

WC Qualification: Belgium and Croatia share spoils

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Belgium was held to 1-1 by visiting Croatia in World Cup qualifying on Tuesday.

Both teams started aggressively, looking to continue their campaigns with a second straight win.

Ivan Perisic put the visitors ahead in the sixth minute, capitalizing on a defensive mistake by captain Vincent Kompany who failed to clear a cross from Mario Mandzukic.

Roared on by a capacity crowd of nearly 50,000, the Belgians reasserted themselves, controlling possession and dropping in dangerous crosses. The equalizer finally came moments before halftime, when Gillaume Gillet volleyed in a loose ball from the edge of the area.

In the second half, Belgium continued to dominate. Their best opportunity came in the 51st when Christian Benteke's close-range shot was deflected from the goal line by Josip Simunic.

After years of futility on the international stage, Belgium hopes to rise again as in the 1980s when it reached the final of the 1980 European Championship and the semifinals of the 1986 World Cup. This is based in large part on the fact that 10 members of the young Belgian side are tied to English Premier League clubs.

Still, Croatia - the top seed in the group - is seen as the favorite to win the qualifying stage based its good performance in this year's European Championship. Croatia was ranked ninth in the world, while Belgium was 40th.

"We played well, created opportunities ... and deserved to win," Belgium coach Marc Wilmot said.

His Croatia counterpart, Igor Stimac, acknowledged the Belgians had the initiative throughout much of the match, but said this was because Croatia was not playing at full strength.

"It will be a very different story in the return match," Stimac said.