

# Burning questions from the Matildas' 2-1 loss to Italy at the Women's World Cup

**The Matildas came crashing back to earth in their World Cup opener, slumping to a 2-1 defeat to Italy in Valenciennes.**

In their first game of France 2019, Australia was exposed defensively while it struggled to make the most of its own chances in attack.

**We take** a look at some of the burning questions to come out of the Matildas' first-up loss.

**WHAT'S UP WITH THE MATILDAS DEFENCE?**

**Australia came** into the World Cup with question marks on its defence – valid concerns, given it had shipped eight goals across its previous two games.

**There was** plenty of discussion regarding the decision to play a high line – with former Matilda Heather Garriock particularly scathing of the tactic – which Ante Milicic conceded didn't work out at times.

**The Matildas** got caught out early – and arguably could have been punished more for their turnovers than they were.

**"We have** been working on that (high) line, and we need to have a better understanding when to drop and when to stay high, and the position of the goalkeeper," Milicic said post-match.

**"It was** a different formation today that we came up against in the last two games. **"But again** we are looking at better protection as well with our two sixes and defending in wide areas.

**"We struggled** at times with that, but in saying that I still feel we created a lot more chances than the opposition, and again disappointed not to have come away with a point at least tonight."

**Barbara Bonansea** of Italy scores the winning goal. (Photo by Tullio M. Puglia/Getty)

**That said,** Italy was frequently caught offside and struggled at times to break that trap. The two goals came from an error in possession, and a failure to close out a late set piece – neither of which directly resulted from the high line. Regardless, composure at key moments remained an issue.

**One of** those occasions was when Clare Polkinghorne received the ball from Alanna Kennedy, and as she attempted to take possession, took a heavy touch, with Barbara Bonansea on hand to steal the ball and go on to score the equaliser.

**But Milicic** went into bat for his centre-back, emphasising the Matildas would continue to play out from the back.

**"Clare is** brave to do that. We are not going to change our style because we have conceded a goal," he said.

**"Yes, she** had a heavy touch, but I thought our positioning could have been a lot better, you look at the isolated situation where we got caught playing out from the back.

**"But I** will always believe in that style, that's the style we want to progress up the field, we just need to get better at it and better at it quickly.

**"Clare has** been excellent for us building up from the back, it's just unfortunately that we got punished on this occasion."

**Meanwhile, Italy's** second goal came off the back of a set piece, with Sam Kerr and Lydia Williams both unable to clear the ball away from Bonansea, who effectively headed home unmarked for the winner.

**"To concede** on a set piece on any sort of the game is frustrating," Caitlin Foord said post-match.

**"Especially when** you've been working on it.

**"We'll have** a look at it and build off that."

## HOW CAN THEY SCORE MORE GOALS?

**While there** were question marks over Australia's defence coming into the tournament, the attack – led by Sam Kerr – was one of the World Cup's most-vaunted.

**But despite** scoring in the 22nd minute, Australia was unable to make the most of its chances from there, looking toothless at times up front despite having plenty of possession – and the likes of Kerr, Caitlin Foord, Hayley Raso, midfielder Tameka Yallop and Lisa De Vanna involved at times.

**Indeed, Australia's** only goal came from Kerr burying the rebound of her saved penalty.

**There has** been a focus in recent games under Milicic in playing Foord more centrally to allow her and Kerr to play

When even the likes of the cool-headed Elise Kellond-Knight were fuming, you could tell it was working.

**It's something** they'll have to get used to though – otherwise they can expect more of the same.

**"We expected** that. We played the Netherlands last week in a friendly and the ball was in play for 43 minutes and today we expected very much a stop-start game," Milicic said.

**"We spoke** about that as a group and we tried to get a little bit of assistance from the fourth official and the ball boys.

**"We want** to play a fast tempo game and it took the rhythm out of it but again we need to overcome that. Teams are going to do that a lot more to us.

**"I still** feel that we could have done things a little bit better when the ball was in play – we just needed to make a little bit better decisions because there were options for us.

**"On the** day we just didn't execute as well as we can."

**Meanwhile, the** midfield structure left Emily van Egmond at times effectively playing a lone hand in midfield, with Tameka Yallop often caught in congestion and Caitlin Foord playing as a No. 10.

**While van** Egmond worked hard to try and both create and defend, she would surely relish more support in the screening role going forward.

**If Elise** Kellond-Knight is cleared to start against Brazil, it's hard not to see her slotting straight into the screening role, allowing van Egmond more room to move forward.

**Meanwhile, with** Kerr spending time out wide during the game, there could be a temptation to return Foord to a genuine wide role – or introduce tall winger Emily Gielnik to the fray – to allow the Australian attackers to run at Brazil's defenders and create chaos, along with giving Yallop more space to deliver her forward runs through the centre of the park.

**There could** also be the temptation to shift Steph Catley to the centre of defence.

## SO WHAT WERE THE POSITIVES?

**Teenage full-back** Ellie Carpenter has had a steep learning curve over the years.

**But on** her World Cup debut, the 19-year-old turned in arguably her best performance for the national team yet.

**Carpenter looked** nervous early but as soon as she settled, delivered a fine effort from right-back, looking to stream forward at every opportunity and breaking through Italy's lines at will.

**The teenager** also impressed with her diligence on the ball, often opting to hit up short, simple through balls to Hayley Raso, rather than simply whipping in crosses.

**Ellie Carpenter** impressed. (Photo by Robert Cianflone/Getty Images)Source: Getty Images

**"Ellie gives** us a lot going forward, I thought she got into some dangerous areas in the front third and we had some good deliveries from her," Milicic said.

**"It's great** to see her make her debut at the World Cup. She just needs to keep working on the game."

**Meanwhile van** Egmond shook off some early miscued passes to deliver a strong performance in midfield, driving the Matildas through the centre of the park.



closer together – but unlike the USA game where it paid dividends, on this occasion the pair rarely combined effectively.

**As the** Matildas failed to break down Italy's resolute defence, Milicic attempted to mix things up, with Katrina Gorry shifted into midfield and Kerr spending time out wide.

**But Australia** had a difficult second half and rarely looked genuinely threatening.

**"We tried** to change things a bit, we moved Sammy to the right and I thought she got in behind quite well a couple of times, but at the same time when you take her out into those wide areas you lose her aerial threat in the centre," Milicic said.

**"We created** enough chances to score more than one, and on another day maybe a few would have gone in.

**"But full** credit to Italy, they came with a game plan and they got the result in the correct manner."

**Post-match, Foord** was optimistic, saying it was a matter of chances not going in the back of the net, rather than not creating.

**"We created** a lot of chances especially, you know, down, Hayley and Ellie's side," she said.

**"We had** plenty of chances. Chloe had two headers. On another other day they might go in.

**"We were** building up well and creating. There's a lot of positives to take. We keep moving forward."

**It was** clear from early in the match Italy was out to frustrate Australia by slowing down the pace of the game, committing fouls and earning them at times that worked to their benefit.