

## Croatia, Serbia, Spain and Hungary win big matches

The second day at the men's U19 European Water Polo Championships in Podgorica saw four big matches which were to decide the top spot in the respective groups. Serbia and Greece produced a thriller, the Serbs edged out their rivals with a last-grasp goal. Spain had to dig deep to beat the Netherlands, but the other two matches turned into one-sided contests, as Croatia outpowered Italy while Hungary thrashed the host Montenegrins. The winners secured their respective berths in the quarter-finals.

**Prelims, Round 2 – Group A:** Spain v Netherlands 11-9, Czech Republic v Malta 9-13. **Group B:** Croatia v Italy 12-7, Slovakia v Georgia 8-15. **Group C:** Greece v Serbia 12-13, Germany v Romania 18-6. **Group D:** Montenegro v Hungary 8-17, Turkiye v France 6-11.

Serbia and Greece went toe-to-toe in the most thrilling battle of the day. It was a brilliant action-packed 25-goal epic with 24 exclusions and a lot of twists and turns. After the 9-goal opener, the Serbs jumped to a 4-8 lead late in the second, but the Greeks came back in the third and trailed by only a single goal before the final period. After an early hit doubled the Serbs lead for 9-11, almost five minutes of enormous fight ensued, then Evangelos Poulos hit a hat-trick in a span of 72 seconds, and with 1:32 to go the Greeks were ahead at 12-11. However, Bogdan Brescianski equalised with a fine action goal 14 seconds later, and 26 seconds from time Vasilje Martinovic netted the winner from a man-up for the Serbs.

Spain had some troubles against Malta on the opening day and beating the Netherlands wasn't a smooth operation either. Though they jumped to a 3-1 lead, but, while in a rare scenario they missed two penalties in 7 seconds late in the first, the Dutch staged a 0-4 surge and led 4-5 at halftime. The Spaniards got back to even in the third but then had to equalise three times in that period to hold on for 8-8 before the last break. In the fourth, Spain finally retook the lead and after the Dutch missed a man-up after a time-out, a goal from the counter gave Spain a two-goal lead and even though their opponents pulled one back, Gerard Gil's man-up goal closed down the contest with 1:06 remaining.

After a balanced first half, ending in 5-5, Croatia smashed the Italians with a brilliant third period. They bettered them in all aspects, killed three man-downs while netting five goals – all in all, with a 7-2 rush in the second they claimed a fine win.

Host Montenegro held on until 4-4 against Hungary, though when the Magyars denied them in three consecutive man-ups within a minute towards the end of the first, the writing was already on the wall. Then in the second Matyas Meszaros scored three in a row, Erik Molnar – member of the silver medallist senior team in Split – added one more, so Hungary led 4-8 at halftime. In the second half it looked even worse from the home side's perspective, the Hungarian master shooters were on target from time to time, stopped at 17 (Meszaros at 6), while at the other end only two Montenegrin players were able to score (they put together the team's 8 hits).

As for the morning session, the games also had a lot in stake, since the winners most probably secured their spot in the crossovers, while the losers had to settle for the matches to be played for the 13-16<sup>th</sup> places.

Slovakia and Georgia were entangled into a brilliant battle in Group B – the Georgians led 5-8 at halftime, the Slovaks hit back with a 3-0 run in the third for 8-8, but Georgia was flying high in the fourth, scored 7 goals. Two of their players really stepped up, Saba Tkeshelashvili and Besarion Akhvlediani scored 13 goals combined to send their team through.

The Germans trounced the Romanians, a 7-0 opening did the damage and they never looked back. Despite a slow start – the first period ended in 0-0 – France took the upper hand against Turkey, and Malta had no headaches to down the Czechs.