

2022 European Water Polo Championships, Split (CRO) – Day 15

Home, sweet and noisy home: Croatia crowned again

Just as in 2010, the Croats made it again at the home Europeans – lifted by 9000 fans and then lifting the roof of the fully packed Spaladium Arena they won a thriller against title-holder Hungary to claim a second European title in their history. Spain won a huge battle against Italy to clinch the bronze, their third medal in a row.

Men's final: Hungary v Croatia 9-10. **Bronze medal:** Spain v Italy 7-6, **For places 5-6th:** Greece v France 10-8. **For places 7-8th:** Montenegro v Georgia 14-11.

Individual awards – Most Valuable Player: Szilard Jansik (HUN). **Best goalkeeper:** Marko Bijac (CRO). **Top scorer:** Tudor-Andrei Fulea (ROU) 19 goals.

Final rankings: 1. Croatia, 2. Hungary, 3. Spain, 4. Italy, 5. Greece, 6. France, 7. Montenegro, 8. Georgia, 9. Serbia, 10. Romania, 11. Netherlands, 12. Israel, 13. Germany, 14. Malta, 15. Slovakia, 16. Slovenia.

The next European Water Polo Championships will take place in October 2023 in Tel-Aviv (ISR).

Somewhat similar to the previous two finals, this one was also decided by penalties – but not in a shootout. After the two unbeaten sides were battling through three and a half thrilling periods, at 8-8, three penalties were called within 40 seconds. Jerko Marinic-Kragic put away the first one, Krisztian Manhercz hit the bar at the other end, then ensuing counter ended in another call and Marinic-Kragic didn't miss the second one either for 8-10, with 2:07 to go. A fairy-tale ending to the home team's march – the star of the local club Jadran Split netted the winning goals as those two secured the hosts' victory.

After a balanced opening period, with three goals apiece, the Croats won the second 0-1 – Hungary couldn't maintain its extremely high-level game in this match, their lower point came in the final (the Croats ticked the 'weaker' performance by finishing 5-5 with Greece in the prelims). Still, the Magyars came back from 3-5, then equalised three times till 8-8, and had a fine chance to take the lead while killing two man-downs, but they were unable to turn the game into their favour, then the penalty drama decided the outcome.

It is the 7th time in history, that the host team made several thousand local fans overjoyed (Hungary in 1926, 1958, 2022, Serbia in 2006 and 2016, Croatia in 2010) – indeed, the atmosphere was electrifying as players of the newly shaped Croatian side celebrated in and out of the pool.

In the rematch of the World Championship final, this time for the bronze medal, Spain bettered Italy in an outstanding battle. Italy – despite playing with one less player in the third straight match (because of suspensions – fought back from two goals down even in the fourth period but Spain's veteran star Felipe Perrone hit the game-winner at 6-6.

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

Spain thus closed their season with another medal after the world title and it's a third podium for them at the Europeans in a row. Italy should not be disappointed either as they collected a World Championship silver, a World League gold before they finished fourth here after two single-goal losses in their last two matches (though their last podium at the Europeans dates back to 2014).

Like a day ago, together with the LEN top officers, President Antonio Silva, First Vice-President Josip Varvodic and Vice-President Kyirakos Giannopoulos, President of Hungary Katalin Novak and Croatian sport minister Nikolina Brnjac handed over the medals for the teams, while the winners' trophy was handed over by the FINA President Husain al-Musallam again.

As for the next FINA event, the last available berth for the World Championships was booked by Montenegro, as expected, which beat Georgia again, just like in the first round of the prelims – they won 14-11, just like in the prelims.

Game recaps

Final

Hungary v Croatia 9-10

It might look awkward for many but those inside water polo know that in this sport these warriors respect each other, and some from different nations are even friends. As a fine demonstration of this, the two teams accidentally met each other in the training pool for the lighter morning practice and soon loud laughter filled the air – the Croatian and the Hungarian players joked with each other. Of course, once the final kicked off, the friendships were put aside – and a brilliant battle ensued in front of 9000 fans.

Both sides missed a man-up before Konstantin Kharkov's left-handed bouncer from the perimeter blew up the Arena after two and a half minutes. Hungary's reply came immediately, Gergo Zalanki blasted in the Magyars' second man-up. Then the second Croatian man-up was denied by a blocking hand, and the blocking man Vendel Vigvari found Erik Molnar in front with a brilliant 20m assist who netted the counter for 1-2. Soon another counter-like attack came but Gergely Burian's hit the post – while the Croats put their first 6 on 5 away, Rino Buric did a clean job from 2m for 2-2. Vogel arrived to the game with back-to-back saves, but Ivan Krapic's 2m push bounced in from his hands in the next man-down. In 24 seconds, it was even again, Molnar stunned Bijac with a cheeky shot from the right wing for 3-3.

Vogel came up with three stops early in the second, the third was extraordinary, in a man-down, and the somehow ball didn't cross the line – but then he couldn't do much with Kharkov's fine shot in the next 6 on 5. The Hungarians were a bit lost in front, their shots were not as sharp as before, Zalanki's ball in their man-up was an easy catch for Bijac. Then they missed another one, this time the 2m finish was stopped by the goalie. And Bijac was on fire, he could have a hand on Szilard Jansik's 6m shot – though the Croats missed a 4 on 3 too. Still, they were 3-4 up – shut out the Hungarians for the entire second period.

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

Buric scored another one from 2m from the first man-up in the third, while Toni Nemet netted one from the centre – as if a whistle had blown but didn't come from the refs –, then the Magyars could have equalised from a 6 on 5 after a time-out but Bijac made another save – the Croats missed their one too, though also played after a time-out. With some luck – after a rebound – the Magyars got a penalty inside a man-up and Manhercz buried it, with 4:30 on the clock it was even again at 5-5.

Hungary had a man-up but they couldn't even take their positions as originally it was a counter and the those in the back arrived lately – the Croats could make the most in a similar situation, Buric netted his third again after a set-up, however, it was even again in 33 seconds, with Akos Konarik's perfect bouncer from a man-up. Kharkov also blasted his third in the very last second of a man-up with 1:59 on the clock. The Croats missed their next one while Vigvari – turning 21 this day – scored a brilliant action goal from a dead attack which seemed to have gone after their substitute arrived lately. Andria Basic's rocket hit the back of the net from a man-up with 18 seconds, sending the Croats to the last period with a 7-8 lead in hand.

The equaliser came early in the fourth, the first better set-up found Jansik on the 2m line and it was a dunk for 8-8. Manhercz soon stole the ball with a shark-attack, but Vigvari hit the post from the ensuing 3 on 2, then Croatia got back-to-back exclusions but the bar then Vogel denied them. Zalanki let the ball fly from the perimeter, it went wide. In the huge battle the small details counted, and Luka Bukic could draw a penalty after sneaking in position, Jerko Marinic-Kragic buried it, at 2:47 Croatia led again. Hungary got one at the other end in a man-up but Manhercz hit the bar – Zuvella turned back, drew another penalty, Jerinic Kragic kept his calm, sent the ball to the left corner again, with 2:07 to it was a won match at 8-10. Especially after Jansik was denied by the block in their next man-up – they were 3 for 12 in this game (the Croats were 5 for 15, still better in total). Bukic missed a counter, Hungary earned another penalty, Jansik converted – but the previous one had much bigger weight as this hit the back of the net 32 seconds from time. They burnt their 30 seconds and that was enough – Soma Vogel tried one last attempt in the remaining 1.7sec but it landed in Bijac's hand and the 9000 people erupted in joy, Croatia made it again after 2010!

It was an even game all in all – many data were identical, the number of shots taken (30-30) and those on target (17-17), but the Croats hit one more and the best goalie of the tournament Marko Bijac made one more save, ultimately, that decided the final.

Bronze medal Spain v Italy 7-6

Soon after an early exchange of goals – two were hit in 17 seconds – Spain took the upper hand as the first half progressed and by netting two, the second with 19 seconds to go, they led 3-1 after eight minutes.

Italy had struggled in front – partly because a couple of disciplinary cases related the red cards in the semis kept two of their starters away from the pool – but in the second they finally found the way to score (in the first their lonely goal came from a penalty). Leftie Luca Damonte's brilliant curved lob

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

bounced in from the post to halt his team's scoreless run of 9:42 minutes. Further four minutes gone without notable action, before Italy earned its first man-up in this quarter and, after a time-out, Giacomo Cannella sent the ball home for 3-3. Spain? No real danger created in the second eight minutes, they seemed to slow down a bit by the end of the tournament, and this low-scoring game with a lot of swimming didn't help to recharge the batteries or at least rest a bit from time to time.

In the third, Italy could have gone ahead, but missed its first 6 on 5, then Marco del Lungo posted a huge save in a man-down, then Marc Larumbe made the second shot after the corner-throw for 4-3. Inexperience took its toll here and soon again, it was rookie Matteo Iocchi who couldn't block in the previous man-up, then he committed an exclusion foul in front of the Spanish goal, and Alvaro Granados dunked the ball from close to make it 5-3, within 37 seconds.

Unai Aguirre posted another save at the other end, this time in a man-down – earlier he managed to catch Francesco di Fulvio's usually lethal 6m shot –, then a second one, but here Luca Damonte had a second chance after the corner-throw and his bouncer went in – after five minutes, Italy scored again. However, Spain replied soon, Bernat Sanahuja put the ball away from a 6 on 5 for 6-4. Italy had one fine chance in the last minute, after a turnover foul and an exclusion they remained 4 on 3 in front, but Jacopo Alesiani's 5m shot was brilliantly blocked by Roger Tahull, so Spain led 6-4 before the final quarter.

The battle heated up in the fourth, Italy got a penalty – it seemed the referee called an illegal under water ball-push by the defender, the centre's hand wasn't on it – and di Fulvio buried it. Then Tahull took three shots at the end of a man-up, in four seconds, but the post and del Lungo were up to each. Soon it was even, Lorenzo Bruni had an easy put-away in a 6 on 5 for 6-6. Spain's next man-up also gone, though the bench debated it whether their man on 2m was denied according to the rulebook. After missed shots at each end, Spain got a 5 on 4 (soon after a double exclusion) – the first shot was blocked but then, though everyone could re-enter, Felipe Perrone used all his experience and remaining energies to send the ball into the net from the perimeter for 7-6 with 3:19 to go. Spain missed a match-ball when they couldn't make a 6 on 5 but it did not matter at the end – the Italians burnt their very last reserves and couldn't create any more danger.

It means that Spain could add a European Championship bronze to the World Championship gold in two months, but Italy also enjoyed a great season: world silver, World League gold and now a fourth place after two single-goal losses in the top four – it's a brilliant achievement in anybody's language.

For places 5-6th

Greece v France 10-8

We had two re-matches in the programme – the ones played for the lower ranks. While the first one (see the recap below) produced the very same result as the first encounter on 29 August (Montenegro won 14-11), this one never seemed to end in the same way. On the opening night France forced a 12-12 tie against Greece to cause the first upset here in Split – now they couldn't reproduce the same effectiveness in offence what brought him to this stage, to play for their best rank since 1950.

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

After a balanced first period, in the second a rather one-sided pattern started prevailing: the French earned a man-up, missed it and the Greek scored at the other end. This is how they had a 4-0 run for 7-2 and held a commanding 7-3 lead by halftime. Perhaps the Greeks laid back a bit, a missed penalty also showed a drop in their concentration level and the French climbed back to 8-5 but Dimitrios Nikolaidis' fine centre-action offered some calm for his side with 53 seconds before the last break, so the Greeks led 9-5.

Early in the fourth, Hugo Fontani made two big saves in man-downs, Romain Marion-Vernoux fired one from 8m – and the next man-up offered the chance for the French to come back to two goals but bad passing ruined their setup and soon Konstantin Kakarakis reset the four-goal gap at 10-6 with 4:23 remaining. And not much changed during the final phase, French could pull one back 38 seconds later from a man-up but the next one arrived too late, 40 seconds from time (from a 6 on 4) so the Greeks finished 5th at the end, but the French shouldn't have been disappointed either, this 6th place is the best one since 1950.

For places 7-8th

Montenegro v Georgia 14-11

Though the difference between the two teams was obvious, when there is a lot at stake – the last World Championships berth –, it's not easy to stay calm and deliver and demonstrate the difference right from the beginning.

This was the case with the Montenegrins who struggled in the first period, while the Georgians, playing without the same pressure, were at ease to let the ball fly whenever they saw the chance. This is how they took a 2-3 lead (scored three in 1:48 minutes) and with 3:05 to go, only bad luck put the Montenegrins on even as after a denied man-down Jovan Saric practically scored an own goal, pushing the ball behind the line as he wanted to clear it from the danger zone. And after 17 seconds they got another one, a quick steal and a counter was enough for Konstantin Averka to retake the lead. The Georgians could equalise for one last time for 4-4, then the favourites geared up a bit, scored two before the first break for 6-4 while their defence started clicking.

After an action-packed 10-goal opening period the second was a toned-down one, after a quick exchange of goals Aleka Ukropina's man-up goal gave Montenegro an 8-5 lead by halftime. Then Vlado Popadic opened the third with a fine goal from the perimeter for 9-5 and from that point the Montenegrins managed to maintain the safe distance – Georgia could reduce the gap to three twice but only temporarily, towards the end of the third the scoreboard showed 12-7 before Dusan Vasic pulled one back with a fine distant blast.

In the fourth, Georgia climbed back to three twice, at 13-10 there was still 4:13 minutes to play. Montenegro got a man-up, Vladimir Gojkovic called a time-out, but the shot was blocked – 48 seconds later, another man-up, another time-out, this time either the explanation was better, or the understanding is deeper, but the ball hit the back of the net as Averka finally had a good shooting position from the left wing for 14-10 with 2:43 on the clock so the game was settled. Fabio Baraldi pulled one back from the

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

centre to produce the very same result as their first game here in the opening round of the prelims – it was a fine reinforcement that Montenegro indeed is the better side of the two.

10 September 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