

CRICKET: ECC DIVISION THREE CHAMPIONSHIPS IN BELGIUM

Croatia defeats Spain in heart-stomping final

BRUSSELS – The Croatian national cricket team took out the European Cricket Championships Division Three title in Belgium last Saturday, following a heart-stopping four run victory over tournament favourites Spain with just balls to spare in the final.

It was a heart-breaking outcome for the Spanish, who had appeared to be cruising to victory with ten overs to go, and the astonishment and relief with which the Croatian players and their handful of supporters greeted the fall of the final wicket was evidence of how close they had come to letting the prize slip from their grasp.

On a damp and misty morning at the Royal Brussels Cricket Ground near Waterloo, Croatian captain John Vujnovich won the toss and elected to bat. It was a brave decision given the dampness of the outfield, which undoubtedly restricted the flow of runs, but in the end the difficulty experienced throughout the week by sides chasing significant totals again came into play, as Spain collapsed from 164 for three to 216 all out in the space of fifteen dramatic overs.

The New Zealand based Vujnovich and his brother Paul had again given Croatia a great start with an 80-run opening partnership, before Paul on 40 was adjudged to have given a sharp leg-side catch to Spanish keeper Shafique Ali off the bowling of Pedro Venus Valiente.

John then continued in company with Perth born Chris Pivac, and they added another 89 in twenty overs. The Spanish attack was hampered by the condition of the ball, but the



two Vujnoviches and Pivac gave a fine display of disciplined batting to take their side through to 169 for two with eight overs left.

John Vujnovich continued almost to the end, finally holing out to mid-off in the penultimate over of the innings. His 88 came off 148 balls, containing six fours and one six. The Spaniards managed to prevent a wholesale slaughter in the final overs, but even so 51 came off the last eight as Croatia reached 220 for five.

Spain began their reply purposefully, evidently determined to chase down this relatively imposing total, and opener Ali played a characteristically belligerent innings, hitting 67 in 96 balls as the Spanish reached 118 for one by the 27th over.

The Croatian seamers were unable to reproduce the consistency they had displayed in demolishing Malta in the semi-final on Friday, and the fielding began to show signs of panic as they were unable to stem the flow of runs. Venus Valiente made a valuable 39 for Spain, and it was not until Pivac came back into the attack that they began to fight back.

He had Spanish captain Graeme Howe well caught by Mate Jukić in the deep, and 29 runs later accounted for Venus Valiente as well. David Climent Yarwood gave him his third wicket, trying an over-ambitious

drive, and Spain were 175 for five.

Faran Afzal, however, continued to score freely, and with four overs left the Spanish needed 15 to win with four wickets in hand. It took a piece of individual brilliance from John Vujnovich to turn the game as, fielding at extra cover, he held onto a full-blooded drive from Afzal off Phil Šiljeg's bowling. Afzal had made 42 at a run a ball, and with his departure the Croatians clearly believed that they could still win a game which a few minutes earlier had seemed to be lost.

The Western Australian based Šiljeg struck again three balls later, and Spain were 208 for eight with three overs left. Another WA based Croat, Jeff Gržinić, dismissed Phil Beal with the total on 211, and two balls into the final over, with five still needed, last man Sam Lupson skied a Paul Vujnovich delivery. Craig Sinovich was under it, completed the catch, and the Croatian celebrations began.

John Vujnovich, unsurprisingly, was declared the Player of the Tournament.

By taking the title, Croatia meanwhile, has earned the right to play off against Israel for a place in next season's Division 2 competition. This match is scheduled to take place within the next couple of months.

WESTERN KNIGHTS UNLUCKY AGAINST STIRLING LIONS

PERTH – The Western Knights were unlucky in the latest round of the WA Premier League, losing 1-0 at Nash Field to the Stirling Lions. Solid defensive work by Cormac Dawson and Jon Mathers for the Knights ensured there would be few chances on goal for the visitors, but eventually the home side did concede what proved to be the winner.

Andrija Jukić featured prominently for the Knights and his neat one-two with Aaron Bahadori allowed the young attacker to fire a powerful shot which the Stirling keeper palmed away. Jukić had another opportunity that went begging, but with the clock ticking down, Knights coach Ronnie Campbell brought teenagers Andrew Jennings, Anthony Skorich and Ivan Gavranich off the bench to spark new life in his side.

But for some poor finishing by Jennings, the switch would've paid off; unfortunately the visitors were in no mood to concede and held on for a valuable win.

In Round 19 action this weekend, the sixth placed Knights are away to second placed Perth.

IAN LOWER LEAGUES

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