

2022 European Water Polo Championships, Split (CRO) – Day 2

Netherlands thrash Hungary, Italy stun Spain, Croatia fly high

The Netherlands handed Hungary its worst-ever defeat since 1985, while Italy stunned Spain winning the middle two quarters 9-3 in the two big evening matches. The others produced fine stories too – host Croatia upset the Germans beating them by seven goals, Israel stopped at 18 goals against Slovakia (never netted more than 11 at the previous championships), and the French won a 29-goal epic against Serbia, scoring the game-winner 9 seconds from time.

Women's round 2. Group A: Netherlands v Hungary 13-4, Germany v Croatia 8-15, Romania v Greece 3-24. *Standings:* 1. NED 6, 2. GRE 6, 3. CRO 3, 4. GER 3, 5. HUN 0, 5. ROU 0. **Group B:** Serbia v France 14-15, Israel v Slovakia 18-7, Spain v Italy 9-12. *Standings:* 1. ITA 6, 2. ISR 6, 3. ESP 3, 4. FRA 3, 5. SRB 0, 6. SVK 0.

Hungary and the Netherlands had the richest common history at the Europeans, they were the early rulers of the championship since it all began in 1985 – met 17 times alone at the Europeans. And apart from the very first encounter, which ended in a 19-4 rout by the Dutch 37 years ago in Oslo, all contests were relatively balanced. But this 18th took a different path as the Magyars were no match this time, looked exhausted in less than 24 hours after their lost thriller with Greece. After a minor comeback from 5-1 to 6-3, they were shut out for 16:58 minutes and at the end the Netherlands won 13-4, the worst-ever defeat for Hungary since that 1985 thrashing. No one would have told that this was a game between the World Championships silver and bronze medallists – two months ago the Magyars won their semi-finals 13-12, quite a difference, indeed.

The other big match of the evening saw two outstanding spells from the Italians against Spain – the first, a 0-5 rush, brought them back from 2-4 down, the other one in the third period put them 6-11 ahead and won them the game. The Spaniards staged a late surge for 9-11, but a fast reply sealed Italy's well-deserved win.

There was another duel which turned into a lopsided contest a bit unexpectedly. For years, beating Croatia was never a challenge for the Germans – now the hosts stormed to a 5-1 lead and never looked back. At the beginning of the third it seemed too easy at 10-3, the Germans tried everything to come back, played 7 on 6s already in the third period (their goalie managed to score once) but they couldn't come closer than 12-8 and at the end they lost by seven goals.

The day was kicked off by a brilliant battle between Serbia and France. It offered a series of twists and turns, and the 29-goal epic went to the French at the end, they scored the winner with 0:09 on the clock. This was followed by Israel's big win over Slovakia – the host of the next edition in 2023 has been going through a significant development in recent years. While four years ago, upon their debut they could net 22 goals in six matches, now they hit 18 and very much on their way to the quarter-finals. Greece had no problems in downing Romania to stand with two wins after the second day.

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Recaps

Group A

Netherlands v Hungary 13-4

Hungary got the upper hand in the two sides' last three encounters – and each of those was highly important: the bronze medal game at the 2020 Europeans, the Olympic quarter-final in Tokyo and the World Championships semi-final this July. So the Dutch had plenty to pay back for – and started off the contest with the utmost determination.

They scored twice quickly and defended extremely well, the Magyars couldn't even look dangerous during their two man-ups. It took 7:25 minutes to open their account and even that goal was totally out of the blue, Greta Gurisatti pushed the ball towards the goal with a backhanded shot from 7m in the last second and it somehow ended up in the net (justifying the good old saying, there are no bad passes, only bad players...). But the Dutch replied immediately, putting away an extra to lead 3-1 after eight minutes.

Hungary's miseries continued, the Dutch scored two in 58 seconds early in the second to go 5-1 up, and deep into the second period they led 6-2 – at this stage no one would have told that the World Championship silver medallist was taking on the bronze medallist as the latter one completely outplayed its rival. Then the Magyars tightened their defence a bit, at least they managed to shut out the Dutch for the remaining six minutes, however, apart from a fine backhander (a real one) from Geraldine Mahieu, they couldn't achieve much in front. Wasted two man-ups, including one after a time-out, without taking a shot in 20 seconds which was quite telling after all.

They had six minutes to come closer – and missing that 'window' cost them the chance for a comeback. Starting the third, the Dutch had two fine actions, set up their centre-forwards, earned a penalty (Simone van de Kraats netter her third), then a man-up, buried by Brigitte Sleeking for an 8-3 lead. An action goal put them 9-3 up soon, while the Magyars had troubles to score at all – again, three man-ups were gone without any visible result. At this stage, both teams took 17 shots, the result was still 9-3 – the Hungarians had only 7 shots on target while the Dutch had 12.

With another converted penalty, the Netherlands turned into the last period with a 10-3 advantage after a 4-0 rush in the third – the only goal the Hungarians may have had was to cut their scoreless run the soonest possible.

Instead, the Dutch went on scoring – converted a fourth penalty: the difference between the centre-forwards were surprisingly big in terms of defence-penetration – and enjoyed a 12-3 lead. Krisztian Garda finally broke the ice from a 6 on 5, it was thick, had been freezing for 16:58 minutes... Still, there was no way for them to escape Hungary's worst-ever defeat at the Europeans since they had lost 19-4 back in the very first edition in Oslo 1985, against... guess who: the Netherlands.

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Germany v Croatia 8-15

Back in 2010, when the Croats took the stage for the first time at the Europeans – as host –, the Germans beat them 23-7. Six years later, in Belgrade it was still 20-9. And even though the Germans' decline was visible in recent years – they avoided finishing bottom-ranked in Budapest 2020 by beating Serbia with penalties.

The Germans came here via a crowdfunding initiative as they did not receive much financial support from their federations – and perhaps that left its mark on the team's preps. They managed to win the match against Romania in the last quarter but on the second day they couldn't do much against the Croatians.

The hosts. This time boosted by a couple of hundreds fans, produced a very nice display of water polo. They set the tone in the first period, scored four goals in a row after 1-1, in a span of 2:28 minutes, prompting an emergency time-out call from the Germans. It didn't help much though, they pulled one back in the first, but the Croats kicked off the second with another double in 32 seconds for a 2-7 lead. And they remained the dominant force throughout the first half, adding two more before the middle break to lead 3-9 – stunning perhaps even the local fans.

And nothing promised any sharp twist as the game went by, early in the third they led by eight, so it was virtually over. Of course, the Germans, as always, fought on and scored three straight goals, including one by the goalie Darja Heinbichner. In an attempt to save something from the game, they started playing 7 on 6s already in the third, which caused a minor mess in the home defence, but Matea Skelin's extraman goal for 6-12 killed the rival's momentum.

A slim hope came to the horizon at the start of the fourth, Gesa Deike netted an action goal for 8-12, then the Germans killed a 6 on 4 – still, in front they were unable to create more danger. In fact, couldn't score any more goals while the Croats did a splendid job, played with discipline and organised and hit three more to claim a huge victory and getting a win away from making the quarter-finals.

Romania v Greece 3-24

After a thrilling win last evening over Hungary, Greece was back to play the last match of the morning session against Romania. Even though the way they managed to upend the world silver medallist should have been uplifting for the Greeks, it was also a demanding match and they had only 14 hours to recover.

However, they didn't show the smallest sign of fatigue in the opening period as they hit eight goals in eight minutes. For the second, the Greeks' concentration level dropped a bit, alongside with the number of goals they scored (four). Though that was just a temporary sit-back as the favourites regrouped themselves again to net eight in third – marking their strong centre-forwards was a mission impossible for the Romanian defence.

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Then in the fourth the Greeks switched back gears and set the same pattern as in the first half, an eight-goal period was followed by a four-goal phase. If one wishes to have a deeper look into the stats where was the big difference, it's definitely the shots on target: 28-9 – and of course the number of saves – the Greek goalie stopped 6 of the 9 shots she faces, while the Romanian netminders could make four catches combined, on the 28 incoming shots.

Group B

Spain v Italy 9-12

For almost ten minutes the match progressed as it was expected. The Spaniards' cruised to a 4-2 lead, seemingly effortlessly, as in their heydays. What came next was anything but similar to the Olympic runner-up side's best days. Giuditta Galardi's fine centre-shot turned out to be a kind of 'ready-to-launch' moment and soon the Italians really got going. They staged a 0-5 rush which turned out to be decisive. They netted two fine man-up goals in 66 seconds, followed by two brilliant counters to take a 4-7 lead. Elena Ruiz halted the Spanish scoreless run after almost seven minutes but that was only a temporary halt for their miseries.

Shortly into the third, Chiara Tabani netted another nice from a counter, and in less than two minutes she had a nice finish from a 6 on 5 for 9-5. Spain could score one, after five long minutes, but Agnese Cocchiere's brilliant backhanded centre-shot reset the four goal gap. Which jumped to five as Tabani netted her third in this quarter for 6-11, again from a man-up, and this second great spell was crowned by a killed man-down.

Italy seemed to be in full control, but the Spaniards didn't let it go, started the fourth with Anni Espar's action goal (came after 21 seconds), followed by a converted 6 on 4 – with 6:11 to go it looked no longer hopeless for them. However, they were unable to build on this momentum and couldn't score in the next four minutes, missed two man-ups. A third seemed to be gone too, though they could play it again due to the malfunction of the time-out button. This time Beatriz Ortiz put it away with ease, but before the Spanish could even think of a comeback at 9-11, Sofia Giustini's fantastic lob (a one-timer at the same time) put an end to the contest 24 seconds later.

Efficiency was the key to Italy's win – the Spaniards took 35 shots while Italy only 22, but the percentage couldn't have been any more contrasting (25.7% to 54.5%), partly thanks to the difference in goaltending. The Spanish keepers posted 4 saves altogether while Caterina Banchelli had 10 on 19 shots for 52.6%, a game-winning effort from the Italian.

Serbia v France 14-15

Based on earlier performances, France was the favourite of this match – however, their stunning defeat against Israel, and the fact, that they had only 12 hours to bounce back as they had to play the first game this morning may have promised a balanced game.

It was indeed – and thrilling too. Serbia took the lead with a funny goal (the ball bounced three times on the goalie's head, but she recognised it lately, and the ball hobbled in), and soon it was 3-1 up. The

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French came back to even, still, Jelena Vukovic's last-second lob put the Serbs ahead after the first period.

Following a quick exchange of goals early in the second, they were still in the lead at 5-4 but then the French picked up their game, hit a double in 46 seconds, soon another two in 86 seconds and this 0-4 rush seemed to send the encounter onto its expected path at 5-8.

The Serbs weren't done, however. Lolita Avdic pulled one back before the halftime break from a nice action, and even though the French held on for 7-9 early in the third, then came a brilliant spell from their rivals with three goals from as many possessions. It took them 1:32 minutes to take back the lead, and after the French wasted two man-ups, Hristine Ilic doubled the Serbs' lead for 11-9. Estelle Millot replied from action to give some hope for France before the last intermission – and she went on scoring in the fourth, two in 34 seconds right at beginning to make it 11-12.

Vukovic brought her team back to even from a nice 6 on 5, but they missed their next one and Camelia Bouloukbatchi netted the ensuing counter – a crucial chain of action at 12-12. Still, Ilic's pinpoint shot equalled the score once more, then Millot buried a penalty for 13-14, her 5th goal, with 3:07 to go.

There were more twists, though – in a man-up, Svec sent the ball home from the 2m line with two defenders around her neck. With 57 seconds to go, the Serbs called a time-out after a saved shot but missed the feed for the centre – now the French had 30sec to win the game, and after an unnecessary foul by the Serbs, resulting in an exclusion, Louise Gillet stepped up and her fine shot hit the back of the net. It was her fourth goal, and with 0:09 to go it was the game-winner as well.

Israel v Slovakia 18-7

Early on the Slovaks could equalise twice but then came the inevitable in the form of three connecting Israeli goals in a span of two minutes, still inside the first period for 5-2. Noa Sasover's fine goal from the centre put Israel 6-2 ahead, though after this fast 4-0 rush the 'storm' calmed down, one goal apiece was scored till halftime – Israel still sat comfortably in the driving seat.

Then they geared up in the third, added three from back-to-back possession in 73 seconds for a commanding 10-3 lead, netter four more a bit later to score as many goals in the third as over the first half. With this, the Israelis reached their targets, so the game settled for a lighter pace while the tightness of their defence also melted a bit, and the Slovaks could score three more goals, though the winners also hit four to stop at 18, a brand new scoring record for them. As a comparison: four years ago, upon their debut, they could net 22 goals in six matches and in Budapest 2020 their best effort was 11 in one game. Though more importantly, they bagged three more points, kicked off the prelims with two wins so Israel is very well set to make the quarter-finals for the first time – quite a prelude for the home Europeans next year in Tel-Aviv!

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