

Lukaku on the double

AFP, Bordeaux

Romelu Lukaku silenced his critics with a brace as Belgium kick-started their Euro 2016 campaign by comfortably beating the Republic of Ireland 3-0 in Bordeaux on Saturday.

After being frustrated by the Irish in the first half, Belgium broke through when Lukaku struck three minutes after the restart, atoning for his profligacy in front of goal in Monday's 2-0 loss to Italy.

Midfielder Axel Witsel headed home in the 61st minute and Lukaku got his second and Belgium's third 20 minutes from the end as Belgium came good at last, albeit against a limited Ireland team who worked hard but created little.

The result put Belgium in prime position to qualify for the last 16 from Group E and also confirmed Italy as group winners, a day after the Azzurri secured their progress to the next round with a 1-0 victory over Sweden.

More than anything the win should reinvigorate Marc Wilmots' Belgium side before their last match with the Swedes.

Wilmots had promised to make changes in the wake of the Italy defeat and Lukaku was expected to be axed after being guilty of

one vital miss in that match.

But he kept his place, as did Kevin De Bruyne, who had also been criticised and had been carrying a knock.

Instead, right-back Laurent Ciman and midfield pair Marouane Fellaini and Radja Nainggolan dropped out, with Mousa Dembele, Yannick Carrasco and Thomas Meunier all coming into the side.

Belgium utterly dominated possession in the first 45 minutes against an Irish side that set out to frustrate their more illustrious opponents, and captain Eden Hazard was the one pulling the strings.

Ireland manager Martin O'Neill had promised a different approach from his team after what he called an "accomplished" showing in drawing 1-1 with Sweden, and it worked in the first half as Belgium struggled to create openings.

Hazard blazed a great chance over after John O'Shea headed out a De Bruyne cross into his path, while Carrasco had a goal correctly disallowed for offside.

Toby Alderweireld also saw his header from a De Bruyne corner cleared off the line as the first period ended goalless, but Wilmots opted against making any changes at the interval and he was rewarded for his patience as the opener came soon after the restart.



Belgium striker Romelu Lukaku (L) celebrates one of his two goals against Ireland during their Euro 2016 Group E encounter in Bordeaux yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Late own goal denies Iceland

AFP, Marseille

An own-goal by Iceland's Birkir Savarsson in the dying seconds rescued a draw for Hungary in a frenetic Euro 2016 clash that keeps both team's hopes alive of a second round berth.

A first-half penalty by Gylfi Sigurdsson put little Iceland on course for a fairytale win. But the European Championship newcomers succumbed to waves of late Hungarian pressure.

With 88 minutes gone, substitute Nemanja Nikolic sent a low ball into the area and in the thick of a goalmouth scramble, Savarsson touched the ball into his own net.

Prior to the tournament both teams viewed this Marseille tie as their best opportunity to get a win.

Modric suffers muscle injury

AFP, Saint Etienne

Croatia's midfield icon Luka Modric suffered a muscle injury in his side's 2-2 draw with Czech Republic Friday that coach Ante Cacic said may have caused his side's loss of a two-goal lead.

The Real Madrid star came off in the 62nd minute of the game with what Cacic called "a muscular problem".

Cacic said Modric was his side's "most important player" and his absence along with flares thrown on the pitch by Croatian fans could have caused a meltdown.

Modric is now a major doubt for Croatia's final Group D game against European champions Spain on Tuesday.

Spain cruise to last 16

AFP, Nice

Defending European champions Spain booked their place in the last 16 round of Euro 2016 on Friday with a convincing 3-0 win against Turkey in Nice.

Vicente del Bosque's men bossed the Group D tie from the kickoff, with a double by Juventus' Alvaro Morata and a first competitive international goal from Nolito sealing a comfortable win.

"We showed our winning mentality and great team spirit here tonight," said Andres Iniesta, who was awarded man-of-the-match.

"It depends on ourselves how far we go here, the feelings we have are very positive at the moment," he said.

Spain, aiming for an unprecedented third consecutive Euros title, can seal top spot in the pool with just a draw against Croatia in their final group game on Tuesday.

Turkey need to beat the Czech Republic in their final match and hope other results go their way to have any chance of progressing as one of the four best third-placed sides from the six groups.

"We have completed our first objective, to qualify for the next round, we controlled the game almost for the whole 90 minutes and we scored goals, so it was perfect," Del Bosque said.

"But we haven't won anything yet, we are on a good path but there is still a long

way to go," he added.

Before the game Turkey coach Fatih Terim had called for more "fight" from his side to keep their Euro 2016 hopes alive after an out-of-sorts display against Croatia on Sunday, and for a while his players responded.

Sitting deep and launching the occasional counter-attack, Hakan Calhanoglu roused Turkey's raucous fans by sending a free-kick just over David de Gea's crossbar on 25 minutes.

From the half-hour though, Spain moved up a gear, starving Turkey of possession and, with Iniesta pulling the strings in midfield, carving out chance after chance.

First Sergio Busquets teed up Nolito for a right-footed curler just wide of left post.

Then the busy Celta Vigo winger scuffed wide under pressure after a cut-back from Juanfran.

On 34 minutes, though, Nolito turned provider to greater effect.

Looking up, he spotted Morata unmarked in front of goal and curled a pass over the defence to the marksman whose header gave Spain the lead.

Three minutes later, Vicente del Bosque's men went two-up, this time with Nolito as the finisher.

A chip into the box by Cesc Fabregas should not have reached its target but Mehmet Topal, off-balance, headed backward to the lurking Nolito who half-volleyed on the turn past Volkan Babacan.



Spain striker Alvaro Morata (L) rejoices his opening goal with teammates during their Euro 2016 Group D match against Turkey in Nice on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP

Croatia, Turkey charged

AFP, Paris

UEFA hit Croatia and Turkey with disciplinary procedures Saturday following flare-throwing incidents at Euro 2016 matches as the Croatian press raged at its "shameful" fans.

Croatian fans hurled flares on to the pitch in the 86th minute of the 2-2 draw with Czech Republic in Saint Etienne on Friday, while Turkish fans let off flares after their 3-0 defeat by Spain in Nice.

UEFA said Croatia was accused of crowd disturbances, racist behaviour, setting off fireworks and throwing objects.

And it accused Turkey of a pitch invasion, throwing objects and setting

off fireworks.

Croatian coach Ante Cacic called the country's fans "sports terrorists" after the incidents which caused a four-minute halt to the match.

A steward narrowly avoided injury when one of the flares exploded as he was clearing it from the pitch.

Croatian fans also fought among themselves in the chaos.

Even the country's president Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic described the violent fans as "enemies of Croatia".

Less than a week after Russian fans tried to attack their English rivals inside the Marseille stadium, the flare incidents heaped new problems on the European Championship finals.

"Ashamed Croatia!" read the front-page headline of the country's top-

selling Vecernji list newspaper.

Croatia had been leading 2-1 when the flares were thrown, but after the stoppage the Czechs scored with a penalty to force a draw.

Croatia's football federation (HNS) said it had warned UEFA and French police in advance that hooligans were planning to disrupt the match.

"In the preparation of this match, HNS did everything possible to prevent incidents and therefore both UEFA and the French police were warned of hooligans' intentions to interrupt it," a federation statement said.

The HNS official in charge of security, Miroslav Markovic, said the federation had a "tip-off" there would be incidents in the 85th minute of the match, the HINA news agency reported.

Candrea in hamstring trouble

AFP, Montpellier

Italy winger Antonio Candrea has undergone tests after suffering a hamstring injury in their 1-0 Euro 2016 win over Sweden on Friday.

Candrea played until full-time at Stadium de Toulouse and was even pictured leaping into the air with a Sweden jersey in his hand as Italy's squad ran to the Italy end of the stadium to hail their fans.

It suggested the injury may not be serious, but the Italian Football Federation said he will undergo daily tests in the coming days.

"At the end of the game with Sweden, Antonio Candrea complained of a right hamstring problem.

"The player underwent scans and he will be evaluated on a daily basis."

Italy has qualified for the last 16 knockout phase after wins over Belgium and Sweden and face the Republic of Ireland in their final Group E game next Wednesday in Lille.

'No chance' of going to Rio

AFP, Moscow



Russian sports minister Vitaly Mutko admitted on Saturday that the country's athletes' Olympic hopes are over following a decision made by the IAAF and supported by the IOC.

On Friday, athletics world governing body the IAAF decided to maintain the provisional ban, first imposed in November, against Russian track and field athletes competing at August's Rio Olympics.

On Saturday, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) said it welcomed the IAAF's "strong stance against doping".

"Given the International Olympic Committee's statements, our sports people have no chance" of going to the Games, Mutko told R-Sport agency, before insisting he would fight on for Russia's athletes.

"We'll keep going in every way. Our position is clear: the responsibility should be individual, not collective."

On Friday, Mutko had vowed to "react" to the IAAF decision, which he described as "expected".

The IAAF had voted unanimously to extend Russia's ban, although all the while leaving open the door for athletes to compete at the Games as neutrals, as long as they could meet certain strict conditions.

The initial ban, supported by the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) had been imposed due to state sponsored doping and mass corruption in the Russian testing system.

But the IAAF said on Friday that "individual athletes who can clearly and convincingly show that they are not tainted by the Russian system" could yet take part.

The IOC backed this tough stance, adding on Saturday: "This is in line with the IOC's long-held zero-tolerance policy."

Russian president Vladimir Putin reacted with fury, branding the extension as "unfair", although it was widely supported around the athletics and sporting world.

Speaking on Friday, Putin had also suggested he expected the IOC to oppose the IAAF decision, while vowing to speak with WADA.

The country's pole vault star Yelena Isinbayeva said she would challenge in court the IAAF decision.

But in a damning verdict, the IAAF had said that the Russian athletics federation was "at least 18-24 months away from returning to full operational compliance with the World Anti-Doping Code".

"There are detailed allegations, which are already partly substantiated, that the (Russian) Ministry of Sport, far from supporting the anti-doping effort, has in fact orchestrated systemic doping and the covering up of adverse analytical findings," the IAAF said.

Peru pay the penalty

AFP, East Rutherford



Arsenal goalkeeper David Ospina was the hero as Colombia slayed their penalty shoot-out jinx to defeat Peru and advance to the semi-finals of the Copa America Centenario here Friday.

Ospina pulled off a superb save deep into injury time to deny Peru a goal before saving a spot-kick from Peru defender Miguel Trauco in the shoot-out to clinch a nailbiting win for Colombia.

A largely disappointing quarter-final in front of 79,194 fans at East Rutherford's MetLife Stadium was settled in penalties after the two sides finished 90 minutes deadlocked at 0-0.

After Colombia drilled their first three penalties, the tide turned in their favor when Trauco saw his effort blocked by Ospina.

Sebastian Perez then scored Colombia's fourth penalty to put his 4-2 up and when Peru's Christian Cueva blasted his spot-kick over the bar Colombia were through.

Victory was especially sweet for Colombia, who had exited the competition last year at the same stage to Argentina.

They will now play either Mexico or Chile in the semi-finals in Chicago next Wednesday.

"Sometimes you win sometimes you lose, and today luck was on our side in the penalties," Colombia's James Rodriguez said.

"Our goal was to get into the semi-finals at least and we've done that. Now we want to win the title," the Real Madrid star added.

Goalkeeper Ospina said he believed Colombia could reach the June 26 final.

"I contributed my bit, and we want to keep going from here," Ospina said. "We can get to the final. The semi will be tough regardless of whoever we face."

than 11 fouls committed, mostly coming from Peru.

The stop-start nature of the contest hampered Colombia's attempts to build momentum and made for a mostly frustrating half for the talented 2014 World Cup quarter-finalists.

Carlos Bacca was the first to threaten the Peru goal, but his shot from a tight angle after seven minutes hit the post.

The best chance of the half came after 22 minutes, Rodriguez picked up the ball in midfield and advanced towards goal before letting fly with a curling low shot from 20 yards.

The strike flew past Peru goalkeeper Pedro Gallese but agonizingly for Rodriguez it struck the foot of the right hand upright and cannonned back across the goal.

Bacca pounced on the rebound but his shot went just wide.

The most notable incidents in the remainder of the half were a series of meaty clashes which left players from both sides rolling on the turf at various times.

Colombia's Daniel Torres was flattened by Peru defender Alberto Rodriguez while Juan Cuadrado also came off worst after a rugged aerial challenge by Trauco.

The bruising nature of the game continued after the break, with Renato Tapia lucky not to concede a penalty in the 53rd minute after a blatant barge on Bacca in the box which went unpunished.

After 63 minutes, Argentinian referee Patricio Loustau had clearly seen enough and reached for his pocket, booking Tapia for a wild foul on Rodriguez.

The frustration of Colombia's players also began to show, with Cristian Zapata and Farid Diaz both picking up yellow cards within a few minutes of each other midway through the second half.

The pattern of play continued as the minutes wore down, with neither side creating much in the way of clear-cut chances.

USA attempt to overturn red card

AFP, Los Angeles

The United States on Friday lodged a protest against the red card issued to Jermaine Jones that looks set to rule the key midfielder out of their Copa America Centenario semi-final.

US Soccer announced the protest against Jones' red, and a yellow card against striker Bobby Wood which also leaves him suspended for the semi-final, in a posting on Twitter.

Jones was given his marching orders early in the second half of Thursday's 2-1 quarter-final victory over Ecuador following a confrontation with Manchester United's Antonio Valencia.

The 34-year-old was issued with a straight red card after raising his hands towards Valencia's face during the skirmish although replays suggested he barely made any contact with the Ecuadorian wide player.

US coach Jurgen Klinsmann later described Colombian referee Wilmar Roldan's decision as a "disgrace".

"Unfortunately we lost Jermaine for that incident which is an absolute joke," Klinsmann said in a press conference.

"Because I was right there -- the fourth official made the decision, not the referee, he didn't see it."