

Euro2012: Croatia too strong for Ireland

Sunday, 10 June 2012

Republic of Ireland's return to the big stage after a 10-year absence fell flat on the field in a 3-1 defeat to Croatia in Poznan.

Ireland fans were in full voice and enjoying their country's first tournament since 2002 but goals from Mario Mandzukica and Nikica Jelavic as well as a Shay Given own-goal were enough for Croatia to claim the points.

The consensus before the match was that Ireland needed to make a strong start if they were to get anything from the game, so things looked bleak when their opponents took the lead within three minutes.

Mandzukic's header from Darijo Srna's deflected cut back appeared to wrong-foot Shay Given and was allowed to loop into the bottom corner of the net.

For a team that had kept 11 clean sheets from 14 games prior to this tournament and is set up to contain the opposition, Ireland could have been forgiven for being rattled.

But their response was impressive with Kevin Doyle competing well up front to win a series of free-kicks. It was from one such opportunity that Giovanni Trapattoni's men levelled it up before the 20 minute mark.

Aiden McGeady whipped the ball in from the left and Sean St Ledger succeeded in eluding Vedran Corluka at the far post to nod home via his own shoulder.

Thereafter Ireland continue to surrender possession with Glenn Whelan and Keith Andrews playing extraordinarily deep in midfield, seemingly happy to invite Luka Modric on to them.

It was working until just before half-time. Stephen Ward horribly miskicked an attempted clearance after a ricochet on the edge of the box, only managing to skew the ball to Jelavic who lofted it over Given.

And any hopes that Ireland could use the interval to regroup were gone when Mandzukic's header came back off the post only to bounce back off Given and into the net to put Croatia 3-1 up.

Trapattoni made changes by introducing Jonathan Walters, Simon Cox and Shane Long but there was little in the way of invention and, for all the Irish efforts, Slaven Bilic's side were able to see the game out.