

2022 European Water Polo Championships, Split (CRO) – Day 4

Netherlands book top spot, Croatia is en route to historical QF

The Netherlands won the big match of the day, downing Greece with a spectacular 3-0 run in the last quarter and this should land them the top spot in Group A. Croatia claimed another win, over Romania, and that will almost surely send the host to the quarter-finals, for the first time in their history. Hungary and Spain all bounced back from their Day 2 losses while Italy went 3/3 after beating Israel.

Women, Round 3, Group A: Greece v Netherlands 8-13, Hungary v Germany 26-4, Croatia v Romania 15-6. *Standings:* 1. NED 9, 2. GRE 6, 3. CRO 6, 4. HUN 3, 5. GER 3, 6. ROU 0. **Group B:** France v Spain 4-16, Italy v Israel 18-5, Slovakia v Serbia 6-9. *Standings:* 1. ITA 9, 2. ESP 6, 3. ISR 6, 4. FRA 3, 5. SRB 3, 6. SVK 0.

At the World Championships two months ago, the Netherlands sank the Greeks with a 12-7 win in the quarter-finals, dominating during the whole game. Here it was a slightly different story, though with the same outcome – a 13-8 victory for the Dutch. They went ahead early in the second period, but the Greeks chasing game worked for long, they had even possessions to go even towards the end of the third. However, a Dutch goal from a counter 3 seconds before the last break, then a missed 6 on 4 early in the fourth put the writing on the wall. Indeed, the Budapest bronze medallists ruled the fourth period, shut out the Greeks for the whole last quarter while adding three more goals to gain another great win and book the top spot in the group.

Hungary, bouncing back after two defeats – never before at any major tournaments they started their campaign with back-to-back losses –, thrashed the Germans, posted the first double-digit period of the tournament (won the second quarter 10-0).

Croatia claimed another huge win – after beating the Germans 15-8, now they netted 15 again, this time against Romania and this almost surely sends them to the quarter-finals, for the first time in their history.

Group B had a calmer day, Spain ‘included’ the first period against France to the recovery process (Italy stunned them two days ago), the French even led 2-3 after eight minutes, then the Olympic silver medallists came up with a 14-1 storm. After two fine wins, Israel had no chance against Italy, though they showed much more than at the previous two editions when they had been beaten soundly by the Setterosa. Compared to 2020, the outcome of the match between Serbia and Slovakia was also quite contrasting – two years ago Slovakia won 6-2, now the Serbs got it with 6-9 and reserved the chance to go through though they need to do something big against Israel.

Ligue Européenne de Natation
9 rue de la Morâche - 1260 Nyon - Switzerland
Phone: +41 22 552 99 99
Email: lenoffice@len.eu
www.len.eu

Game recaps

Group A

Greece v Netherlands 8-13

After both sides had beaten the Hungarians, this game decided the top rank in the group. Accordingly, it was a huge battle, with a lot of tactical manoeuvres and of course the individual skills also shone from time to time.

For a while, the teams seemed to splash into the middle of it straight away, three action goals were scored in a span of 39 seconds, Greece took a 2-1 lead – then came five and half minutes long fight, defences worked extremely well, forced shots finished the possessions, the goalies barely had to make saves.

The second quarter unfolded quite differently, the offences stepped up, especially the Dutch players were quite effective, netted two from action to turn the cards while the Greeks were struggling a bit. Indeed, they couldn't find the back of the net for 8:46 minutes, then Margarita Plevritou buried a penalty for 3-3 and from that point it was a chasing game. The Netherlands took the lead again and again, the Greeks could equalise twice but not after Simone van der Kraats' penalty, which gave a 5-6 lead for the Dutch 58 seconds before the big break.

The third saw a different pattern – in two minutes the world bronze medallists jumped to a three-goal lead, with a fast man-up goal and, after a killed man-down, Lola Moohuijzen's fine action shot. The Greeks responded well, though, in 44 seconds they came back to one, Eirini Ninou put away a 6 on 5 and Margarita Plevritou's bouncer from the perimeter was good enough for 8-7. Eleni Xenaki even had a chance to equalise but her tipped shot was stopped and a nice centre action ended in another penalty and van der Kraats made no mistake. The Greeks had a couple of less attractive attacks, though they killed a man-down in between and that looked crucial, since instead of another +3 for the Netherlands, they halved the gap once more with a pinpoint shot by Ninou. And they had a possession to go even, but the Dutch zone not only forced them into a ball loss, but Moohuijzen could storm away for a counter and her lob gave her team an 8-10 lead with 3 seconds to go.

That was decisive in the wake of the early happenings in the fourth. First, the Greeks missed a 6 on 4, then the Dutch, despite missing a man-up, soon earned a penalty and Moohuijzen converted it for 8-11 (the different body sizes of their powerful centre-forwards and the lighter weight Greek defenders were quite visible and that resulted in three penalties). This put the game in bed, the Greeks didn't have enough energy and perhaps desire either to make another try – they kind of faded away in the remaining minutes. Indeed, they were shut out for the entire final quarter while the Dutch added two more goals to claim a convincing win and book the top spot in the group.

Hungary v Germany 26-4

Ligue Européenne de Natation
9 rue de la Morâche - 1260 Nyon - Switzerland
Phone: +41 22 552 99 99
Email: lenoffice@len.eu
www.len.eu

Never ever Hungary started any major event with back-to-back defeats, so the World Championship silver medallist went into that game with the determination to leave all the disappointments behind. That was bad news for the Germans – as they had to play under enormous pressure, imposed by the Magyars.

At stages, especially in the second period, they were unable stop the rivals' storm. Hungary hit six in a span of 2:47 minutes, it was steal after steal, counter after counter – the 10-0 partial result told the story. The Magyars slowed down for the third, the German defence worked much better, Felicitas Guse could post a couple of saves, so this quarter ended in 3-1.

And the trend did not change for the fourth, the Hungarians' concentration didn't bounce back to the level we saw in the first half, though scoring four in the last two minutes pushed their tally to 26 goals. Indeed, the real difference again was mirrored by the number of shots on target: it was 31-9 at the end.

Croatia v Romania 15-6

Head coach Aljosa Kunac called for a time-out after just 3:03 minutes – with 0-0 on the scoreboard. Still, the Croatian boss didn't like what he saw, or rather what he did not. For sure, he managed to make order – in 2:40 minutes the home side led 4-0, scoring those goals from four straight possessions.

That put the match on the desired track, another 4-1 quarter followed the first, so the Croats led 8-2 at halftime – no more time-out was needed as the three points were already in the bag. The second half continued on the same path, with this second win the Croats secured their spot in the quarter-finals – a historical result for the hosts as they never got close to that upon their previous three appearances.

Group B

Slovakia v Serbia 6-9

2020: Slovakia v Serbia 6-2.

2022: Slovakia v Serbia 6-9.

A significant change in two years – though even the Serbs admitted, they were aware that Slovakia miss a handful of important players, while the Slovaks added: due to the unusually long shutdowns during the pandemic, they lost an awful lot training time in the past seasons. Still – when it comes to championship time, whatever lineup you have, you go for it. And the Slovaks fought bravely and even had a chance to catch up with the Serbs, despite falling back 3-7 deep into the third period.

The damage was done at the beginning, the Slovaks took the lead but then they were unable to score again for 9:25 minutes while the Serbs staged a 0-4 rush and led 2-5 at halftime. Though the Slovaks pulled one back, two more action goals put Serbia 3-7 ahead. However, two fine lobbs in 73 seconds brought some hope for the trailing team, so the last period started at 5-7. And another lobb, by Karin Kackova, just 47 seconds into the fourth cut the gap to a single goal.

The Slovaks had three possessions to equalise, but they couldn't capitalise on that and Hristina Ilic's fine shot from the perimeter reset the two-goal cushion with 3:48 remaining. And there was no way

Ligue Européenne de Natation
9 rue de la Morâche - 1260 Nyon - Switzerland
Phone: +41 22 552 99 99
Email: lenoffice@len.eu
www.len.eu

back for Slovakia, they lacked the necessary power to gear up once more and a nice centre-shot from Nada Mandic closed down the contest.

France v Spain 4-16

Spain needed a little more than a quarter to find back on the right track. They were derailed two days ago when they lost to Italy and for eight minutes, they struggled a bit while the French jumped to a 2-0 lead and the Olympic silver medallists scored its first after five minutes.

Surprisingly, the French led 3-2 after eight minutes – but the minor miracle didn't last long. The Spaniards stroke back with a 0-7 rush in the second period, before anyone would have thought of something bigger. The next French goal came after 11:32 minutes, in the third, when Spain was already far away, 3-10 up, so the most important questions had been answered by then.

In fact, that was the last time they managed to put the ball away, so after gaining a 3-2 lead, they could score a single goal in the remaining three periods – Spain produced a 1-14 run, so it was a good way to bounce back from the minor shock two days ago.

Italy v Israel 18-5

This is the third time Israel has qualified for the Europeans and upon the previous two occasions they were also drawn to the same group with Italy. The outcome was kind of the same in both matches: 21-2 in Barcelona 2018 and 17-1 in Budapest 2020.

Though they couldn't avoid another big defeat here, still, the overall impression of the game was different. The Israelis put up a good fight, their previous two matches in Split were a strong proof of their development (won both, stunned France, thrashed Slovakia). Even if the gap was huge once more, the Italians had to work much harder for their goals and needed to put into more efforts to their defending to deny their rivals' attempts, who were more powerful, aggressive and organised than two years ago.

Stats don't lie, a comparison of the shooting charts reveals a very visible improvement from the underdogs.

2018: 42-22, on target: 34-13 – score: 21-2

2020: 34-14, on target: 26-7 – score: 17-1

2022: 35-27, on target: 24-12 – score: 18-5

And another note: while two years ago only five players had attempts, and two took 10 of the 14 shots, now all but one player let the ball fly during the game. With two wins in their bag, they are on their way to the quarters, they may even reach the third place if they could beat the Serbs in the last round of the prelims.

30 August 2022

Ligue Européenne de Natation
9 rue de la Morâche - 1260 Nyon - Switzerland
Phone: +41 22 552 99 99
Email: lenoffice@len.eu
www.len.eu