

## 2022 European Water Polo Championships, Split (CRO) – Day 13

### Croatia to play a sell-out final against title-holder Hungary

**Host Croatia beat Italy in a thrilling match to reach the final for the first time since 2010 – that had happened on home soil in Zagreb and now again, in Split. The showdown is due against Hungary as the Magyars’ newly shaped team bettered the world champion Spanish side with some extraordinary efforts in defence. Indeed, the Croats and the Hungarians downed the World Championship finalists respectively.**

**Semi-finals:** Hungary v Spain 11-8, Croatia v Italy 11-10. **For places 5-8<sup>th</sup>:** Montenegro v Greece 12-14, Georgia v France 5-7. **For places 9-10<sup>th</sup>:** Romania v Serbia 1-17. **For places 11-12<sup>th</sup>:** Israel v Netherlands 7-17.

**Schedule for Saturday – Final:** 20.30 Hungary v Croatia. **Bronze medal:** 18.00 Spain v Italy. **For places 5-6<sup>th</sup>:** 15.30 Greece v France. **For places 6-7<sup>th</sup>:** 14.00 Montenegro v Georgia

Three days before the championship started, in the calmness of the Spaladium Arena, the local service-providers were running tests of the giant video screen and for that they featured two flags: one for Croatia and one for Hungary. Considering the draw, the chances for these two meeting each other was mostly a showdown in the final.

While the Croats looked well set for that, Hungary came with a new coach and with a very young team – still, they demolished the Serbs, outpowered Montenegro and now outplayed the world champion Spanish team to face off the Croats. And all this just eight weeks after a series of humiliating defeats dropped them to the 7<sup>th</sup> place at the World Championships, held in their home in Budapest.

The Croats gradually rose to the occasion: initially, they struggled to perform on the expected level in the giant arena, in front of 8000 supporters. It always took time to get over their tensions, that almost cost them the crucial group game against Greece, but then the quarter-final against Georgia settled them, and they were ready for the big fight with Italy right from the start.

The game offered everything you may expect in such an (over)heated battle. It was a huge physical fight with 33 exclusions and three red cards for the Italian players whose temper boiled over from time to time. That left them fewer and fewer options in the bench (practically with a single substitute for the fourth period), still, their fighting spirit helped them to come back from 7-5 and then 9-7 down. They had the ball at 10-10 with 1:34 minutes to go, but an awkward though quite brave move from Loren Fatovic – hunted down the goalie, pushed his hand under the water with the ball in it – earned Croatia a penalty and Konstantin Kharkov buried it. Italy had two more man-ups but missed both, so the home players could begin their joyous celebrations with the ecstatic crowd.

Hungary and Spain produced a different but equally exciting encounter in the previous semi. For one and a half periods the world champions kept the game under control, Hungary could barely penetrate

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their defence – then all of a sudden, the Magyars started rolling and netted five goals in four minutes to lead 7-5 at halftime. Spain wasn't done, came back strong and managed to reset its defence to shut out their rivals for the entire third period while coming back to even for 7-7. However, there was one more twist in the tale, the Hungarians scored three action goals in 2:40 minutes while killing three man-downs (including a 6 on 4). That tremendous defensive efforts were the key: they had 12 blocks plus 12 saves from Soma Vogel to counterbalance Spain's superiority in the shotmaking (27-37).

In the games for the lower ranks, France outlasted Georgia to claim its ticket to the 2023 World Championships, while Greece staged a 4-0 run once being 3-5 down against Montenegro and won with a spirited second half to play for the 5<sup>th</sup> place. Montenegro now has one last chance to go to Fukuoka – they clash with Georgia for the last available berth.

## Game recaps

### *Semi-finals*

#### **Hungary v Spain 10-8**

The game started where their last one had finished back in January 2020. Alvaro Granados faced Soma Vogel from the penalty line – back than Vogel made the save and that won the title for the Magyars –, now he hit the post 25 seconds into the game. Here of course there were plenty of time to play, and within a minute Granados took the shot in a man-up and hit the back of the net. Toni Nemet replied from the centre with a fine goal, but the Spanish went on scoring, Bernat Sanahuja's shot from the perimeter was precise, followed by a fine man-up play which gave Spain a 1-3 lead. The Magyars missed their first one and otherwise were forced to outside shots by the well-organised Spanish zone. A block denied Granados on his next try in a man-up while at the other end Szilard Jansik put the second extra away for 2-3, with 7 seconds on the clock.

The first Spanish man-up was also ended on the blocks (twice) early in the second, but not the next one as it found Roger Tahull unguarded after the exclusion – at this stage it was a sharp contrast that the Spaniards could feed the ball to the centre easily, while the Magyars could not, so they didn't have too many chances to score. Though once Nemet managed to break free, earned a penalty and Krisztian Manhercz made no mistake. And once he got going, he equalised in 45 seconds from the perimeter – after four minutes of struggling, the Magyars were back at 4-4.

Granados found a hole among the arms in the next man-up, but Adam Nagy was also on target in the following extra and just like Manhercz, he also doubled down within 53 seconds to put his team ahead for the first time. Things got worse from the Spanish perspective when Gergely Burian pushed the ball through Aguirre's arms from an impossible angle – in the last four minutes the Hungarians hit five to take a 5-7 lead.

The break not only halted but turned back the trends – though Vogel could put a hand on Granados' shot in a man-down, but the ball bounced in from the crossbar, while Aguirre managed to save Vendel Vigvari's shot in an extra. Vogel made a huge save in the next Spanish extra though, and also in the third (though it was rather a missed push from close). At the other end it started to get similar to the first

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and a half periods – apart from that missed extra, the Magyars couldn't do much harm while Alberto Munarriz blasted one from the perimeter for 7-7, after they recollected another rebound after a blocked first shot (that was their 5<sup>th</sup> second chance in the game).

The Hungarians' next man-up was blocked, and Burian couldn't sell his sharp angle attempt again after the rebound, while Vogel flew out from his goal to steal the pass in the Spaniards' extra. Manhercz's bouncer came off from the bar in their third 6 on 5 with 20 seconds to go – so the Magyars were unable to score in this period, thus the last one kicked off from 7-7. Fun fact: both goalies stood with 8/15 at this stage, a lot were on their shoulders in the fourth.

Both made a save at the beginning, Aguirre's one was the bigger as he managed to push Jansik's 2m shot to the bar in a man-down. Gergo Zalanki broke the deadlock 2:17 minutes into the fourth after a fine counter-like attack – while the Spaniards' 6 on 5 was killed by a block. Then Adam Nagy made a steal, joined the attack and sent an untimely bouncer under the bar – Hungary was 9-7 up with 4:03 to go and Spain needed a time-out but that was not much help. Vogel stopped Perrone's shot in a man-down and the Hungarians delivered one more from their super-patient possession, setting up Erik Molnar 2sec from time whose one-timer from the wing was as good as it could be – and it virtually ended the contest at 10-7. The Magyars were flying, denied a 6 on 4 with 1:20 on the clock – guess what, by another block: they 12, an astonishing effort (Spain had 3). Their rivals could net another extra for 10-8, but with 34 seconds on the clock it didn't bother the Magyars who wildly celebrated of reaching the final after 2020 again.

Add: this happens to them just eight weeks after they had hit the rock bottom by finishing 7<sup>th</sup> at the home World Championships in Budapest (second all-time worst performance), which led to the change of the head coach (the last time the boss was sacked in the middle of an Olympic cycle dates back to 1989). And now Zsolt Varga, who had coached Ferencváros to three medal-winning performance in the last three editions of the Champions League (including a win in 2019), led his newly shaped side to the final.

By beating the team which won that World Championships eight weeks ago.

### **Croatia v Italy 11-10**

Francesco di Fulvio kicked off the party with a 6m shot 29 seconds into the game – the reply came immediately, Konstantin Kharkov sent the ball home from the first man-up. Mirroring extras followed – both went in, both times the ball got a wicked deflection on a blocking arm. Some great defending followed, passes were stopped in man-downs, the goalies made stops on shots coming from the perimeter.

Croatia got a 6 on 4 nearing the last minute, Jerko Marinic Kragic let the ball fly and it bounced in from Marco del Lungo's hand – while the other Marko, Bijac made the difference in the first period as he denied Jacopo Aleasiani, though the Italians also played in 6 on 4.

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Though Italy had a 6:20 minute-long silence after the two fast goals, Andrea Fondelli quickly halted that phase with a great bouncer from the perimeter after just 20 seconds in the second. Then again, the blocking hand fooled Del Lungo in a man-down at Marinic-Kragic's shot. Bijac made a save at the other end in a man-down, Del Lungo delivered a big one on Loren Fatovic's blast. That was crucial as the Croats missed their next extra as well, while Italy, with some luck, managed to go even again, when Luca Marziali sent the ball home from close range, the ball fell to his hand after Bijac's save.

And soon they were ahead, di Fulvio had a clean shot in 5m in a man-up, for him, that's even easier than a penalty. Andria Basic responded with an action goal, the ball somehow sneaked in under the goalie's arm, then the Croats killed a man-down and Marinic Kragic netted his third from the right wing, again from a 6 on 5 for 6-5, with 1:47 on the clock. Bijac posted his 7<sup>th</sup> save in a man-down inside the last minute, and Marziali was red carded in the dying seconds for provoking his opponent, a big blow for the Italians who played with one man less due to an earlier suspension (of Vincenzo Renzuto, whose brutality went unnoticed against Montenegro, but not during a post-game review).

Italy's first extra was anything but a fine execution, unlike the Croats' play which set up Marko Zuvela on the 2m line and he managed to send the ball home while the defenders tried to hunt him down. It was the first two-goal lead, so Alessandro Campagna rather went for a time-out before their next 6 on 5. It didn't help, Bijac made a save on di Fulvio's shot, and Cannella hit the post after the rebound – though Vincenzo Dolce didn't miss the following one for 7-6. Soon it was 7-7, di Fulvio's trademark 6m blast did the damage – while the Croats' level in offence dropped a bit. The Italians could have scored a third one in a row, but the pass never found the finisher at the post in another man-up – while Rino Buric scored a great one from action.

That was a turning point again, Cannella fired the ball into Bijac from a 6 on 5 – while the other end the Croats got a 6 on 5, which turned into a 6 on 4 (plus another red card for Edoardo di Somma for gesturing on the referee), so Italy left with two substitutions and a two-goal deficit as Marinic Kragic scored his fourth (the fans were loud as he is from Split). Andrea Fondelli gave back some hope with a fine hit from a man-up so Italy trailed 9-8 before the final period but faced a huge challenge as the Croats had two more substitutes to use (though two of them were fouled out already).

Luca Damonte's fine left-handed shot from action in the last second of the first possession silenced the crowd – soon Italy lost another player, Fondelli, with a third exclusion, though they managed to kill the Croats' man-up. Bijac delivered a couple of saves on perimeter shots, then Nicosia did a huge stop on Kharkov's ball in a man-down, but after the corner-throw the Croats still managed to put the ball on Basic's hand whose one-timer sent his team ahead once more. Not for long, though, Italy also made the most of their man-up, Lorenzo Bruni had an easy finish from close for 10-10, with 3:24 to go. Nicosia posted two more stops, then Italy had a man-up, but Damonte was denied by the block.

With 1:35 to go, things went wild – a turnover was called against the hosts, but Fatovic jumped onto the goalie's hand holding the ball, to earn a penalty. Kharkov buried it – but Italy still had two more man-ups, however, Bijac made a tremendous save in the first while the second was denied by a blocking

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hand once more. And that was it – an extraordinary end to an extraordinary match, the Croats made the final for the first time since 2010. That was in Zagreb – for them home is really sweet.

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

**Montenegro v Greece 12-14**

For a while it was a balanced game, Montenegro took the lead three times, but the Greeks could equalise till 3-3 – then the Montenegrins hit two in 48 seconds for 5-3. Could have been more and also less by halftime, but the goalies took over, Konstantinos Limarakis could save Vlado Popadic's one-one-one despite the Montenegrin had approximately 5 seconds to finish the action undisturbed, while Petar Tesanovic made a stop on Angelos Vlachopoulos' penalty.

He couldn't do much with the next one, though, Alexandros Papanastasiou buried it early in the third for 5-4. The Montenegrins were unable to put the ball away from the cleanest chances – hit the bar from another one-on-one after an exclusion, though Limarakis' head also played a role in that – and they were playing with the fire until they were burnt badly as Greeks found the back of the net three times in succession (while another extra was wasted by the Montenegrins).

While at 5-3 the Montenegrins seemed to rule the game, now they had to regroup themselves after a 0-4 phase and a time-out (the last three came in a span of 90 seconds). After a blocked shot the second possession also seemed to be dying, the Greeks took a bit of risk, one player left for a counter, so the unmarked Dusan Markovic's shot was an important one, but he made it to halt his team's scoreless run after exactly 11 minutes.

Ioannis Alafragkis netted a 6 on 4 with ease, followed by converted penalties at both ends within the last minute for 7-9, so the landscape changed dramatically before the final period: now the Greeks – hitting six in the third – led by two. It meant that the Montenegrins had to dig deep if they didn't want to leave to secure their World Championship berth to the last game.

They needed a 6 on 4 to halve the distance – the first man-up was missed badly –, but Stylianos Argyropoulos didn't leave too much room for setting up the Greeks' 6 on 5, delivered the solution from the left wing after one pass for 8-10. Then came Konstantin Kakarakis' brilliant goal from the centre, put the ball to the empty net while the defender and the goalie tried to push him towards the bottom of the pool.

Indeed, the Montenegrins sank further, Konstantinos Genidounias hit the far-right corner from the right wing in the last second of their next possession – in less than two minutes Montenegro was four goals down at 8-12. Some luck helped them to regain a ball after a shot hit the bar in a man-up and Averka sent it home, but the time was ticking down, only 3:20 minutes were left. Further 50 seconds later it was 10-12, Marko Petkovic finished off a 6 on 5 quickly, now Theodoros Vlachos called for a time-out. It helped, Genidounias hit his 4<sup>th</sup> from a man-up with 1:57 on the clock – Montenegro's 5-3 lead and that 100% scoring chance looked like a fading memory...

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With the pressure on, Marko Mrcic pulled one back again, again from a man-up, again quickly – and they could even come back to one goal, but it was too late, only 21 seconds left and the Greek managed to score one more beating the buzzer as the goalie was also ordered to hunt the ball – apparently, in vain.

This loss leaves one last chance for the Montenegrins to book their ticket to Fukuoka – may look easier than beating Greece, but when there are no more bets, it can get harder to achieve it.

### **Georgia v France 5-7**

In the previous big games, the French always produced a huge run in the first halves, they were sharp, fast and aggressive – and that founded their draw against Greece, frightened the Croats for quite a while and ultimately earned them that famous win over Serbia. What’s more, Italy also had to work hard to leave them behind in the quarter-finals.

However, in this game not much was shown from the early surge – though they led 2-3 at halftime, but Georgia also missed a handful of opportunities to go ahead in the second. The first saw one goal apiece and a dreadful penalty-execution from Ugo Crousillat as the ball flew backwards from his hand. Credits to him that he stepped up early in the second and netted a 6 on 5 for 1-2, but midway through this quarter Nika Shushiashvili equalised, also from a man-up. Both sides missed the chance to take the lead from 6 on 5s, then Thomas Vernoux could finally put one away 33 seconds before the big break.

In a low-scoring game like this, an action goal had a real value and Charles Canone got one 42 seconds into the third – the ball somehow sneaked in under the goalie’s arm (needed the VAR to confirm that). The Georgians had two man-ups in a minute, but Jovan Saric was denied in both, first by the bar, then by Hugo Fontani in the goal – and then a third also gone, despite it was played after a time-out (Fontani stopped Marko Jelaca’s shot). It hit back, Vernoux earned a penalty, and Alexandre Bouet buried it for 5-2. France could go for the +4 after a time-out but missed their next man-up and Shushiashvili blasted one from 6m for 5-3 with 3:19 before the last intermission. The fight intensified but no more exclusions come, only swimming and shooting from the perimeter, without any success – so the French started the last period with a two-goal advantage.

Georgia had the first chance, but Dusan Vasic hit the bar – that set-up wasn’t that promising at all –, that was followed by an even more painful waste, when Vasic let the ball fly after one pass while just earning a 6 on 4, and Fontani made an easy save (he finished the game with 12 on 17 for 70.6%., a brilliant performance). In 40 seconds, Enzo Khasz put away a ‘simple’ man-up for 6-3, however, Andria Bitadze came up with a fine one from the centre and there was still 3:20 minutes to play. But Mehdi Marzouki, who hit the winner against the Serbs, also scored from a man-up – then Vernoux made a great steal in a Georgian 6 on 5 (played after a time-out) and it was over.

Indeed, the Georgians were worn out by this stage and especially for the second half of such a low-scoring game. Their big shooters were off the target (which also an appraisal of the French defence), their Serbian-Croatian cannons, Vapenski, Jelaca and Saric had 1 for 15 combined – since the team relies on them in scoring, it was inevitable that they would lose.

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At the same time, the French did a professional job – and claimed their well-deserved berth at next year’s World Championships.

***For places 9-10<sup>th</sup>***

**Romania v Serbia 1-17**

Playing the last game two days before the end of the tournament and in the morning hours – this is not something Serbia got used to (and just avoided to come even earlier by prevailing in the shootout against the Dutch in the previous round). Perhaps this is not the new reality and with the addition of a couple of ‘veterans’ they can become a threat once more. When three more Olympic gold medallists may join them for the future tourneys (goalie Branislav Mitrovic, who took a rest after the Worlds, plus centre-forward Dejan Lazic and ultimately one of the best all-rounders in the world Nikola Jaksic, the latter two have been sidelined with injuries), this team should perform better than it did here in Split.

Anyway, the city won’t be their favourite site – back in 1981, at the Europeans held in the nearby Poljud complex, the mighty Yugoslavians produced one of their most embarrassing results when they finished only fourth, had four defeats in seven games (kind of shock in those days as the current 9<sup>th</sup> place).

At least in this match they didn’t leave any chance for the game to turn into another nightmare. The past also showed that there was a small chance for that as the Serbs held a 14-0 lead in the head-to-head – though in their current shape some might have expected another shocking outcome. But it never happened as the Serbs pulled themselves together to finish the championship on a high and save some pride.

A 1-6 rush in the first period set the tone and it continued in the same way till the end. The Romanians lacked the energy and definitely the belief that they could stand any chance here – the Serbs missed a handful of clear chances and still led 1-9 at halftime and 1-13 before the last break. As for the Romanians’ part, it was a telling scene when their best shooter, Tudor-Andrei Fulea had to leave the pool after being red-carded as he punched his defender in frustration (he stood 0/5 at that point). For three periods, only 9 of their shots were on target, only 1 in the third period, stood with 1/15 in total – they had only better moments at these Europeans in the previous stages. Indeed, they scored a goal after five minutes – and could never again in the remaining 27...

***For places 11-12<sup>th</sup>***

**Israel v Netherlands 7-17**

The Dutch were superior in their last game here in Split, outshot the Israelis 35-25 and the shots on target also mirrored their dominance (25-16). Besides the volume, the quality was also on their side, not for a single moment Israel seemed to stand a chance to force a tight contest. The Netherlands took a commanding 1-4 lead in eight minutes and after relatively balanced second period they scored seven goals in the third period.

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The Israelis fought hard in their last game, though they seemed to get worn out a bit towards the end of the tournament and could not come up with the same resistance they had shown against Romania where they lost by penalties at the end (Romania and the Netherlands played a tie in the prelims, so they are on the same level).

8 September 2022

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