

WORLD CUP GERMANY 2006 / First Round
Stuttgart, Gottlieb Daimler Stadion, 22 June 2006

AUSTRALIA - CROATIA

2-2

GUUS HIDDINK'S NEW MIRACLE

Australia, land of kangaroos and koalas. Land of rugby, surfing and Australian football. But not land of football. Apart from a fleeting sortie in 1974, the Socceroos had repeatedly failed to qualify for the World Cup over the next 30 years, until the coming of Saint Guus Hiddink. The Dutch coach, a great protagonist of the fourth place at the 2002 World Cup with South Korea, had arrived on the bench of the Australian national team on 22 July 2005, sharing the role with the coach of PSV Eindhoven. In addition to winning the Dutch championship for the third time in a row, he led Australia to the intercontinental double-header for World Cup qualification against favourite Uruguay: 1-0 for the South Americans in Montevideo and 1-0 for the Australians in Sydney, and after extra time it was penalty kicks that qualified Australia for the World Cup in Germany exactly 32 years after their last appearance. The group with Brazil, Croatia and Japan did not leave much hope but Hiddink created a real team, solid and physical but with some first-class individuals such as the giant centre-forward Viduka of Middlesbrough, the acrobatic attacking midfielder Cahill of Everton and above all Harry Kewell, The Jewell of Liverpool, European champion the previous year. In the first match against Japan, the Australians paid a little emotion for their debut, they went down 1-0 but then in the final minutes they turned the game around and won 3-1 with a double from Cahill and a goal from Aloisi. In the second against Ronaldo's Brazil, Ronaldinho and Kaka managed for a time to keep it nil-nil, only to lose honourably 2-0. By virtue of the draw between Croatia and Japan, in the last match against Croatia the Australians only need a draw to pass the first round for the first time in its history. Croatia were clear favourites and after two minutes had already taken the lead with a fantastic free kick by Srna, who put the ball into the crossbar. But Australia reacted immediately, shortly afterwards Viduka received in the area with his back to goal, tried to turn with his mammoth size but was belted and held back by Simunic, he let himself go a little and the referee whistled nothing, but the penalty would have been there. Australia were playing well, high tempo and quick passing, Croatia were dropping back and the first dangers arrived with conclusions from outside the box intercepted by the Croatian defenders. In the 29th minute Kewell received from Cahill and kicked from outside the box, Croatian goalkeeper Pletikosa repelled and a terrified Simic put in a corner: it was Australian domination and Croatia were surprisingly on the ropes. In the 37th minute, on a cross by Emerton from the right, Tomas raised his arm in an inexplicable way, touching the ball as if he were playing volleyball, and the referee awarded a penalty for this blatant ingenuity. From the penalty spot, defender Moore dispatched Pletikosa and gave Australia the equalizer. In the second half Croatia returned to attack, but the Australians did not disdain to counter-attack the opponent, keeping the rhythm high and the game vibrant, but in the 11th minute the Australian goalkeeper Kalac, who had already risked an incredible duck in the first half, made a clumsy mistake, losing the ball on a far from irresistible shot by Kovac. The ball rolled mockingly into the net, shattering Australia's dreams of glory. The Socceroos didn't lose heart and resumed their game, urged on by Hiddink's shouts: in the 20th minute, The Jewell delighted the crowd with a brilliant touch that went over the defence and put Viduka alone in the box, but Pletikosa made a miracle save, even though the linesman had raised his flag signalling a non-existent offside. Australia's pressure was mounting: Cahill took a long throw-in, Viduka was the buoy in the box, controlling and discharging

Kewell's shot from the that was a sure shot from the that was a penalty spot, but Pletikosa's reflex was that of a that was a good one. On the development of the corner kick Bresciano's new-entry centre, Kewell touches it and Pletikosa blocks the ball with a swipe of his kidneys towards goal, while being swept away by Cahill and Aloisi. Moments of suspense, the ball seemed to go in but did not cross the line, and the referee removed the chestnuts from the fire by whistling a breakthrough foul by the Australian attackers. In the 74th minute the Croatian defender Tomas incredibly repeated the intervention with his arm raised that had already given the opponents a penalty in the first half, taking the ball away from Kennedy's head, an even more evident and sensational foul than that of the first half, but the referee did not see it and awarded the corner to Australia. In the 78th minute Bresciano put in a left-footed cross from the right, surprising the Croatian defence, Aloisi's header backwards unmarked The Jewell, left-footed control and right-footed shot beating Pletikosa at the far post: it was the deserved 2-2 amid the delirium of the Australian crowd. Kewell would have been slightly offside but in those days fortunately there was no Var system to ruin the sport. Croatia made a desperate final assault led by a young Modric, who inexplicably came on with 15 minutes to go, but in the 84th minute Simic fouled Cahill on the Australian restart, picked up his second yellow card and was sent off: the Croatians were struggling to find a goal with a man down. But shortly afterwards Simunic made a perfect throw that caught Tudor alone in the opponent's box, on Emerson's recovery the Juve midfielder shot weakly past Kalac but found Neill to clear on the line. It was a fiery finish and Emerton was also sent off for a double caution after a handball, restoring numeric parity on the pitch. Croatia attacked with all their players desperate to score, the Australian counter-attack restarted, Viduka defended the ball and gave it to Kennedy who was tackled in (Australian?) football style by Simunic, who also got his second caution. But incredibly despite the second yellow card the referee 'forgot' to draw the red card and the Croatian defender remains on the pitch! The English referee Poll was totally in a daze, first he gave a throw-in to Australia, which on the development went into the net with Aloisi, then he cancelled the goal for a dubious foul by Kennedy, who touched the ball with his shoulder and not with his arm; finally, for protests, again for the throw-in given to Australia, he drew the third yellow card on Simunic, who was finally sent off! The only case in World Cup history of an expulsion with 3 yellow cards. It is over: Australia is in the round of 16, Hiddink has performed a new miracle. He played against Italy and managed to hold Lippi's Azzurri in check for 95 minutes, until Francesco Totti scored a penalty conceded in the last minute, sending Italy ahead and the unrepeatable Australian national team home.

AUSTRALIA: Kalac 4, Emerton 6.5, Moore 7, Neill 7, Chipperfield 6.5 (*from 75' Kennedy sv*), Sterjovski 5.5 (*from 71' Bresciano 7*), Culina 6.5, Grella 6.5 (*from 63' Aloisi 6.5*), Viduka 6.5, Cahill 6.5, Kewell 7.5. Coach Guus Hiddink.

CROATIA: Pletikosa 7, Srna 6.5, Simic 5, Tomas 4 (*from 84' Klasnic sv*), Simunic 5, Babic 5.5, Tudor 5, N.Kovac 6, Prso 5, Kranjcar 5 (*from 65' Leko 5.5*), Olic 5 (*from 74' Modric sv*).

Manager: Zlatko Kranjcar.

Referee: Poll (ING) 4

At 2' Srna 0-1; at 38' Moore (Rig.) 1-1.

On 56' N.Kovac 1-2; on 78' Kewell 2-2.

Sent off 84' Simic, 89' Emerton, 93' Simunic.