

SLOVENIA CLOSE TO PLAYOFFS

LJUBLJANA: Slovenia edged closer to a Euro 2016 playoff berth after a 1-1 home draw with Lithuania after two penalties in a Group E match held up for several minutes in the second-half by partial flood-light failure on Friday.

The result, with Slovenia captain Valter Birsa and Lithuania's Arvydas Novikovas each scoring from the spot, left the Slovenians third in the section on 13 points from nine games, three ahead of Estonia and Lithuania. If all three sides are level on points after Monday's final round of games, Slovenia will finish highest with the best head-to-head record.

If Slovenia and Estonia finish tied on 13 points, the race will go down to overall goal difference in the group as both sides have beaten each other 1-0 at home. Apart from being strong favourites to get a result away to San Marino, the Slovenians also have a vastly superior goal difference of plus five to Estonia's minus four in the group.

Estonia entertain Switzerland in their final match while Lithuania are at home to England. The draw in Ljubljana's

Stozice stadium also meant that the Swiss, 7-0 winners over San Marino, joined England, who beat Estonia 2-0, in next year's tournament in France.

Slovenia dominated the opening period and, having missed several chances, they took the lead on the stroke of half-time when Birsa converted a penalty.

Dutch referee Bjorn Kuipers awarded the spot kick after a vicious Jasmin Kurtic shot struck Marius Zaliukas on the arm and Birsa made no mistake, sending Emilijus Zubas the wrong way.

The Slovenians came close to doubling their advantage three times before some of the floodlights went out and seemingly turned around the two teams' fortunes.

Kuipers decided the match should continue and Lithuania capitalised after Slovenia defender Branko Ilic clumsily handled a teasing cross from the right in the closing stages.

Novikovas drilled the penalty into the top right corner and the Lithuanians then held off a fierce Slovenian onslaught in a frantic finish to claim a point. — Reuters

Preview

GERMANY SEEK GEORGIA WIN TO SEAL EURO BERTH

LEIPZIG: Under-fire Germany want to finish their qualifying campaign with a win over Georgia today to secure qualification to Euro 2016 and bounce back from their shock defeat to Ireland.

The world champions remain top of Group D despite suffering a 1-0 defeat to the Irish on Dublin, which kept Martin O'Neill's side in contention to qualify directly.

Germany need only a draw at home to minnows Georgia to ensure their ticket to France next year and even if they lost, only a draw between Poland and Ireland in Warsaw would condemn them to a play-off spot. A draw in Dublin would have been enough for Joachim Loew's side but substitute Shane Long made sure Irish eyes were smiling with the winning second-half goal after outpacing Mats Hummels and Jerome Boateng before beating Manuel Neuer in the Germany goal on Thursday.

The top two sides go through from the group, but Germany, on 19 points are just one ahead of Poland and Ireland. Finishing third in the group could put Germany in the unthinkable position of needing to win a two-legged play-off to reach Euro 2016.

But Loew is more concerned with simply bouncing back from a rare and surprising defeat by returning to winning ways. "The situation is clear, but we have things in our own hands and we want to win against Georgia to qualify directly," said Loew.

Loew will also have to do without a couple of key components from his World Cup winning team as forward Mario Goetze is definitely out with a hamstring tear while captain Bastian Schweinsteiger is doubtful after injuring a hamstring in the warm-up in Dublin.

"Mario will not be there for sure. We'll have to wait to see how Schweinsteiger is, but his chances are very small," said Loew. Georgia are second from bottom with just

three wins in their nine matches and Germany have won all four meetings between the teams.

Germany have not lost in 21 home qualifiers since a 3-0 defeat by the Czech Republic in October 2007, including 17 wins and four draws.

In contrast, Georgia have won just one of their last 23 competitive away matches and their single victory was a 3-0 win against minnows Gibraltar.

Georgia, coached by former Eintracht Frankfurt player Kakhaber Tskhadadze, will be without injured playmaker Giorgi Chanturia, who plays for Duisburg in Germany's second division, but the visitors will be looking to follow Ireland's example.

"There is no bigger stage for our boys than a game against the world champions," said former Hertha Berlin defender Levan Kobashvili, who is now president of the Georgian FA. "This is a dream."

But a third defeat in their Euro qualifying campaign would be a nightmare for Germany, having already lost to Poland and now the Irish, on their rocky road to the European championships in France.

Loew described the Dublin defeat as "unexpected" and "unnecessary." "We were superior, we were dominant, but we didn't do anything with it. It was one of the most unnecessary defeats we have suffered in recent years," he said.

This is not the first time Germany have failed to hit the target in front of goal since winning the World Cup and Loew says they will fix that against Georgia.

"The final passes were not arriving in the penalty area against Ireland and that is something which we must improve," said Loew. "We lacked some decent finishing, then we made one mistake, opened the door for them and Ireland took their chance. "But in terms of fighting spirit, I can't fault my team." — AFP



LOGRONO: Spain's David Silva (left) is tackled Luxembourg's Lars Gerson, during their Euro 2016 qualifying soccer match Group C between Spain and Luxembourg. —AFP

SPAIN STILL STRUGGLING TO REVIVE GOLDEN ERA

BARCELONA: Although reigning champions Spain have qualified for Euro 2016 there still remains plenty of work to be done if they are to match the heights they attained in their golden spell before their failure at the Brazil World Cup.

A routine 4-0 victory over Luxembourg on Friday rubber-stamped their passage to France next year having won eight of their nine qualifying matches in Group C.

Still they have been made to work hard and have not been able to ease to victory against inferior sides on paper. Against Luxembourg again they got the goals in the end but it was a long way from the dominant 'tiki-taka' football when they swept aside opponents with quick passing.

Tellingly, they have struggled in friendlies against stronger sides and have lost to France,

Germany and the Netherlands since the World Cup. "We have picked up a lot of points (in qualifying) but it has not been easy," coach Vicente Del Bosque told reporters. "We have had some difficult moments."

They will go to the tournament having won the European Championship in 2008 and 2012, along with the 2010 World Cup, but Del Bosque has had to rebuild the side following the poor display in Brazil.

Their inability to get out of the group stage led to several of the older faces like Xavi and Xabi Alonso making way for new blood.

While they are spoilt for choice in midfield, they lack options in attack where they have never been able to replace the goals from David Villa and Fernando Torres in their pomp.

Fernando Llorente, Alvaro Negredo and Roberto Soldado are among players who have

been tried out, and Diego Costa has also had only moderate success. The favorites now to lead the line appear to be Alvaro Morata and Paco Alcacer.

Morata's strong form for Juventus pushed him ahead of Alcacer and he looked lively against an albeit weak Luxembourg defence but went off injured after half an hour. It opened the door for Alcacer, who has not had a regular place in the Valencia team this season, and he took full advantage with two goals.

Defensively also Spain have little cover for regular centre halves Sergio Ramos and Gerard Pique. Inigo Martinez's star has been on the wane at Real Sociedad and the inexperienced Marc Bartra of Barcelona and Real Madrid's Nacho Fernandez are the other options. — Reuters



SKOPJE: Ukraine's Andriy Yarmolenko (right) is challenged by Macedonia's Kire Ristevski during their Group C Euro 2016 qualifying soccer match at the Philip II stadium. —AP

UKRAINE KEEP EURO HOPES ALIVE

SKOPJE: Ukraine kept alive their hopes of qualifying for Euro 2016 with a 2-0 victory in Macedonia on Friday that moved them level on points with second place Slovakia in Group C and facing a nerve-jangling finale. Yevhen Seleznyov broke the deadlock from the penalty spot in the second half and substitute Artem Kravets secured a crucial victory when he doubled the lead in the 87th minute to move Ukraine up to 19 points from nine games.

The odds on them finishing above Slovakia and claiming one of the two automatic qualification spots, however, will be stacked against them.

Ukraine host group winners and European champions Spain in their final encounter on Monday, needing to better Slovakia's result away in Luxembourg to finish in the top two.

Ukraine dominated possession but created little going forward before Romanian referee Ovidiu Hategan awarded the visitors a penalty for a handball when Macedonia defender Leonard Zhuta tried to block Andriy Yarmolenko's header at the far post.

Seleznyov fired home from the spot to

open the scoring, before Sevilla winger Yevhen Konoplyanka failed to beat the keeper with a clear-cut chance in the 80th minute.

Kravets came off the bench in the second half to wrap up victory, bursting into the penalty area from the left and slotting the ball into the net between the keeper's legs.

"I am sure we would have broken the deadlock later in the second half even if I had missed the penalty," Seleznyov told broadcasters. "I hope we can achieve a praiseworthy result with Spain." Ukraine will have to do without centre back Yevhen Khacheridi and defensive midfielder Serhiy Sydorchuk for the game against Spain as both players were booked in the first half and will now serve a one-game suspension.

"These are very serious and unwanted losses," Ukraine coach Mykhaylo Fomenko told a news conference. "We tried to explain that emotions should help, not destroy but failed put this idea into their mind. "Both of them knew about a possible suspension before the match so now the players who step in against Spain have an opportunity to prove their worthiness." — Reuters

SWISS BOOK EURO 2016 SPOT

ST GALLEN: Switzerland booked a place at Euro 2016 by thrashing minnows San Marino 7-0 at home on Friday to clinch second place in Group E with a match to spare.

The Swiss, who scored six second-half goals, have 18 points from their nine matches and are five points clear of third-placed Slovenia, whose own faint hopes of automatic qualification were dashed in a 1-1 draw at home to Lithuania.

Switzerland, who will finish behind group winners England, play their final match of the campaign in Estonia tomorrow.

Slovenia, who conceded a 79th-minute equaliser against Lithuania in Ljubljana, can now only qualify via the play-offs.

The Swiss were initially made to work harder than they might have expected against San Marino after taking the lead when Michael Lang volleyed past Aldo Simoncini from close range after 17 min-

utes. They had to wait until 10 minutes into the second half to extend their advantage, however, when Gokhan Inler fired home from the penalty spot following a handball by Davide Cesarini.

Admir Mehmedi steered into an empty net when Simoncini diverted a Fabian Schaer shot into the forward's path to make it 3-0 in the 65th.

Johan Djourou added a fourth from another penalty on 72 minutes after Schaer was brought down inside the box, before Pajtim Kasami made it 5-0 on 75 minutes with a powerful finish from just inside the box following a cut back from Francois Moubandje.

Breel Embolo converted the third penalty of the night to further extend the lead five minutes later and substitute Eren Derdiyok completed the emphatic win on 89 minutes when Simoncini failed to deal with his close-range header. — Reuters



SWITZERLAND: Swiss Gokhan Inler (right) fights for the ball with San Marino's Mattia Stefanelli during the Euro 2016 qualifying Group E soccer match. —AP



Matches on TV
(Local Timings)

EURO QUALIFIERS 2016

Finland v Northern Ireland	19:00
Abu Dhabi Sport	
Armenia v Albania	19:00
Abu Dhabi Sport	
Serbia v Portugal	19:00
Abu Dhabi Sport	
Faroe Islands v Romania	19:00
Abu Dhabi Sport	
Greece v Hungary	19:00
Abu Dhabi Sport	
Poland v Ireland	21:45
Abu Dhabi Sport	
Germany v Georgia	21:45
Abu Dhabi Sport	
Gibraltar v Scotland	21:45
Abu Dhabi Sport	