

**GROUP E**  
By Steven Goff

**FIRST-ROUND SCHEDULE**

All times Eastern

MONDAY

**USA vs. Czech Rep.**, Noon (ESPN2) in Gelsenkirchen ★

**Italy vs. Ghana**, 3 p.m. (ESPN2) in Hanover

SATURDAY, JUNE 17

**Czech Republic vs. Ghana**, Noon (ABC) in Cologne

**Italy vs. USA**, 3 p.m. (ABC) in Kaiserslautern ★

THURSDAY, JUNE 22

**Czech Republic vs. Italy**, 10 a.m. (ESPN2) in Hamburg

**Ghana vs. United States**, 10 a.m. (ESPN) in Nuremberg

★  
KEY MATCHES

**TEAMS AT-A-GLANCE**



**CZECH REPUBLIC**

**Coach:** Karel Bruckner.

**Appearance:**

First (eight times as Czechoslovakia).

**How Qualified:**

Finished second in Europe's Group 1, beat Norway in a two-game playoff.



**GHANA**

**Coach:** Ratomir Dujkovic.

**Appearance:** First.

**How Qualified:**

Won African Group 2.



**ITALY**

**Coach:** Marcello Lippi.

**Appearance:** 16th.

**How Qualified:**

Won Europe's Group 5.



1934 1938 1982



**UNITED STATES**

**Coach:** Bruce Arena.

**Appearance:** Eighth.

**How Qualified:**

Won CONCACAF region.

**STAR PLAYER » PAVEL NEDVED | MF | CZECH REPUBLIC**

# Nedved Saves Czech Republic From Danger

Following the 2004 European Championship, Pavel Nedved had had enough. Dividing time between the national team and Italian club Juventus had taken its toll on both his psyche and cranky knees. It was time, he figured, to concentrate solely on his club career.

But a year later, with his country in danger of missing the World Cup again, Nedved was persuaded to come out of international retirement. The Czechs had finished behind the Netherlands in group play and needed to subdue unimposing Norway in a qualifying playoff, which they accomplished with a pair of 1-0 victories.

On a roster packed with extraordinary talent, Nedved, 33, remains a half-step ahead of his teammates. His mazy runs on the left flank, improvisational instincts and passing vision have made him one of the world's most feared attackers of the last half-dozen years. In 2003, he was crowned Europe's best player.

Nedved inspired the Czechs' entertaining run to the Euro 2004 semifinals, but an early knee injury against eventual champion Greece devastated their chances. That seemed to be the end for him, but the allure of finally playing in a World Cup was difficult to ignore.

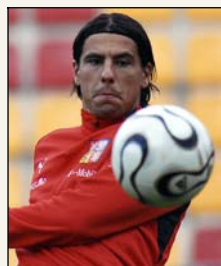
"The World Cup has always been a sort of unaccomplished dream for me," the floppy- and blond-haired Nedved said recently.

He might be burdened, however, with the match-fixing scandal unfolding at Juventus. "I don't feel good about it," said Nedved, who has not been implicated but could end up retiring sooner than expected because of it. "They'll have to sort it out soon."

**GROUP E**

**Note for Novices**

Czech Republic F Milan Baros was the leading scorer at Euro 2004, with five goals. That total is the second-most in European Championship history (Michel Platini had nine for France in 1984).



**Playmaker Pavel Nedved, 33, is back after he retired from international soccer.**

BY STUART FRANKLIN — GETTY IMAGES

**CZECH REPUBLIC OUTLOOK**

Many observers are calling the Czechs the 2006 version of Portugal in '02 — an immensely talented European team that might be a bit beyond its prime and has defensive concerns. Although there are many similarities, the Czechs seem to have the hunger for success, more frontline threats, a spectacular playmaker in Tomas Rosicky (just purchased by Arsenal from Borussia Dortmund) and a world-class goalkeeper in Petr Cech (Chelsea).

» **Best-Case Scenario:** Win the group and advance to the semifinals.

» **Worst-Case Scenario:** Finish third in a difficult group and go home early.

**GHANA OUTLOOK**

African soccer's notorious underachievers have finally reached the World Cup, but the length of their stay will depend heavily on midfielders **Michael Essien** (Chelsea) and Stephen Appiah (Fenerbahce, Turkey) and longtime Europe-based defender Samuel Kuffour. However, they will be without right-side midfielder Laryea Kingston, who received a controversial four-game suspension for involvement in an incident at the African Cup of Nations.

» **Best-Case Scenario:** Finish second in the group and play in the round of 16.

» **Worst-Case Scenario:** Three straight losses.



**ITALY OUTLOOK**

Despite the distraction of the scandal enveloping Italian soccer and obsessive concerns about playmaker **Francesco Totti's** recovery from a broken leg, the Azzurri appear to be Europe's best threat to unseat Brazil as world champion. The classically firm back line supports the central midfield tandem of Andrea Pirlo (a free kick master) and Gennaro Gattuso (a nasty enforcer), all of which leads to an attack instigated by Totti and topped by 6-foot-4 Luca Toni (Fiorentina) and Alberto Gilardino (AC Milan).

» **Best-Case Scenario:** Playing Brazil in the July 9 final.

» **Worst-Case Scenario:** Finish second in the group and play Brazil in the round of 16.



**UNITED STATES OUTLOOK**

The Americans were surprising quarterfinalists in 2002, but to repeat that historic feat they will need to minimize defensive letdowns, not be afraid to attack the Czechs and Italians, and find someone to finish scoring opportunities assuredly created by midfielders Landon Donovan and DaMarcus Beasley. While Kasey Keller is among the world's best in goal, the left back, Eddie Lewis, is a natural midfielder and there is no clear choice to play on the right side of midfield.

» **Best-Case Scenario:** Win the group, return to quarterfinals.

» **Worst-Case Scenario:** Lose the first two games, rendering the finale against Ghana meaningless.