



# REUTERS

New Zealand hold champions Italy to shock draw

By Gideon Long

NELSPRUIT, South Africa, June 20 (Reuters) - New Zealand produced one of the great shocks of the World Cup on Sunday by holding Italy to a 1-1 draw, leaving the defending champions with a fight on their hands to make it through to the knock-out stages.

The All Whites took the lead in the seventh minute though Shane Smeltz and then withstood a barrage of Italian pressure for most of the rest of the match.

Marcello Lippi's men found a way through in the 29th minute, Vincenzo Iaquinta stroking home an equalizer from the penalty spot after Tommy Smith was judged to have pulled down Daniele de Rossi in the box.

But despite wave after wave of attack, the Italians failed to grab a winner and have just two points to show from their opening two Group F matches. They face Slovakia in their final group match and need a win to guarantee a place in the last 16.

New Zealand also have two points and have a chance of making it out of the group if they can take something from their final match against Paraguay.

"We knew we'd be up against it tonight but we showed great resilience and I'm well pleased," New Zealand coach Ricki Herbert said. "We're going to be bloody hard to beat I'll tell you that."

This was by far the greatest result in New Zealand's modest footballing history. Their one previous appearance in their World Cup finals ended in three defeats.

For the Italians, this marks an embarrassingly set-back. Despite their constant pressure they still look a shadow of the side that lifted the World Cup four years ago.

New Zealand got off to a sensational start, scoring with their first attack of the match.

Simon Elliot hoisted a long free kick in from the left toward the back post. It floated over the heads of the Italian defenders and bounced off Fabio Cannavaro's knee, leaving Smeltz free to prod the ball home from inside the six-yard box.

Italian coach Lippi noted it was the second time in the tournament his team had conceded a goal from a long free kick.

The Italians immediately went on the offensive and laid siege to the All Whites goal for the rest of the half.

On 22 minutes, Zambrotta floated a right foot shot just over the corner of post and crossbar, and five minutes later Riccardo Montolivo saw his low right foot drive cannon off the base of Mark Paston's right hand post and run harmlessly across the face of goal.

A goal seemed inevitable and two minutes late it came. Smith tugged at De Rossi's shirt inside the penalty area, the Italian made a theatrical dive to ground and Guatamalan referee Carlos Batres pointed to the spot.

The decision looked harsh - it was the sort of challenge that Italian defenders have turned into an art form down the years - but even so, Smith should have known better. His name went into the referee's book and Iaquinta's spot kick into the net.

"There's wasn't a goal, it was a ridiculous call," All Whites captain Ryan Nelsen said afterwards.

Lippi made two changes at halftime, bringing on Mauro Camoranesi on the right and Antonio Di Natale in the center. Both looked sharp, but neither could crack the stubborn New Zealand defence.

Montolivo and Camoranesi forced fine saves from Kiwi goalkeeper Paston with long range efforts in the last 20 minutes of the match while at the other

end, second half substitute Chris Wood almost won it for New Zealand, squeezing past Cannavaro and firing a low shot across goal and just wide of Federico Marchetti's left hand post.

The final whistle brought joyous celebrations from around a thousand Kiwi fans in the Mbombela stadium in Nelspruit.

"Certainly it's not the will of the lads that is missing but a bit of fluidity. We hit the post and had chances but we created little really," Italian coach Lippi said.

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