



PHOTO: AFP

Czech Republic veteran Milan Baros is exultant after his side qualified for the quarterfinals with a win over hosts Poland at the Municipal Stadium in Wroclaw on Saturday.

'Spirit took us through'

AFP, Prague



Czech Republic's injured captain Tomas Rosicky said he believed it was his team-mates strong character that had seen them rebound from an opening hammering by Russia to securing their place in the Euro 2012 quarterfinals.

The 31-year-old playmaker - nicknamed the 'Little Mozart' - had to watch from the touchline because of a calf injury as his team-mates beat co-hosts Poland 1-0 in Wroclaw on Saturday to top Group A.

Such a scenario had looked highly unlikely when they opened with a 4-1 defeat by Russia - instead it is the Russians who are heading home after a 1-0 defeat by Euro 2004 champions Greece also on Saturday saw the Greeks take second spot.

"It was pretty tough for me. The experience as a fan is completely different from what the player feels," Rosicky told the website of Czech daily paper DNES.

"But the boys handled it well, the second half was excellent. We absolutely deserved to advance.

"The first 25 minutes were hard for us, we made big mistakes, lost possession and the Poles could take advantage of this very well -- there's no doubt they could have scored, they had big chances.

"In the second half the boys controlled the ball brilliantly and the Poles didn't know what to play."

Rosicky, along with goalkeeper Petr Cech and striker Milan Baros survivors from the flair-filled side that lost to Greece in the Euro 2004 semifinals, said he thought the fact they had to battle through a play-off to qualify had been helpful.

"I'd say we have benefited from our experience from the tough qualifying campaign," said Rosicky, who admits he is doubtful for Thursday's quarterfinal.

"We knew how to handle the situation after losing to Russia, that it's no good to panic.

"If we didn't have strong personalities, the team would have fallen apart. But we stayed calm thanks to coach (Michal) Bilek and our team spirit."

End of a great adventure

REUTERS, Warsaw

Poland coach Franciszek Smuda mourned the end of their "great adventure" as the co-hosts slumped out of Euro 2012 after a 1-0 defeat by the Czech Republic in the final Group A game.

The Poles, who had fought bravely in a 1-1 draw with Russia on Tuesday, never showed the same application in a game played in very wet conditions.

"We did what we could do. I don't know how to explain the fact that in one game the boys played like they were fired up while in the second game they didn't," Smuda told reporters.

"It is the end of this great adventure".

Poland were hampered by the fact that they had automatically qualified for the tournament as co-hosts and did not get the chance to improve their performances in competitive matches.

In hindsight, their failure to reach the quarterfinals was perhaps sealed in the first game when they allowed 10-man Greece to equalise and escape with a 1-1 draw.

Greece best with backs to the wall

REUTERS, Warsaw



Greece, cornered and faced with an early exit from Euro 2012, came up with the goods on Saturday, beating odds-on Group A favourites Russia 1-0 and proving once again they perform best in the face of adversity.

There are comparisons with their stunning Euro 2004 triumph when the Greeks came into the tournament as rank outsiders to snatch the trophy in one of the biggest upsets in international football.

The will to win and succeed when everyone had ruled them out are the same but this time there is more to the story than just another upset.

"We managed to qualify despite everything, that is why the value of this qualification is great," said captain and scorer Giorgos Karagounis who will miss the quarterfinal through suspension.

The Greeks came into the tournament undefeated in 10 qualifiers and having conceded just five goals. They had also lost only one match in their last 21 since the 2010 World Cup.

Yet it was their defence which let them down in the first two group games, a 1-1 draw with Poland and a 2-1 defeat by the Czech Republic with the backline in complete disarray at the start of each match.

Matters got even worse with central defender Avraam Papadopoulos injured in the first game and his partner Sokratis Papastathopoulos was sent off, leaving coach Fernando Santos with a makeshift backline against the Czechs.

They conceded two goals in the opening six minutes but reorganised and came close to clawing their way back for a draw as they had done against Poland.

The warning signs were there for Russia but it seemed they were still gloating over their 4-1 win over the Czech Republic and a dazzling performance first-half display against Poland who fought back bravely to claim a 1-1 draw.

Russia coach Dick Advocaat even called them the best team in the tournament.

Santos went back to basics against the quickfire Russians, picking the team he arguably should have fielded from the start of the tournament.

Sokratis was back and formed a natural partnership with 20-year-old Kyriakos Papadopoulos, whose immense talent has made him a starting fixture at Bundesliga club Schalke 04 since he was 18.

Gutsy Giorgos Tzavellas was moved to the left with Vasilis Torosidis shutting out Russia's Andrei Arshavin on the other side, while erratic Jose Holebas, poor in both previous games, was relegated to the bench.

Irish Trap for Italy



ITALY
7 WINS

HEAD TO HEAD
Played: 11
Draws 2



IRELAND
2 WINS

REUTERS, Krakow

Giovanni Trapattoni may be a proud Italian but he knows he has a professional duty as Ireland coach to try his hardest to deny Italy a passage into the Euro 2012 quarterfinals on Monday.

Italian media is obsessed with fears Spain and Croatia will play out a 2-2 draw in the other Group C game and knock out the Azzurri even if they beat the Irish in Poznan.

Such is 73-year-old Trapattoni's standing in the game, though, that no one is questioning his loyalties.

Trapattoni, who managed Italy at Euro 2004 when they suspected a never-proved fix when Denmark and Sweden drew 2-2 to eliminate them, will make sure his troops are motivated despite only having pride to play for.

"It would not be fair to the other countries in the group if I did not select my best team," said Trapattoni.

"With this team, and these players, I am proud."

Italy coach Cesare Prandelli is sure Ireland and Spain will be totally professional.

"I know we have to believe right until the end. I don't believe in any suspect going on," Prandelli said. "It all depends on us, we need to deserve the win, it won't be easy."

A victory would be enough for Italy to reach the quarterfinals in second place if

Spain or Croatia win the other match.

However, an Italy win and a draw in the Spain game makes the situation complicated because all three teams would then be level on five points and head-to-head results come into play.

A 'mini-league' between the three would be the deciding factor, with Italy having drawn 1-1 with both.

A 0-0 draw between Spain and Croatia means Italy would go through with a win while a 1-1 draw would bring group goal difference into play.

A scoring draw of 2-2 or higher between Spain and Croatia, though, and Italy are out whatever the do against the Irish.

Prandelli is set to make changes with forward Mario Balotelli possibly being replaced by Antonio Di Natale and Alessandro Diamanti in the running for a spot in midfield or as a second striker after impressive form in training.

Defender Andrea Barzagli is almost fit after a calf problem.

The Italy coach was annoyed that the players sat on their 1-0 halftime lead over Croatia last time out only for Mario Mandzukic to equalise.

"It's not a matter of fitness, it's more a mental thing," Prandelli said. "This is the mentality we have to change. We are a good team, we've got to believe it a bit more."

Smuda resigns

REUTERS, Wroclaw

Poland's Franciszek Smuda was the first managerial casualty of Euro 2012 after the hosts slid out of the tournament with a disappointingly flat 1-0 loss against the Czech Republic on Saturday.

The coach, whose future after the tournament had been unclear, said he had agreed with Polish FA chief Grzegorz Lato that his contract would not be renewed.

Polish press have speculated for some time that Smuda would be replaced barring a strong showing for the national team at the finals, but creditable performances against Russia and Greece had strengthened the case for him to stay on.

"I don't have to resign because I had a contract until the end of Euro 2012 and I do not see any reason (to quit); the contract is finishing, because I had come to terms with the head of the FA and I know what will now happen," he told reporters.

"At any rate my adventure with the national team is over," he added.

The Poles, who had fought bravely in a 1-1 draw with Russia on Tuesday, never showed the same application in a game played in very wet conditions.

"We did what we could do. I don't know how to explain the fact that in one game the boys played like they were fired up while in the second game they didn't," Smuda told reporters.

Poland were hampered by the fact that they had automatically qualified for the tournament as co-hosts and did not get the chance to improve their performances in competitive matches.

Smuda said his team showed too much confidence, had not taken their chances in the first half and had paid the price.

"We have to swallow this bitter pill today. We were too sure about the possibility of winning against the Czechs," he said.

"We wanted to counter attack but the Czechs were very solid in defence ... They were pressing and they were better."

Smuda said the players had made progress and expressed confidence the team could qualify for the 2014 World Cup.

In hindsight, their failure to reach the quarterfinals was perhaps sealed in the first game when they allowed 10-man Greece to equalise

Tough Croats in way



SPAIN
2 WINS

HEAD TO HEAD
Played: 4
Draws 1



CROATIA
1 WINS

REUTERS, Gdansk

After thrashing an accommodating Ireland side 4-0, holders Spain may find Croatia a tougher nut to crack when they meet in Gdansk on Monday in a game that will decide who tops Euro 2012 Group C.

A 2-2 draw would put both sides into the quarterfinals even if third-placed Italy beat Ireland and a defeat would probably mean an early flight home.

Spain played sparkling football against Ireland when the recalled Fernando Torres scored twice but the world champions are wary of a dangerous Croatia side who are unlikely to stand around watching Iberian artistry.

In midfield playmaker Luka Modric, heavily linked with a move to Manchester United, and the tournament's joint top scorer with three goals Mario Mandzukic, Croatia have the quality in key areas to cause problems for Spain.

"We watched the two matches they played here and they fully deserve the four points they have," Spain defender Raul Albiol said on Saturday. "Croatia have always had talented players and they are going to make it very tough for us."

Only needing to avoid defeat to reach the last eight, Spain coach Vicente del Bosque will be toying with the decision about whether to retain Torres or revert to the strikerless line-up he put out in the 1-1 opening draw with Italy.

One thing is for sure, according to Albiol, neither side will be worrying about the maths of the group or play for the 2-2 draw that would suit both.

"Of course 2-2 is one of the possible results in football but what is clear is that we will go out to win," he said.

"There is not going to be any pact and each team will go out there focused on victory so they have their fate in their own hands. There has been a lot of talk (about a pact) but Spain has always gone out there to win and that's what we will do.

"We want the seven points that will win us the group. The team will prepare for the game in the same way as the previous matches conscious of how important it is."

Croatia, who have never played Spain in a competitive game and are unbeaten in open play in their last six European Championship matches, are an intrepid side.

They lost to Turkey on penalties at Euro 2008 and they will be bristling with intent against a Spain side unbeaten in 16 competitive matches.

"They are a grand team, but we have no fear of them," said Mandzukic, who scored the equaliser in a 1-1 draw with Italy and two goals against Ireland. "We're ready to leave our hearts on the pitch, but we will need a little luck, too."

One lucky omen for Croatia is that when they played the holders at the 1996 European Championship they effectively knocked them out with a 3-0 win over Denmark inspired by Davor Suker and his infamous chip over goalkeeper Peter Schmeichel.

The dilemma Croatia, who also have four points, face is that they must go for a win because a 0-0 draw would not be enough if Italy beat Ireland.



PHOTO: REUTERS

Spain maestro Andres Iniesta plays with the ball during a training session yesterday at Gniewino.

SPORTS POLL
WEEKLY QUESTION
Is Shakib Al Hasan rightly given a break?
Visit the sports page of www.thedailystar.net to cast vote
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What to WATCH

Maasranga TV
Euro 2012
Croatia v Spain
Live from 12:45am (Tuesday)
Italy v Ireland
Delayed from 2:45am (Tuesday)
TEN Cricket
Sri Lanka v Pakistan
Fifth ODI
Live from 3:00pm
TEN Cricket
Sportscenter India
Sports News

DAY'S EVENT

Bangladesh Premier League
Abahani v Farashganj
Time: 5:30pm
Venue: Bangabandhu National