



Croatia striker Mario Mandzukic (L) heads in the third goal against Ireland during their Euro 2012 Group C match at the City Stadium in Poznan on Sunday.

## Croatia off to flier



**IRELAND 1: 3 CROATIA**  
ST LEDGER 19



**MANDZUKIC 3, 48**  
**JELAVIC 43**

REUTERS, Poznan

Dark horses Croatia made a flying start at Euro 2012 on Sunday, giving a lively and varied attacking display in a 3-1 win over an unusually sloppy Ireland.

Although Ireland gave Croatia a helping hand in all three goals, the 2008 quarterfinalists were deserving winners as they ended their opponents' 14-match unbeaten run and gave them an unhappy start to their first major tournament for 10 years.

Mario Mandzukic, off-balance and unmarked, headed Croatia ahead after two minutes, destroying Ireland's plan to frustrate their opponents.

Although Sean St Ledger levelled for Ireland, Croatia regained the lead when Nikica Jelavic was left alone to prod the ball past Shay Given just before halftime.

An unlucky Given own goal at the start of the second half effectively ended Ireland's chances and put Croatia top of the Group C after Spain and Italy drew 1-1 in Gdansk.

Ireland coach Giovanni Trapattoni, who at 73 is Bilic's senior by 30 years and became the oldest coach at a European Championship, was non-plussed by his team's defence, which is usually their strong point.

"It was not like our other performances, in many games we have played better, we didn't concede goals, tonight we conceded three goals," said the Italian, whose side's 14-match unbeaten run included 11 clean sheets.

Mandzukic, who had stumbled from his knees and was unmarked, got up just in time to head Darijo Srna's cross from the right past a stranded Given after three minutes.

It was a dream start for Croatia although Ireland hit back quickly when Aiden McGeady floated a long free kick over from the left and St Ledger at the far post got ahead of Vedran Corluka to nod the equaliser.

Although the game briefly became bogged down in midfield, Croatia came into their own as Bilic's bold formation paid off.

Captain Darijo Srna, usually a midfielder, was moved to right back and, with Ivan Rakitic and Ivan Perisic marauding down the wings and playmaker Luka Modric coming to life, their quick and incisive attacks were a pleasant variation on Spain's tiki-taki.

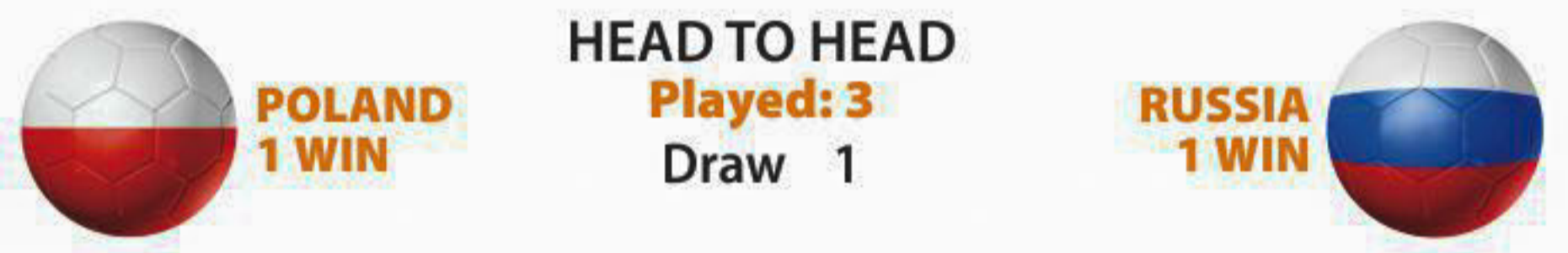
After Perisic had twice fired wide, they regained the lead three minutes before the break.

Modric's low pass hit two Irish defenders on its way through the defence and landed at the feet of in-form striker Jelavic who diverted it past Given.

The entire Irish side protested about an offside in the build-up, Trapattoni saying a player had been "two metres offside."

Another impressive interchange of passes led to their third goal two minutes after the break, Perisic crossed the ball into the area where Mandzukic met it with a header, the ball hit the post and ricocheted against the hapless Given and into the net.

## Emotions run high



REUTERS, Warsaw

Poland and Russia are doing their best to keep their minds on soccer ahead of a Euro 2012 Group A game on Tuesday that off the pitch looks like one of the tournament's potential flashpoints.

Authorities in Warsaw have been working hard behind the scenes to ease concerns over a planned march by Russian fans through the city to the national stadium.

Russian fans were also at the centre of a handful of incidents in the southern city of Wroclaw around Friday's game against the Czech Republic and are expected to be in Warsaw in force on Tuesday.

Their team produced the performance of the tournament to crush the Czechs 4-1 in an exuberant display of swift movement and flawless finishing on Friday.

That reinforced their status as firm favourites for Group A, although the Poles showed enough in a dominant first-half display against Greece to suggest they will not be pushovers.

"The Russians are favourites but we've played with teams who are better than they are. There is no reason to be scared. We are at home," Polish attacking midfielder Adrian Mierzejewski told reporters on Sunday.

"For us as players, it doesn't really matter who we play but for the fans of course there is a bit of a clash, a bit more tension in this game."

**HEAD TO HEAD**  
Played: 3  
Draw 1

**POLAND**  
1 WIN

**RUSSIA**  
1 WIN

## Disquiet in Dutch camp

AFP, Krakow

Fears of discontent inside the 2010 World Cup finalists Holland's Euro 2012 squad grew on Monday when it was announced star striker Klaas-Jan Huntelaar would be the only player not talking to the Dutch press.

The 28-year-old - the leading scorer in the Bundesliga last season with 29 goals for Schalke 04 and also in the Euro qualifiers with 12 in 10 games - had been left seething when Robin van Persie was preferred to him to lead the attack for their opening Group B match against Denmark.

The Danes went on to pull off a surprise 1-0 win over the Dutch in Saturday's clash and left the talented but fragile losers in danger of going home early as they still have games against three-time champions Germany and Portugal.

Van Persie gave a listless performance - as he had done in the 2010 World Cup where once again coach Bert van Marwijk's preferred front man he scored just once in seven games - and Huntelaar was finally sent on with 20 minutes remaining.

## Time to solve defensive woes



**GREECE**  
1 WIN

**HEAD TO HEAD**  
Played: 3  
Draws 2



**CZECH REP**  
0 WIN

REUTERS, Wroclaw

Greece and the Czech Republic have defensive problems ahead of their Euro 2012 clash in Group A on Tuesday with the Greeks missing their first-choice central defence and the Czechs desperate to plug a leaky back line.

Greek coach Fernando Santos must find replacements for Avraam Papadopoulos, who is out of the tournament with a knee injury, and Sokratis Papastathopoulos who is suspended after being harshly dismissed against Poland in the Group A opener.

The pair anchored a defence that conceded only five goals in qualifying and Santos will likely pair veteran midfielder Costas Katsouranis with 20-year old Kyriakos Papadopoulos who came on for his namesake in the 1-1 draw against the co-hosts.

The Czechs have defensive issues as well but their problems are mostly of their own making after Russia ran riot in a 4-1 victory on Friday, mainly due to glaring mistakes at the back.

Czech coach Michal Bilek might be tempted to move Michal Kadlec back to central defence from the left side and bring in David Limbersky, while defensive midfielder Tomas Hubchman could also start the game to reinforce the rearguard.

## Polish FA hits back at Spain

REUTERS, Warsaw

Polish FA chief Grzegorz Lato has played down Spain's complaints about the pitch after Sunday's 1-1 draw with Italy at Euro 2012, denying the grass was too long and saying the Italians refused to let it be watered.

Spain midfielder Andres Iniesta and coach Vicente del Bosque complained that the pitch was too dry, spoiling the Group C game at the PGE Arena in Gdansk for both sides and the fans.

Polish media also reported that organisers judged after the match that the grass was too long and ordered for it to be cut.

"What nonsense! The grass was the perfect length," Lato, winner of the Golden Boot as top scorer at the 1974 World Cup, told Polish radio station TOK FM on Monday.

"The thing is that often one waters the pitch for the game. But you need agreement from the two teams. The Spanish wanted it to be watered, the Italians did not agree," he added.

Lato said the Italians had clearly wanted a slower pitch to make it easier to block Spain's intricate passing game.

## Italy lift spirits

REUTERS, Krakow

Italy's expectations heading into their Euro 2012 opener against Spain were about as high as diminutive frontman Antonio Di Natale but his goal and their all-round play in the 1-1 draw have lifted spirits.

Italian media were pleased with Sunday's performance in Gdansk after weeks of negative headlines ranging from match-fixing allegations to injuries to poor displays in warm-up games.

"Beautiful Italy, we want you like that," ran Monday's front page in Gazzetta dello Sport.

Down to earth coach Cesare Prandelli was not shouting from the rooftops but the fact he was annoyed that a possible win was prevented by Cesc Fabregas's quickequaliser spoke volumes.

Di Natale's opener on the hour came moments after he replaced the ineffective Mario Balotelli and the Udinese striker will now hope to stay in the side for the game against Croatia in Poznan on Thursday.

"It's my best goal with the national team," he told reporters after slotting home with aplomb following Andrea Pirlo's superb run and pass.

"I finally put the ghost to bed because it was me four years ago who missed one of the penalties against Spain."

That quarterfinal exit at Euro 2008 after a 0-0 draw cost coach Roberto Donadoni his job. Prandelli will not get carried away and the jubilation of some fans at matching the world and European champions for long spells may have been tempered slightly by Croatia's impressive 3-1 dismissal of Ireland in the other Group C game afterwards.

Thursday's encounter will be awkward, especially as Croatia play with two powerful strikers, unlike Spain who started with none.

It will be a difficult test for Italy's new formation with three in defence and Emanuele Giaccherini at left wing back having debuted against the Spanish.

Midfielder Daniele De Rossi started as a centre half and found Spain's approach tricky to deal with.

"When we saw there was no striker in the Spain team we joked about it. Initially I was a bit worried because a forward gives you someone to mark," he said.



Greek players jog during a training session in Legionowo on Sunday. Greece will play the Czech Republic in Wroclaw tonight.

PHOTO: REUTERS

### SPORTS POLL

#### WEEKLY QUESTION

Is Shakib Al Hasan rightly given a break?

Visit the sports page of [www.thedailystar.net](http://www.thedailystar.net) to cast vote

Follow The Daily Star Sport on

**twitter**  
[www.twitter.com/dssport](http://www.twitter.com/dssport)



**Maasranga TV & NEO Sports**

Euro 2012

Greece v Czech Republic

Live from 10:00pm

Poland v Russia

Live from 12:45am (Wednesday)

**ESPN**

Sportscenter India

Sports News



**Bangladesh Premier League**

Sk Jamal v Sk Russel

Time: 5:30pm

Venue: Bangabandhu National