



**THE
MIRACLE**

04

**THE MOST UNLIKELY TRIUMPH
IN TOURNAMENT HISTORY**

VASILIS SAMBRAKOS

THE MIRACLE

THE FOOTBALL TEAM THAT
SHOCKED THE WORLD

VASILIS SAMBRAKOS



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Chapter One

Curtain Up

DUTCH REFEREE Dick Jol blew the final whistle. The Greek journalists who were at Old Trafford on the afternoon of 6 October 2001 to watch Greece's match against England hugged each other with the passion of fans whose team had just achieved a historic victory.

We shared that joy with David Beckham, who was on a victory lap with his team-mates. They were celebrating with 65,000 singing English fans. The other thousand spectators, cheering just as loudly, were Greek students. The 2-2 draw was historic, not only for sending England to the 2002 World Cup finals in Japan and South Korea, but also because it was the most positive result achieved by a Greek national team against the Three Lions in a competitive match. The previous high water mark had been a 0-0 draw in a friendly at Wembley in 1983.

Beckham's 93rd-minute goal deprived Greece of a seminal victory. It did not, however, overshadow the Greek team's outstanding performance. In this, his second game in charge, Otto Rehhagel went from 'dark' – the 5-1 defeat against Finland on his managerial debut in

Helsinki a month earlier – to ‘light’. The German coach had just provided an early indication of what he would be trying to achieve with the team he had taken over. He had used Old Trafford as a screen on which to show a trailer of the show he was planning to stage at Euro 2004.

That tournament would not only turn into the most extraordinary event in Greek football, but would also constitute one of the biggest surprises in the history of the international game. That Saturday afternoon at Old Trafford was the first hint of a dream, the unveiling of the future European champions. Rio Ferdinand, at the heart of the England defence in that 2-2 draw, was suitably impressed.

‘Of course I remember the match,’ he said, with the hindsight of many years’ experience. ‘Greece were a difficult team to play against. Tough, disciplined, with good players. Very stable. I certainly didn’t expect them to win the Euros, but it was a tough team to beat. Its greatest advantage? Tactically, it was very stable and solid. A very tough opponent. I followed them and noticed that they were improving, I realised they would present other teams with difficulties, but back then I certainly couldn’t say they would become champions.’

What had happened on the pitch at Old Trafford? How could a team that had already been eliminated and was still recovering from an embarrassing 5-1 friendly defeat against Finland, lead until the last minute against a team that had just come from a 5-1 win against Germany in Munich and had produced five consecutive wins during the qualifying stage – one of which had been a 2-0 defeat of Greece in Athens?

Once we had overcome the initial shock of what we had just witnessed, the Greek journalists headed towards

the press room to interview Rehhagel. We felt joy at the performance and the result at Old Trafford, a stadium we knew as the Theatre of Dreams, but we had all feared would turn into a lions' den for the Greeks. It was time to make amends.

We felt guilty about the severe criticism we had levelled against the seemingly unapproachable Rehhagel, following the heavy defeat against Finland. We wanted to shake his hand in order to congratulate him and wish him more days like this. Our surprise at the team's performance was matched by the surprise provoked by the German manager's attitude. It was not just the glint of satisfaction that one could see in his eyes. Irritation was clearly visible too, and his wrinkled forehead betrayed the anger he felt at Beckham's goal, or rather at the foul given by referee Jol for Konstantinidis' challenge on Sheringham.

Rehhagel was furious. He wanted to publicly castigate the referee, particularly for his performance during the final stages of the match and for the 'non-existent' foul. Giannis Topalidis, his assistant, and some other members of the the Greek Football Federation, the EPO, managed to calm him down and persuade him not to vent his anger during the press conference.

At the time, many thought that Rehhagel was upset because the 2-2 result was not enough for his beloved Germany to confirm qualification. Their goalless draw against Finland, which took place at the same time in Gelsenkirchen, kept them in second place in the group, below England. Time has shown however, that Rehhagel's frustration was based on the knowledge that the magnitude of a victory against England would have provided him with a short cut in his attempt to assert himself in Greece. It

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would have afforded him the time that he needed to build the team he envisioned, with fewer difficulties.

When I asked Rehhagel to reminisce about the start of his, and the team's journey, he answered: 'I always knew what I wanted, and I always tried to impose what I wanted on both the team and the EPO. I tried to get my way. Sure enough, success was the crucial factor. That made everything easier.' To his mind, 'the result is everything. Those results were our way of achieving the creation of this team.'

During the 31 days from the evening of 5 September in Helsinki to that afternoon in Manchester, the 63-year-old manager had been to hell and back. Heavily criticised for the poor performance and subsequent heavy defeat during his first match as Greece's coach, he found himself being enthusiastically praised. That result against England had an impact on both the Greeks, who had now seen fit to give him their approval, and on the German media. He had always followed the German press closely since his playing career, and was counting on their positivity. His plan was to create enough of a good impression in Greece to allow him to move back to Germany, and manage another big Bundesliga club, or the national team.

Those 31 days provided Rehhagel with an extremely accurate indication of what his work would be like over the next 24 months. This initiation period lasted until 11 October 2003. On that night he was on the pitch at the Leoforos Alexandras Stadium in Athens, a short distance from his beloved Acropolis, celebrating his first Greek miracle. Greece had just qualified for the final stages of the European Championship for the first time in 24 years.

In Manchester the team that he was trying to put together had given him the first convincing sign that not only could he succeed as a national team manager, but that he could also be successful outside Germany. He quickly understood the nature of the challenge he faced in attempting to impose his methods on the Greeks. It would be an exhausting struggle. For at least two years, he lived from game to game, aware that his position and his plan were precarious to the extent that they depended solely on each result. He feared that he needed to be ready to relocate to his home in Essen at a moment's notice.

The EPO had announced they would offer Rehhagel a contract on 9 August 2001, his 63rd birthday. 'Time will tell if this is such a wonderful present. It is a difficult and very interesting job,' was his first public statement to the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* newspaper. The German manager did his best to conceal his enormous satisfaction at being offered the chance to manage a foreign national team after ten months of unemployment and a lifetime in German football.

Rehhagel was ready to work abroad for the first time, but his initial ambition was to manage the national team of neighbouring Austria. He reasoned this would allow him to move to Vienna, a city he and his wife Beate loved. They planned to combine work with frequent visits to the opera. It took almost three years and the achievement of a historic victory over France at Euro 2004, before the German manager publicly revealed his original plan. In an interview with the Austrian daily *Kronen Zeitung* he stated that 'Austria could have been as successful if they had chosen me'.

Beate Rehhagel had been the one who opened the door to Greece. A childhood sweetheart, she had been his wife since 1963. Otto referred to her as ‘my best friend’, but she was also his closest advisor throughout his coaching career. Willi Lemke, his boss during his golden 14-year stint with Werder Bremen and one his few close friends, understood the dynamics of their marriage. He marked his 80th birthday in August 2018 by writing an open letter to Otto: ‘... you should be incredibly pleased at what you have achieved with the support of a wonderful woman’.

Beate had been informed that the EPO had advertised for the position of manager on its website. She located secretary-general Giannis Ekonomidis’ telephone number in FIFA’s yearly official communications guide, and called him to state her husband’s intention to interview for the position. The opposition was strong. Terry Venables, Javier Clemente, Marco Tardelli and Nevio Scala had done the same via their agents.

Vasilis Gagatsis, the then president of the EPO, remembers: ‘As far as the committee I had formed was concerned, it came down to two candidates, Scala and Rehhagel. The significant difference in their financial demands [Scala was asking for one million euros after tax per year, Rehhagel for around 400,000 euros] led us to the German manager. I had respected him greatly since the time he had won the Bundesliga with FC Kaiserslautern.’

When his wife aired the possibility of working in Greece, Rehhagel recalled the only time he had seen the national team play live, at the Olympic Stadium, (OAKA), in Athens. Four months earlier, on 28 March 2001, he had been invited by the German FA to watch Greece play

Germany. The Greeks lost 4-2, but the result did not reflect what Rehhagel had seen at the half-full stadium. Greece had been competitive until the final 10 minutes, when they conceded a third and then a fourth goal to a ten-man Germany. Defeat cost them qualification for the 2002 World Cup.

‘Greece weren’t bad,’ Rehhagel told his assistant, Giannis Topalidis, in October 2001, during talks regarding the possibility of their working together. ‘I realised that the quality of the players was interesting. That was my initial thought when they approached me.’ This explains the fact that, of the 14 players he first saw that night, he took six to the European Championship three years later. Four of them (Zagorakis, Basinas, Karagounis and Charisteas) formed the nucleus of the team he went on to put together. The remaining two were Goumas and Georgiadis.

Five days after shaking hands with Vasilis Gagatsis in Athens, without having signed a contract, Rehhagel boarded a plane to Moscow, where Greece were playing a friendly against Russia on 15 August. He told Gagatsis that he wanted to sit on the bench, but was convinced otherwise by the president. ‘You don’t even know the names of the players, why take the responsibility for the result?’ Gagatsis told him, ‘You will sit in the stands with me.’

‘The plane was full of EPO executives that wanted to go to Moscow. I remember him talking to us before the match and watching from the stands,’ recalls Stelios Venetidis, one of his future players. Theo Zagorakis, who would become captain under Rehhagel, also had a powerful initial impression: ‘We wanted to appear serious for his first trip, because he was travelling with us,’ he remembers. ‘But he still thought it was a circus. Go figure ...’

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As a manager with 29 years of experience in ten different coaching jobs, Rehhagel spent the trip observing everything with a view to preparing future changes. Over 48 hours in Moscow, he would experience the essence of the previous two and a half years of Greek football at international level. From October 1997 – when the team came close to qualifying before elimination from the 1998 World Cup – until the day Rehhagel arrived in Athens, the Greek national team had been in persistent decline.

Antonis Nikopolidis, the goalkeeper who had been a member of the national team since 1999, admits: ‘The team had been completely discredited. The players weren’t showing any interest. They came, they went and all they cared about was boasting that they played for the national team. Lacking clear goals and motivation, they didn’t themselves believe that they could achieve anything. They picked which games to play. They would be there for one match, gone the next, and this resulted in ongoing infighting among the players. Some of us would show up for friendly matches, in order to get the team into shape supposedly, and were dropped for official qualifiers for the sake of other players. This did not contribute to a feeling of unity. Why kill yourself doing that when you know someone else is going to play in the end? There was a lot of preferential treatment which ruined the atmosphere. You didn’t believe that the coach was getting the squad he wanted. There was also tension between players from the big clubs. At Panathinaikos there were voices urging the players not to join “Gagatsis’ national team”. In 1999, we had reached the lowest point ever. There was open conflict between the EPO, Panathinaikos and AEK, two of the biggest clubs, with AEK players

stating they would leave the national team due to the state of the Greek league.

‘The national team was not held in high regard, not by players, not by fans, not by the press ... no one. It was a shambles in terms of organisation and priorities. It would adjust to the needs and demands of the clubs. And that was the root of all evil, that it wasn’t above them. What bothered me the most was that there was no real desire to wear the colours of your country. Rather, the priority was to become established in your club and get a good contract. And that attitude was obvious and it was perpetuated. We very rarely played in full stadiums, with the exception of the match against Denmark in 1997 in front of nearly 65,000 fans – when we missed the chance to qualify for the 1998 World Cup. The national team was held in extremely low regard in world football.’

Nikos Dabizas, who made his international debut in October 1994, immediately after Greece’s first appearance in the final stages of the World Cup, was equally scathing: ‘The Romanian coach Anghel Iordanescu tried to change things but failed, due to the special relationship he developed with AEK. To everyone’s mind each previous coach had had a preference: Polychroniou favoured Olympiakos, Iordanescu AEK and Daniel Panathinaikos. It was a vicious cycle of colours changing but the situation staying the same. Iordanescu made a serious attempt to change things but he didn’t receive any support, so we remained victims of the same situation.’

Giorgos Karagounis, who would go on to win a record 139 caps, agrees with his team-mate: ‘We would train in Vironas one time, Nikaia the next ... anywhere there was a pitch going ... it was all very slipshod. My first manager

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with the national team, Vasilis Daniel, tried to balance it all out, have three players from each of the big clubs so that he didn't have to face any front-page criticism the next day. That was no way to do things. Things wouldn't change with a Greek manager. We had to find someone indifferent to all that, who wouldn't be affected by it.'

Angelos Charisteas' first impression of the national team was discouraging, to say the least: 'We barely had kits back then. I remember my first training session in Crete, for a friendly against Russia in 2001; the vests were torn, the shorts falling apart. It was tragic compared to what you were expecting to find in the national team. As far as the make-up of the team, it was very cliquey, let me put it that way. They didn't all hang out together. You had Olympiakos players there, Panathinaikos there, AEK there, "foreign" players (players who played abroad) there. It wasn't a team. At the end of that friendly, Niniadis, who was very good, complained to the coach, Vasilis Daniel, because he replaced him with Zagorakis after 19 minutes, so that Zagorakis wouldn't make a fuss. So he went and asked why he had been taken off. "You will be in the starting line-up for the next competitive match," said the coach ... They explained things to the players back then.'

Takis Fyssas continues the theme: 'My first time, February 1999 with Anghel Iordanescu at the helm, I entered the conference room, it was about midday. I am a quarter of an hour early and I take a seat at the very back thinking that the senior players would go to the front, to hear the coach. Also, I was very green. So here comes this guy behind me, taps on my shoulder and says, "Kid, move, this is my seat." I get up like I've been caught red-handed,

I apologise, say that I didn't know and go sit somewhere else. It made a really bad impression on me. It was like being in the army the way he spoke to me so abruptly. That's how the more senior players behaved and it made me never want to act like that. I reminded that particular player of the incident years later and he laughed, he didn't even remember it; that's how commonplace it was.'

Demis Nikolaidis remembers: 'The image I have in my mind of the national team I first joined in April 1995 is that of an amateurish team. It was also a public relations situation. This many players from Olympiakos, this many from Panathinaikos, this many from AEK. Internally, without being on bad terms, we each hung out in our corner with our team-mates from the club. We didn't mix.'

The EPO's first attempt to upgrade the national team and extricate it from power plays, conflicts of interest and corruption took place in 1998. Sotiris Alimisis' administration, as a result of the infamous Alexandroupolis elections – which had been the object of an inquiry by the prosecuting authorities, led to questions being asked in parliament, and had gone down in Greek football history as one of its biggest scandals – decided in February 1998 to offer around 400,000 euros per year to Anghel Iordanescu for a two-year contract.

The Romanian, who led his home national team to the round of 16 during the 1998 World Cup, made his Greek debut on 6 September 1998, in the first qualifying game for the 2000 Euros, a 2-2 draw against Slovenia in the Athens Olympic Stadium. To this day, it remains a mystery how an administration that was in thrall to various controlling interests decided to hire a foreign manager who would not give in to pressure and would not be controlled.

‘Iordanescu’s stint was an oasis,’ says Demis Nikolaidis. ‘He was a very serious and strict manager, who gave the impression that he would do good work. However, we didn’t get to work with him much ...’ Six months after his first appearance, the Romanian manager quit on the night of 27 March 1999, after a 2-0 home defeat against Norway, which drove Greece further away from the goal of qualifying for the finals.

Giorgos Papalannis worked for the EPO for 43 years before his retirement. He was responsible for providing the Romanian manager with administrative support, and went on to be team manager of the squad which won Euro 2004, but admits: ‘The EPO didn’t have any money. It failed to even cover the players’ travel costs. It was also remiss in its stated obligations towards Iordanescu. We had found a 500 square metre house for him in the Dionisos area, which only had beds in it. No furniture, no electrical appliances, no other household goods. I can still recall very clearly the moment I brought him, after some time, a small fridge to store milk for his one-year-old child. He was horrified. He couldn’t bear that the house we gave him didn’t even have a fridge.’

Iordanescu tried to convince the EPO to take the national team seriously. He asked for a training facility to be created, and insisted on finding a better hotel for the players. Until then, they had been staying at one of those cheap short-term hotels for illicit couples. He also asked for upgraded services and care for the players, so that they started to see their participation as a privilege and not as a chore. He kept pressing, and began to be seen as an irritant by an administration that had looked askance at his decision to make Demis Nikolaidis captain.

‘He was a great guy and a very serious manager, but as soon as he made me captain, that was it,’ recalls the former AEK and Atletico Madrid forward. This, however, wasn’t the only reason that caused the federation to put the pressure on Iordanescu. He was damaged by a rumoured meeting with a representative from AEK, which had been arranged by an EPO executive in order to discuss the possibility of him working for the national team and AEK in tandem.

Gagatsis, who, at the time, served as secretary-general of the EPO, admits: ‘It was the administration’s fault at the time that we didn’t provide him with the right people. We did not show him the necessary trust. We were not able to convince him regarding the upgrade attempts we were making. As he was innately rather insecure, he quit.’ Theo Zagorakis offers additional insight: ‘When Iordanescu arrived, the conflict between Olympiakos and AEK had reached extreme proportions, so the internal issues of the Greek league carried over to the national team. That was one of our biggest problems.’

Before Iordanescu made his escape, he managed to convey his ideas regarding the steps they had to take in order to upgrade the national team to EPO president-to-be Gagatsis. One of the more intelligent executives in the federation, he could not help but pay attention to the ideas of a manager that had led Romania to the quarter-finals of the 1994 World Cup. They spent many an evening discussing the most efficient model of running an international programme.

During the next 30 months or so, until Rehhagel’s arrival, the team was in freefall. Iordanescu was succeeded by Vasilis Daniel. Takis Fyssas recalls: ‘With Daniel, I

experienced something for the first time. With Iordanescu, you saw players from different clubs sitting close, mingling at the hotel. When I joined Daniel's national team, there was the Olympiakos table, the Panathinaikos table, the AEK table, all separate. That's how we ate. One time I didn't have anywhere to sit and there was an empty seat at the Olympiakos table. I remember Georgatos saying, "Come, sit with us, we're not eating." That's what was going on then. There was this "we are the best, we are the national team" thing. But it was the manager and the EPO who allowed that. It wasn't the players making the rules. Maybe they didn't know there was another way. They couldn't think of that.'

Stelios Venetidis adds: 'Back then, in 1999, when I was called up for the first time, the FA had signed a contract – in order to make money – for the national team to play three friendlies in a row, on Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday, like a touring company, in nearby cities like Kavala, Trikala and Larissa. The team was like a free-for-all. We would be invited to join just like that. It was difficult for a Greek manager to solve those issues under so much pressure. The Greek status quo demanded that he take three of each colour, green, red and yellow, one black and white and whatever else. The national team had been discredited.

'You had the feeling that you came from your club to rest, unwind, with everything that entails. You didn't have a sense of responsibility for being on the national team. The mentality and climate created a sense that you're on a team that rated lower than the club you played for. Our club managers would say, "Careful there, take it easy, don't overdo it." The players were more lax in the hotel. There was not a bond between them. The primary motive of

those players that played abroad was to get a taste of Greece again, to let off some steam. I still remember managers and agents showing up at the hotel to talk. It was like a free-for-all.’

Zagorakis builds up the picture: ‘In those days, the manager would receive a lot of pressure and interventions regarding who he wanted to call up to the squad and the final line-up. These came from the administration. I don’t know if they dictated which players he should use, but I knew that they would ask that a certain player be excused so that he wasn’t injured. The club would say, for instance, “We have a major match on Sunday. Don’t let them take so and so, he’ll be tired.” I experienced things like that. I remember being accused by people at my club, PAOK, that I was being too serious about the national team. “You play well, you give it your all, why?” they would ask, as if I was doing something wrong. I was proud of wearing the colours.’

After signing a preliminary contract on 9 August in Athens, in the presence of his lawyer, Robert Wiesman, who had been on the board of FC Kaiserslautern during Rehhagel’s stint with the club, the German manager started looking for an assistant. The EPO suggested that Nikos Christidis, the veteran international goalkeeper would stay on, as he had been on Daniel’s technical staff and had also undertaken goalkeeper coaching duties for the friendly against Russia in Moscow. Rehhagel refused and did not give in to Gagatsis’ insistence to retain Christidis as goalkeeping coach. The president of the EPO then recommended former international goalkeeper Nikos Sarganis, whom he also rejected. ‘He was put under a lot of pressure, but he didn’t want anyone connected to the

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world of Greek football so he persevered,' Giorgos Papalannis remembers.

Not being in any particular hurry to find an assistant, Rehhagel, who had done his homework, travelled to Helsinki without an assistant or an interpreter for his first match against Finland. He had an interpreter for the media, journalist Ferry Batzoglou, who had been sent to the EPO by the German consulate. He also chose to use one of the players he had called up, Kostas Kostantinidis, a defender who had been born in Germany and was playing for Hertha Berlin, to interpret for him during training and the match itself.

On the flight to Helsinki, Rehhagel was reacquainted with the 'charter flight of joy', as we journalists had christened the flights of the national team. The plane was full of executives from the country's 53 local football unions and a myriad of hangers-on from all divisions and leagues in Greek football. Gagatsis admits: 'In Finland we made a mistake. We had even taken our wives with us. That's when I said, no more ...'