

2022 European Water Polo Championships, Split (CRO) – Day 1

Greece wins in crazy finish, Israel gains biggest win in history

Greece beat Hungary in a crazy finish in the big match of the day – Hungary scored four goals in a row in the fourth, then Greece hit back with three, scored by three sisters, in the last two minutes to win 9-8. In the other tight encounter Israel claimed its biggest win so far – after two victories against lower ranked sides upon their first two appearances, now they managed to upend the French 8-7. Favourites delivered in the other matches, the Netherlands hit 32.

Women’s prelims, Round 1. Group A: Hungary v Greece 8-9, Romania v Germany 15-10, Croatia v Netherlands 6-22. **Group B:** Serbia v Netherlands 3-32, Slovakia v Italy 1-26, France v Israel 7-8

The last two games offered the most thrilling contests of the opening day. Greece seemed to control the highlighted encounter with the Hungarians for most of the time, led 3-6 early in the third, and were still two up at the beginning of the fourth. Then came eight minutes of craziness – the Magyars, struggling for three quarters which included an almost 10-minute long scoreless phase, suddenly got on fire and netted four connecting goals to lead 8-6 with 2:24 to go, while the Greeks missed a second penalty in the evening. However, the Plevritou family stroke back – all three siblings netted a goal in the last two minutes, Eleftheria’s brilliant lob-like shot with 5 seconds from time won the match for the Greeks.

Beforehand, Israel stunned the French with a brilliant second half. Upon their third appearance at the Europeans, they got their first really big win. They played brilliantly in the third and fourth period, shut out their rivals for 17:39 minutes while netting five goals in a row. France came back with a double at the end, but was unable to save the game to a tie.

In the other encounters the favourites won with ease. Italy, Spain and the Netherlands all crashed their respective rivals while the Germans found it harder than expected to down the Romanians but thanks to a 6-1 blast in the last period, they bagged all three points.

Game recaps

Group A

Hungary v Greece 8-9

The day was devoted to Hungary v Greece battles across the continent – while the two sides played the highlighted match of the opening day in the Spaladium Arena, at the U16 World Championships both the men’s and the women’s finals were contested by the two countries’ youngsters in Larisa and Volos. (The Magyar girls bettered the Greeks 10-6, the boys won 11-10.)

As for Split, the Hungarians scored from their first 6 on 5 after 1:22 minutes but then faded in offence, Ioanna Stamatopoulou came up with a couple of fine saves and the defence also worked really well.

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Unlike at the other end where a couple of mistakes offered easy chances for the Greeks and they grabbed the opportunities, netted three action goals to lead 1-3 after eight minutes.

Stamatopoulou denied Greta Gurisatti in a one-on-one counter, but she couldn't do much in the next two on one when Kamilla Farago sent the ball home for 2-3. Maria Patra sent the ball high above the bar from a penalty, the Magyars thanked it and Kinga Peresztregi-Nagy hit the equaliser right away. They had a man-up to take the lead, but a fine block denied them while Margarita Plevritou's blast – also from extra – gave back the lead to the Greeks. And soon they rebuilt the two-goal gap, the other Plevritou sibling, Vasiliki just beat the buzzer with a fine lob for 3-5.

Soon they went three up, after a finely played three on three situation while the Hungarian struggled to feed the centre-forward – and to beat Stamatopoulou. They needed more than five minutes in the third to score an action goal, Gurisatti halted their goal-less run of 9:53 minutes. Soon they had a man-up after a time-out, but Stamatopoulou made the stop once more – though the Greeks also missed their 6 on 5, so they kept the two-goal gap they had built in the first period.

Gurisatti halved the distance right from their first possession – converting an extra –, and then Dorottya Szilagyi found the hole under the goalie's arm, so in a span of 69 seconds it was even. The Greeks got a penalty, but they missed that one too – Alexandra Kiss, sent in at halftime, made a great save. And that looked crucial – a block denied the Greeks' man-up as well and Vanda Valyi scored from the ensuing counter, with 3:11 to go the Magyars led again after 1-0. And they were on fire, Krisztina Garda let the ball fly from 8m, it ended up in the net, Hungary was on a 5-0 run while the Greeks called a time-out.

That helped, Margarita Plevritou put the ball away from a 6 on 5 to halt the Greeks' silence after 12:08 minutes. Hungary messed up its next attack, and Vasiliki Plevritou made the most of a rare 5 on 4 for 8-8. Hungary got a man-up but missed it badly – and the third Plevritou, Elefteria decided the game with a brilliant lob-like shot 5 seconds from time (also from a 6 on 5). Indeed, the Greeks, after not scoring for 12 minutes, netted three in the last 1:57 minutes in a crazy finish to win the game.

Germany v Romania 15-10

Unlike in the qualifications, when the Germans sank the Romanians easily – won 11-4 –, here a real battle unfolded, at least as long as the Romanians had the stamina to keep up with the game's favourites. That offered three thrilling periods where, a bit surprisingly, the underdogs were in the lead in the third period. For quite a while Germans' top player, left-handed Belen Vosseberg kept her team in the game, she scored 7 of the first 9 goals of the Germans.

It was even at halftime, at 5-5, then the Romanians netted two for 5-7 and deep into the third they were still 6-8 up. There they missed a couple of fine chances, a clean shot from the centre for example, and Vosseberg hit a double in a span of 88 seconds to equal the match at 8-8. Soon it was 9-8 as the Romanians remained silent for more than four minutes, however, a fine centre-shot from Chelsea Gandrabura brought back them to 9-9 22 seconds from time.

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However, that four-minute drought of the Romanians was a preview of what was coming in the fourth. The Germans started rolling while their rivals' defence crashed. They conceded three action goals in 1:47 minutes, and even if they pulled one back with 3:47 to go, but Gesa Deike replied immediately for 13-10 and there was no way back for the championships' newcomers. Two more hits from the Germans put a definite end to the contest – indeed, all five goals in the fourth period came from action while the Romanians could score only twice in the last 11:06 minutes, which ultimately mirrored the different levels of the teams.

Croatia v Netherlands 6-22

The home side should have dreamt an easier start than this: facing the Netherlands which had to use this game for gearing up before facing arch-rival Hungary on Sunday. And the Dutch took a flying start, scored after 15 seconds, and barely stopped pushing. It was a telling scene when the Croats lined-up for a restart after conceding the third goal, lost the ball after the second pass – a mere five seconds –, and got another one, so within 19 seconds the Dutch scored twice.

Based on the partial result after eight minutes (0-7), it was hard to see that a similar miracle happens here what occurred a couple of hundreds of kilometres away in Belgrade where the Croatian girls beat the Dutch 8-6 at the U16 Worlds. Still, after 0-11, the hosts produced a brilliant spell, netted three in a row in 76 seconds (the last two came in 24sec) to offer their fans something to cheer for.

The Dutch hit back with three to finish the second period with seven goals as well – but had a bit modest second half, scored eight goals (following 14 in the first half). Especially the last period turned into a warm-down exercise for the favourites, the hosts could score two more and conceded only three.

Group B

Serbia v Spain 3-32

Spain needed almost four minutes to settle in the opening match, but once they managed to get on the scoreboard after 3:45 minutes, they hit six in a row in the remaining 4:15 minutes and added to more early in the second for a 0-8 run.

As expected, the two sides were not in the same weight category, at halftime not only the score demonstrated that (3-14) but the number of shots taken: 7-21 and those were on target (5-18).

The landscape didn't change in the second half either, for the title-holders it was more about to get everyone scoring, which is important for the players to get ready for the really important matches. Early in the third, the goal was almost reached, 10 out 11 field players already netted a goal – and finally Pili Pena also netted on in the fourth to 'complete' this mission.

The end did not look good for the Serbs as they conceded 32 – got 21 four years ago in Barcelona, then 26 in Budapest 2020 –, while the Spaniards, winning the second half 0-18 and outshooting their rival 12-41 (on goal: 9-37), looked sharp enough for Sunday's big match against Italy.

Slovakia v Italy 1-26

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If Italy wanted to keep up with group-rival Spain in scoring, then we can say that until halftime it was like a copy-paste operation – netted six in the first period, then eight in the second to lead 14-1 (Spain led 14-3 against Serbia). And they also had ten out of their 11 field-players scored at least by the third began.

Then in the third their speed dropped, as well as their concentration and the Slovaks also tried to slow the pace as much as they could, using most of their 30secs in possession to leave less time for the Italian attacks. It worked, Italy hit only four in eight minutes – what did not was the Slovakian offence; the fourth period was already on its way when they had only four shots on goal, though that was also the price of their time-killing in front. Indeed, early on the equalised for 1-1 after 2:11 minutes – and never scored again in the remaining almost 30 minutes. At the same time, Italy geared up and added eight in the fourth, and also looked well set for the clash with the Spaniards.

France v Israel 7-8

After a series of lop-sided matches, the evening session featured a thrilling contest between France and Israel. Though the French jumped to a 2-0 lead with two fast goals in 38 seconds, a couple of fine saves from Ayelet Peres halted the storm and the Israelis came back to 3-2 by the end of the first by netting their goals from extras.

The French reset the two-goal gap early in the second, and still held on for 5-3 with 3:11 to go, but then they started losing their composure in attack. Israel pulled one back from a penalty before halftime, but the real magic came in the third as they netted four unanswered goals to go 5-8 up. Deep into the third, they had a perfect 76-second rush with three goals while their defence did a brilliant job, so they led by three before the last quarter.

The trends didn't change in the fourth – Peres delivered more saves, sometimes luck was also on her side, and this was all Israel needed. They did not take any risk in front – played disciplined and organised, something one may expect from a team coached by a Greek maestro, Dimitrios Mavrotas.

The clock was ticking down, only 1:42 remained when Audrey Daule's shot from the distance somehow bounced in from Peres' hand to halt the French painfully long silence of 17:29 minutes. However, the game heated up soon when they managed to score another one, from extra, in 55 seconds after a steal for 7-8. And another steal gave them a 25sec possession in the finish, but they couldn't set up a shot so the Israelis could celebrate a big win loudly.

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