

2022 European Water Polo Championships, Split (CRO) – Day 7

Italy, Croatia, Spain and Hungary go directly to the quarters

Italy staged a 5-0 rush in the third period to beat Montenegro and book their quarter-final spot. Croatia scored five goals in the entire game against Greece, none in the first half, but it was still enough for a draw and the top spot in Group B, much to the joy of the 8000 spectators, filling the Spaladium Arena. Spain and Hungary secured their QF berths too.

Men, Round 3, Group A: Italy v Montenegro 13-8, Georgia v Slovakia 16-11. *Rankings:* 1. ITA 9, 2. MNE 6, 3. GEO 3, 4. SVK 0. **Group B:** Greece v Croatia 5-5, Malta v France 8-15. *Rankings:* 1. CRO 7, 2. GRE 5, 3. France, 4. MLT 0. **Group C:** Germany v Spain 6-17, Romania v Netherlands 12-12. *Rankings:* 1. ESP 9, 2. NED 4 (+6), 3. ROU 4 (0), 4. GER 0. **Group D:** Hungary v Israel 23-4, Serbia v Slovenia 17-6. *Rankings:* 1. HUN 9, 2. SRB 6, 3. ISR 3, 4. SLO 0.

Fixtures, Sunday. Crossover games – 15.00: Montenegro v Romania, 16.30 Georgia v Netherlands, 19.00 Greece v Israel, 20.30 France v Serbia.

Quarter-finals (Tuesday): Hungary v MNE/ROU, Spain v GRE/ISR, Croatia v GEO/NED, Italy v FRA/SRB

For places 13-16th (Sunday): 10.00 Slovakia v Germany, 11.30 Malta v Slovenia

In the first big match of the evening session Italy and Montenegro produced the expected enormous battle which was even until the middle of the third period when it stood 5-5. Then Italy's high intensity game bore its fruits, they staged a 5-0 rush and that decided the outcome. In the other match of Group A, Georgia didn't leave it so late to deliver the killer-blow, a 5-0 storm right in the first period did enough damage against the Slovaks to send the team to the crossovers.

As the coronation of the preliminary round, the grand fight took place between Greece and Croatia in front of a sell-out crowd of 8000 people. It was indeed a grand fight where the Croats enjoyed both the advantages and the disadvantages of the home soil. The latter one hit them in the first half, very hard, as they cracked a bit under the pressure and were unable to score for the entire first half – the Greeks had two brilliant distant shots to lead 2-0.

Then came the home advantage, in all possible forms, and that helped the hosts to catch up with their rivals. It could have gone either way, but at the end it finished in a tie – and that favoured the Croats to qualify for the quarter-finals, where they face the winner of the game Netherlands v Georgia. At the same stage, the Greeks, after a predictable win over Israel, will have to clash with world champion Spain, so all the tensions in this game was very much understandable.

There was another hard-fought draw earlier, in Group C, the Netherlands and Romania battled toe-to-toe throughout the contest. Towards the end, the Dutch were more in control, and even though the Romanians came back from three goals down twice, the last equaliser came too late – this draw sets the

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Netherlands up against Georgia for the crossovers, while Romania goes on a mission impossible against Montenegro.

In Group D, the newly shaped Hungarian team offered another power demonstration, hit 23 goals once more, this time against Israel and finished the group stage with 62 goals. This is a new record for the prelims since the current playing format had been introduced in 2016 (the previous record was held by the Spanish, set in Budapest 2020 with 58 hits). Serbia woke up in time against Slovenia to stage a 10-1 rush in the second half, after they built only a modest 7-5 lead in the first.

Game recaps

Group A

Italy v Montenegro 13-8

Vincenzo Dolce put Italy ahead from an extra right after one minute, and few would have guessed that this would be the only goal scored in the opening eight minutes. Both teams defended extremely well, Dejan Lazovic stopped Edoardo di Somma's penalty with a fantastic move, then in the second half of the quarter Italy killed three man-downs in a row.

That hit back early in the second as Giacomo Cannella didn't miss Italy's second penalty for 2-0. The Montenegrins battled on, though, and Miroslav Perkovic finished a fine counter to score his team first after 8:32 minutes and soon it was even – Lazovic had another save in a man-down while Bogdan Durdic hit the back of the net from an extra at last. Italy got a third penalty – in a man-up –, this was buried by Vincenzo Renzuto for 3-2. Montenegro wasted two man-ups within a minute, the second after a time-out, without a shot, but they made the third, leftie Aleksa Ukropina's one-timer left no chance for Marco del Lungo. Italy had a better conversion rate at this stage, Cannella's excellent shot hit the net in the dying seconds for 4-3 (and Italy was also 3 for 4, Montenegro stood with 2 for 7).

The extreme physical battle just intensified in the third, almost three minutes gone when Marko Mrsic's 6m blast equalled the score at 4-4, but Luca Marziali replied immediately with an easy put-away in a man-up, Durdic also netted an extra, just like Dolce a 6 on 4.

After this 1:48min madness (four goals from connecting possessions), Italy could hit first, Francesco di Fulvio netted a one-on-one (actually turned into a 6 on 5 because of a foul in the 'backyard') and he hammered one in from the distance, which was even more painful for the Montenegrins as, thanks to Lazovic's tremendous save, they just survived a man-down. And Italy made the most of this critical phase when Luca Damonte sent the ball home from another man-up for 9-5, with 15 seconds to go. And Montenegro hit the rock bottom as they lost the ball right after the restart, Italy launched a counter and Cannella made a kind of touchdown for 10-5, two seconds before the buzzer.

With this devastating 5-0 rush in 3:32 minutes the World Champ silver medallist put the contest into bed – but the Montenegrins fought on, though they couldn't get much closer – netted two man-ups, Lazovic saved another penalty, though in the meantime Renzuto had a brilliant backhander from the

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second centre position. It was 11-7 with 5:11 to go, but it took further three minutes to pull one more back from a man-up, it was too late – and Italy could score two late goals, so at the end the gap remained the same by the end of the contest.

Georgia v Slovakia 16-11

Georgia's win in the clash for the third place in the group was never in question. They stormed to a 5-0 lead and never looked back. Their experienced mix of Serbian, Croatian, Montenegrin and Italian players with Georgians – who spend their whole season together in Dinamo Tbilisi, play in the Champions League, under the same coach, Serbian Dejan Stanojevic – did a very clean job especially at the beginning, and the powerful start set the tone.

The Slovaks had some better though short spells, they came back to 6-3 early in the second, only to concede two more in 34 seconds, and after 8-3 there were no way to stage a comeback. After that point the Georgians managed to cement this 5-6 goal gap, the Slovaks fought hard but whenever they scored, the reply always came so the difference was kind of constant – 13-7 Georgia led before the last period.

The fourth didn't bring any change – though coach Dejan Stanojevic never stopped commanding his teams and didn't seem too happy with his defenders' performance at some stages. Still, the win was theirs, though the Slovaks could also leave the pool with heads held high – especially after the last-grasp backhanded goal by Matej Caraj, which was a real beauty.

In this game, the storyline didn't end by the buzzer though – the Georgian goalkeeper Irakli Razmadze climbed to the stands and made a proposal to his fiancée, and after the kiss the announcer could happily tell the public via the loud-speaker: “She said yes!”

Group B

Greece v Croatia 5-5

A sellout crowd of the 8,000 people, or perhaps even more as not a single position on the mezzanine walkways were left empty, highlighted the last match of the men's prelims. However, for extremely long minutes it was felt and seen that the weight of the packed stands and the whole atmosphere simply froze the home players. Also, Greece's rookie goalie Konstantinos Limarakis posted one huge save after the other, he had a hand on each ball on target, and sometimes the woodwork also supported him (deserved it, for sure).

At the same time, the Greeks settled already in the first period and two fantastic shots from the perimeter by Konstantinos Genidounias, then Angelos Vlachopoulos gave them a 2-0 lead after eight minutes. As incredible as it may sound, this was also the halftime score as the second period didn't see any goals. The Croats tried to beat Limarakis in vain who stood with 10/10, while the Greeks wasted two man-ups late in the second, though the latter one was whistled off by the ref for a 2m violation, hotly disputed by the Greeks. Both teams had a 0 on 4 conversion that far, but the Olympic silver medallists hit those two action goals.

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The ice was finally broken, the Croats needed a 6 on 4, it was easy for Marko Zuvela from 4.5 metres. Soon arrived the second, in 66 seconds, Josip Vrlcic backhanded one from the centre, once he found – made – some room for himself for 2-2. In between, Gkiovetsis' bouncer hit the bar, then the Greeks denied a man-down with a great block, and Alexandros Papanastasiou sent the ball home from a dying man-up, though Bijac saved the first shot with his head. The Croats equalised again, from a man-up, Konstantin Kharkov found an easy way to beat Limarakis above his head. Papanastasiou's next shot hit both the bar and the post but bounced out, then the Greeks could make a fine steal, earned a man-up 15 seconds before the last break, Angelos Vlachopoulos sent the ball home, but the refs called a 2m violation once more, apparently against a player not taking part in the action. So it stood 3-3 before the final period.

Split-born Jerko Marinic-Kragic got the crowd on their feet, he also sent the ball above Limarakis' head from a man-up, so for the first time in the game, the Croats led at the beginning of the fourth. It could have been more, but the next man-up play didn't work, however, the Greek shots weren't that precise either. Still, soon it was even, though Greece needed two man-ups in one possession. Bijac had two great saves in the first, but couldn't do much when Papanastasiou finished off the second from the left wing for 4-4. And Angelos Vlachopoulos soon consoled himself from the same position where he had already netted one at the end of the third, only on equal strength, with a brilliantly placed shot for 5-4, with 3:36 from time. Tensions ran high as the Croats could finish a dying 6 on 5, Rino Buric just beat the buzzer for 5-5.

Vlachopoulos tried to catch Bijac off-guard – they just collected a rebound –, but the Croatian goalie was on alert. Then the home side had a man-up after a time-out, but a fantastic block denied them with exactly one minute on the clock. Dervisis tried his luck from the perimeter as the centre was covered, but Bijac made his 11th save (on 16 shots for 68.8%, Limarakis finished the game with 13/18, 72.2%). The Croats burnt their 30sec, the Greek had 2.8 after a time-out, was enough for a distant shot through the crowd but it flew into the celebrating crowd from the crossbar as with this draw the Croats landed right in the quarterfinals.

Malta v France 8-15

If anyone thought that France would make a serious attempt to improve its goal difference to match the Greeks – with whom they played a draw in the first round –, then one had to recognise right after the first period that it was never a goal for the French. What's more, during the first half, at certain stages, not even their win seemed to be secured.

The Maltese players fought hard as long as they lasted and held a 1-1 draw after eight minutes, then deep into the second it was still 3-3 – Matthew Zammit's backhanders from the good old centre-forward school were as brilliant as could be –, while French goalie Clement Dubois had to come up with a series of huge saves.

Then the Maltese started committing errors like a lazy pass from a corner-throw and losing balls on the perimeter and the experienced French penalised them for those, and with two counter-attack goals they jumped to a 3-5 lead by halftime.

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Malta pulled one back right away, but a fine centre-shot from Thomas Vernoux and another counter by Romain Marion-Vernoux in 34 seconds gave the French a 4-7 lead. Both sides missed a man-up apiece (after respective time-outs), then after Jake Tanti stopped a counter, Dino Zammit's blast from a free-throw brought Malta one closer at 5-7. Still, on more and more occasion at least one Maltese lagged behind and Charles Canonne used that 6 on 5 for an action goal – though Dino Zammit replied from action once again for 6-8. With 27 seconds to go in the third, it looked even more embarrassing from the French perspective when Sam Gialanze put away a man-up for 7-8, so it looked pretty much an open game before the final period.

At this point one may have recalled the French head coach Florian Bruzzo's words who refused to praise his team's fine first half efforts against Croatia, saying they were no longer happy with partial success, the six-goal defeat is a bad result as they wanted to be on the same level with the top teams. Well, those top teams beat Malta by 10-20 goals difference here...

Before the heat would have turned on them, the French netted three fast goals, in a span of 73 seconds at the beginning of the fourth, a man-up and two counters did the damage for 7-11. By then, the Maltese lost their composure as their energy level dropped significantly, so after holding tight for three periods for 7-8, it was followed by a 1-7 thrashing by the French.

Group C

Romania v Netherlands 12-12

The Dutch took a flying start with two fast goals (the second was approved by the VAR, though the goalie made a save, though behind the line) – but soon the Romanians 'flew' after them. Mainly thanks to their perfectly flying balls coming from the perimeter – all three shots from the distance were really spectacular and enough to be on level after eight minutes at 3-3.

A no-look pass from Lucas Gielen was the key in Jorn Winkelhorst's fine one-timer from the centre early in the third. Next came one man-up goal apiece, followed by an almost four minutes long physical battle. The Romanians could finally earn a man-up, though needed a time-out to have refreshed players around and it paid off, Andrei Neamtu sent the ball home from the right wing for 5-5. The reply came immediately, Gielen also converted an extra from the perimeter, so the Netherlands led 5-6 at halftime.

Andrei-Tudor Fulea was on fire though, he netted his fourth early in the third, a great one-timer from the left, then Marius-Florian Tic made a great save in a man-down, however, a bit later he couldn't do much with Pascal Janssen's blast from 5m. The Romanians missed a crucial extra, as Guus van Ijperen's ball – also from a 6 on 5 – sneaked in under Tic's arm and in 47 seconds Winkelhorst's penalty gave his team a 6-9 lead.

Silvian Colodrovschi's fine backhander from the centre halted the Dutch 0-3 rush – till this, the Romanians had a 4:04 minute-long silence in front –, and soon they came back to one, Victor-Andrei Antipa's left-handed one-timer found the hole between the goalie's hand and the post. It was 27 seconds

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to go, but was enough for another Dutch goal, Janssen put away a late man-up with 0:03 on the clock for 8-10.

And Janssen carried on where he finished – finishing a counter 39 seconds into the fourth reset the three-goal gap. It did not last long, though, Fulea hit his fifth from a man-up, and Colodrovski also made one for 10-11. Soon they had two extras to go even – the goalie denied them in the first, the second came after a time-out, and just like in the first half, it helped, Vlad-Luca Georgescu's bouncer was one from the finest ones from the left wing for 11-11, with 2:31 remaining. The Dutch, whose game slowed down a bit in the previous minutes, also had a 6 on 5 finally but couldn't make it, the Romanians defended extremely well. They couldn't make the centre-feed in the next possession and that cost them the second place as Gielen managed to find the back of the net from 6m for 11-12 – with 51 seconds to go. Fulea hit his 6th from a man-up to save the game to a tie 21 seconds from time, but that was only a consolation as the better goal-difference kept the Dutch in the second position That secured them a crossover with Georgia for the QF berth, while the Romanians have to face a much demanding task, to clash with either Italy or Montenegro.

Germany v Spain 6-17

And it happened. Man-up No. 23 at these Europeans – and the Germans scored. Too bad, that by then the Spaniards sailed away with the game (which didn't decide on anything: Spain already booked the top spot, while the Germans finished fourth anyway). At the beginning the two teams weren't at the same level – the swimming speed, the passing speed and the game intensity was like Heaven and Earth and that was sharply mirrored by the scoreboard. Spain led 1-5 after the first period and it looked even worse at halftime, 2-12 – one could hardly recall any German team from the past which played such an inferior role even against the top sides.

The world champions switched back gears for the third, though still controlled the game but at least the Germans could put some make-up to the scoreline, including the 6 on 5 hit by Zoran Bozic. After missing 20 out of 20 in the first two matches, and two more here, this one went in, prompting coach Petar Porobic to make an unmistakable gesture, kind of telling that it would be so simple, just need to play it properly...

The last period lacked the entertainment factor, the Spanish added two more but tightened their defensive line a but to shut out the Germans for the last eight minutes.

Group D

Hungary v Israel 23-4

It was another surgeon-precision-like job from the Hungarians. Two days after their blockbuster performance against Serbia, they came back to play the first morning match at 9.00, and they dismantled their rival with an extremely disciplined game at both ends of the field.

Israel could score their first at 7-0, while the Magyars kept them under enormous pressure – they took no risky moves in defence, but in offence they played almost each possession until they could shoot at

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the end. They took 40 shots (in 32 minutes), 34 of those were on target, only the Israeli goalies prevented them from bettering the Greeks' scoring record of 25 as they posted 11 saves. Indeed, the shots on target show the huge difference: 34-7. Krisztian Manhercz was the most precise among the Magyars, he came up with a 6/6 ratio, scoring two goals more than the rivals altogether.

As a side note: for the first time at these championships, a female referee was appointed to officiate a men's game and Spain's Marta Cabanas also did a splendid job.

Serbia v Slovenia 17-6

Serbia had to bounce back from a historical defeat – as historians revealed, a six-goal loss to Belgium (1:7) back in 1927 was the all-time low from the ancient times, before they were thrashed by nine goals by the Hungarians two days ago.

Some signs were still visible in the opening period, kind of underlining that a hard and bumpy road leads back from hell – missed easy scoring chances and silly defensive mistakes showed that the team was still in a regrouping phase. What was perhaps a bit more embarrassing that it was also visible on the scoreboard too – deep into the second period the Slovenians was trailing by a single goal only, 5-4, and the Serbs missed their second man-up in this period.

Then Djordje Vucinic put away the third one from close range, but they couldn't move on as goalie Jure Beton simply stole the ball from Nemanja Vico' hand in a clear centre chance, and Vukasin Stefanovic brilliantly finished the Slovenian counter for 6-5. Strahinja Rasovic, the team captain, one of the four Olympic champs remaining on the roster, stepped up and drove himself to a clear position and sent the ball home from 2m – at least the family ties worked as the perfect assist came from his younger bro Viktor.

Radomir Drasovic then made a fine steal and swam away for a one-on-one, and 42 seconds later Strahinja Rasovic buried a penalty, to offer some instant cure for the in-house tensions. The Slovenians pulled one back though from a man-up but as the gap looked safe, the Serbs played with some confidence and Vucinic and the younger Rasovic both had clean finishes from back-to-back man-ups. Now they were rolling as in the good old days, scored from six consecutive possessions, and led 13-6 before the final period.

The fourth was spent in afterparty mood, the Serbians played with confidence but couldn't – or didn't want – to maintain the high intensity of the third quarter, while the Slovenians ran out of gas and ideas alike. It was a peaceful 3-0 finish – all in all, the 7-5 first half was followed by a 10-1 second, a glimpse of what this side is capable of.

2 September 2022

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