

## 2022 European Water Polo Championships, Split (CRO) – Day 3

### France almost stun Greece, the Dutch blow away the Germans

**Favourites delivered on the opening day of the men’s tournament, with one exception: Olympic runner-up and World Championship bronze medallist Greece had to settle for a tie with the French. In another highlighted clash of the day, the Netherlands crashed the Germans with an outstanding performance.**

**Men, Round 1. Group A:** Georgia v Montenegro 11-14, Italy v Slovakia 21-9. **Group B:** Greece v France 12-12, Malta v Croatia 5-19. **Group C:** Romania v Spain 9-16, Germany v Netherlands 6-13. **Group D:** Serbia v Israel 18-3, Hungary v Slovenia 23-7.

No major hiccups on the first day, almost all favourites kicked off the competition with fine wins. Only Greece had troubles with bagging three points – the French put up a great fight and when they scored five connecting possessions in the second period, it became clear that that the Olympic silver medallists wouldn’t get this win with ease. If they got at all – though they came back strong for the third and led before the fourth, they missed the best chances to put an end to the contest. Instead, the French hit back and also had a man-up to gain a two-goal lead in the finish, but that time the Greeks defended well and soon managed to equalise – though couldn’t add more and the thrilling battle ended in a tie.

The spectacular match was a perfect prelude to the opening ceremony, attended by the Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic and Split City Mayor Ivica Puljak and other dignities. On behalf of LEN, First Vice-President Josip Varvodic welcomed the water polo family and thanked the support of the local government, the city and all the partners supporting the event.

Later in the evening, the Croatian team didn’t have a demanding task to entertain the fans as they faced Malta, the bottom ranked side of the previous edition. Still, in the first half the home players had unexpected difficulties to beat the Maltese goalkeeper Jake Tanti who held them on five goals, practically single-handedly. The Croats got going in the second half, though, netted 14 more to finish the evening with 19 goals, despite Tanti’s 12 saves.

Earlier in the day, world champion Spain kicked off the men’s tourney with an effortless victory against Romania, then the Olympic champion Serbs downed newcomer Israel whose bench and fans were still over the Moon watching their players scoring the first goals in the championships’ history. 2020 bronze medallist Montenegro had minor headaches in their encounter with Georgia but overcame on them quickly – while title-holder Hungary geared up after the first period to score 23 against Slovenia. World champ runner-up Italy also broke the 20-goal barrier against Slovakia.

In the game, which was supposed to be the tightest, the Netherlands simply outplayed Germany. The Dutch defence was outstanding, killed all 9 man-downs, while in front they netted magnificent goals to

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claim a great win, which well can send them to the quarter-finals for the first time ever (the Dutch reached the top eight for the last time in 1993, when QFs were not part of the playing format).

## Game recaps

### Group A

#### Georgia v Montenegro 11-14

Georgia could withstand the pressure for one and a half quarters. The Montenegrins hit two in 38 seconds deep into the first to jump to a 2-4 lead, but for a while their rivals could keep the gap on two goals, pulling one back twice after being down by three. Then at 4-7 this pattern broke, Vladan Spaic had an easy put-away from close in a 6 on 5 for 4-8, and after a couple of minutes of battling, Aleksa Ukropina added one more for a commanding 4-9 lead. Former Montenegrin leftie Boris Vapenski netted one for Georgia, still, it looked like an easy path for the favourite side.

It wasn't. Vapenski sent the ball home from an extra 22 seconds into the third and it turned out that during the three-minute break the Montenegrins' concentration level dropped significantly. While they scored easy goals from man-ups and from the perimeter as well in succession, their offense fell apart, and the Georgians, smelling blood, geared up. Soon, in a span of 52 seconds, two more goals landed in Dejan Lazovic's net and it all looked open once more at 8-9.

This was a wake-up call for Montenegro – though head coach Vladimir Gojkovic's voice-level should also serve the purpose – and they hit back with four goals from as many possessions. They needed 2:19 minutes to do the final damage as after 8-13, with one quarter to go, there was no way back for the Georgians.

Consequently, the last period lacked the tensions – the Montenegrins considered the job done, and unlike after the second period, this time they were right, even though they scored only one goal in the last quarter. Georgia had two late hits in the final 74 seconds to have some consolation and Marko Jelaca, who netted the last one, pushed his tally to five goals.

#### Italy v Slovakia 21-9

Though the Slovaks took the lead, Italy responded with three goals and added three more till the first break. With the underdogs being able to score two more, the first period was really entertaining (6-3) – but usually that does not make the coaches happy.

The Italians' concentration level was fluctuating, fine spells were followed by minor blackouts, they missed a series of clear scoring chances, including two penalties and a handful of one-on-ones – though Tomas Hoferica also did a splendid job in the Slovakian goal, posting several outstanding saves.

Still, this only seemed to save the Slovaks from a really bad beating as the World Camps runners-up controlled the game easily. Apart from a four-minute long mess early in the third when they couldn't

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put the ball away from any angle (and the Slovaks came back to 13-7), they netted enough goals to keep the scoreboard in ‘acceptable condition’.

Then in the fourth not even the goalie could save the day – Italy finished the game with 21 goals, despite Hoferica’s 14 stops. This shows the difference in the defences’ quality: the Slovaks let 44 shots for Italy, 36 of those were on target, while only 14 shots reached the Italian goal, out of 20 attempts.

## Group B

### Greece v France 12-12

Early on, France jumped to a 1-3 lead, scoring three connecting goals following Konstantin Kakarakis’ centre-shot. Two of those were fine finishes, then they needed some luck for the third as the ball hit the bar first then bounced in from the goalie’s head. However, Goddess Fortuna quickly gave that back to the Greeks – Dimitrios Skoumpakis managed to equalise in 86 seconds and both goals came after his mates collected rebounds.

The next ones were clear hits, Stylianos Argyropoulos buried a penalty, then Georgios Dervisis tipped the ball in from a brilliant combination – all in a span of 39 seconds. The 4-0 run was halted by Thomas Vernoux who sent the ball home from an extra, but Angelos Vlachopoulos also found the hole on the French wall in a 6 on 5. Goals didn’t cease flooding, five of the next six possession ended in a hit and the French did better as they not only managed to catch up the Greeks, but with a third straight goal they retook the lead at 7-8. This seemed to be a crucial phase – after 5-3, the Greeks were unable to prevent the French from scoring in five consecutive possessions, while they missed two man-ups.

Substitute goalie Konstantinos Limarakis backed his team with a couple of great saves while the Greek centre-forwards delivered: a penalty (converted) and a fine goal by Dimitrios Nikolaidis brought the team back to even, what’s more, Alexandros Papanastasiou finished off a great counter for 10-9. Enzo Khasz’ cheeky goal from the right wing, with right hand, almost from zero angle, was a stunner, but Konstantinos Genidounias’ blast from the perimeter 13 seconds from time put the Greeks ahead at 11-10 before the final quarter.

Vlachopoulos could have doubled the Greeks’ lead at the beginning of the fourth but his shot was an easy catch for Hugo Fontani, and Marion-Vernoux’s distant shot ended up in the net – in a matter of seconds it stood 11-11 instead of 12-10. And things turned from bad to worse for the Olympic silver medallists when Emil Bjorch’s spectacular one-timer hit the top left corner with 4:24 remaining from the game. And unlike in the third, the Greek centre-forwards had only misses, Nikolaidis’ backhand hit the post, then Kakarakis pushed the ball to the post from a one-on-one man-up. Now the French had a match-ball but they couldn’t make their 6 on 5 either after a time-out – next came the Greeks’ extra with 2:04 on the clock, also following a time-out. It was much more like the ones won them Olympic and World Champs medals, Argyropoulos put it away from the wing for 12-12.

The Greek defence could make a steal, while the French were unable to mark Kakarakis who earned another 6 on 5, played after another time-out – but this time Fontani could make the save on

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Papanastasiou's shot from the same angle and he also denied the second shot from the distance. France had 16 seconds to win the game, but Limarakis posted his 6<sup>th</sup> stop so the game ended in a tie – which promises some fine excitements for the remaining two rounds with the Croats being also on board in this quartet.

## Malta v Croatia 5-19

The game quickly turned into a Croatia versus Jake Tanti contest – the Maltese goalie managed to put his hands on a series of shots, deep into the second he stood with 7 on 10, The Croats could only beat him from one-on-one or three on two counters, but not in man-ups or with perimeter shots.

At the same time, the underdogs couldn't really penetrate the hosts' defence, they had one better chance in the first half, a counter, but Marko Bijac denied it. Then with 1:09 to go till the middle break, they found the back of the net from a 7m shot to make it 1-5. It was the halftime standing – a slight disappointment for the home fans, a rather fine feat for Malta, considering their 2020 'adventures' when they lost to Spain 7-23 and Hungary to 0-26.

The crowd was stunned when Matthew Zammit's backhander hit the back of the net for 2-5 – though after that Loren Fatovic could put the ball to the empty net after a rebound and in 28 seconds Luka Bukic scored another one from a counter. That was a clear sign that finally the Croats managed to 'arrive' to the championships, even though they reached the double digits only after 22 minutes, they netted seven in this period alone, after getting five in the first half. Seven more arrived in the final period, despite Tanti's 12 saves altogether – without him, it would have been a humiliating defeat for Malta as the number of shots on goal (13-31) showed an even bigger difference, than the actual 14 goals which separated the teams at the end.

## Group C

### Romania v Spain 9-16

The reigning world champion's game kicked off the men's tournament and the Spanish didn't disappoint the water polo fans. They did a clean job, not for a single moment one had the feeling that they could get into trouble in this match.

For a while Marius-Florin Tic held off the Spanish offence with a couple of fine saves but soon the attacking machine broke the Romanian defensive lines, stormed to a 1-6 lead, killing the party right away by the middle of the second period.

From that point only the margin of the Spaniards' win was in question – with some fine goals, the Romanians managed to keep up, so the final scoreline show they could put up a good fight. Among the Spaniards, Alvaro Granados netted 5 to kick in his campaign to claim the top-scorers' title here.

### Germany v Netherlands 6-13

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If someone thought that this game will be the highlight of the day where the two sides would produce a thrilling neck-to-neck battle, then one had nothing but disappointment – apart from the Dutch of course, who came up with a magnificent performance and simply tore their arch-rivals apart.

The game was won primarily by the Dutch defence as they held the Germans on three goals for almost three periods – the fourth one came in the dying seconds before the last break, by then the Netherlands were 3-9 up.

The Germans' problems started right away in the first quarter, they lacked the composure in the offence, and it was just getting even more visible in the second when they fell 1-5 behind. In the second and the third periods their man-up stood 0 for 7 – though it also praised the Dutch defence and Eelco Wagenaar in the goal. He had to deal with 10 shots in the first three periods, while the Germans had 27 attempts – so it was a mix of fine defending (blocks and positioning) and an embarrassing set of missing.

To the top of that, the Dutch could score three goals from counters launched after the denied German 6 on 5s, a real nightmare for the coaches. They were flying, even netted goals which would top any daily highlights show – Thomas Lukas tipped the ball from the centre while his back faced the goal, only Kas Te Riele's curved lobshot may have beaten it in the beauty contest. The Dutch won the lopsided contest with unexpected ease (kept the Germans 0/9 in man-up) and are well set to make the quarters.

## Group D

### Serbia v Israel 18-3

It took some time until the Serbs started rolling against the tournament's newcomers – they netted their first after four minutes and the next two arrived in the last 40 seconds in the opening period, but soon came the inevitable as the favourites settled in the pool.

The Israeli players fought hard but couldn't cope with the Serbs' shooting power and swimming abilities, nor could they match the physical superiority of the Olympic title-holders' defenders.

Still, even though trailing 8-0, the whole Israeli bench erupted in joy, the fans were jumping up and down on the stands and the players were also smiling when Or Schlein managed to beat the blocking hands and the goalie 0:56 before the middle break. It was a historic goal, the first Israel's men's team scored at European Championships, so one big goal was achieved.

To hold off the Serbs – well, that proved to be a harder task as they seemed to be determined to keep the level of their defence on a maximum level to get ready for the big game against Hungary. Still, there were smaller pieces of successes for the Israelis, like a saved penalty by their second goalie Yahav Fire and a converted one at the other end (though missed a second one...), and finally a goal in a 6 on 5, netted in the last period.

After scoring 11 in the first half (eight in the second period), the Serbs didn't push that hard in front, added seven in the second half, three of those arrived in the last two and a half minutes.

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### **Hungary v Slovenia 23-7**

Hungary had to go through some initial struggles before finding the right pace. Conceding three goals in the first period did not make their new coach Zsolt Varga happy, to say the least – though they were always in the lead as the offense ‘kept up’. Still, they needed some luck to finish a man-up after collecting a rebound, Adam Nagy’s last-second hit put them 4-3 ahead before the first break.

They copied that in the first possession in the second, again, took a second chance in a 6 on 5 to take a two-goal lead for the first time in the match. Soon the gap jumped to four, Krisztian Manhercz and Gergo Zalanki, the two master-shooters remaining on the roster from the Worlds, offered some appetizer of their skills. It happened in 39 seconds, the Magyars went 7-3 up and that was the point when they settled down finally.

A 6-2 run in the second period demonstrated they were getting close to the championship level. The Slovenians – who hadn’t made the cut in the qualifications but could join the field after Russia had been suspended – gradually ran out of fuel, they were no longer able to play as sharp in front as they could in the first half. The third period mirrored that, the Magyars staged a 6-0 rush – the Slovenians could score after 11:26 minutes, by then the title-holders were 17-5 up. They stopped at 23, after taking an unusually high number of shots, 42, which showed that they could create chances in almost each possession, though their precision is something they need to work on too.

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