

Croatia Braves Through ICC European Division 3 Undefeated

Zagreb/Brussels – In another astonishing week of cricket, Croatia's national team swept all before them to win the ICC European Division 3 Championship held in Belgium between August 19th and 26th this year, and thereby gain the chance of promotion to division 2 next year. Due to restructuring of the European divisions, Croatia will now have to play the lowest placed side from Division 2 (Israel) in order to move into that division and hence closer to the possibility of even joining the World Cricket League ?!

Last week in Belgium contained almost everything necessary to make for an exciting Championship – heart-stopping finishes, brilliant team displays and also some notable individual performances. The only ingredient missing was some reasonable weather for cricket – but that was not sufficient to dampen the mood of Croatia's cricketers.

The Croatian team arrived first in Belgium and put the two days before the start of the tournament to good use by getting in a couple of good practice sessions. It was evident from these that the team was ready to put forward its best foot and that a good result was a strong possibility. Achieving this good result was always going to be a difficult task as Croatia had been drawn in the same group as the no. 1 and 2 seeds – Spain and Portugal respectively – and only the top two teams in each group would move ahead to the semi-finals whilst the remaining two would have to fight to stave off relegation back to Division 4.

A dress-rehearsal for the Final

The opening day of the tournament brought together the two strongest teams on paper, and although we didn't know it then, the eventual finalists Spain and Croatia. Apart from being the number 1 seeds in the Championship, Spain held a 2-0 lead in the previous encounters between the two countries – although it must be said that both of these wins had been achieved in the last two balls of the respective matches. And with Croatia in good form, and in great spirits, it was clear that another close match was on the cards at the Antwerp Indians oval.

Croatian captain John Vujnovich won the toss and elected to bat. This decision appeared to be the right one as Croatia got off to a flying start – reaching 0-34 after just 4 overs. The Spaniards then started to get their bowling together and put the clamps on the free scoring Vujnovich brothers to bring the run-rate down to 4.0 at the first drinks break. After the drinks break, Paul Vujnovich kept the run-rate ticking with some great shots (including a massive six which went a long, long way out of the ground) despite some excellent bowling from spin-twins Syed and ur Rehman.



In great touch. Paul Vujnovich sweeps away for 4 runs.

When hard-hitting Chris Pivac came to the crease with the score on 95 after losing our first wicket, the prospect of a 230+ score looked a distinct possibility. This prospect took a turn for the worse when Paul Vujnovich was dismissed for 71 and soon afterwards Pivac for 21 to make the score 3-152. The middle order then failed to take advantage of the solid platform provided by the first three batsmen, but a sound 24 n.o. by Jeff Gržinić and a quick-fire 19 n.o. by Phil Šiljeg (off just 14 deliveries – including a huge six to the longest part of the ground) brought the total to 6-198 off the allotted 50 overs.

Although the total seemed quite good, it was obvious from the onset that Croatia would need to bowl out the Spanish team to win the match, and dismiss their danger man Shahfiz Ali early in the piece. 'Big' Phil Šiljeg gave Croatia the started they wanted by bowling Ali for just 19 to make it 1-29. Spain steadied however and started to make the run chase look relatively easy by keeping up with the required run-rate and not losing too many wickets. With the score on 3-135, with plenty of overs and wickets in hand Spain must have thought they had this one in the bag. But inspired bowling changes by Croatian captain Vujnovich paid immediate dividends the score went quickly to 5-142. With the momentum now with Croatia, the bowling and fielding lifted another notch and all of a sudden it was 8-171 with J. Vujnovich and Gržinić ripping through the middle order. Šiljeg then came back on for his final spell and sealed the result by dismissing Abbas for 21 to make it 9-177. After the loss of Abbas, it was evident that Spain would not have the fire-power necessary to score the 22 runs required for victory and they fell 16 runs short in the 49th over.

Was this an omen? We had finally beaten Spain – who in the past had always chased down good scores achieved by us.

Bring on the second seeded team – we're ready for anyone!

As could be expected, the victory over Spain had a tremendous impact on confidence and morale – something that could only be dampened by bad weather. Or could it?

As we approached Gent where the match against Portugal was scheduled to be played the low clouds opened up and the rain started to fall steadily. The officials however did not give up hope for getting some play in during the day, even though this seemed to be impossible. Nevertheless, after the rain had stopped and countless pitch and field inspections by the umpires it was decided that a 10 over-a-side match could be played within the allowed playing time. Hence, a new form of cricket was born - 10-10. But, at least it was new to both teams, so the ones with the cooler heads should be expected to win – and we knew that we were stronger in that department.

Croatia won the toss and sent Portugal in to bat – and they came out with all guns blazing. This approach didn't seem like the right one – especially when trying it against the likes of Croatia's opening squadron. In a 10-10 match each bowler is limited to just 2 overs, but this didn't prevent the likes of Šiljeg (2-13), C. Pivac (1-6), J. Vujnovich (2-10) and P. Vujnovich (2-11) from ripping into the opposition line-up, and Portugal managed just 8-58 in the allotted 10 overs.

In difficult weather conditions this was never going to be a walk-over, and scoring at almost 6 per over from the onset was still a tricky task, and after losing Pivac in the first over it was looking even trickier. But Croatia's dynamic duo, the Vujnovich brothers calmly went about the task and accumulated the runs steadily. With an over to go, Croatia still needed 6 runs to win. The run-out of Paul Vujnovich with only 3 balls to go added extra pressure and brought Phil Šiljeg to crease. A big-hit over midwicket for two by Šiljeg brought the winning runs on the second last ball.

Apart from now having a record of 2-0, we were now starting to win the close matches – a sign of the team's maturity, and perhaps another sign of things to come.

Just too strong

The third group match was at the same ground in Gent against the newly-promoted Finish team. Even though they were a young developing side, they had beaten Portugal in their previous match and were not to be taken too lightly.

Croatia again won the toss and elected to bat. The opening pair, in the brothers Vujnovich again provided a solid start with a 57 run opening partnership. This brought Pivac to the crease and he was determined to make amends for his early dismissal in the previous match. Despite a very slow outfield Pivac made a quick 47 (off just 55 balls) to bring the score to a healthy 2-128. But when J. Vujnovich was stumped for 47 to make the score 3-132 things took a turn for the worse. The middle order again failed to make an impression and the next 6 wickets fell for just 23 runs. With the score on 9-155 Split's Mate Marović came in for his first innings for Croatia. The difficult conditions and pressure of the situation clearly didn't faze big Mate who played two brilliant straight drives for 6 and 4 to finish with 12 runs and help the score along to 167 off 48.1 overs.

The relatively inexperienced Finish batting line-up was not strong enough to stand up to Croatia's fearsome bowling line-up (of the last 15 internationals played by Croatia the opposition has been bowled out 13 times). The pick of the bowlers were Phil Šiljeg 3-13 off 8 overs and Chris Pivac 3-12 off just 6.3 overs. The game also provided some of the newcomers to the team, Lenko Marinković (Vis) and Mate Jukić (Split) to bowl their first overs for Croatia. Finland was finally dismissed for 87, giving Croatia a comfortable 80 run victory – but at the cost of injuries to Pero Kaštelan and Jasen Butković. Thankfully we had Antony Sumich on tour with us and he played a great role in helping the bruised and sore players make each match as fit as possible. And in all fairness, I think that his prayers (Antony is currently studying at a seminary in Nebraska to become a priest!) did more for our cause than any of the other omens and signs mentioned here.

Simply Awesome

The semi-final match against Malta was due to be played on the Thursday, but due to poor weather and ground conditions at Mechelen, it was postponed until Friday.

Friday morning finally brought fine, sunny weather to Belgium. Surely, this was another sign that the sun was going to shine on the Croatian line-up.

And shine it did. Malta won the toss and elected to bat, and from the very start rued that decision. Pivac broke through early and Malta were 2-9 before they'd had a chance to settle into the match. Excellent fielding and bowling, the best the team had shown during the week, meant that the wickets continued to tumble – and only one Maltese batsman (Naudi – 12) managed to reach double figures. In fact the score in the inning was reached by Mr. Extras who was responsible for 15 of Malta's 66 runs. Šiljeg finished with 3-14 off 10 overs, J. Vujnovich took 3-17 off his 10 overs and Chris Pivac took 2-16 in his 9 overs.



A huge appeal for lbw by a fierce looking Phil Šiljeg is turned down. Brave umpiring!

Croatia's batsmen made easy work of reaching the target of 67 in 20.2 overs to win the match, losing only the wicket of J. Vujnovich for 26. The not out batsmen were P. Vujnovich with 28 and C. Pivac with 6.

The emphatic win was important psychologically and also physically, as the other semi-final between Spain and the Isle of Man went down to the wire – so both teams would be emotionally and physically drained. In the end, scores were tied – but Spain won by virtue of having lost less wickets in the match.

Unstoppable

Saturday morning started off dull and gloomy, and it looked as though the mist over the fields of Waterloo, where the venue of the final was situated (Royal Brussels Cricket Club), would never lift. The start of the match was delayed by an hour due to the poor conditions, but play finally got under way around 12.30pm.

Croatia again won the toss and despite the slow outfield, elected to bat. And again the Vujnovich brothers provided a solid start with an opening stand of 80, with Paul contributing 40 of these. The second wicket partnership between J. Vujnovich and Pivac was another fruitful one, adding a further 89 runs before Pivac (41) skied one to Syed off his own bowling. In a true captain's knock, John Vujnovich was finally dismissed for 88 in the penultimate over, with the score on 214. Croatia added another 6 runs in the final over to finish with 5-220.



A text-book cover-drive for 4 runs by Croatian captain John Vujnovich

Chasing down this total was never going to be an easy task for Spain, and it would require a smart innings from some of their key players to overhaul the Croatian total. As expected, Shahfiz Ali came out with the intention to reach the score by the half-way mark, and in a flurry of shots in the air – many of which were frustratingly landing often between two or three Croatian fielders – made his 50 in no time, and putting Spain comfortably ahead of the required run-rate. And it must be said that he was aided in this by a terrible fielding effort from the Croatian side.

As the overs went by and Spain reached 1-118 things were looking desperate. Captain Vujnovich brought back fast opening bowler Šiljeg in an effort to stem the tide but even this was not enough. As a last-gasp effort, Jeff Gržinić

was brought on to bowl and this move paid immediate dividends as he trapped Ali (67) playing across the line, directly in front of the wickets, and the umpire had no hesitation in pointing his finger towards the heavens.

Suddenly things looked a little brighter for Croatia, as run-rate slowed and the mist lifted to reveal a perfectly clear blue sky (surprisingly rare in Belgium considering that it was mid-summer). Was this another sign?

Pivac came back into the attack and had the Spanish captain (Howe) caught brilliantly for 8 at long-off by Mate Jukić, and then the dangerous Valeinte caught on the boundary at deep backward square leg by Paul Vujnovich for 39. All of a sudden it was 4-164 and Croatian hopes were beginning to grow. Spain's hopes rested with Afzal, who scored 42 at a run-a-ball. When he was brilliantly caught by skipper John Vujnovich driving low and hard to mid-off Spain found themselves in a spot of bother with the score on 7-208 – but surely had enough momentum to score the remaining 13 runs required for victory with almost 4 overs remaining. Reid was then caught behind superbly by wicketkeeper Tony Govorko (whose wicket-keeping was a valuable contribution to team all week) off Šiljeg's final over (and the 48th over of the match) to make it 8-208. Gržinić then bowled Spain's no. 8 batsman for 3 in the penultimate over leaving the game hanging in the balance. At 9-214, it was a simple calculation for the last over – Spain needed 7 runs to win and Croatia needed to take one wicket to do likewise.

The experienced Paul Vujnovich came on cold to bowl the last over, and when the first ball was swatted away for 2 runs over mid-wicket there were only five runs required for victory. In an attempt to do the same thing with the next delivery, Spain's Lupson managed only to sky it directly over the position where vice-captain Craig Sinovich was standing. The balls swirled in the air for what seemed like an eternity and then to the cries of 'yes' it became apparent that he had held on to the catch and Spain were all out for 216 – leaving Croatia the victors by 4 runs with 4 balls to spare.



Croatian players and fans celebrate the breath-taking victory

It was a fitting final, going right down to the wire, and the eruption of emotion that followed from small but loyal and vocal group of Croatian supporters and officials summed up the magnitude of what had just happened. Croatia has won another championship with a 5-0 record (to repeat the effort from Slovenia 3 years earlier when they won the Division 4 championship) and earned the right to move to Division 2. A massive achievement – but then, no less could be expected from a group of people with such massive hearts!



The Champions

Back L to R: Sunil Bhatt, Lenko Marinković, Chris Pivac, Tony Govorko, Mate Jukić, Philip Šiljeg, Jeff Gržinić, Jasen Butković, Michael Gržinić (Coach), Zdenko Leko (Manager)

Front L to R: Siniša Vodopija, Pero Kaštelan, Craig Sinovich, John Vujnovich, Paul Vujnovich, Mate Marović

Croatia now has an enviable record of 12 victories in its last 15 matches! And to add icing to the cake, John Vujnovich was awarded the 'Player of the Championship' trophy (his third in six appearances at European Cricket Championships!) having scored 203 runs at an average of 50.75 and taken 10 wickets for 99 runs at an average of 9.9 runs per wicket and a strike rate of 25.2 balls per wicket.

What's next?

Due to restructuring of the European Cricket Divisions, Croatia must now play Israel (the bottom placed side in Division 2) in a play-off for promotion to Division 2. The match is due to be played in Israel (or a neutral territory) within the next couple of months. You will be able to catch more details here at the Croatian Herald!

And thanks go to.....

Since all of us go to great personal expense and great personal sacrifice to achieve these fantastic results for Croatia it is important to say thanks to all those who made the week memorable and indeed possible:

- our players and officials for making tremendous personal sacrifices to be there for the entire week,
- David Lambasa who provided the team with their 'baggy reds' as well as caps for all of our supporters,
- our supporters – the Pivac family from Perth, Vincent Sinovich and Ronnie Car from South Africa, who travelled around Belgium with us, and our other supporters who were not present physically with us, but who constantly followed the results and sent through a barrage of well wishes and congratulations at each step of the journey,
- our supporter and good luck charm - Frane Vujnovich from Auckland (Croatia has never lost any of the 10 matches at which Frane has been present in the last three years),
- our team physiotherapist and mentor – Antony Sumich,
- our team photographer Helen Leko, who captured many of the moments from the week on disk (including the pictures in this article),
- the Croatian Olympic Committee and our other sponsors.

With such a great bunch of people involved in Croatian cricket, we can only expect the great results to keep coming.

Article by: Zdenko Leko