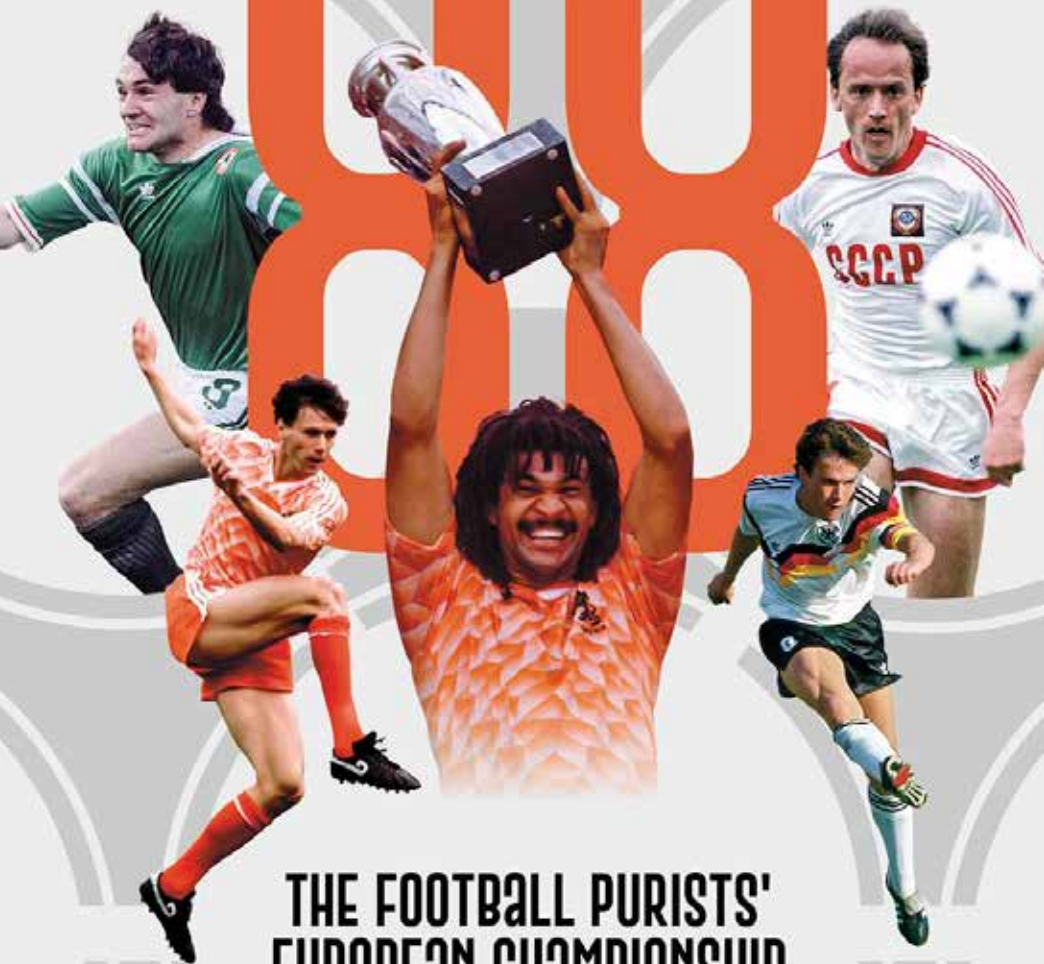


STEVEN SCRAGG

EURO



THE FOOTBALL PURISTS'
EUROPEAN CHAMPIONSHIP

EURO
88

**THE FOOTBALL PURISTS'
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STEVEN SCRAGG



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Chapter One

Frankreich

La Pire Défense d'un Championnat d'Europe de Tous les Temps

EIGHT QUALIFYING fixtures played, with only one win secured, just four goals scored, weighing in at an average of one goal every 180 minutes, although a complete failure to register a goal at all in five out of eight matches played, largely due to a dysfunctional style of play, a sizeable hangover from the 1986 World Cup and the retirement, mid-campaign, of arguably their nation's greatest player; it all made for the worst defence of a European Championship ever.

As France limped away from Mexico in the summer of 1986, they did so with another semi-final bruise having been administered by West Germany. European Championship success had eased the pain of the events of Seville in 1982, and *that* semi-final loss on penalties, and *that* poleaxing of Patrick Battiston by Harald Schumacher.

It was with a joyful footballing panache that France won the European Championship on home soil two years later, with Michel Platini at the epicentre of everything; the

scorer of nine goals en route to glory, inclusive of the first goal of the tournament against Denmark, two hat-tricks in the group stages against Belgium and Yugoslavia, an iconic winner against Portugal in the semi-final, and the opening goal of the final victory over Spain. Platini scored in every match France played at the 1984 European Championship finals. Perfection was at play.

Yet there was more to it than Platini on his own, a man who was a talismanic and skilled figurehead, but one who was never found without compelling support acts, especially when it came to his fellow members of the magnificent *Le Carre Magique* midfield quartet, which had gravitated to one another under the watchful coaching eye of Michel Hidalgo. Without the collective of Alain Giresse, Jean Tigana and Luis Fernández, Platini would never have been able to realise the true extent of his individual greatness, and nor would he have scaled the seemingly impossible heights he did during the summer of 1984.

By the time of the 1986 World Cup semi-final, France headed to the Estadio Jalisco in Guadalajara ready and willing to accept a grovelling apology of a performance by an uninspiring West Germany, and to claim their rightful passage into the final, where Platini would duel for the prize against Diego Maradona and Argentina.

West Germany were never big on following the scripts of others, however. A 2-0 victory for Franz Beckenbauer and his players ended the dreams of France, and football was never quite the same again, undone as Michel's team were by opponents who were both physically and mentally stronger, faster, more determined, and at times clearly more intimidating, as France simply wilted under the heat of the midday sun.

On that hot and humid Guadalajara afternoon, Platini had been shackled by the focused man-marking of Wolfgang Rolff, a player who Beckenbauer had brought in specifically to smother the threat of the French No. 10 and captain. With Giresse carrying the tired legs of a 34-year-old into international football for one last mission, and struggling with the conditions, it was a match that largely passed him by, meaning that Tigana and Fernández were left to cope with the vision of Felix Magath and the everyman performance of Lothar Matthäus.

As West Germany possessed strikers of greater threat than France, in the shapes of Karl-Heinz Rummenigge, Klaus Allofs, and Rudi Völler, compared to the less effectual Yannik Stopyra and Bruno Bellone, chances were that if you could nullify the creativity of the French midfield, then the rest would eventually fall into place via natural order. This was even without considering the mistake that Joël Bats would make when it came to the opening goal he conceded to Andreas Brehme from an early free kick.

Once in arrears, France were left to chase a game in which they could easily have been trailing 3-0 by the interval, had Rummenigge been in sharper form. French frustration grew as the second half unfolded, and it came as no surprise when Völler walked a second West German goal in during the final few seconds.

Starkly, when Michel looked to his substitutes for inspiration, it was difficult to locate, and although they were fine club players, neither Philippe Vercruyssen nor Daniel Xuereb were able to prevail where Giresse and Bellone had floundered on an unforgiving afternoon where Dominique Rocheteau was missing through injury, and Jean-Pierre

Papin was also absent, having been marginalised beyond the group stages.

Four days earlier, France had been majestic in narrowly getting the better of Brazil during an unforgettable quarter-final in the very same stadium, and the common theory was that that titanic tussle had played its part in how insipid Michel's team went on to be in the semi-final. It's a theory that rightly nods towards the fact that for France their last-four encounter represented a fifth successive midday kick-off at the tournament, yet fails to take into account that West Germany, an ageing team, also went through 120 minutes of football and a penalty shootout on the very same day against the hosts, Mexico.

Across the span of the 90 minutes of that 1986 World Cup semi-final against West Germany, the fork in the road at which France took a landscape-altering turn for the worse is highly visible. Here was a game of football in which a team and its nation had its heart broken in slow motion, and Platini's frustrated outpouring of emotion at every perceived ill wind as the second half wore on was emblematic of the moment.

In Mexico, France had gone toe to toe with Valeriy Lobanovskiy's Soviet Union and been their equal; they had knocked out the World Cup holders, Italy, and they had put an end to Telê Santana's attempted reinvention of the beautiful game with Brazil. Drawn into the same 1988 European Championship qualifying group as the Soviet Union, when the two of them faced one another at the Parc des Princes in October 1986, it was just four months and two days since they had shared the rarefied air of Irapuato, yet one of the two teams would be completely unrecognisable from how they played at the World Cup.

Immediately hampered by the international retirements of Maxime Bossis, Giresse and Rocheteau, within the slipstream of the 1986 World Cup, along with Bernard Genghini's lack of commitment in continuing, a player who had travelled to Mexico but not played a single minute, having very much fallen to the periphery of the team since the rise of Fernández, it was with the drawing in of the autumn nights of 1986 that the fragile personality and paucity of international-calibre footballers below the increasingly sparse elite in France became glaringly obvious.

In August 1986, France headed to Lausanne to take on Switzerland in their first assignment of the new season, a match that should have offered the opportunity of a fresh beginning, as they looked to move on from the cycle of the World Cups of 1982 and 1986, and their success in the 1984 European Championship. When it came to first steps into an uncertain new world, they were to be faltering ones for France, against far from illustrious opponents, this being a Switzerland team that was still a considerable way off the one that would become a regular attendee at major international tournaments from the mid-1990s onwards.

A midfield with not only the now retired Giresse absent, but also Platini, Tigana, Fernández and Genghini, while Michel had to go into the match with a very experimental combination in the engine room, he was still able to call upon two of the midfielders he had taken to Mexico, in the shapes of Jean-Marc Ferreri and Vercruysse. Michel supplemented Ferreri and Vercruysse with recalls for the more defensive-minded midfielders, Fabrice Poullain and Dominique Bijotat, the former an excellent club player who won French First Division titles with both Nantes and Paris Saint-Germain (PSG), the latter an integral part

of the Monaco midfield for over a decade, and a member of France's gold medal-winning squad at the 1984 Summer Olympics under the guidance of Michel. While Ferreri and Vercruysse were asked to fill the expansive and attacking void vacated by Giresse and Platini, Poullain and Bijotat were handed the jobs of covering the disciplined aspects that were usually the domain of Tigana, Fernández and Genghini.

With Bats in goal, and a defence that could boast the experience of Battiston and Amoros, Michel offered a recall to the Bordeaux right-back, Jean-Christophe Thouvenel, and a senior international debut to Basile Boli.

In attack, Stopyra was leading the line, partnered by another debutant, the free-scoring Brest striker, Gérard Buscher, whose senior international career would stretch to little more than 100 minutes across two appearances before drifting from contention.

Despite the heavy reconstruction of his team, Michel had fielded a line-up that should still have been able to brush aside the challenge of Switzerland, yet they fell to a dispiriting 2-0 defeat, conceding twice within three second-half minutes as the match wore on.

A sobering start to the 1986/87 season, this was to be France's only friendly of the campaign and, with no elbow room with which to test new ideas, Michel was now faced with an unforgiving five European Championship qualifying fixtures up to the summer of 1987. A decision needed to be taken over whether to revert to as many familiar faces as were willing to be involved or to continue apace with fresh call-ups.

Four weeks beyond the loss to Switzerland, it was to Reykjavik that France travelled for the start of the defence

of their European crown, to face Iceland, opponents that could be notoriously stubborn on home soil, despite a propensity to concede big numbers when on the road.

Bats continuing in goal, William Ayache returning to join Battiston, Amoros and Boli in defence, Genghini opting to give international football one last spin alongside Tigana and Fernández in midfield, with Vercruysse continuing to deputise for Platini, and the latest pairing in attack being Stopyra and Sochoux's Stéphane Paille – apart from the question marks up front this was as strong a France line-up as Michel could have made in September 1986.

A frustrating goalless draw was to take place, however, with the loss of the creativity and potency of Giresse, Platini and Rocheteau all too painfully apparent. While mostly secure at the back, France failed to make the breakthrough going forward, with their best half-chances falling to Genghini and Stopyra. With a lack of perceived game-changers on the bench, Michel didn't make one substitution despite the stalemate situation and the end of the match drawing ever nearer. Instead, French frustration was to bubble over, and a trio of second-half yellow cards were accumulated by Ayache, Vercruysse and Amoros.

A line in the sand for Genghini, this was to be his last international appearance, and while it wasn't yet the end of his own international career, Vercruysse wouldn't appear again for France during the qualifying campaign for the 1988 European Championship. Added to this, Battiston would soon drop out of contention, although he would eventually return to the fold during the early stages of Platini's reign as coach.

From here Michel launched himself into a scattergun approach to team selections, with only Amoros and Boli

taking part in all eight qualifiers for France, although Bats and Stopyra would also remain key elements, with the goalkeeper missing only one match, and the striker eventually omitted from the last two, having played the first six qualifiers.

Within this, even though Bats was still the undisputed first-choice goalkeeper, and Amoros and Boli were ever-present, this potentially stable bedrock was not all it seemed to be, as the adaptability of both defenders, along with regular tweaks of formation by Michel, meant that the two defenders were not always fielded in tandem. A revolving door system came into operation, with Ayache being the next most regular sight in the French defence, yet one who only appeared in half of the qualifying matches, while across the breadth of all eight fixtures Michel selected 12 different defenders, as in, out, and sometime in and out again went Battiston, Thouvenel, Jean-François Domergue, Yvon Le Roux, Philippe Jeannol, Rémy Vogel, Didier Sénac, Luc Sonor and Sylvain Kastendeuch.

Among this expansive cast of defenders, Domergue had been the unexpected hero of France's 1984 European Championship semi-final win, a match in which he scored twice, the only two goals of his entire international career, an event that was mirrored in the 1998 World Cup semi-final when Lilian Thuram saved the only two goals of his own international career to vanquish Croatia.

Le Roux was another with compelling experience, having been part of France's European Championship-winning team and making Michel's squad for the 1986 World Cup, although his involvement had been restricted in Mexico to 56 minutes of the third-place play-off against Belgium, thus he had undeniably drifted to the periphery.

It was beyond Amoros, Boli, Ayache, Battiston, Domergue and Le Roux that Michel struggled to find suitable international-class defenders, and while Thouvenel's first senior international appearance had come as far back as 1983, neither Hidalgo nor Michel had selected him for the last two major tournaments.

While the emergence of Boli had been one of the few true positives beyond the 1986 World Cup for France, a player who was a potential belated heir to the wondrous Marius Trésor, despite the talent he possessed he was still vastly inexperienced at the highest international level and was badly in need of the presence of somebody who had seen it and done it all before. Within this, the guidance that the likes of Battiston and Le Roux could have given Boli should have been invaluable, yet he was only exposed to a combined 270 minutes of their teachings during the qualifiers.

Once it became evident that France's hopes of qualifying for the 1988 European Championship were truly off the rails, Boli was instead thrust into the situation of babysitting a cluster of central-defensive partners who were both less experienced than he was and less talented. There were five candidates in this respect, and three of these defenders were paired with Boli during the final two qualifiers, when France by then were unable to reach the finals and experimentation was an acceptable indulgence for Michel, who could now only turn his attention towards piecing a team together in preparation for the forthcoming 1990 World Cup qualifiers.

A short-lived recall for Sénac, another player, like Thouvenel, who had already been assessed and discarded by both Hidalgo and Michel, was balanced by opportunities handed to complete newcomers to international football,

Sonor and Kastendeuch, both of whom would survive the early cull of Platini before being marginalised in favour of Laurent Blanc and Bernard Casoni, as the new coach rebuilt the French national team for an assault on the 1992 European Championship.

This late sense of flux was entirely understandable, given the original target of qualifying for the European Championship was already over, yet Michel's central-defensive thinking was massively questionable for the two biggest matches of the campaign, which came as there was everything still to gain when France faced the Soviet Union in Paris, and, while increasingly hopeless, everything still to claw back when going up against the same opponents in Moscow.

At the Parc des Princes in October 1986, Michel opted to hand Jeannol his international debut, at a point in time when Boli's senior international career was just eight weeks old. A crucial part of the PSG team, Jeannol had made his breakthrough at Nancy, a team-mate of Platini when the club won the 1978 Coupe de France. He had moved on to the capital in 1984, where he would win the competition again in his first season with PSG, before claiming the league title the following year.

Jeannol had begun his career as a winger, and operated as an attacking midfielder, before his vision was utilised as a sweeper, via a spell as an emergency left-back. Skilled, intelligent, and dangerous at free kicks, he had the type of all-round game that could have made him a mainstay of a revamped French squad, but when thrown in at the deep end against the attacking might of Igor Belanov he was torn asunder and was never seen again on the international stage.

If defeat to Switzerland in Lausanne had been careless, and France had sleepwalked their way to a draw against Iceland in Reykjavik, these warnings hadn't been heeded ahead of the visit of Lobanovskyi and his ruthless players to Paris.

Of the 13 players to make an on-pitch contribution for France on that cold Paris night, ten of them had made it on to the pitch at the Estadio Nou Camp, in the afternoon heat of León four months earlier against the same opponents. Added to this, only two of the Soviet Union's 13 active players that evening hadn't been on duty in Mexico, and of the two that had sat on the sidelines, Aleksandre Chivadze would have played too, had he been fit enough to do so.

This was very much a game that was projected as a rematch of what had taken place in León, a magical match in which Vasyl Rats beat Bats with a beautifully thunderous effort, and Fernández was calmness personified in stroking home the equaliser after magnificently controlling a delicate and precise through ball from Giresse.

At the Parc des Princes, the Soviet Union delivered a knockout blow to France, and one that took them at least four years, and arguably a decade, to recover from, yet it could have been so very different had the fine dividing lines fallen in favour of Michel's team on an evening when both goalkeepers were kept busy.

Platini once again available, the France No. 10 had enough will in his legs and desire in his heart to drag his team into yet another encounter of style and substance, although the killer blows were to be landed by the visitors. Whereas the Soviet Union defence was marshalled wonderfully, there were holes at the back for France, and while possession was artistically retained by both teams, it was Lobanovskyi's

men who were the more adept at perforating the thin blue defensive line than the home team were at breaking beyond the all-white, steely, defensive defiance of not only Chivadze but Oleh Kuznetsov, Volodymyr Bezsonov and Anatoliy Demyanenko.

France were increasingly restricted to powerful yet accurate shots of distance from all angles, plus dangerous free-kick attempts from Platini, but Rinat Dasayev still had to be at peak concentration and display high levels of reaction to keep the French captain and his teammates at bay.

It was midway through the second half that the Soviet Union broke the uneasy deadlock, as Sergei Rodionov and Oleksandr Zavarov combined incisively to tee up Belanov for the opening goal. Within another six minutes, Rats had beaten Bats for the second time in 1986, this time with a low, well-guided effort into the French goalkeeper's bottom left-hand corner.

Up until this debilitating six-minute span, the closest either team had come to scoring had been a remarkable first-half Soviet Union free kick that had been rolled into the path of Rats, which he struck with venom, only to see the ball bounce off Bats' right-hand post, hit the back of the diving goalkeeper's head and then ricochet against the post again, before diverting away to safety.

Deserved winners, for the Soviet Union a run all the way to the 1988 European Championship Final was ahead of them, while France were to drift into an unfathomable wilderness. Before the 1986/87 season ended, Michel's team would hold East Germany to a creditable goalless draw in Leipzig, pick up a much-needed victory over Iceland at the Parc des Princes, but then catastrophically lose in Oslo to

Norway. While a win would have been of greater help in Leipzig, the recalls of Battiston and Le Roux had at least shored up the defensive shortcomings that had been on display against the Soviet Union, yet Battiston wouldn't appear again in the qualifying campaign, and Le Roux wouldn't return until the largely meaningless last match, at home to East Germany.

Unbeknown to anybody watching at the time, the victory over Iceland in April 1987 was to be the last time that Platini would play for France, taking most observers by surprise a few weeks later when announcing his retirement from both international and club football. Timing is everything in football, and without Platini it was in mid-June that France were beaten in Norway, on a damp evening in which Bats made an astounding gift of the opening goal to the central defender, Per Mordt, the only goal of his international career.

There had been just under 20 minutes left to play, and a win for France would have brought them to within three points of the Soviet Union, with Lobanovskiy's next task being a trip to Leipzig. With nothing more than an outside chance of qualification, the least Michel's team could have done was to have applied a little mild pressure to the group leaders as they headed to East Germany, but nine minutes later Bats was exposed again, to a high ball over the back line, and this time it was Jørn Andersen breaking free to score.

Against Iceland, Platini had been noticeably slower in pace, yet all the vision, skill and intelligence were still there to see as he set up the Metz striker, Carmelo Micciche, for the first goal of the match, this on a promising international debut. From that performance alone, it's hard to imagine

France being as insipid as they were in Oslo, had Platini been present on the pitch.

Domergue and Thouvenel had been brought back into the defence against Iceland, and the clean sheet gained at the Parc des Princes persuaded Michel to field the same back line against Norway, but this time with disastrous consequences. Neither player would represent their country again.

Three months later, when France headed to Moscow to take on the Soviet Union again, nobody could have blamed Michel for expecting the worst, yet his team gave their hosts unexpected headaches when taking an early lead thanks to a towering header from José Touré, and then managing to hold on to it until 13 minutes from the end, when Oleksiy Mykhaylychenko bundled in the equaliser.

It was with a sense of jubilation that France's players greeted the final whistle, pleased as they were at an individual job well done. An evening of complexities, as Lobanovskyi's players walked from the pitch at the end they wore facial expressions that didn't suggest they had just eliminated their opponents from the qualification race with two matches to spare. Yet, that is exactly what they had achieved.

Just as when handing Jeannol his one and only cap against the Soviet Union when the two teams faced one another in Paris, in Moscow it was Vogel's turn to get the call from Michel to play alongside Boli, and despite being a part of arguably France's best performance throughout qualifying he would never receive a call-up again. Vogel was yet another example of a dependable club player casting across the divide of two eras of the French national team. Not good enough to be considered an alternative to the likes

of Christian Lopez, Gérard Janvion, Trésor, Bossis and Battiston during the pomp of the early-to-mid-1980s, but nor was he given the wider opportunity to cement a place in Michel's attempts to regenerate his squad as the second half of the decade limped on.

Despite this, as a teenager Vogel had made a few crucial contributions to Strasbourg's surprise 1978/79 French First Division title success, and as a former team-mate of Arsène Wenger, it was perhaps no shock when the future Arsenal manager swooped for his services at Monaco in the summer of 1987, where he would be a league champion once again as part of an influx of transfers that included Glenn Hoddle, Mark Hateley and Battiston too.

This state of perpetual rotation of players by Michel was not solely confined to his defenders either. In midfield, while Fernández and Tigana were still the predominant components, with either one of the two appearing in all but the last qualifier at home to East Germany, they were only fielded together twice, and not at all in partnership beyond the Paris defeat at the hands of the Soviet Union. With Genghini dropping away after the opening draw in Reykjavik against Iceland, Poullain came into the equation, going on to play as many minutes across the campaign as Tigana did, while Bijotat and Bruno Germain were other more defensively minded midfielders to drift in and out of the picture after France's qualification hopes had been ended. Jean-Philippe Rohr was another to make a brief cameo, before heading back to club football, never to return to the international stage.

In terms of playmakers, beyond the receding presence of Platini, Vercruysse's exile saw more attacking endeavour expected of Ferreri in the matches he played, while

Toulouse's talented Gérald Passi was brought into the picture, his international bow coming on the same night that Platini bade farewell to the Parc des Princes. Any hope that Passi could pick up the baton from Platini to any lasting effect would come to an end at the same time as Michel's reign, towards the tail end of 1988, while another potential successor to France's greatest footballer, Patrick Delamontagne, was given another brief shot that fell short of expectations.

Passi was indeed an excellent playmaker for Toulouse, and later for Monaco, whose form at club level had put him into the conversation for a place in France's 1986 World Cup squad, only to narrowly miss the cut. Having been billed as the potential heir to Platini, he was cast from the international scene by the very man he was meant to replace on the pitch, when he was one of the sacrificial lambs after Michel had overseen France for the last time, in an embarrassing World Cup qualifying draw away to Cyprus in October 1988, events that led to Platini taking up the reins as head coach of the national team not much more than 18 months beyond playing for them for the final time.

Platini the coach would never call upon Passi, and the pressure on him as the heir apparent to Platini the player was to prove too much, while in the case of Delamontagne, here was arguably the finest player ever to emerge from Brittany, who was adored by the faithful at Stade Rennais, Laval and Nancy, while never quite hitting the same levels of consistency in spells at Monaco and Marseille. At Nancy, Delamontagne had even been recruited as a belated replacement to Platini, who had moved on to Saint-Étienne a year before his arrival. Despite his undoubted talents,

unfortunately regular injury problems would blight his limited and sporadic opportunities at international level.

In theory, a French midfield inclusive of Passi and Poullain should have been perfectly balanced, had they been harnessed with the experience of Tigana and Fernández. The closest Michel came to fielding this potential quartet came on that sobering day in Oslo, however, when Tigana played, but not Fernández. Conversely, Passi and Poullain did play together again, with Fernández for company as part of what was essentially a three-man midfield, to far better effect in Moscow against the Soviet Union.

This defined sense of what might have been with Michel's search for playmakers was repeated in his mission to locate strikers of potency, within the void left behind by the retirement of Rocheteau, and amid an air of initial uncertainty over the prospects of Papin.

Going into the qualifying campaign, Stopyra was still Michel's favoured option, and across his six appearances he would be partnered by not only Papin, Touré and Micciche, but also Stéphane Paille and Philippe Fargeon. Amid that blizzard of experimentation in the latter stages where Stopyra sat out the Paris matches against Norway and East Germany, there would be opportunities handed to Eric Cantona, and recalls given to Philippe Anziani and Bernard Zénier, the two being further examples of players whose international chances had seemingly come and gone long before.

That France managed to score only four times across their eight qualifying matches is testament to just how dysfunctional the situation had become, with half of these goals being procured by Stopyra and Micciche on the same evening at the Parc des Princes against Iceland. The

other two were claimed by Touré in Moscow and Fargeon against Norway. Four goals from four different strikers and not one of them netted by Papin, who was restricted to just two starts and two substitute appearances as Michel stumbled around in the dark in search of the right attacking chemistry. In some respects it was almost as if there was too much choice, but not enough flair.

Ideally, Michel would have been able to count upon the hugely talented Touré, an attacker who had been primed to lead the French forward line alongside Rocheteau at the 1986 World Cup finals until a serious knee injury ruled him out of the tournament, a blow that prompted the call-up of Papin. Touré had been a French First Division title winner with the same Nantes team as Poullain and would go on to win it again with Bordeaux in 1986/87. A force of nature, he had determination, power and great technique, and would drop deep to find the ball and the space in which to use it. A player who could also be fielded as an attacking midfielder, he was only 25 in the summer of 1986, and was all set to be a key component of the national team throughout the remainder of the decade, before injury interrupted his progress.

With Stopyra offering the perfect all-round game, a foil to Touré, who also had wonderful technique, proving highly adept with the ball at his feet and in the air, with an added streak of bubbling aggression, here was an ultimately unrequited partnership that was all set to be thrown together for years to come; two strikers in their mid-20s, and a pairing that should have carried France into the 1990s.

Given the additional rise of Papin, and the emergence of Cantona, Michel's post-1986 World Cup team should

have been well catered for in terms of goals, yet fate seemed to dictate otherwise, and inclusive of this were the brief flickers of promise shown by Micciche, Fargeon, Paille and Anziani, with Micciche's burgeoning potential being curtailed thanks to a significant knee injury of his own.

Beyond this, Fargeon had built a fine understanding with Cantona but was beset by issues with form and fitness all too swiftly, while Paille had a style entirely of his own, which mixed all the expertise of a target man with a wonderfully laconic swagger with the ball at his feet, a man who had the presence of mind to remain with Sochaux despite their 1986/87 relegation, so he could lead them straight back to promotion the following season, even though it meant Michel would ignore his claims for a place in the national team until his return to the top flight.

Other hopefuls included Anziani, another one-time hero of Sochaux and former teenage prodigy, who went on to play for Nantes and Monaco, plus Gérard Buscher and Patrice Garande, who were finding the back of the net regularly between 1986 and 1988 for Brest and Saint-Étienne, respectively.

Throughout it all, what now seems to be ludicrous doubts persisted about Papin, a goalscorer who in the summer of 1991 would momentarily become the most expensive player in the world, and it was these combined issues for Michel, in failing to settle on a regular strike force, that were of course mirrored throughout most positions.

Across the span of their eight qualifiers for the 1988 European Championship, the soon to be deposed French coach sent 36 players into active on-pitch qualifying duties, peculiarly unable as he was to find the right combination to revive the rapidly dipping fortunes of a team that had won

the European Championship with such panache in 1984 under Hidalgo, and that he himself had guided to within 90 minutes of the 1986 World Cup Final.

With Michel caught within a spate of influential retirements, the fluctuations of form and fitness of remaining key players, the next generation of talent not being at the levels of footballing affluence of the one it was being asked to replace, and a blizzard of his own indecisiveness and doubts, perhaps tellingly, when Platini went on to take France to the 1992 European Championship finals, only six of the 36 players Michel had fielded throughout the 1988 qualifiers went to Sweden, with half of them having been team-mates of his in Mexico six years earlier.

Badly wounded by their loss to West Germany in the 1986 World Cup semi-final, the reasons why France drifted into three wilderness years to follow and failed to adequately defend their European Championship are undeniably multilayered, and there was so much more to it than them nursing a basic broken heart.