

Barasat Kolkata-700129

# STORY OF GENERATIONAL DECAY

## FADING AZZURRIS

- 2006** Champions
- 2010** Exit from group stage
- 2014** Exit from group stage
- 2018** Did not qualify (Eliminated by Sweden)
- 2022** Did not qualify (Eliminated by North Macedonia)
- 2026** Did not qualify (Eliminated by Bosnia and Herzegovina)

Italy are the only former champions to miss three consecutive World Cup tournaments.

In 1994, when the US hosted the World Cup, Italy had the last kick of the tournament, Roberto Baggio missing the penalty that gave Brazil their fourth triumph. In 2026, the World Cup is back in the US, but Italy won't have a kick in the tournament.

Note: Italy won the World Cup four times: 1934, 1938, 1982 and 2006

## WHAT THEY SAID

**The World Cup curse**  
screamed the front page of Italy's main daily **CORRIERE DELLA SERA**

**The third apocalypse**  
a front-page editorial in the **GAZZETTA DELLO SPORT**

**It hurts** **GENNARO GATTUSO** Italy coach

- Inter Milan is the last Italian club to win the Champions League, achieving this in 2010
- Inter played two Champions League finals in last four years. In 2023, they lost to Manchester City, and in 2025, PSG routed them.
- In the last 15 years, Inter have the best record in the Champions League. Teams like AC Milan and Juventus struggled. Atalanta won the Europa League in 2024.

Italy goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma falls on his knees with hands on his head after Bosnia & Herzegovina won Tuesday's 2026 World Cup European qualifier knock-out playoff match at Stadion Bilino Polje in Zenica. (Getty Images)



ANGSHUMAN ROY

Four-time champions Italy lose to Bosnia, fail to earn World Cup finals berth for the third consecutive time

WORLD CUP QUALIFIER	
BOSNIA	1 (4)
ITALY	1 (1)
Bosnia win 4-1 on penalties	

at the same stage by Sweden in 2018 and by North Macedonia in 2022.

The failure to qualify for the 2022 edition was shocking because they had won the European Championships defeating England just eight months earlier. Italy, not being able to qualify even for the 48-team Cup is, however, not shocking anymore. It's more the norm.

Years of lackadaisical planning, a stubborn refusal to blood young players in the Serie A, and an ultra-defensive strategy by most clubs have made the once-popular and widely-followed Serie A and the national team prisoners of their own devices.

There was a time in mid-90s when Serie A was at its peak. Talents like Diego Maradona, Ruud Gullit, Marco van Basten, Frank Rijkaard and Lothar Matthäus were plying their trade in Italy. Clubs like Napoli, AC Milan, Juventus and Inter Milan were followed widely. Add to that home-grown talents like Franco Baresi, Paolo Maldini, Roberto Baggio, Alessandro Del Piero and Fabio Cannavaro, and you had a fantastic league.

However, it's a free fall for the Azzurris, 2006 onwards — something akin to the West Indies in cricket, Pakistan in hockey or Bengal cinema. All three are living in the past, grappling with a tense present and staring at a bleak future.

Now Serie A hardly grabs eyeballs as fiercely competitive Premier League and highly technical La Liga march ahead. As celebrated Italian coach Fabio Capello recently said: "A Lamine Yamal (Barcelona) superstar who is just 18 would not have got a chance to

start so early — Yamal made his first-team Barca debut when he was not even 16 — if he was playing in Italy."

Everything seemed to be rotten in the state of Italy and it was manifested once again at Zenica by Bosnia, who were not intimidated by the legacy of the former champions. Alessandro Bastoni, the Inter Milan defender presently courted by Barca, had no business in going for a late last-man tackle on Amir Memić.

He was shown a red card. With 10 men even before the half-time whistle was blown, Gennaro Gattuso's men were walking on thin ice in front of a hostile Bosnian crowd. Bastoni's ejection had come when the score was Italy 1 Bosnia 0. Moise Kean had given the visitors the lead. Bosnia's equaliser came 11 minutes from time through Haris Tabakovic and in the tie-breakers (Itallans, Pio Esposito and Bryan Cristante, missed their penalties. The hosts made no mistake from the spot.

Italy's faith in a three-man defence is also not paying off. Germany after their disappointing 1994 World Cup exit, started investing more in the youth system and were blessed with a platoon of highly talented youngsters like Thomas Muebler, Sami Khedira, Mesut Özil, Philipp Lahm and Bastian Schweinsteiger. Result? The 2014 World Cup triumph.

Italy on the other hand are caught in a time-warp. There are no new talents on the horizon, and the country which produced attackers like Paolo Rossi, Baggio, Francesco Totti and Del Piero is now bereft of flair and flamboyance.

No out-of-the-box thinking and that mirrors the plight of the national team. Heads will roll after the latest setback but will that bring back the glory days? Very unlikely. The rut is too deep.



Bosnia and Herzegovina players and staff celebrate after qualifying for the World Cup on Tuesday. (Reuters)

## Struggle pains Indian followers

ANGSHUMAN ROY

Calcutta: Italy have a huge following in India, particularly amongst those who were in their teens or youth in the 1980s.

The affair started with Paolo Rossi's hat-trick against Brazil in the 1982 World Cup. Rossi was a hero in India as Italy went on to win the World Cup, defeating West Germany 3-1. Then there was a lull of 24 years even though Italy played a semi-final (1990) and a final (1994) in between.

The 2006 triumph once again catapulted the Italian footballers to stardom in India, a nation which loves to follow international football and gives a cold shoulder to its own national team.

"It's a pity that the World Cup will once again be without Italy," Ratan Chowdhury, who works in a city-based export firm, said. "We fell for Italy from the days of Rossi. Then came Baggio with magical skills. Now it hurts to see Italy struggle," Chowdhury rued.

"That's the way it is," Real Kashmir FC coach and former footballer Ishaq Ahmed said. "I started watching Italy from the 1994 World Cup, which was

also hosted by the US. Baggio is the player we all tried to copy in Srinagar," he said.

"A very sad day for Italy fans. Hopefully, they will regroup and qualify for the 2026 World Cup finals," said former India striker Dipendu Biswas.

"That's the team we all followed from our days in the Tata Football Academy," Biswas added.

Such was Biswas's madness for Italy that he started supporting Chelsea after Italian attacker Gianfranco Zola moved to the Premier League club.

"They have very good players like Sandro Tonali (Newcastle United), Riccardo Calafiori (Arsenal), Gianluigi Donnarumma (Manchester City), Alessandro Bastoni (Inter Milan), but struggling as a team," Biswas said.

"Italy will be missed. That's for sure. They have a rich history, but now fallen on hard times. I remember watching Italia 90 during my Tata Football Academy days. "From those days Italy is part of my system," Kalyan Chaubey, former goalkeeper and present president of the All India Football Federation said.