

2022 European Water Polo Championships, Split (CRO) – Day 9

Shock of the year: France ousts Serbia

It happened. France won a thriller against Serbia and made the top eight for the first time since 1958, while the Serbs could tie their worst-ever finish from 1927, and that remained the best-case scenario for them here. Apart from the last match's shocking outcome, the other duels ended as expected, Montenegro, Greece and Georgia all made the quarter-finals with ease – it was also history for Georgia, as they've never reached the quarters before.

Men's crossover matches: Montenegro v Romania 13-8, Georgia v Netherlands 12-8, Greece v Israel 22-9, France v Serbia 10-9. **For places 13-16th:** Slovakia v Germany 7-18, Malta v Slovenia 13-9. **Quarter-finals (Tuesday):** 15.00 Hungary v Montenegro, 16.30 Italy v France, 19.00 Spain v Greece, 20.30 Croatia v Georgia. **For places 9-12th:** 12.00 Romania v Israel, 13.30 Netherlands v Serbia. **For places 15-16th:** 9.00 Slovakia v Slovenia. **For places 13-14th:** 10.30 Germany v Malta

Serbia, including the ancient era of Yugoslavia, met France 7 times at the Europeans and won all seven matches since 1934 – the last two ended in a rout, 15-6 in 2014 and 16-8 in 2016. However, the mighty side, which won 7 of 9 editions between 2001 and 2018, is no longer that feared team. After half a dozen of their greats bid farewell after Tokyo and due to recent injuries, only four of the 2021 Olympic champions remained on board – and the reshaped team could barely withstand the pressure at this tournament. Neither the one coming from the opponents, nor the expectations the country had towards the national team after a golden era.

The writing had already been on the wall since Day 2, when they suffered their worst-ever defeat, Hungary thrashed them by nine goals. Still, many thought that beating France would not be a huge task, though perhaps harder than usual. But the Serbs' game didn't start ticking once more, as soon as they fell behind 0-3 in the 5th minute, the French knew this could be their day. They could hold their rivals on two goals till halftime, despite having a 11-minute-long scoreless phase. The Serbs geared up a bit for the third, but their defence was still easy to penetrate, and with one period remaining they were 9-6 down.

Two Tokyo heroes Dusan Mandic and Strahinja Rasovic tried to shake up the team, but their shooting ratio told the story: 3/8 for Mandic and 3/13 for Rasovic (21 combined, out of 37). Still, while the French switched to a more passive game, the Serbs kept coming back and these two greats brought them back to even with 1:07 remaining. Then a time-out helped the French to set themselves up for a last-man-up and Mehdi Marzouki put it away with 29 seconds to go. The Serbs also had an extra latelly, but without a time-out – one had to be burnt to stop the free-fall at 0-3... And Mandic, who had won many big matches for the Serbs in the past, couldn't beat the French goalie Hugo Fontani, who came up with his 14th save and played an instrumental role in France's win, which guarantees them an 8th place finish at least – the best since 1958.

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And some special the excitements remain for the second week as we have four non-qualified teams in the quarters for three 2023 World Championships berths: Hungary, France, Montenegro and Georgia. The latter two won two hard-fought matches, though by the end their respective wins were more than convincing.

Romania staged a fine battle, but the Montenegrins' quality prevailed at the end. Georgia's experienced players handled almost all crucial moments way better than the Dutch, and at the end they celebrated wildly their historical feat, to reach the quarters for the first time in their history. Greece had a much calmer evening, their encounter against Israel was the most one-sided contest of the day, though that was expected – the Olympic silver medallists now had a rendezvous with world champion Spain in the quarters.

Game recaps

France v Serbia 10-9

When the ball bounced to the goalie's head from the bar and then fell in, it was pure bad luck. But the next two was anything but fortunate. A finely played man-up, finished by Thomas Vernoux from the 2m line, then a converted penalty – and France led 3-0 after four and a half minutes.

Dejan Savic had to burn a time-out immediately and 15 seconds later Radomir Drasovic's shot from the perimeter seemed to have brought some calm for the Serbs. It did not. They missed – messed up – back-to-back man-ups and needed some luck to survive a man-down and a centre-shot so it stood 3-1 after eight minutes.

The French killed another men-down – it was amazing that even the experienced captain Strahinja Rasovic was 'able to' hit the post from 2m in a one-on-one –, but the ball remained on the Serbs' hands and Marko Radulovic sent it through the blocking arms for an action goal.

However, for long minutes that was all – the Serbian offence lacked anything it had been known for earlier. Again, it was rather some static shooting exercise where the players thought the ball's speed would do the damage, but not, it did not. The French couldn't make much advantage of that, though, perhaps the proper defending consumed too much energy. But at least that worked as Hugo Fontani delivered another tremendous save in a man-down, and then, despite wasting a clear 4 on 3, the French could finally score after 11:01 minutes – through some hardship, but Emil Bjorch's ball bounced through Lazar Dobozev's hands in an extra, so France led 4-2 at halftime.

Dejan Savic needed all his coaching magics to shake up his players – despite being in a transition process with the team, still, the fact that Serbia could score only two goals against France in an entire half looked quite awkward. A man-up + penalty combo brought them closer, Rasovic buried it, but Ugo Crousillat immediately replied from a 6 on 5. And the veteran leftie soon let the ball fly from 7m for a fantastic goal. Rasovic pulled one back from a nice drive, but soon Marko Radulovic roughed one of the French players while Serbia already had the ball, he was red-carded, and Mehdi Marzouki netted the 6

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on 5 for 7-4. Dusan Mandic converted another penalty after a fine centre-action, but then again, the forced distant shots didn't bring any fruit – either went wide or were easily stopped by Fontani.

The Serbs were playing with the fire and more and more sign showed that it would not end well. Though they killed a man-down, but Crousillat tried his luck from the wing and the ball sneaked in under the goalie's arm. The Serbs were lucky to finish their 6 on 5 when the ball fell to Nemanja Vico's hand after a save and he pushed it in from close. The French didn't mind it as Vernoux came up with a breath-taking backhander from the centre for 9-6 and when they got another gift from the Serbs for the last 20 seconds in the third (Drasovic fouled a French player far from the ball, while trying to escape), they had a chance to go by four goals up, but Marzouki took a hurried shot, stopped by Dobožanov.

Seventeen seconds into the fourth, Mandic hit his first real shot here in Split from 7m which lifted the Serbs' spirits, but it was not followed a real breakthrough. They had a man-up, but the ball hit the post. Rasovic went for the drive, got a pass, Fontani stopped it. In between, the French missed an extra – then with 3:20 to go, Fontani made another save on Rasovic's shot in a man-up. The next one, six on six, hit the back of the net though, a classic rocket under the bar from the perimeter, for 9-8, with 2:37 on the clock. Then France had a second match-ball, but they failed to convert their man-up and Mandic equalised from the Serbs' 6 on 5 for 9-9 with 1:07 to go.

Serbia was on a 3-0 run, while the French couldn't score for almost eight minutes. Then, with 47 seconds remaining, they got another man-up and this time Marzouki could deliver from the left wing, after a time-out, so the Serbs had 29 seconds to save the game to a penalty shootout. Nineteen remained on the clock, when they got a 6 on 5 and Mandic stepped up to take the decisive shot, but Fontani delivered his 14th (!) save in the game and that was it.

Serbia dropped out from the top eight for the first time since... Chronology keeps record on a 9th place finish from 1927... However, in the modern era they barely missed the podium at all, a 7th place from 1999 was their worst-ever finish.

At the same time the French returned to the top 8 for the first time since 1958 – and it was also the first-time ever that they could beat the Serbs at the European Championships, as the Serbs (including the Yugoslav era) held a 7-0 head-to-head up until this night.

Montenegro v Romania 13-8

At the beginning, it went according to the – imagined – script, the Montenegrins took the lead twice, but then the Romanians not only equalised for the second time (with two great shots from the perimeter), but with 50 seconds to go in the first, Tudor-Andrei Fulea put away a man-up for 2-3 (with some luck). The Montenegrins missed a man-up in the meantime, then another one, though after the save was made the Montenegrins forced a penalty – but Bogdan Durdic hit the post.

Then early in the second it all started going according to that script – Vladan Spaic made an easy put-away from a man-up (no marker as the defender was excluded), followed by two counters, so

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Montenegro scored three in 52 seconds for a 5-3 lead. An emergency time-out helped the Romanians somewhat, soon Andrei Neamtu pulled one back from a man-up, but Marko Petkovic also sent the ball home 19 seconds later at the other end, also from a 6 on 5 for 6-4. Just like in the first, another action goal came from the right wing after a rebounding shot, this time Ionut Vranceanu sent the ball back immediately, from right hand, catching Lazovic by surprise. And the Romanians made a steal in a man-down and had three possessions to go even but couldn't make more harm, though the 6-5 halftime score still looked better than they might have expected.

And looked even better early in the third when Francesco Iudean scored from close after a fine drive-in for 6-6. Then the rebound helped the Montenegrins, for a man-up, and Kanstantin Averka finished it off with a great shot from the left wing with 2 seconds on the shot-clock. And just like in the previous quarter, in 23 seconds came another one, from a counter by Marko Petkovic for 6-8.

This spell and the following couple of minutes showed that the difference in physical condition started to separate the teams – the Romanians attacks were no longer that sharp as in the first half, they had a man-up, but it looked rather hopeless while Aleksa Ukropina's shot in the Montenegrins' 6 on 5 was simple but effective (9-6). When Vlad Georgescu finally pulled one back to halt his team's 4-minute drought, it was rather a smaller error from Lazovic (the sneaking ball came from 7m at least). To make things a bit more exciting though, Averka missed another penalty, then Tic posted another huge save in a man-down, to reserve some hope for the fourth.

Tic carried on, had an out-of-Earth catch in a man-down at the beginning of the fourth, but that was only a save – he couldn't help his mates scoring. And in the next man-down not even he could do much when Vasilje Radovic finished it off from the 2m line. The Romanians' extra almost went unnoticed – hit the blocks twice –, while Durdic's magnificent lob virtually ended the contest at 11-7, even though there were 4:49 minutes to play.

Later Neamtu put one away for, but a blocking had denied them in their following 6 on 5, and this time Durdic sent a rocket under the bar from the perimeter for 12-8, with 1:53 to go. Towards the end Tic also lost his composure, got a third one from the perimeter in a row, which sealed Montenegro's victory and their spot in the quarters.

Georgia v Netherlands 12-8

With Russia being away, the eighth quarter-final spot besides the 'Magnificent Seven' was up for grabs and this was the crossover game where not one of the favourites faced off an underdog but two teams on equal strength clashed. It also had some extra at stake as the QF berth came with a World Championship spot for 2023 – so the game was expected to be filled with emotions and tensions.

It was, indeed. The Dutch had the better 'opening', they jumped to a 1-3 lead with two great action goals and a nicely played man-up, but the foreign-born stars of the Georgians kept the team in the game. Dusan Vasic netted a dying extra, Fabio Baraldi put one away from close with 26 seconds to go in the first for 2-3, then early in the second Marko Jelaca's great bouncer from the perimeter brought back Georgia to even. Not for long, though, despite a killed man-down, the next possession ended in a great

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action goal for the Dutch, by Jesse Koopman. But Boris Vapenski beat his defender one-on-one to equalise again with a great left-handed shot, then the Dutch missed another 6 on 5 and Vapenski put Georgia ahead with a brilliant curved lob-shot. Lacking the same precision in finishes hit back on the Dutch – while Nika Shushiashvili sent the ball home from a man-up, they wasted a third one in a row. To make the difference more spectacular, Kvicha Jakhiaia netted a fine one from the perimeter with 18 seconds to go (this last two hits arrived from Georgian born players), to lead 7-4 with a 4-0 rush.

The Dutch man-up plays were in ruins, two more misses came within a minute early in the third. And even though the Georgians also wasted one, soon Jelaca's great action goal gave them a comforting 8-4 lead. A time-out helped the Dutch to halt two bad runs parallel: they finally scored after 9:30 minutes and the goal came in a man-up (after five straight misses). However, the reply came painfully soon, in 25 seconds, Valiko Dadvani hammered one in from the left wing. Jon Winkelhorst pulled one back from a counter-like 6 on 5 but couldn't come closer in the third – but at least the gap wasn't four as the Dutch could kill two man-downs in one possession at the end.

Still, they faced a mount to climb, starting the fourth from 6-9 down. Janssen buried a penalty for 7-9, but Andria Bitadze didn't make any mistake in a man-up, while Koopman let the ball fly from a hopeless position in a man-up. Soon Nikoloz Shublazde came up with a fine save in the next man-down – and as a sharp contrast, Bitadze finished another one from the 2m line for 11-7. Up until that point, both sides had 9 extras, the Georgians scored 5 goals, the Dutch only two.

And soon it was over: Janssen hit the post from a penalty, while Jelaca sold his 'body-against-body' action shot again right from the next possession – so it was 12-7 and not 11-8 with 4:01 on the clock. Nothing really worked in the Dutch offence, they couldn't put away a 2 on 1, when they could hit one from the distance, only 1:21 remained from the game – and they had another 6:00 minute-long scoreless period in the meantime.

The Georgians celebrated wildly, the victory sent them to the quarters, so it's going to be their first-ever top eight finish in history. To have some extra, the President of the Georgian Federation also managed to beat the security guards – like his players did with the Dutch defenders a couple of times – and starting from the stands, he jumped over the fence, avoided the 'blocking hands' and dove into the water to greet the team upon the grand occasion.

Greece v Israel 22-9

In four minutes or so it became clear that this encounter would not offer the same excitements as the previous two. The Greeks staged a perfect 4-0 storm, and even though they missed a couple of chances, including a penalty, it was their defence which sent the strongest message by almost completely neutralising the Israeli offence.

The underdogs showed some courage though, netted two fine action goals in 32 seconds for 6-2 early in the second and managed to add a couple of more still in the first half. The Greek coach Theodoros Vlachos was not too happy what he saw, even though the offence kept on delivering. However, while

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the fans' entertainment was guaranteed, the expert's eyes may not have found it satisfactory that a 6-0 first period was followed by a 6-4.

The third period, ending in 5-3, didn't cheer him up either, perhaps the last one a bit (5-2) – but at the end it was a 22-9 win, each player scored a goal, and one should not forget, that despite two draws in the prelims, Greece arrive to the quarters still unbeaten.

For places 13-16th

Slovakia v Germany 7-18

The Germans finally caught the wave – and downed the Slovaks with ease. They bettered them in all elements of the game, they could put-away some man-ups (which they failed to do in the prelims), finished with 3 for 5 and they could penetrate the Slovak defence on equal strength too.

The first period set the tone when they netted three in a row after 1-1, but the real blow came in the second. The Slovaks pulled one back only to be floored in the next five minutes with a 0-6 rush by the Germans (even a missed penalty was part of the package). The Slovaks were unable to stop them in the back while fell apart in front – and remained in that state for the third when they were shut out for the entire period.

There was an almost 16-minute-long phase when they could score a single goal while the Germans outplayed them and netted nine. Moritz Schenkel was instrumental in Germany's win as he posted 10 saves on 17 shots for 58.8%, most of those stops came when the game was decided.

Malta v Slovenia 13-9

Malta could finally break the Slovenian defence in the fourth period. Up until the end of third, it was an even game. Slovenia never led in the game but could always keep up with their rivals, even though Malta rushed ahead for 2-0 quickly, and after 5-5 they could gain a two-goal lead again for 7-5. Still, by the end of the third it was even once more at 8-8.

However, in the fourth it was decision time – when the Maltese could score two from counters in 71 seconds for 10-8, it was felt that the Slovenians were broken. Their offence was down, couldn't really create any threat, earn man-ups or set up clear chances while their outside shots were easy prey for Jake Tanti. And the inevitable came soon, within a span of 33 seconds Malta had two more action goals for 8-12 and this 0-4 rush ended the contest. One more goal apiece, a saved penalty by Tanti – and the Maltese could celebrate their first win in Split, a well-deserved one, indeed.

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