

Cricket: Close loss to Croatia relegates national team

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John Vujnovich hit a half century and took three wickets as Croatia bowled out Israel and relegated the national team to Division 3 of the European Championship in a nail-biter at the Hadar Yosef Athletics Stadium in Tel Aviv on Sunday. The Croats set their hosts a target of 153 to win the limited-overs match. Israel came within a whisker of topping that score, but it was not to be. Needing seven runs off the last six balls, the team had to rely on a tail-end pairing of Yaniv Razpurkar and Steven Shein, who could not handle the pace of Croatia's powerful Phillip Siljeg.

Razpurkar had hit a smashing straight-drive for six in the penultimate over to reignite Israeli hopes for a victory. But when he tried to slog a full toss from the thundering Croat with four balls left, he looked behind to see his off-stump knocked askew and his bails splayed across the turf.

"Our bowling was superb, our fielding was good, but our batting was atrocious - it let us down dismally," Israel captain Stanley Perlman said after the match.

Vujnovich, who captained Croatia, was delighted with his team's performance.

"It is an amazing result to win Division 3," he said. "To be in Division 2 after our cricket association has only been in existence for seven years is a great achievement."

Richard Holsworth, the International Cricket Council representative in attendance said he was impressed by both the quality of play and the standard of the pitch.

“I think the standard is very high,” he said. “Both teams have bowled and fielded exceptionally well and made life difficult for the batsmen. The pitch played very well. The grass outfield is in good condition, although the running track [which takes up the outfield of the pitch] is a bit of a problem.”

Croatia won the toss and chose to bat first.

Some sloppy fielding early in the game had looked like it might cost Israel. But a cautious start behind the bat from Vujnovich and his brother Paul, and tight, composed bowling from Sanjay Gupta and Isaac Massil, meant that after 35 overs Croatia were struggling on 71-4 and looked unlikely to set a challenging target.

Massil bowled a good length throughout the morning session, ending up on 27 for 2. Although Gupta never took a wicket, he only gave away 14 runs during his nine overs at the crease.

But then Croatia began to increase the intensity. John Vujnovich hit two identical fours past square leg as Croatia hit 17 runs in the 39th off paceman Isaac Talkir.

Talkir continued to give runs away at a dangerous rate. Siljeg slogged him all over the park, taking 27 runs off 20 balls, and hoisted Croatia to a respectable lunchtime score.

Although the target was attainable, the hosts didn't make it easy for themselves. Shalom Ruven fell for a duck and Dovi Myers followed soon after. When Gupta was caught leg-before-wicket, Israel was on 7 for 3 and in the middle of a very early batting collapse.

Israel regrouped and slowly inched its way nearer to the target. Herschel Gutman (44) proved to be the side's bedrock as he worked his way through a series of partners, including Massil (29) and Danny Hotz (14).

It looked like the wicket of Gutman could prove crucial, and so it was. In the 40th he drove through midwicket, but it was caught excellently.

The tailenders put up a spirited fight, as they scrambled for singles. But they were playing with fire and always looked like getting burned. As the team ran out of time, they could no longer control the flames.