan Baros who is not well known outside England and the Czech Republic. Look out for France's Philippe Mexes and Holland's Arjen Robben, who will be at Chelsea next season, and Rafael Van der Vaart.

MP: Joaquín Sánchez of Spain.

SB: Antonio Cassano – if Trapattoni picks him – has been in blistering form for Roma in Serie A. He has a good partnership and understanding with Totti. Still only 21, Cassano become Italy's most famous teenager when moving from Bari to Roma for £20 million. Scored on his international debut last November.

Any particular games you're most looking forward to, and why?

GL: The early games in the group stages tend to be cat and mouse, so I like the latter stages – England v Croatia, as at this stage we are talking a knock-out. Spain v Portugal and Germany v Holland are also highlights for me.

AH: Later stages and knockout stages are the most exciting.

JM: Holland v Germany; lots of previous history.

BD: Just to enjoy what I'm given to see.

MB: Seeing all the stars, Figo, Zidane, Gerrard. It is a big tournament and should bring out the best in them.

SW: The big grudge matches: France v England, Spain v Portugal and Holland v Germany. Any of these would be a great final.

MP: England v France, Spain v Portugal, Netherlands and Czech Republic – two excellent sides.

DJ: Spain v Portugal has a nice ring to it – and all of England's games of course.

Do you have a favourite memory from previous European Championships?

GL: When France won and Motson's incredible commentary when Platini scored.

AH: Euro 2000 – last ten minutes.

JM: Platini's last-minute winner for France against Portugal in 1984 – the best match I ever saw in seven European Championships.

BD: Three in particular: Euro 96 semi-final, England v Germany; Euro 72 Final, Germany v Russia; Euro 2000 semi-final, Holland v Italy.

MB: Going to Euro 96 as a fan. I loved it, well nearly!

SW: Watching Michael Platini's performances in 1984 on TV as a 16-year-old and being at Wembley for England 4, Holland 1 in Euro 96.

MP: Watching Zidane in Euro 2000 against Denmark – mesmeric performance.

DJ: My best and worst memories are from Euro 96. The best highs I can remember following England – and the lowest low, that semi-final v Germany.

SB: England's 4-1 victory over the Netherlands at Euro 96 – a heady mix of a lovely summer evening, the football coming home feel-good factor and England playing some terrific football. It's not very often England play as well as that.