

2022 European Water Polo Championships, Split (CRO) – Day 5

Hungary blow away the Serbs, Croatia sink France in front of 7300 fans

In the highlighted matches of the evening, title-holder Hungary handed a historical 9-goal defeat to Serbia, while Croatia beat the French with a brilliant second half. Playing in an electrifying atmosphere in front of 7300 fans, the hosts staged a 11-3 rush after going 2-4 down early in the second period. World champion Spain had to dig deep to beat the Netherlands in a hard-fought battle, while Romania downed the Germans for the first time since 1966.

Men, Round 2. Group A: Montenegro v Slovakia 18-10, Italy v Georgia 18-8. *Standings:* 1. ITA 6, 2. MNE 6, 3. GEO 0, 4. SVK 0. **Group B:** Croatia v France 13-7, Greece v Malta 25-6. *Standings:* 1. CRO 6, 3. GRE 4, 3. FRA 1, 4. MLT 0. **Group C:** Netherlands v Spain 10-11, Romania v Germany 11-4. *Standings:* 1. ESP 6, 2. NED 3, 3. ROU 3, 4. GER 0. **Group D:** Serbia v Hungary 7-16, Israel v Slovenia 9-5. *Standings:* 1. HUN 6, 2. SRB 3, 3. ISR 3, 4. SLO 0.

Hungary's biggest wins over Serbia (Yugoslavia) at the Europeans were two 7-4 victories – from 1970 and 1985, just to put the Magyars' 16-7 rout of the Serbs into perspective. Though only four players remained on board from the Olympic winning side of Serbia (and five from Hungary's European champion team from 2020), still, the way Hungary outplayed them from the second period was somewhat incredible. The Magyars staged a 0-7 run after 2-2, shutting out their rivals for exactly 14:00 minutes. There was no way back from there, it was Hungary all the way, 24 out of their 31 shots were on target and the Serb defence simply cracked under that pressure (the Serbs had 15 shots on target and missed 11).

In the other match in Group D, Israel did a splendid job to claim a historical win at the Europeans upon their debut. Beating Slovenia also books them a spot in the crossovers, a fine prelude to the home Europeans in Tel-Aviv next October.

After France's surprising draw with Greece, many expected some great excitements from their match against the Croats. For a while they held on, led 2-4 early in the second, but after the home side – enjoying the support of 7300 spectators who created an electrifying atmosphere – geared up and staged a 11-3 run. Marko Bijac was instrumental in the hosts' big run as he came up with tremendous saves in the crucial moments, including a penalty stop at 5-4. The Greeks set a new single-game scoring record for this edition by netting 25 against Malta, just like Stylianos Argyropoulos who hit 7, this is the best individual tally so far here.

Group B produced an action-packed day too. The Netherlands almost stunned Spain, despite a 0-4 run in the second by the world champion side. The Dutch came back in the second half, played a really high-level water polo and had a man-up in the last possession to save the game to a tie but the ball hit the head of the defender, good for a blocked shot, so Spain got the win at the end.

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In the other encounter, Romania managed to beat Germany at the Europeans for the first time since 1966, when they had first met. And it was a sound beating, they outplayed their rivals completely – the Germans were simply unable to put the ball away in man-ups, after going 0/9 against the Netherlands, they ended up 0/11 in this match. The second defeat sends them down to play for the 13-16th places, their worst-ever finish in history – and it happens to them in the city where their golden generation reached their first big success, the European title in the 1981 edition...

Favourites delivered in Group A. Montenegro beat Slovakia, though after a 4-0 start they were entangled in a havoc in the second period, conceded six goals, five from the centre, the Slovaks even came back even twice before the Montenegrins netted three to redirect the game to its expected path. Then in the third they blew their rivals away with a 6-0 run, so they'll arrive two wins to face Italy for the top spot. The Italians didn't have any headaches while beating Georgia, didn't have any similar lapse throughout the game.

Game recaps

Group A

Montenegro v Slovakia 18-10

The first period saw no surprises, Montenegro stormed to a 4-0 lead, it was going to be another lopsided contest, though many. Even after Samuel Balaz just beat the buzzer to put Slovakia on the scoreboard at the very end of the first.

Then Balaz did the same in a man-up – hit a blistering one from 7m in the very last second –, and even though Marko Mrcic scored in a man-up, soon came something out of the blue. Three Slovakian goals from a row – all three from the centre-position, in 1:38 minutes. It was a complete blackout from the 2020 bronze medallists, they missed a clear one-on-one, a man-up and got three action goals from the centre, well, this is not something one got used to from Montenegro.

Mrcic's blast eased their pains, but the defence was still off as they conceded a fourth one from close range, this time after a rebound – so it stood 6-6. Before it would have turned into a complete disaster, the Montenegrins stepped up and netted three in a row, still, Lukas Seman pulled one back, 3sec from time, you may guess from where: yes, from the centre. So the Slovaks won this entertaining 11-goal period (5-6), while Montenegrin coach Vladimir Gojkovic probably grew 11 years older.

The Slovaks' energy lasted a bit in the third, killed a man-down, then Robert Kaid managed to send the ball home at the end of a bit adventurous possession for 9-8, but then the Montenegrins raised their game, scored three within two minutes to go 12-8 up. Their defence also started working on the normal level, killed two man-downs, and when Kanstantin Averka netted two fine goals within 88 seconds and Dusan Matkovic finished off a counter 5sec before the last break for 15-8, it was clear that there would be no more eye-brows-lifting scenarios. After this 6-0 rush in the third, all was settled, the fourth period was as peaceful as it could be, ended in a 3-2 partial result.

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Italy v Georgia 18-8

Unlike the Montenegrins, Italy didn't let themselves be involved to any kind of game-time craziness. The world silver medallists kept their match under firm control, built a massive 7-1 lead and cruised to victory. They had a minor setback in the third, when they conceded four goals (got three in the entire first half) but it wasn't that painful as they kept on scoring in front, won that quarter 6-4. Then in the fourth order was restored, let only one for the Georgians and hit 18, just like Montenegro. Since their main rivals in the group had minor headaches against Georgia in the first round – won 14-11 only –, the Italians shouldn't have any concerns in this match, a draw would still favour them in two days.

Group B

Croatia v France 13-7

It was the first real festive night in the Spaladium Arena, with approximately 7300 spectators filling the stands – and again, especially in the first period, the pressure visibly had its impact on the Croatians. Especially their man-up finishes lack the necessary calmness, they stood 0 for 4 after the first period – though two action goals helped them to get the crowd onto their feet for a couple of times.

Still, they trailed after eight minutes as the French played with discipline, put away two 6 on 5s, netted a fine action goal and then early in the second they buried a penalty to go 2-4 up. Loren Fatovic finally hit the back of the net from an extra, then they killed two man-downs – the French had four shots during those –, but they needed to wait a bit longer to go even as they missed an extra too. The French were forced to take shots from the perimeter, all were easy catches for Marko Bijac. Then, with 32 seconds before the middle break it happened, Andrija Basic 6m free-throw beat Hugo Fontani, so it stood 4-4 at halftime.

The hosts finally got the upper hand thanks to Bijac's brilliant saves – early in the third he made stops in man-downs, but more importantly he had his hand on Mehdi Marzouki's penalty shot when the Croats led 5-4. Marko Zuvela made it 6-4 right away and that was a psychological turning point. Though the French pulled one back, Fontani couldn't do much with the blasts of Basic and Zuvela, in 30 seconds the Croats were 8-5 up. What's more, Jerko Marinic-Kragic also sent the ball home from a man-up with 0:07 on the clock, and this 5-1 run of the hosts virtually ended the contest.

The fourth started in the same way, this time three came from as many possessions, in a span of 2:05 minutes, Luka Bukic – son of the Olympic champion legend – netted two, and Russina-born leftie Konstantin Kharkov scored from a counter to make it 5-12, while Bijac delivered more saves, at one stage he stood with a 64% saving percentage while Fontani dropped back to 33% in the opposite goal. It turned into a lopsided contest, something one may have expected from this match-up, though after the French showed some strength against Greece, more excitements were forecasted, instead, after 2-4, the Croats came up with a 11-3 run.

Greece v Malta 25-6

Malta produced some heroics in the first half of their opening game against Croatia, mostly thanks to Jake Tanti, the goalie who held the hosts on five goals in the first two quarters. Without playing the

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pressure and going for as many goals as possible after the draw with France, the Greeks were focuses right from the beginning, plus the reserve goalie, Nicholas Grixti couldn't produce the level as his No. 1 pal – though the defenders weren't too much help either. (By the way, Malta is unlucky once more to face a top side which had to go for a big win after playing a tie with the big group rival – back in Budapest 2020, after the draw between Spain and Hungary, the hosts needed a huge win to finish atop and beat the Maltese 26-0 – now the Greeks were in the same situation.)

Compared to the opening night two days ago, the first period predicted a minor disaster for the Maltese as they conceded eight goals in eight minutes, seven of those came 4:38 minutes, from eight possessions (again, they received only five in two periods from Croatia). It stood 14-3 at halftime, then Tanti came in and made some fine saves to keep the Greeks on four goals, though the World Champ bronze medallists also considered the job done, especially in the morning hours when Mediterranean people are less active...

Still, they could add a bit more in the fourth as the Maltese ran out of gas and couldn't really stop the Greeks counters, so the last period saw 7 more goals, Greece stopped at 25, to set a new single-game scoring record for this edition and Stylianos Argyropoulos also set a new individual mark as he netted 7 in this match.

Group C

Netherlands v Spain 10-11

It all began as one expected, the world champions scored two goals in the first minute – but it didn't continue in the way it had been supposed to. The Spanish could score one more goal in the first period while the Dutch managed to equalise, first for 2-2, then for 3-3 and held on firmly for a while, even denied their rivals in a 6 on 4.

They even had a man-up early in the second to take the lead but couldn't capitalise on it but killed another man-down. After four minutes of battling, Alvaro Granados finally broke the ice from a penalty, and in 2:04 minutes two more goals came, Alejandro Bustos put away a man-up, then Granados finished off a counter – though in the back they needed a couple of great saves from Unai Aguirre. Marc Larumbe sent the ball home from another extra to complete the 0-4 run (the storm lasted for 3:05 minutes) and that may have seemed to do enough damage.

It did not. Kas Te Riele halted the Dutch bad run in the 25th second in the third to score their first after 10:20 minutes. Lucas Gielen further curtailed the gap from a man-up, while the level of the Spanish offence dropped a bit for three and half minutes, before Bernat Sanahuja's bouncing shot found the back of the net. Still, the Dutch didn't break down, Guus van Ijpeern converted another extra from the left wing for 6-8. The Spanish wasted a man-up, the Dutch also had one, after a time-out, but couldn't beat the defence and Alberto Munarriz didn't miss the next shooting opportunity in a 6 on 5. But van Ijperen also found the tiny hole among the arms from a 6m free-throw for 7-9 – so it was still an open game after three periods.

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The Dutch defended well, and Aguirre needed a huge save on a backhanded centre-shot to keep the two-goal gap, but with 4:28 to go not even he could stop Jorn Muller to score from a man-up for 8-9. Before it could have got really tight, Felipe Perrone sneaked to the second centre position and pushed the ball in, just beating the buzzer – it also halted Spain’s almost 6-minute scoreless run. The Dutch reply was immediate, Gielen put the ball away from the 2m line in the next extra for 9-10 and there was still 3:21 minutes to play. Spain also got a man-up, they needed two shots, but Perrone’s one hit the net – only to see Gielen being on target again, this time from action. Spain’s goal came too late from the man-up, shotclock expired, so the Dutch could for the equaliser in the last minute. A save gave them another possession, and with 40sec to go they earned a 6 on 5 – but Pascal Janssen’s shot hit the Miguel del Toro’s head and it was over. Still, the Dutch team deserves all the credits for forcing such a great game against the world title-holders.

Romania v Germany 11-4

After losing to the Netherlands, it was do-or-die day for the Germans, but this afternoon it didn’t come through that they were playing with a knife on their neck.

The Romanians were much more organised, while the Germans couldn’t play their man-up schemes properly. After going 0/9 against the Dutch, here they went 0/5 in the first half – so after six periods at the Europeans, they were yet to score a man-up goal. Some fine action hits helped them out somewhat, two came from the centre to keep up with their rivals, but after 3-3, two finely played extramen gave the Romanians a 5-3 lead by halftime (as a kind of contrast what made the difference in the first two periods).

The trends didn’t change in the third – the Germans missed another 6 on 5 early, and this time they couldn’t realise any action goal either, didn’t even have any serious chances apart from that man-up. The Romanians waited for their moment and even though their 6 on 5 was dying after a saved shot, but Tudor-Andrei Fulea managed to use the second chance before the excluded player reached him at the right wing. It was his fourth and the Romanians led by three. Soon it was five – first, Bogdan Remes’ brilliant bouncing one-timer hit the back of the net, followed by Andrei Neamtu’s left-handed blast 40 seconds later, for 8-3. The Germans had a last man-up 23 seconds before the last break, after a time-out, but that didn’t help much – extra No. 16. (7 in this game) also gone...

Their embarrassment was somewhat eased early in the fourth when Flynn Shutze buried a penalty, to end their scoreless run after 14:26 minutes. Then came a man-up where Mateo Cuk would only have needed to put the ball away from close after one pass, but the goalie stopped that one too. And in the following one Marius-Florin Tic made another save, so just like against the Dutch, the Germans reproduced their 0/9 conversion... And at the other end Fulea put an end to the contest with a fine action goal for 4-9, while the Germans missed their 10th and 11th too (0/20 so far in Split...). The Romanians put one more away to beat their rivals for the very first time since 1966, when they first met in the history of the Europeans. In the meantime, 12 matches were played with 10 German wins and 2 draws – and much better German man-up plays... The newly shaped German side now faces games to be played for the 13-16th places – so it’s already their worst ever performance in history, and it

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happened to them in a city where their golden generation claimed their first bit win, the European crown at the 1981 edition.

Group D

Serbia v Hungary 7-16

Though one may have labelled this game as the clash of the Olympic champion and the European title-holder, but the line-ups were anything but reminiscent of the winning sides in Budapest and Tokyo respectively. Only four players remained on board from the Serbs' world-beaters from last summer, and five players were part of the Magyars' home victory in 2020. Still, a game between these two nations – the bests on the all-time medal charts – has always been a major spectacle at any championships.

After some mutual testing without any major threats, Akos Konarik opened Hungary's account with an out-of-rhythm wrist shot, Strahinja Rasovic responded from a man-up, using a second chance. Soon Erik Molnar netted a nice one from the centre, then came Rasovic again, this time with a penalty for 2-2. Gergely Burian geared up on the wing to net a fine one from action – and his next shot was also promising but the VAR review didn't validate it as a goal, so it stood 2-3 after eight minutes.

Krisztian Manhercz doubled the Magyars' lead in the second from an extra, then the Serbs lost the ball around the halfway line, quite unusually, and Manhercz finished off the ensuing two-on-one for 2-5. The Serbs' attacks were anything but sparkling, it was rather a static shooting exercise, they hit the woodwork without creating any damage, in the meantime the Hungarians just waited for their chance and Adam Nagy put their next man-up away, while Viktor Rasovic's shot in the Serbs' extra flew out of the world. And they sank further when Manhercz buried a penalty for 2-7 21 seconds before the middle break – Hungary was in a 0-4 run while their rivals scoreless phase entered its 11th minute.

The third started with wasted man-ups at both ends, but countering the Serbs' miss, Konarik sneaked himself into shooting range and made the most of it. The next extra went in, Szilard Jansik pushed the ball in from close range for 2-9, then Radomir Drasovic finally halted Serbia's bad run after exactly 14 minutes, and Luka Pljevanovic also finished a nice man-up for 4-9. Konarik was on fire though, didn't show any signs of being a rookie, hit his third from a 6 on 5, and Soma Vogel's save in the next man-down killed the Serbs' momentum. And it was Hungary all the way, Vogel delivered the save of the day in a 3 on 2, Daniel Angyal finished off the recounter for 4-11 – one should go back deep in history to find a game of these two where one of these sides led by seven before the last break (the Serbs had a 9-goal advantage back in 2005, in the World League final, where they won 16-6).

The fourth went on like the third, Angyal made a dunk in a man-up, Vogel made a save in a man-down – then Radomir Drasovic had a nice shot in a 6 on 5, but only just a bit nicer which was the 13th hit of the Magyars, by Burian. Djordje Vucinic tried his luck from a sharp angle for 6-13 but the Hungarians couldn't miss a chance, Gergo Fekete scored one from the centre. It looked a bit better for the Serbs after Ognjen Stojanovic's great shot from an extra, but Manhercz also went for a counter to score his fourth, soon came Angyal's third from a man-up – indeed that goal told the story as the Serbs could tip away a pass and usually after that in most of the cases the man-up is done – now Angyal had

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an easy put-away from the 2m line. Hungary posted 7 for 11 in man-ups, a great conversion, especially against the Serbs – and 24 of their 31 shots were on target (the Serbs had 15, and missed 11 shots), so the numbers also explain how this match could end in a rout. To put into perspective: Hungary's biggest win had been two 7-4s from 1970 and 1985, while the Serbs barely lost by nine in their history.

Slovenia v Israel 5-9

The first 'little' final of the tournament was right away the first game in the morning – here the winner would go the quarter-finals, while the loser had to settle for the 13-16th place playoffs (since the other two giants in the group, Serbia and Hungary were out-of-reach for these two).

Accordingly, the game was tense and filled with emotions – both teams were backed by noisy supporters, goals, saves and blocks were followed by pump-fisting and celebrated wildly.

Israel, playing its first-ever Europeans, took a flying start, with 3:35 to go they led 0-4, an action goal was followed by a converted penalty, and two man-up goals – all looked bright for the newcomers. However, the Slovenians found some rhythm soon and before the first break they managed to halve the gap with a 6 on 5 and a penalty for 2-4.

That sent the game into an enormous tussle, the second period saw a huge battle but no goals – both teams missed a man-up apiece, and more painfully for the Israelis, Ronen Gros sent the ball to the post from the penalty line five seconds before the middle break.

Gros stepped up though, and early in the third his 6m shot hit the back of the net, but Matic Rahne replied immediately from a man-up – and soon this was repeated when Tamir Frid fired one from the perimeter, but Jasa Kadivec put away a man-up within a minute for 4-6. So it was the same old story, Israel held a two-goal lead and the Slovenians were unable to reduce the gap to a single goal, even if they had four minutes still in the third.

As the fight turned into the final period, scoring the first goal became crucial. But the clock was ticking, and the Slovenians were unable to come closer – they missed back-to-back man-ups early in the fourth. Almost nine minutes gone since the last goal, when finally Ido Goldschmidt put away an extra for Israel for 4-7 and that almost ended the party. The Slovenians could finally score again too, Martin Stele sent the ball home from a 6 on 5 after a time-out, then Israel missed two shots in one possession, so their rivals had the ball to reduce the gap to one but failed to create any danger. A steal ended their attack and soon it was over, Or Schlein finished the ensuing counter for 5-8, with 1:06 remaining. Slovenia had a last man-up, but they were denied and with some luck Gal Haimovich could put the ball to the empty net after a rebound for 5-9 to seal Israel's historical win.

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