

Dancing in the streets of Serravalle tonight, Matthew

The UEFA Nations League qualifying that took place in October didn't really throw up any results that could be tagged as "eyebrow raising". In fact, the number of draws, especially goal-less ones was probably the stand out fact - of the 20 games played on Sunday 11th October, nine ended all square. But one scoreless draw may not have registered on your radar but for one nation it was a reason to celebrate

When I say nation, I am perhaps stretching the definition as far as I can. San Marino's 0-0 draw with fellow minnows Liechtenstein in Vaduz may not seem newsworthy but for the Microstate, officially called The Most Serene Republic of San Marino it could mark a pivotal moment in their history.

That draw broke a run of 39 consecutive defeats for the team, dating back to another 0-0 draw at home to Estonia in November 2015 (this game in turn broke a run of 61 consecutive defeats), a run that has seen them drop to 210th, and last, in the most recent FIFA World Rankings. A draw, their first away from home since August 2003 (also in Vaduz against Liechtenstein) wasn't enough to see them keep hopes alive of promotion from Nations League D but with one home game left against Gibraltar, confidence will be high that they could push for a win, something San Marino have only done once in their International Match history, once again against Liechtenstein in a friendly back in 2004.

Back in November 2002 I almost witnessed history when I made the trip to Serravalle, the "capital" of San Marino where, by the grace of god, they almost beat Latvia. The word "almost" often comes into play with underdogs, but on that chilly night, with the score at 0-0 in the last minute of normal time, San Marino broke clear of the tiring Latvian defence only for a linesman's flag to deny them the chance to make history. Forty five seconds later a Latvian free-kick from their right hand side was headed into his own net by Carlo Valentini, the cruelest way to end the game for San Marino.

Back in 2002 thrashings were a common result - four consecutive games in the UEFA Euro 2000 qualifying saw them concede 30 goals, whilst in February 2001 Belgium hit double figures against them. However, the formation of the Nations League has meant more regular games against international sides who are at a similar level of development.

The last competition back in 2018 saw them lose all of their games, albeit on a much more competitive basis to Belarus, Moldova and Luxembourg. March 2019 saw them restrict the Scots to just two goals in Serravalle in front of over 4,000 fans. This time around narrow defeats to Gibraltar and Liechtenstein proved more palatable to the football-watching Sammarinese.

For those unaware of San Marino, it is a fully landlocked republic in between Bologna and Pescara. Famous for the San Marino Grand Prix, which was actually held in the Italian town of Imola nearby, the republic has a population of around 34,000. If you consider the demographics, the chance of a male aged between 16 and 35 getting a game for San Marino is pretty high.

Gavin Newsham, author of the book Sportonomics, examined the population statistics in San Marino to determine what exactly those odds could be.

In 2011 the population of the principality was just 31,817, of which 15,343 were male. More importantly, 5,431 men were in the "football playing age" bracket of 16 to 35 years old. Newsham looked at the position of goalkeeper, where an international squad will typically pick three for every international. Using some maths based on the take up of youngsters in our Premier League he deduced that for every 7 footballers in San Marino, one will play at an international level. Factor in the keeper situation and you stand a 1 in 2.4 chance of playing for your country. Alas, before we all start packing our boots, to qualify to play for San Marino, you or your parents have to have been resident there for thirty years.

From @theballisround