

## Italy Starts Euro 2016 with a Bang

Bryan Solomon (June 15, 2016)



Italy won a decisive match on Monday, June 13th against Belgium, winning 2-0. Although pegged as weak and doubtful to make a deep run in the tournament, Italy gave a great performance in their first match and knocked off the heavy favorite of their group.

The Azzurri start off the 2016 Euro Cup with a tremendous 2-0 win against star-studded Belgium. Written off by Italian media as one of the worst teams in Italian history, the aging roster showed that they can still play with Europe's best. Emanuele Giaccherini first got Italy on the scoreboard scoring after 32 minutes of action. After receiving a perfect pass from Leonardo Bonucci with one foot, Giaccherini slipped it past Belgium goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois with the other foot.

Italy almost scored again four minutes later after Graziano Pelle edged an open header just wide of the net. Italy entered halftime with a small one goal lead and resumed their great play during the second half.

Despite a few close calls, Belgium began the second half with strong attacks and what should have been an equalizing goal from Romelu Lukaku, Italy's composure, strong defensive play, and balanced counterattacks finally broke down Belgium as Pelle scored off of an assist from Candreva during stoppage time.

"We did really well to prepare this game so well and prove all the critics wrong, because the critics were all against us," said Italy coach Antonio Conte. "But this is the beauty of football. You get the chance to prove people wrong, if you have the determination and will to work like we have."

Defenders Leonardo Bonucci, Andrea Barzagli, and Giorgio Chiellini proved to be forces on the back line for the Italian squad. Their experience and skill allowed them to fight off Belgium's dangerous second half attacks and keep Belgium from getting on the scoreboard. With Monday's game, the trio now have a total of 200 appearances for Italy.

"Our defense was fantastic and I think we have the best defense at the Euros," Emanuele Giaccherini said. "We all had to help each other and to try, when we had the ball, to hurt them."

Conte used Matteo Darmian and Antonio Candreva as wing backs, pushing them so far forward and wide that they spent most of the game level with strikers Eder and Pelle. Their pressure kept Belgium's full-backs back and spread out. Conte said earlier this week that he wanted his wide players to be "spitting blood" after an hour on the pitch, and with the way Darmian and Candreva worked out there they may have lived up to Conte's request.

With the injuries to Marco Verratti and Claudio Marchisio and the absences of stars like Marco Balotelli, Andrea Pirlo, and Riccardo Montolivo, Italy was left with little start power on their roster. But with a well-balanced team effort and the superb play of Leonardo Bonucci, Italy was able to assert their dominance against a team full of star power.

It is important to note that Italy, a weakened team due to a few notable injuries, beat another heavily weakened team. Belgium is without four defenders, Nicolas Lombaerts, Bjorn Engels, Dedryck Boyata, and most importantly, Vincent Kompany. Although Belgium is full of great players at the midfield and attack, their defense is considerably weaker without these four men.

Italy's next game is against Sweden on Friday, June 17 in Toulouse (3 p.m. CET/9 a.m. ET, ESPN). Sweden is expected to finish at the bottom of Group E, but a team with Zlatan Ibrahimovic should never be taken lightly. Sweden has won only one game in their last six matches, making Italy the heavy favorite in Friday's matchup.

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