

Beat: Sports

Inspired Hart earns sloppy England a point in Slovenia

Football Soccer - Slovenia v England

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USPA NEWS - England were indebted to inspired keeper Joe Hart as they stumbled to a 0-0 draw in Slovenia in World Cup qualifying Group F on Tuesday -- a result which ended their 14-game winning sequence in qualifying matches.

Hart on loan with Torino after falling out of favour at Manchester City, was by far England's most impressive player as he made several fine saves to keep out a vibrant home side.

With captain Wayne Rooney watching from the bench until the 73rd minute after being dropped by interim manager Gareth Southgate, England produced a disjointed display and Slovenia will rue failing to punish the visitors for some slipshod errors.

That was largely down to Hart whose clawing save from Jasmin Kurtic's near-post header shortly after halftime was stunning.

"It was my best game (for England) for a while," Hart said having helped his side move on to seven points at the top of the group with Slovenia on five.

"I was asked to do quite a bit which was down to a few errors from us. But we dug in on an intense night and took a point.

"My body is in pieces, I will struggle to get up tomorrow," added the over-worked stopper who appeared to defy gravity to stop Kurtic's header creeping under the crossbar before landing painfully against the goal frame.

All the pre-match talk was about the decision to drop Rooney, England's all-time record scorer, and play Tottenham Hotspur midfielder Eric Dier in his place.

Dier had a mixed night, having his blushes saved by Hart after 15 minutes when his careless back pass let in Roman Bezjak. Seconds later Kurtic beat Hart but his right-foot curler bounced back off the post.

Rooney was eventually introduced late on, replacing Dele Alli in midfield. Taking the captain's armband from Jordan Henderson he galvanised England somewhat and went close to scoring with a shot that flashed past Jan Oblak's post.

Oblak did well to keep out Rooney's Manchester United team mate Jesse Lingard's powerful drive late on but victory would have been flattering for an England side who were fortunate to avoid their first defeat in a qualifier for 32 matches.

"We owe our goalkeeper really for getting a point," Southgate, in charge for his second game after replacing sacked Sam Allardyce, said. "He was fantastic.

"The overall objective is to qualify so long term that could be an important point. Everyone can see we could be better but their chances came from our mistakes or set-pieces."

England failed to learn their lesson from a sloppy start to the first half after the restart.

First Josip Illicic jinked through England's flat-footed defence but failed to locate two unmarked team mates in the area. After Hart's heroics to keep out Kurtic, Illicic then flashed a left-foot snap shot just wide.

England continued to live dangerously and Henderson was guilty of a wayward pass to Gary Cahill that was intercepted by Illicic who brought another fine save by Hart.

Danny Rose lashed one shot wide at the other end but England were relieved to walk off without losing too much ground, even if the jury remains out on Southgate's job prospects.

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