

## 2022 European Water Polo Championships, Split (CRO) – Day 12

### Spain and Greece to stage the final showdown

**Both unbeaten group-winners fell in the semi-finals: Spain took the upper hand against the Netherlands with three great periods, while Greece controlled the entire game against Italy and also gained a three-goal win. Spain may retain their title on Friday, while the Greeks may claim their first-ever European crown after three silver medal-winning effort in 2010, 2012 and 2018. As for another historical milestone, Israel managed to beat Croatia to play for the 5<sup>th</sup> place and that victory also sent them to the 2023 World Championships to highlight an incredible rise of a nation whose women's team debuted at the Europeans only four years ago.**

**Women's semi-finals:** Netherlands v Spain 7-10, Greece v Italy 12-9. **For places 5-8<sup>th</sup>:** France v Hungary 9-19, Israel v Croatia 15-8.

**Schedule for Friday – Final:** 20.00 Spain v Greece. **Bronze medal match:** 19.00 Netherlands v Italy. **For places 5-6<sup>th</sup>:** 17.30 Hungary v Israel. **For places 7-8<sup>th</sup>:** 16.00 France v Croatia

The Netherlands and Italy enjoyed an unbeaten run before this day, both posted a 6/6 wins – but they were stopped in the semi-finals. Spain and Greece, finishing runners-up respectively, did a splendid job to play for the gold medal on Friday evening.

Spain, the reigning champion, produced a brilliant first half, held the Netherlands on three goals – they almost completely switched off the Dutch scoring machine with some astonishing defending. Then Brigitte Sleeking came up with two great woman-up goals in the third, and even though Spain retook the lead soon, the Netherlands seemed to have found the right rhythm. However, it turned out to be just a brighter spell, the Spanish regained the control in the fourth, built a massive four-goal gap and never let their rivals back to the game again. Elena Ruiz hit four, but it was a real team effort, especially in the back: goalie Martina Terre had to deal with only 12 shots (13 were missed or blocked), while Laura Aarts faced 25 (only 6 were less precise), a huge difference in a game at this level. This set up Spain to become the first team in 12 years to retain their title (Russia had a hat-trick between 2006 and 2010).

Greece will be there trying to prevent them from the double – their spirited and really disciplined performance against Italy brought them a two-goal lead by halftime. Soon in the third, a minor collapse in Italy's defence gave the Greeks a 9-5 lead and from that point they simply cruised to victory. Some of their players celebrated with tears in their eyes – the Greeks had more downs than ups recently, didn't make any semis since the 2018 Europeans, missed the Olympics, fell at the Worlds in the quarters this June, only to come back big here in Split. At the same time, the Dutch and the Italians had to settle for another bronze medal contest after the World Championships.

In the games played for the 5-8<sup>th</sup> places, Israel staged a power demonstration against Croatia after a balanced first period, to add another amazing chapter to their history book. Making the quarters here was already a never-seen feat by them, but by beating the Croats they also booked their tickets to the

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2023 World Championships. Considering that they debuted only four years ago in Barcelona, this is almost like a fairy-tale – only those tales missing to mention the extremely hard work part, which these girls did under the Greek maestro Dimitrios Mavrotas. They will face Hungary for the 5<sup>th</sup> place as the Magyars beat the French soundly.

## Game recaps

### *Semi-finals*

#### **Netherlands v Spain 7-10**

In a span of 1:45 minutes Spain jumped to a 0-2 lead with the usual great centre goal by Maica Garcia and a fine action shot by Elena Ruiz – and that made a long-lasting impact, at least to the rest of the first half. Both teams missed a woman-up in the following phase before Simone van de Kraats put the Dutch on the scoreboard after 5:12 minutes. The Spanish centres went on delivering, next came a penalty, Beatriz Ortiz buried it but Nina ten Broek hit a nice one from action for 2-3.

Still, after killing a woman-down, Spain earned another penalty, Ruiz made no mistake – and the Dutch started playing with even more tensions. In the next five minutes they were unable to score from two man-ups, in between they had problems to set up the centres or to make their lethal perimeter shots. Later two huge saves from Laura Aarts kept them close but she couldn't do much when Ruiz came one-on-one in the next counter, the lob put Spain 2-5 up. It could have been +4 but the Dutch defended brilliantly in a woman-up, got a 6 on 5 with 10 seconds to go, called a time-out and Sabrine van der Sloot needed only seven to pull one back for 3-5.

This was a psyche-lifting finish, and the Dutch came back fresh and with a positive mindset after the three-minute break, and most importantly their defence managed to neutralise the Spanish centre-forwards for most of the time. When they needed to face a woman-down, they moved quite well, denied two in this period, and when they had 6 on 5s, they put both away. It happened midway through the third, in 1:30 minutes, there was no way to stop Brigitte Sleeking's blasts. All of sudden it was 5-5 – but the Spaniards reacted well, and in a long possession, after two saved shots, Ruiz managed to beat Aarts with a brilliant one-timer, it was her fourth in the game.

Whatever happened in the third, the fourth offered the same pattern we had seen in the first half – though one may have got used to that in the women's game you should expect the unexpected. The Dutch were unable to maintain their high-level defence and their offensive level also dropped a bit unexpectedly. Paula Leiton got a fine pass in the first extra on the 2m line, from there it was easy, then Sleeking was blocked in the Dutch woman-up and in a minute Pili Pena's left-handed shot hit the back of the net as the defenders let her way too close and the blocking hands didn't cover the goal enough. Vivian Sevenich pulled one back with 4:58 to go for 6-8, then both sides missed a man-up apiece – it was more painful for the Dutch in the given situation. Especially because Anni Espar managed to sneak away and finished off the counter for 6-9 – with 3:45 on the clock, it seemed to be decisive. It was, indeed – and soon four separated the two sides when Ortiz netted an extra. Even though Sleeking's next shot hit the back of the net in a 6 on 5, the Dutch couldn't score any more in the remaining 2:38 minutes.

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### **Greece v Italy 12-9**

The Greeks opened the scoring with a fine man-up play, finished by Erini Ninou, then came a lengthy battle, with a lot of swimming and position play to seek any minor advantage. Italy needed 4:28 minutes to open their account in this game, then Domitilli Picozzi's pinpoint shot was good enough for an equaliser. The Greeks regained the lead in 20 seconds with a penalty, but Claudia Marletta gained some ground and arrived to the Greek goal unmarked to make it 2-2. Both sides missed its next man-up, then Italy got an extra chance nine seconds before the first break, the excluded player didn't swim out but Marletta sent the ball painfully wide from the penalty line.

Eleni Xenaki's magnificent centre-shot put the Greeks ahead once more in 27 seconds and this time they hit the next one too – from a woman-up+penalty combo, Ninou made it 4-2. The Italians missed an extra, but the Greeks couldn't expand their lead – and finally Roberta Bianconi halted Italy's scoreless run after 7:45 minutes by burying a penalty. The answer came immediately, Christina Siouti's amazing bouncer from the left wing reset the two-goal gap. Silvia Avegno pulled one back again, but Ninou was on fire and blasted his third one with 43 seconds on the clock for 6-4.

A quick exchange of extra-man goals kicked off the third period, then came a decisive phase: the Italian defence denied two Greek shots but a lapse in attention left Maria Patra alone and she thanked the opportunity. Then there was another collapse in the same position 50 seconds later, Vasiliki Plevritou could shoot unguarded, for her it was a Christmas gift and Greece led 9-5.

Italian head coach Carlo Silipo called for a time-out and in the middle of the period Avegno shaved off one by netting a penalty. However, the time-out helped the Greeks too as Vasiliki Plevritou had another clean shot in a woman-up. Valeria Palmieri delivered from the centre for 10-7 with 2:30 to go. Enough time to have a 6 on 5 apiece but the defences stood firm so the three-goal margin remained and that looked quite good from the Greeks' perspective.

And looked even better – they killed a woman-down and soon Ioanna Chydirioti came up with a fine sneaking shot from the perimeter for 11-7. Italy's next extra needed a VAR review, it showed that the goalie made the save behind the virtual line, so Avegno was credited with her third and there were five minutes to play. That's a lot in this sport – but three minutes were gone, and Italy didn't get any closer as they missed two 6 on 5s. All credit went to the Greek defence, they did an astonishing job, and soon they denied a third one. Before that they also missed an extra at the other end, but it was affordable with such efforts in the back; Ionna Stamatopoulou was 10 on 18 at this stage, for 55.8%, a game winning performance. The two late goals – one apiece – didn't matter that match, this semi-final also ended in a convincing three-goal win.

### ***For places 5-8<sup>th</sup>***

#### **France v Hungary 9-19**

As expected, Hungary took a commanding lead in eight minutes – they had a perfect storm in the middle of the first period, netted four goals in 102 seconds to set the tone. Early in the second they were already 2-8 up and perhaps thought they did enough damage to switch back gears.

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The French fought on, however, and won the next three and a half minutes 4-1 while Hungary's head coach Attila Biro's audio level constantly hit new heights. It took a bit more time to wake everyone up on his side – in the middle of the third it was still 8-12, then the Magyars managed to reach the required level again and with another 0-4 rush in 2:51 minutes they closed down the contest inside the third period. This was really enough, three more came in the fourth and the gap was extended to 10 goals, to mirror the real difference between the sides.

## Israel v Croatia 15-8

For eight minutes the home sides managed to maintain the hope that they could make a miracle and play a close game with Israel which looked stronger anyway. They staged a stunning start, took a 0-2 lead, then Israel pulled one back and late in the first netted two more in 39 seconds to go 3-2 up. However, Jelena Butic's 8m last-grasp shot got deflected on a blocking hand to beat the goalie and the buzzer for 3-3, and the spectators, turning out in record numbers for this crucial match, were cheering loudly.

But the moments of truth came in the second period – though a bit delayed. First, the Croats killed a 6 on 4, but also missed a man-up and in 17 seconds Maria Bogachenko netted a fine action goal – and 34 seconds later another one. And further 44 seconds gone when Nofar Hochberg put away an extra and there the hosts were somewhat broken. They missed another 6 on 5, then shortly before the middle break two more came in a minute, and this 5-0 run left no room for a comeback for the Croats.

The gap was just growing, Israel dominated the game – their players remained ecstatic even when they were 6-7 goals up and jumped in joy after each hit. And they had many occasions to celebrate as they netted five in the third (just one piece of stats: the number of saves stood at 10-3, with both teams having 16 shots on target). With a substantial 13-6 lead in hand, the fourth was a kind of winding-down, with two goals apiece.

The Israelis staged memorable celebrations on the pool deck – upon their third appearance at the Europeans they not only achieved their best-ever result, but with this win they booked their berth at next year's FINA World Championships, an astonishing jump in development by anybody's language.

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