

WORLD CUP ARGENTINA 1978 / Second Round, Group A Buenos
Aires, Estadio Monumental, 21 June 1978

HOLLAND - ITALY

2-1

TWO SHOTS FROM DISTANCE ELIMINATE ITALY

In Group A of the second round, Holland had scrambled the revelation Austria 5-1 in the first match, securing an unparalleled goal difference. Italy had also beaten Austria but only 1-0 (goal by 'Pablito' Rossi), showing the first signs of tiredness after drawing 0-0 with West Germany despite dominating the match. The Netherlands had had to chase Germany twice, finishing 2-2 to guarantee them access to the final with two results out of three in the last match against Italy. While West Germany and Austria were mathematically eliminated, Italy only needed to win against the Dutch, who, compared to four years earlier, were no longer a team of extraterrestrials. Crujff's absence had made itself felt more than expected from a technical and unpredictability point of view, leading coach Happel to prudently administer energy by resorting to a less flexible tactical module, compared to the one adopted in Germany by Michels, which envisaged rare forward projections of defenders and midfielders and more retention of the ball. All in all, despite the Dutch team's goleada against the Austrians, for the Azzurri the match seemed to be well within reach. After all, Enzo Bearzot's Italy had shown the best game of the entire World Cup, surprising the international press with their fast restarts and attacking play, as well as the evolution of the classic catenaccio, with a free agent who participated in the construction of the game like Gaetano Scirea. Bearzot left Antognoni and Bellugi on the bench and lined up Zaccarelli and Cuccureddu as starters, Happel played pretence by declaring that Neeskens and Rensenbrink were injured, then fielded them both, with Neeskens in the curious role of stopper in marking Paolo Rossi. Italy obviously took off at full speed, a cross by the very active Zaccarelli from the right and a header by Pablito who anticipated the exit of the goalkeeper Schrijvers but put over the crossbar by a whisker. On 10 minutes Causio stole the ball from the bewildered Neeskens on the three-quarter line and ran towards the goal, but instead of shooting he attempted to assist Paolo Rossi and the goalkeeper was able to grab the ball, anticipating the Azzurri striker. Immediately afterwards Willy Van de Kerkhof unleashed one of his intercontinental throws that caught Rensenbrink in the area all alone, forgotten by Cuccureddu, the Dutch winger dived head first to hit the ball in plastic style and, fortunately for Zoff, the ball went a metre above the crossbar of the posts. The Netherlands were very wait-and-see, so the Azzurri broke the deadlock and began to put on a show: in the 18th minute, an amazing counter-attack maneuvered with touches at speed from Scirea to Tardelli, then to Zaccarelli who changed sides with a throw to the left, the ball to Bettenga, Benetti inserted himself in the box, a touch on Causio who didn't get there by a whisker to touch the ball into the net. Immediately afterwards, another fantastic combination on the volley: Cabrini, Bettenga, Benetti, Rossi and again Bettenga who found himself alone in front of the goalkeeper, on him Brandts recovered in a slide, who unluckily hit the ball towards the goal and also ran over his goalkeeper, giving away the own goal and causing a bad injury to Schrijvers, forced to leave the field replaced by the expert Jongbloed. Italy thus found itself in the lead, with the result it needed to reach the deserved final, once again leaving everyone open-mouthed for the ease of dribbling, the rapidity and naturalness with which it managed to get its forwards in a position to score. In the 23rd minute there could even be a double but the newly-entered Jongbloed had the reflexes of a cat to deflect Rossi's close-range shot, served in by Cabrini. The Netherlands seemed to be completely down, not even the most banal passes succeeded, the Azzurri perhaps thought

that they had already reached the goal and they dropped the pace, trying to manage the game and their energy. In the 33rd minute Cuccureddu badly lost the ball in midfield and there was a beautiful Dutch combination Neeskens-Rensenbrink, with Zoff beaten and the post saving, but the referee had interrupted for offside on the last touch for Rensenbrink. The Dutch frustration was all evident in Haan's hysterical rage in the 35th minute, after a clash with Zaccarelli he kicked him violently on the shin, with the referee taking no action. The Netherlands did not seem able to trouble the Azzurri defence, splendidly led by Scirea, and on the counter-attack Italy could close the game out, as in the second half with Bettega's tower for Paolo Rossi's header: a great save by Jongbloed but Pablito, according to the referee, was offside. Bearzot was already thinking about the final, he took Baron Causio off the field (a sacrilege) replacing him with Claudio Sala, thinking of resting him and covering more of the midfield with the Turin player. What Enzo Bearzot did not imagine was that the Netherlands that took the field in the second half was a transformed team: Happel the fox moved Neeskens up front and Jansen in defence and the team started to play great. The Dutch coach would declare at the end of the match: 'I knew the Italians were tired, I let them vent in the first half trying to limit the deficit, and then punish them in the second'. After three minutes, Zoff already had to work overtime to deflect over the crossbar a header from the revived Neeskens, launched by Krol. On the following corner, Neeskens himself collided with Zoff, who threw the ball into the side foul for help. It was customary for the Dutch to give the ball back to the Azzurri, but instead Poortvliet threw the ball into the box, there was a back-and-forth battle and Brandts, from outside the box, found the shot of his life and the ball went just wide of the post. So much for fairplay. After the equalizer, the great Italy seen in the first half melted like snow in the sun, lacking the lucidity to return to attack Holland, lacking the accelerations of Causio while Sala failed to enter the game, but what was missing most was breath, physical strength. It may also have been affected by having played to death the third game of the first round against Argentina, when Italy was already qualified, instead of resting the starters and playing the reserves. The Netherlands mastered the field and managed to trap the Azzurri with continuous movements and good pressing, but the defence did not suffer. Until, in the 75th minute, there was a formidable shot from 30 metres by Haan that hit the inside post and went into the net with Zoff slightly late. Poor Dino, at the age of 37, would be accused of advanced blindness after conceding two more goals from distance (this time more within his grasp) in the final for third place lost to Brazil in much the same way as this match. Bearzot threw Ciccio Graziani into the fray in the final for a three-pronged Italy (a late move, perhaps it should have been tried immediately after the draw) without achieving anything other than making Holland close in on defence to control the result. It remained a great Italy, which collapsed at the most beautiful moment because it was exhausted after a tournament played at its best, but it must be said that it was also and only because of two lucky shots from distance. Actually, thanks to this extraordinary experience, it had already started to win the World Cup four years later.

HOLLAND: Schrijvers 6 (*from 21' Jongbloed 6.5*), Poortvliet 6.5, Brandts 6, Krol 6.5, Jansen 6.5, Neeskens 7, Rensenbrink 6.5, Haan 7, Rep 5.5 (*from 65' Van Kraaij 6.5*), R. Van de Kerkhof 6.5, W. Van de Kerkhof 7. All's Ernst Happel.

ITALY: Zoff 6, Gentile 6, Cabrini 7, Benetti 7 (*from 77' Graziani sv*), Cuccureddu 5, Scirea 7, Tardelli 7, Zaccarelli 7, Rossi 7, Causio 6.5 (*from 46' Sala 5*), Bettega 7. All. Enzo Bearzot. Referee: Martinez (SPA) 5.5

On 18' AUT. Brandts 0-1.

At 50' Brandts 1-1; at 75' Haan 2-1.