

France sunk as Italy grab lifeline

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World champions Italy qualified for the UEFA EURO 2008™; quarter-finals in impressive fashion on Tuesday as they defeated France 2-0 at the Letzigrund Stadion and Romania lost by the same scoreline to the Netherlands.

Pirlo penalty

Romania had begun the evening second in Group C and would have progressed regardless of events in Zurich had they beaten the already-qualified Dutch. But their reverse opened the door to the Azzurri who clinically grabbed the opportunity, inflicting another painful defeat on France and condemning the FIFA World Cup finalists to last place in the section. The game's turning point arrived in the 24th minute when, after fouling Luca Toni, Eric Abidal was sent off and Andrea Pirlo converted the resulting penalty. Daniele De Rossi's second-half strike added gloss to a wonderful evening for Italy, dampened only by the yellow cards for Pirlo and Gennaro Gattuso which mean they will miss the quarter-final against Spain on 22 June in Vienna.

Ribéry injury

France almost handed Italy an ideal start when Toni pounced on Abidal's slip, only to shoot narrowly wide. Having started slowly in each of their first two matches, Les Bleus were keen to seize an early grip and Franck Ribéry twice fired efforts wide before, to the dismay of the France fans, the winger injured his left leg in the tenth minute and was carried off. Samir Nasri was sent on, yet France's focus appeared to waver and Claude Makelele immediately needed to clear a Christian Panucci header off the line.

Red card

Italy looked menacing every time they broke and after Simone Perrotta had narrowly failed to collect Pirlo's pass, France finally cracked. Abidal fouled Toni as he bore down on goal, prompting the referee to point to the spot and brandish a red card. Pirlo made no mistake, expertly dispatching the ball into the top left-hand corner. The double blow left France reeling and despite defender Jean-Alain Boumsong replacing the unfortunate Nasri, the two-time champions were in disarray. Toni might have scored three in as many minutes before the half-hour, but after skilfully back-heeling Antonio Cassano's cross fractionally past the post, the FC Bayern München forward twice missed the target with only Grégory Coupet to beat.

Gross free-kick

Thierry Henry had a chance to raise French spirits in the 34th minute but after racing on to Jérémy Toulalan's slick pass, the FC Barcelona forward directed a cross-shot past the post. With the strikers struggling to find their range, Fabio Grosso looked to show them the way just before half-time, curling a brilliant free-kick towards the bottom corner only for his Olympique Lyonnais team-mate Coupet to push it on to the post.

Almighty roar

Despite playing with ten men, France began the second period in the ascendancy, with Karim Benzema volleying over before Henry had two shots comfortably saved by Gianluigi Buffon. News that the Netherlands had opened the scoring against Romania prompted an almighty roar from the Azzurri faithful and the celebrating continued when De Rossi scored on 62 minutes. The AS Roma midfielder's 30-metre free-kick took a cruel deflection off Henry, wrong-footing Coupet and effectively ending the French challenge. Although Benzema subsequently saw his swerving shot brilliantly tipped wide by Buffon in the 74th minute, there was no way back for France, who finished with just one point after losing back-to-back matches for the first time in 15 years. (uefa.com)