

Euro2012: Italy hexed? Hasn't beaten Croatia since 1942

Thursday, 14 June 2012

Italy coach Cesare Prandelli has been warning for months that his team's toughest match of the European Championship is the one against Croatia.

First because Croatia is an unpredictable opponent that has always created trouble for Italy. And second because the Azzurri always seems to struggle in the second match at major tournaments.

Looking back in the record books, it's hard to argue with Prandelli entering Thursday's game in Poznan.

Italy hasn't beaten its Mediterranean neighbour in their five meetings since Croatia declared independence from the former Yugoslavia in 1991, and the Azzurri are also winless in their second match at their last five major tournaments.

What's more is that Croatia leads Group C after opening with an impressive 3-1 win over Ireland. Italy also was praised after drawing 1-1 with defending champion Spain.

"It's going to be the decisive match of the group," Prandelli said. "I've been saying for a while that Croatia is the most dangerous squad because it's the most unpredictable one. They change the way they play all the time, sometimes even from one half to another."

Croatia is also ranked four spots above Italy in the FIFA rankings — No. 8 vs. No. 12 — but that doesn't mean much to Croatia coach Slaven Bilic.

"For me Italy is — they're not better than Spain, right — but you can't analyze them, they play with more options," Bilic said. "You know how Spain are going to play but Italy are so unpredictable. They can pass the ball. They can play the short balls. They can play through the middle. They can play counterattack, with long ball from (Andrea) Pirlo to the strikers. They can play down the flanks. They are for me one of the biggest favourites in this tournament."

In their last official meeting, Croatia beat Italy 2-1 in their second group match at the 2002 World Cup — a game marked by questionable refereeing decisions. Croatia also beat the Azzurri twice in qualifying for Euro 1996, plus in two friendlies, the last coming in 2006.

Italy's only win over Croatia was a 4-0 friendly victory way back in 1942.

Bilic is expected to maintain an offence-minded approach led by strikers Mario Mandzukic and Nikica Jelavic, who accounted for all three goals against Ireland.

Italy faces a big question in attack, after Antonio Di Natale scored immediately after replacing Mario Balotelli in the second half against Spain.

Prandelli could keep Balotelli paired with Antonio Cassano, or start Di Natale instead.

"When we decide how to face (Croatia), then we'll decide which players to use," the coach said.

Prandelli also indicated that he could abandon the new three-man defence he employed for the first time against Spain, and return to a more traditional four-man backline — which could allow Daniele De Rossi to return to his more natural position in midfield.

"We need to do well at reading the matches before our opponents," Prandelli said. "The most important thing is to have a balanced squad."