

Italy European champion: Was the coin tossed for penalties decisive?

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Those who followed the recent European football championship were sure to witness the exciting hits of penalty kicks after gruesome regular-time draws. In addition to the final game Italy vs England, other games in the tournament were decided by penalties.

Italians vs Spaniards, Spaniards vs Swiss and French vs Swiss were also games decided by penalty shoot-out. Perhaps those who followed did not realize that in all the Euro games subject to a penalty shoot-out, the team that started the penalty shoot-out took its opponent down.

The winner was always the team that took the first penalty. Many will argue that the draw is just a pro forma to decide who takes the first penalty, but the numbers say the opposite: at the time of the coin toss, one of the teams already has, in theory, some advantage.

It is in this much-seen movement of tossing the coin in the air — and apparently trivial — that one begins to define who wins the tie by kicking the penalty mark.

Coincidence? Maybe yes, maybe not — but there is data to back up the “maybe no” answer. A 2011 study by the London School of Economics analyzed more than 1,300 penalties in more than 100 tiebreakers and concluded that in 60.5 percent of cases, the winner was the one who had the honor of hitting the first penalty.

The study conducted by J. Apesteguia and I. Palacios-Huerta points out, however, that at the end of each of the five penalty rounds the team that beat first is always more likely to win.

The London School of Economics study points out that the decrease in kick success of the team that beat in second place — which normally, according to the data, is at a disadvantage on the scoreboard — is directly related to the kick-taker's failures and not to an increase in the defenses of the opposing goalkeeper. This is to say that the mental pressure factor of being behind the marker influences the skill of the player who will take the kick, and this disadvantage on the marker began to be drawn further back, at the time of the draw.

The authors of the study listened to many players and 90 percent prefer to take the first penalty kick, precisely because of the mental factor. That decision can be crucial.

In the final Italia vs England, when the referee asked Giorgio Chiellini Heads or Tails, and won the toss, he had a choice and decided to start taking penalty kicks. Domenico Berardi was the first to score and it seems that this decision was decisive for Italy to be champions.

According to the Laws of the Game, the two teams have the same probability of winning and the outcome only depends on the ingenuity of the scorers and the goalkeepers.

UEFA has been studying the matter and has already tested the implementation of the ABBA system.

ABBA is nothing more than the adaptation to football of the system used in tennis tie-breaks, which stipulates the order of the services of the two players

The ABBA system defines that team A hits first and team B can take two consecutive penalties (ABBAABBAAB). This sequence would allow team B to have an advantage on the scoreboard, reducing the odds pointed out in the study by the London School of Economics.

The player who will take the second shot is under greater mental pressure, because if the opponent's first penalty scores a goal, a miss by the next player could mean defeat for his team, especially from the fourth penalty onwards — was that why Bukayo Saka missed his penalty? — hence the interest in ABBA. UEFA has tested this system at the U-20 World Cup and the Community Shield in England and is expected to be adopted in the future.

A question arises : If England had started the penalties shoot-out, would they have won the European championship ? So it pays to keep a close eye on the outcome of the coin toss before a penalty shoot-out. The outcome of the tournament could depend on it.

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