

14:57 04 Sep 2002 INTERVIEW-Schroeder must raise game in next TV clash - coach

By David Crossland

BERLIN, Sept 4 (Reuters) - German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, whose re-election campaign has become a one-man show, urgently needs to raise his game in Sunday's TV debate with challenger Edmund Stoiber, a top media coach said on Wednesday.

It will be their final head-on clash before the September 22 election and may influence opinion polls in the remaining two weeks of what has turned into a neck-and-neck race for the leadership of Europe's largest economy.

With few policy differences between the main parties, the campaign has essentially boiled down to which leader do Germans want - genial Schroeder, or stern Stoiber, who displays none of the earthy joviality associated with his home state of Bavaria.

Schroeder's strong handling of last month's flood disaster enabled his Social Democrats to draw almost level with the conservatives in opinion polls, although the telegenic northerner emerged as loser on points from the last TV debate on August 25.

Now Schroeder, 58, who switches on charm like an actor and has mastered the art of the punchy soundbite, finds himself in the unfamiliar role of underdog against the wooden conservative Stoiber, 60, who startled Germany with an assured performance.

Richard Schuetze, who heads Ipse Communication, an agency which trains managers and politicians how to perform in media appearances, said Schroeder was over-confident last time and needs to get down to some serious training to avoid another defeat.

„My advice to him is to limber up an hour before he goes on air. Short sprints up and down the room, jumping in the air and shouting out loud should help loosen him up,“ said **Schuetze**, who is regularly asked for his views on German TV and radio.

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Schroeder had been expected to easily win the August debate, the first direct confrontation between a chancellor and his challenger on German television, but seemed detached and tired.

Trying to talk with a champagne cork in his mouth should help, said **Schuetze**. „Do that for five minutes and everything you say after that comes out more fulsome.“

Gaffe-prone Stoiber, who impressed viewers with an array of fluent attacks on Schroeder's economic record last time after months of coaching from a tabloid newspaper editor, only needs to perform as well as he did two weeks ago, said **Schuetze**.

„Schroeder's campaign in this last phase is focused on himself,“ said **Schuetze**. „He's all he's got to show. That's a huge burden on him and it showed last time. He was tense.“

Schroeder needs to come out punching this time rather than trying to appear calm and statesmanlike, said **Schuetze**.

Schroeder has consistently led Stoiber in popularity stakes but the lead has been irrelevant because Germany votes for political parties rather than directly electing its leaders.

The Social Democrats have caught up in voter surveys after being well behind the conservatives for much of the year. A Forsa poll this week showed each party at 39 percent.

To add spice to Sunday's debate, co-host Maybrit Illner is a notoriously aggressive interrogator known for rapid-fire attacks which quick-witted Schroeder may handle better than Stoiber.

„Women are indeed more charming but they often ask tougher questions,“ said Michael Spreng, Stoiber's media adviser. „It's going to be an exciting battle.“

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