



Italy striker Giuseppe Rossi (L) led the goal-fest against Estonia during their Euro 2012 qualifier at Braglia Stadium in Modena on Friday. Here he scores the opening goal in Italy's 3-0 win.

PHOTO: AFP

Italy stroll, Germany leave it late, France stumble

AFP, Paris



Germany and Italy continued their leisurely stroll towards the Euro 2012 finals with wins which underlined their domination of their groups but France dropped unexpected points by drawing in Belarus.

Three-time winners Germany thanked a Mario Gomez double as they floored neighbouring Austria 2-1 in Vienna and Die Mannschaft now stand seven points clear of Belgium in Group A with a game in hand while the Austrians will have to find alternative entertainment next summer.

In Group C, Italy were all business in swatting Estonia 3-0, Giuseppe Rossi, Antonio Cassano and Giampaolo Pazzini all on target for the Azzurri.

Italy stayed five points clear of Slovenia, 2-0 winners in the Faroe Islands, with a game in hand, and need only win two of their last four matches to guarantee progress to the finals.

Coach Cesare Prandelli had warned the Italians they would have to work, remembering a tough 2-1 win eked out in Tallinn last September.

But once Rossi had fired in the opener midway through the opening period it was all one-way traffic.

"No games are ever easy, it becomes easy when you play like we did tonight," insisted Prandelli.

"After you score a goal it becomes much easier to keep the ball and we did that tonight.

If Germany and Italy are cantering towards the line as a berth for the finals in Ukraine and Poland beckon, France still have work to do.

FRIDAY'S EURO 2012 QUALIFYING RESULTS

Group A:	At Bucharest
At Astana	Romania 3 (Mutu 36, Marica 41, 54) Bosnia 0
Kazakhstan 2 (Grudin 57, 69)	At Minsk
Azerbaijan 1 (Nadirov 64)	Belarus 1 (Abidal 20-o.g.) France 1 (Malouda 22)
At Vienna	Group E:
Austria 1 (A. Friedrich 50-o.g.)	At Kishinev
Germany 2 (Gomez 44, 90)	Moldova 1 (Bugaev 61) Sweden 4 (Toivonen 11, Elmander 30, 58, Gerndt 88)
At Brussels	At Serravalle
Belgium 1 (Ogunjimi 4)	San Marino 0 Finland 1 (Forsell 41)
Turkey 1 (B. Yilmaz 22)	Group F:
Group C:	At Split
At Toftir	Croatia 2 (Mandukic 76, Kalinic 78)
Faroe Islands 0 Slovenia 2 (Matavz 29, Baldvinsson 47-o.g.)	Georgia 1 (Kankava 17)
At Modena	Group D:
Italy 3 (Rossi 21, Cassano 39, Pazzini 68) Estonia 0	

Coach Laurent Blanc was clearly unimpressed as his charges laboured to a 1-1 draw against Belarus in Minsk.

The point still keeps Les Bleus - champions in 1984 and 2000 - four points clear of the eastern Europeans - but they are making heavy weather of their passage.

Eric Abidal returned after a frantic ten weeks first saw him have surgery on a liver tumour then regain his place in the Barcelona side in time to lift the European Cup at Wembley.

But his return to the national team was marked chiefly by

the left back putting the ball through his own net on 20 minutes.

Florent Malouda swiftly levelled but the French could not find the win which would effectively have sewn up the group. Blanc, who came under fire recently over alleged proposals to introduce race quotas at youth level before an internal investigation cleared him, was frustrated.

"It was a disappointing match, especially in the first half. We lacked a bit of freshness - I don't think we deserved to win tonight," Blanc told French television.

"They've taken four points off us in two matches and that's a lot - yet they are not a better team than us. We came for three points and we didn't get them."

In other Friday action, Sweden thumped Moldova 4-1 away but are struggling to catch the Dutch, who have a perfect record after six matches.

Although the Scandinavians have a match in hand they have six points to make up. Croatia gained a potentially crucial win in Group F as two goals inside three minutes from first Mario Mandzukic then Nikola Kalinic saw off Georgia, who had taken the lead through Jaba Kankava after 17 minutes.

The Croatians lead 2004 champions Greece, who host Malta on Saturday, by two points but have played one more game.

In Group I, there was a rare win for Liechtenstein, who beat Lithuania 2-0 with goals from Philippe Erne and Michele Polverino, the win moving the tiny hosts to within a point both of the Lithuanians and Scotland.

Holders Spain lead the way in the group with a perfect 15 points from five games.

Guus may return to Chelsea

Football

AP, Brussels

Guus Hiddink Guus Hiddink left the possibility of a return to Chelsea open on Friday and his future with Turkey uncertain.

The 64-year-old Dutchman put a hand over his heart when recollections of Chelsea came up and said "it was a beautiful time." Despite his contract with Turkey till next year, he did not rule out reliving them soon.

When asked after Turkey's 1-1 draw with Belgium late Friday whether he would be in charge of its next Euro 2012 qualifier in September, he said "we'll see."

"There is nothing certain," he said.

Team captain John Terry said he would welcome back Hiddink, who has remained as a Chelsea adviser since winning the FA Cup in 2009. Carlo Ancelotti was fired last month after his second season at Stamford Bridge ended without a trophy.

"At my age, when some issues can come up we can always talk," Hiddink said.

Turkey is in a tight race for second place in Group A of Euro 2012, the kind of international challenge Hiddink has always thrived on since he took South Korea into the semifinals of World Cup 2002 and Australia into the second round four years later.

Stanford Bridge, though, also still tugs at his heart.

Hiddink insisted only one thing was certain as of next week. He was going on holiday, happy to see how his future would play out.

He certainly did not show any detachment from Turkey's national team, trying to bring any question about his future back to Friday's game, which he was lucky to escape with a draw after Belgium's Axel Witsel missed a late penalty.

"We were lucky that it was missed," Hiddink said. "We can be happy with the result."

Behind runaway leader Germany with a perfect 18 points, Belgium held on to second place with 11 points from seven games, with Turkey totaling 10 points from six. Second place almost certainly assures a playoff spot for the finals in Poland-Ukraine next year.

Whatever happens, Hiddink took a philosophical approach. "My future is more behind me than in front of me."



Germany needed a 90th minute winner from Mario Gomez (L) for a 2-1 victory against a feisty Austria during their Euro 2012 qualifier at the Ernst-Happel Stadium in Brussels on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP

Loew thanks luck

AFP, Vienna



Germany admitted that luck had played a big part in their 2-1 win against Austria on Friday, sealed at the last minute with a second goal by Mario Gomez.

"One must say we won this game through luck... The Austrians fought hard and ran well. We made a lot of mistakes," Germany coach Joachim Loew told journalists after the game.

"But only the result counts in a game like today," he said as Germany stayed on course to Euro 2012 qualification with their sixth win in as many games.

"There was a sensational atmosphere, it was a difficult game as expected," German striker Lukas Podolski added.

"Austria was a strong opponent especially

in the second half, they put on a lot of pressure. In the end they would have deserved a point," he said.

Up until the 89th minute when Gomez hit the net a second time, Austria was set for a much-needed draw and a rare result against traditional rival Germany.

But despite the loss, Austria's performance raised some hopes about the team, after two defeats in their last two Euro 2012 qualifiers against Belgium and Turkey.

"When you see how they played, I think if they keep playing like that, they have a good future ahead," Podolski noted.

Austrian Captain Christian Fuchs added: "This is the performance we've been talking about. We need to have more confidence and today we didn't just react, we acted."

"I think we can all be proud of the team's performance," he added.

FIFA is run by dinosaurs: Maradona



Diego Maradona speaks at a press meet in Dubai while being introduced as AlWasel's new coach yesterday.

AP, Dubai

Diego Maradona says corruption and match-fixing scandals that have hit FIFA will continue as long as the sport's governing body is run by "dinosaurs."

The Argentine was in Dubai on Saturday to sign a two-year contract to coach the local Dubai AlWasel club.

Maradona said FIFA had been badly run over the years and attacked the re-election of President Sepp Blatter "who has never kicked a football." Maradona said an ex-soccer player should be in charge but did not suggest anyone.

Maradona hasn't coached since leading his country to the 2010 World Cup quarterfinals. His contract was not renewed after the World Cup.

The Dubai club has not provided any details of the contract, and Maradona denied reports he is being paid \$10 million.

IN brief

FIFA probes Argentina's defeat against Nigeria

AFP, London

FIFA are investigating reports of unusual betting patterns following Nigeria's defeat of Argentina in an international friendly Wednesday, it was reported Saturday.

Nigeria ran out 4-1 winners against a largely second-string Argentine side in the friendly encounter in Abuja.

Ike Uche scored twice and Victor Obinna once to put the hosts three up at the break, while Emmanuel Emenike made it four in the second half.

Argentina did not score until eight minutes into injury time -- only five having been signalled -- when Joseph Yobo was penalised for a handball by referee Ibrahim Chaibou of Niger and Mauro Boselli scored from the penalty spot.

It is claimed a high number of bets were placed for there to be another goal with the score at 4-0.

FIFA said in statement released to the Daily Telegraph: "FIFA can confirm that this match between Nigeria and Argentina was one that we had an active interest in, and forms part of a wider ongoing FIFA investigation."

Rooney has hair transplant

AP, London

England striker Wayne Rooney has had a hair transplant.

Rooney confirmed the news via Twitter: "I was going bald at 25, why not. I'm delighted with the result."

The 25-year-old Manchester United star said his head was "still a bit bruised and swollen."

The Sun newspaper said he was seen visiting London's famous Harley Street during the week and leaving with his hair covered, adding that Rooney was going for a "hi-tech baldy cure."

Rooney is suspended from playing in Saturday's European Championship qualifier between England and Switzerland.

Essien returns as Ghana triumph

AFP, Johannesburg

Chelsea midfielder Michael Essien ended his international football exile this weekend to help Ghana defeat Congo 3-1 in an Africa Cup of Nations qualifier.

Appearing in the colours of the Black Stars for the first time since January last year, Essien was denied a goal by the woodwork during the first half before being taken off when the three points were secure.

Essien has suffered several serious injuries while on national team duty -- most recently during the 2010 Cup of Nations in Angola -- and decided to take a break.

Victory confirmed the supremacy of Ghana over Congo in qualifiers for the premier African senior national team competition with six victories from six meetings.

Defender Isaac Vorsah, striker Prince Tagoe and midfielder Emmanuel Agyemang-Badu scored for the four-time Cup of Nations winners while Matt

SPORTS POLL

WEEKLY QUESTION

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What to WATCH

ESPN

MotoGP World Championship

Catalan Grand Prix

Live from 2:57pm

STAR Cricket

England v Sri Lanka

Second Test, Day 3

Live from 4:00pm

STAR Sports

French Open Tennis

Men's Final

Live from 7:00pm



Bangladesh League

Sk Russel v Sk Jamal

Time: 4:15pm

Venue: Bangabandhu