Was Zidane honest or well-informed? How UEFA barely avoided a serious scandal

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Was Zidane honest or well-informed?
How UEFA barely avoided a serious scandal

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𝔐ögliche Gefechte sind der Folgen wegen als wirkliche zu betrachten

(Carl von Clausewitz: *Vom Kriege*)

Abstract

UEFA Euro 1996 qualifying is known to violate strategy-proofness. It is proved that a team could be better off by exerting a lower effort: it might be optimal to concede some goals in order to achieve a better position among runners-up, and hence avoid a hazardous play-off. We show that it is not only an irrelevant scenario with a marginal probability since France had an incentive to kick two own goals on its last match against Israel.

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1 Introduction

Suppose you are *Zinédine Zidane*,[1] a player of the French national association football team. You are playing against Israel in Group 1 of the UEFA Euro 1996 qualifying tournament, and your teammate Lizarazu has scored a goal recently, in the 89th minute of the match. What should you do? It will be revealed that the optimal course of action is to kick two goals – in your own net!

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[1] Zinédine Yazid Zidane is a French retired attacking midfielder and the current manager of Real Madrid. He was named the best European footballer of the past 50 years in the UEFA Golden Jubilee Poll in 2004 and is regarded as one of the greatest players of all time.

According to our knowledge, there were two football matches where a team deliberately kicked an own goal because of some strange incentives. Perhaps the most famous example is Barbados vs. Grenada (1994 Caribbean Cup qualification), played on January 27, 1994 (Kendall and Lenten, 2017, Section 3.9.4). In the qualifiers, each match must have a winner to be decided in a sudden-death 30 minutes extra time with a golden goal counting as two. Barbados needed to win by two goals to progress, otherwise Grenada would advance. Barbados had a 2-1 lead in the 87th minute, when the players realized that by scoring an own goal, they have much more time remains to win by two goals. After choosing this radical strategy, they succeeded in preserving the 2-2 result. Finally, Barbados have managed to score a goal in extra time and qualified. FIFA did not penalize the Barbados Federation since they behaved according to the prevailing rules. Nevertheless, this controversial rule was never used again.

The second case is Thailand vs. Indonesia in the 1998 Tiger Cup on 31 August 1998 (Kendall and Lenten, 2017, Section 3.9.2). Both teams were already qualified for the semi-finals such that the group-winner would face hosting Vietnam, while the runner-up would play against Singapore, perceived to be the easier opponent, and would avoid moving the team's training base. The score was 2-2 after 90 minutes implying Indonesia would be the group-winner. However, in extra time an Indonesian defender deliberately scored an own goal despite the Thai's attempts to stop him doing so. FIFA fined both teams 40, 000 for '*violating the spirit of the game*', furthermore, the Indonesian defender was banned from domestic football for one year and international football for life.

Besides a careful analysis of historical events, we think it is also important to consider *possible* scandals since rules may have a low probability to go awry, but the potential costs can be enormous. Dagaev and Sonin (2013), Dagaev and Sonin (2017) and Csató (2017) have shown such hypothetical examples. Csató (2017) proved by a theoretical model that UEFA Euro 1996 qualifying was incentive incompatible, in other words, a team might be strictly better off by playing a draw (or even losing) instead of winning. In the following, we will present that it would have happened in the match France vs. Israel, played on 15 November 1995. Since the manipulation by France might have hurt a third team, it would be a more serious case than Barbados vs. Grenada.

2 The potential scandal

Qualifying for UEFA Euro 1996 divided 47 teams into seven groups of six and one group of five teams. All teams played a home-and-away round-robin tournament in their groups. The group winners along with the six best runners-up qualified automatically, while the two worst runners-up were involved in a play-off.

This was the first time when the qualification for the European Football Championship awarded three points (instead of two) for a win. Tie-breaking rules in the groups were as follows:

1. greater number of points obtained in all group matches (three points for a win, one for a draw and no points for a defeat);

2. greater number of points obtained in the matches played between the teams concerned;

3. superior goal difference in the matches played between the teams concerned;

4. greater number of goals scored away from home in the matches played between the teams concerned.

Table 1: UEFA Euro 1996 qualification – Group 1: Final standing before the last match France vs. Israel

Pos	Team	W	D	L	GF	GA	GD	**Pts**
1	Romania	6	3	1	18	9	9	**21**
2	France	4	5	0	20	2	18	**17**
3	Slovakia	4	2	4	14	18	-4	**14**
4	Poland	3	4	3	14	12	2	**13**
5	Israel	3	3	3	13	11	2	**12**
6	Azerbaijan	0	1	9	2	29	-27	**1**

Pos = Position; W = Won; D = Drown; L = Loss; GF = Goals for; GA = Goals against; GD = Goal difference; Pts = Points. Romania, Slovakia, Poland and Azerbaijan have played 10, France and Israel 9 matches.

Table 2: UEFA Euro 1996 qualification – Group 1: Match results

Position	Team	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Romania	—	1-3	3-2	2-1	2-1	3-0
2	France	0-0	—	4-0	1-1	?	10-0
3	Slovakia	0-2	0-0	—	4-1	1-0	4-1
4	Poland	0-0	0-0	5-0	—	4-3	1-0
5	Israel	1-1	0-0	2-2	2-1	—	2-0
6	Azerbaijan	1-4	0-2	0-1	0-0	0-2	—

Position is given without the match France vs. Israel
Home team is in the row, away team (represented by its position) is in the column

Further tie-breaking rules in the groups are not relevant for us.

The runners-up were placed in a table to rank them such that only matches played against the first, third and fourth teams of the groups were regarded. Tie-breaking rules among the second-placed teams were as follows:

1. greater number of points obtained in the group matches considered;

2. superior goal difference in the group matches considered;

3. greater number of goals scored in the group matches considered.

Further tie-breaking rules are not relevant for us.

Table 1 shows the standing of Group 1 before the last match of France vs. Israel, played on 15 November 1995 at 20:45 according to Central European Time in Caen, France. The other two matches of Group 1 in the last matchday were started at 16:00 and 17:30 on the same day, so Table 1 can be assumed as common knowledge at the beginning of this particular match. France led by a score of 2-0 at the 89th minute. What were the options of the team?

France is guaranteed to be the second (it would have at least 17 and at most 20 points), so players should aim to achieve a better position among the runners-up, where matches played against the fifth (Poland or Israel) and the sixth (Azerbaijan) teams are discarded. If France defeats Israel, the latter would get the fifth place in Group 1, therefore France has 10 points, 8 goals for and 2 goals against (a goal difference of +6) among the second-placed teams, according to Table 2.

However, if France concedes two goals, Israel would be the fourth due to its 13 points and better head-to-head result against Poland (see Table 2): they have 3 points and a goal

difference of zero against each other, but Israel scored 3 goals away, while Poland scored only 1 goal away. Consequently, France would have 10 points, 9 goals for and 3 goals against (a goal difference of +6) among the second-placed teams. Since the two worst runners-up are involved in a play-off for qualification, but the first six directly qualify, it is strictly better to have the same number of points and the same goal difference with more goals scored in the ranking of second-placed teams. Zidane should have kicked two own goals, or have agreed with his teammates to make some mistakes in defence as a draw of 2-2 is also preferred by Israel.

3 Conclusions

The actual result of the match France vs. Israel remained 2-0. Perhaps the players were honest, despite the risk involved in not conceding two goals. Maybe they were well-informed: the difference between the two scenarios was marginal and could not influence whether France was among the top six runners-up qualifying automatically, despite some matches were played later.

Nevertheless, it makes no sense to deny that the shadow of a major outrage floated above UEFA Euro 1996 qualification, identified to be the first incentive incompatible qualifying for UEFA European Championships (Csató, 2017). We hope the presented example is a clear warning for football governing bodies to organize strategy-proof qualifications in the future. They can follow the mechanism suggested by Csató (2017) to guarantee this crucial property.

Acknowledgements

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