



POPPERFOTO



PORTUGAL

Stars face uncertain futures

The United States opens World Cup play against Portugal, one of the most talented teams in Europe.

From Real Madrid star Luis Figo, the 2001 FIFA World Player of the Year, to 18-year-old Sporting Lisbon midfielder Hugo Viana, who debuted for Portugal in November, Coach Antonio Oliveira's team is loaded with skilled players.

If there's a concern in the Portuguese camp, it's the number of players who have been injured or had long layoffs.

Here's a look at five veterans who have had their ups and downs:

FERNANDO COUTO. The 32-year-old sweeper was the first big-name player caught up in the doping scandal that has swept Italy.

He was suspended for four months after testing positive for the banned substance nandrolone and missed 10 games for Lazio in the second half of the 2000-01 season.

JORGE COSTA. The 30-year-old Costa has been a fixture in the middle of the Portuguese defense with Couto, but he had a falling out with Porto coach Octavio Machado in September.

Costa was benched for four months before moving on loan to English club Charlton.

PAULO SOUSA. Sousa, one of only two players to win back-to-back European Cups with different teams, was dropped by Greek club Panathinaikos in December with a year and a half left on his contract.

The 31-year-old midfielder's stock has plummeted since leaving Parma in 2000.

RUI COSTA. The 29-year-old midfielder has had a rough season since joining AC Milan last summer after seven years at Fiorentina.

He was blamed for Milan's early problems that resulted in the exit of Turkish coach Fatih Terim.

He recently injured his foot and is out at least a month.

VITOR BAIA. Portugal's starting goalie at Euro 2000 missed 17 months with knee problems before returning to action with Porto in November.

Baia, 32, missed the entire World Cup 2002 qualifying campaign after undergoing a fourth operation on his right knee.

Fernando Couto (left) is back in action with Lazio, but Rui Costa now finds himself sidelined at AC Milan.