



## MEN'S SOCCER

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### Tonci Skroce Takes Soccer Skills To International Stage

Flames standout represents his country as member of U-21 Croatian National Team.

Dec. 16, 2004

In Croatia, soccer is a source of immeasurable pride. Representing the country while playing the sport is an even bigger honor.

So when University of Illinois at Chicago sophomore [Tonci Skroce](#) was selected to play for the U-21 Croatian National Team, there was no way he was going to miss the opportunity.

Skroce, a 6-foot-1 multifaceted talent who played forward, midfield and defense during his first year as a Flame this past season, was spotted by a national team scout for Croatia at UIC's 3-1 victory over UW-Green Bay on October 24th at Flames Field. The scout liked the skills Skroce displayed and offered him a spot on the Under-21 team for Croatia's game against Slovenia on November 9th.

"It's a big honor to be picked for a selection like that," said Skroce. "I never expected it to happen coming [to the U.S]."

Before he could get to Croatia, though, Skroce had unfinished business to take care of with his UIC teammates. The Flames had to travel to Dayton, Ohio, to take on Wright State in the Horizon League Quarterfinals. With Skroce playing on an ankle still healing from a sprain suffered a week earlier, UIC lost a nail-biting 2-1 contest. But while the Flames were headed back to Chicago, Skroce's journey was only getting started.

Immediately following the Wright State game, Skroce drove to Cincinnati to catch a flight to New York. From there he caught a plane to Frankfurt, Germany, where he was able to catch a flight to Croatia, arriving 12 hours before the Slovenia game.

Injured ankle. Heartbreaking tournament loss. Long flights. Through it all, nothing was going to stand in the way of an

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Sophomore Tonci Skroce donned the colors of his native Croatia for a U-21 match against Slovenia in November.

opportunity that many dream of but few get a chance to fulfill.

Before Skroce could take the field, the players had a two-hour instructional meeting that went over goals kicks, free kicks, places, throw-ins, and other on-field sets. From there the team went through a light one-hour practice before taking to the pitch for the big game.

Skroce played a huge role in the team's 2-0 win over Slovenia in Zagreb, the capital city of Croatia. He started and played 60 minutes, including the entire first half and 15 crucial second period minutes, at the attacking midfield spot.

"I didn't think I would play good but I did," said Skroce, overcoming jitters and some jetlag to help post the shutout.

While the weather was sloppy, that didn't stop 3,000 loyal fans from coming out to the contest, including Skroce's parents, who drove five hours through snow from the family's home in Zadar, and Skroce's sister, Jasna, who flew in from London.

The differences in styles of play between collegiate soccer in America and international friendly matches were immediately noticeable to Skroce, who had to re-adjust quickly after playing a grueling slate against a tough Horizon League and some of the nation's best in non-conference play.

"Here [in the U.S.] it's more physical. In Europe it's more skill and tactics," said Skroce. "The pace wasn't as fast as it is here. The players there are much more skilled. Here you rush more."

Skroce was able to get some big-time international experience against tough competition while teaming with many of the players he used to play with years ago. While he could have stayed in Croatia to play professionally like many of his peers on the U-21 team, Skroce knows he made the right choice to play at the collegiate level in the U.S. while working toward a degree.

"Some say, 'you're stupid to play in the U.S.,' when you can make money in Europe," said Skroce. "But anything can happen. Injuries. Life here is much better."

Even at what he called "less than 80 percent" strength, Skroce's performance was very well-received in Croatia, where he was all over the newspapers. In fact, his arrival to the team for the Slovenia game was hyped up even before he landed in the country.

"I didn't even tell my parents until I called one day before [the game]. My dad already found out when he saw me in the paper," said Skroce.

Besides the media attention, Skroce's skills were noticed by the coaches, including head coach Aljosa Asanovic, a star for the Croatian National Team at the 1998 World Cup in France, and was welcomed to play in the U-21 championship qualification game against Bosnia a week later. But classes were in session back in Chicago, so right after the game Skroce hopped on a plane back to the United States to resume his studies for the semester.

Although it was one game, Skroce takes pride in his selection and was happy to play. He hopes to play for the U-21 team again soon, with a possibility of that happening in the summer of 2005 if the team travels to Chicago to play at Soldier Field as planned.

But for now Skroce will cherish his chance to represent Croatia on an international stage, an opportunity that should be the first of many more to come.

"It was awesome," said Skroce. "It was a good time."

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