

Ballack hopes it's third-time lucky for first big title

German captain Michael Ballack is quiet optimistic that he will be third-time lucky with the national team as he seeks to shake off his reputation as perennial runner-up in big matches.

The Germany captain found himself on the losing end of Champions League finals with Bayer Leverkusen in 2002 and Chelsea last month.

In Germany duty, Ballack had to sit out the 2002 World Cup final over a suspension which Germany lost 0-2 against Brazil. Four years later Germany lost 0-2 in the semi-finals against Italy from late goals.

But Euro 2008 could finally be Ballack's moment for glory and confirm the playmaker him as one of the big stars of the game.

Germany are considered favourite in the semi-final with Turkey and would then also stand a chance in a final Sunday against Spain or Russia.

'To be honest, I am very calm. I am happy that we are in semis. We have a great chance to make the final and to get the cup,' the 31-year-old midfielder told a news conference Tuesday.

Ballack said he got over the latest setbacks of losing the Champions League final (and the Premier League crown) to Manchester United within a few days in May.

'I have shown that I have gotten over it, I turned my concentration to Euro swiftly. It is nice to have new challenges quickly,' he said.

Ballack showed his value at Euro with the 1-0 winner against Austria and the crucial third goal in the quarter-final with Portugal.

But he was also crucial off the pitch as one of the initiators of a team meeting without coaches after the 1-2 defeat against Croatia in the group stage which got the squad back on track in the title bid.

'One impulse came from the coaching staff, but of course from us as well. Footballers don't mess around with words, whether its in the camp, during training or after the match. Sometimes a few words are sufficient. Things are not always nice and great,' Ballack said.

Back on the pitch, Ballack reiterated that his long-term injury in 2007, he was sidelined from April until late December, was a blessing in disguise because it allowed him a better preparation than normal pre-season summer training.

He showed his class with outstanding games for Chelsea - for instance with a double in the 2-1 league win against United and also by taking the first penalty in the Champions League shootout which nonetheless was won by United - and is now fresher than many others who played a full season.

'I had long injury and good preparation. I could prepare properly after the injury. The English league is very intense, and that pays off now,' said Ballack.

Ballack insisted that Germany will not underestimate a suspension- and injury-hit Turkey team.

'It (the 2006) motivates us, it doesn't bother us. We want to make the final. 2006 showed that you must fight until the end to win. We lacked a few per cent then, I hope we have it now to take the final step and make the final.

'But we require two good matches and a little luck as well.' 'We want to take final step, the chance is good, it is up to us,' Ballack said.

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