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ON SOCCER

Something's wrong with Italy's men's soccer team, and other observations from final World Cup qualifiers

By Frank Dell'Apa Globe Correspondent, Updated April 1, 2026, 8:42 a.m.



Italy players react during their penalty shootout against Bosnia and Herzegovina on Tuesday. Italy lost. ARMIN DURGUT/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Before being [eliminated from men's World Cup contention](#) by Bosnia and Herzegovina on Tuesday, Italian players were caught on camera expressing relief they didn't have to face Wales in a playoff.

"I don't know why Italia would be afraid of Wales or Bosnia," Bosnian forward Edin Dzeko said. "If they are afraid of playing against Wales, there's something wrong."

Dzeko got that right. Three successive World Cup misses signal a shocking slide for a country that counts four titles, plus a European Championship in 2022.

As for what's wrong, coach Gennaro Gattuso is accepting no excuses.

"I don't want to talk about referees, I don't want to talk about anything like that," said Gattuso, a midfielder on the 2006 championship team. "It's difficult to take, but we have to accept it and it's a crushing blow. After not scoring the second goal, we were in trouble. We had chances to go ahead, 2-0, and those are the incidents that condemned us."

Italy's self-destructive tendency sped along its demise. It started while protecting a 1-0 lead, when Alessandro Bastoni was issued a 41st-minute red card, following an ill-advised Gianluigi Donnarumma goal kick that led to an Amar Memić breakaway. The Azzurri found a breakaway of their own in the 60th minute, but Moise Kean misfired. That failure to up the lead proved costly, once Haris Tabaković converted a controversial 79th-minute equalizer.

There are plenty of problems with Italian *calcio*, from a bloated, 20-team Serie A to an excessive amount of foreigners displacing domestic players. But in Gattuso's playing days, the Azzurri overcame similar obstacles and usually made big plays when it counted.

Other observations from Tuesday's final day of World Cup qualifying:

- Six countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Czechia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Sweden, Türkiye) advanced on Tuesday, [Iraq becoming the 48th team to qualify](#) for the event, which opens on June 11 in Mexico City. Meanwhile, questions were raised about the inconsistencies and length of qualifying, which started in 2023, and extended until late Tuesday night. Italy, for example, is out, despite a 7-2-1 record. Sweden, though, is in with a 2-4-2 record.
- Iraq took a 2-1 victory over Bolivia in the Monterrey suburb of Guadalupe, Mexico, concluding a 21-game odyssey that started in Basra on Nov. 16, 2023. The Iraqis, who open Group I play against Norway in Foxborough on June 16, last competed in New England during the 1984 Olympic Games at Harvard Stadium, where they tied Canada (1-1) and lost to Cameroon (1-0). Bolivia proved resourceful, hanging on to the end while compiling a 7-11-2 record from Sept. 7, 2023, through Tuesday night.
- Former Revolution winger Esmir Bajraktarević clinched [Bosnia's penalty-kicks win](#), sending his shot inside the right post past a diving Donnarumma. Bajraktarević, 21, moved from Appleton, Wis., to join the Revolution Academy in 2021, before moving to PSV Eindhoven on a \$6 million transfer in 2024. Two years ago, he appeared for the United States before being recruited by Bosnia, his parents' homeland. Bajraktarević was not among the penalty-kick takers when Bosnia eliminated Wales last week, and the last time he attempted a penalty, he misfired for PSV Eindhoven in a KNVB Beker (Dutch Cup) game last month.
- The Swedes failed to win during the first phase of qualifying (0-4-2), then took two victories in six days to advance to their 12th World Cup finals. Sweden benefited from success in the UEFA Nations League, a tournament instituted in 2018 which guaranteed a spot in the playoffs. Arsenal striker Viktor Gyökeres led the way with four goals in two matches, including the decider in a 3-2 victory over Poland on Tuesday. Sweden joins the Netherlands, Japan, and Tunisia in Group F.
- The Czechs, four minutes away from elimination before Ladislav Krejčí equalized in a 2-2 tie with Ireland last week, slipped through on penalty kicks against Denmark in Prague. Czechia, in its first

appearance since competing as the Czech Republic in 2006 in Germany, confronts South Korea in a Group A clash on Opening Day in the Jalisco suburb of Zapopan, Mexico.

- Turkiye, making its third finals appearance, filled out Group D, along with Australia, Paraguay, and the United States, as Kerem Akturkoglu's 53rd-minute goal made the difference in a 1-0 victory over Kosovo in Pristina. Vincenzo Montella became the third Italian coach to advance, following Fabio Cannavaro (Uzbekistan) and Carlo Ancelotti (Brazil).
- Burnley defender Axel Tuanzebe's extra-time goal advanced Congo to the finals for the first time since 1974, when it entered as Zaire. The Leopards, who eliminated Cameroon and Nigeria in a previous playoff, will open against Portugal in Group K in Houston on June 17.
- Some of the late comers might have to scramble to set up accommodations. Should Iraq choose the Boston area, only one FIFA-designated practice site could be available — the Revolution Training Center. During the 1984 Olympics, Iraq stayed and trained at Harvard University.
- France, which will train at Bentley University during the World Cup, plans to negotiate with FIFA to adjust travel plans. Coach Didier Deschamps said Les Bleus were caught in traffic on the way to [a 2-1 win over Brazil at Gillette Stadium](#), and also faced excessive delays in airports. Deschamps plans to arrive two days early for games against Senegal in East Rutherford, N.J., on June 16, and Iraq in Philadelphia on June 22. Doubtless, Deschamps will set his alarm early for the France-Norway match in Foxborough at 3 p.m. on Friday, June 26.

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