

Italy: Good Friday

Gergely Csurka, FINA Media Committee Member (HUN)

Italy clinched the top spot in Group B, holding Russia on 2 (!) goals and will face Canada in the quarters where the Olympic berths are decided. The last QF spot went to France but their quest might end on Saturday as the mighty US team awaits them. The all-European clashes promise the toughest battles and a really painful ending to the losers. Either Greece (2011 world champion) or Russia (the only European side taking part in each edition since 2000) will fall, and one other giant, either Spain (2013 world champion) or the Netherlands (2015 world silver medallist) will watch the Rio Games from home.

Game 1 – 12.40, Group A: South Africa v United States 1-25 (0-7, 0-6, 0-5, 1-7)

Referees: Svetlana Dreval (RUS), John Waldow (NZL)

SOUTH AFRICA: Rebecca Thomas, Amber Penny, Kieren Paley, Emma Hardham 1, Cary Wessels, Christine Abrahamse, Amy Keivy, Alex van der Valt, Megan Parkes, Amica Hallendorf, Kelsey White, Lauren Nixon. Head coach: Samuel Gareth

USA: Samantha Hill, Madeline Musselman 4, Melissa Seidemann 1, Rachel Fattal 1, Caroline Clark 4, Margaret Steffens 4, Courtney Mathewson 1, Kiley Neushul 1, Aria Fischer 2, Kaleigh Gilchrist 3, Makenzie Fischer 2, Kameryn Craig 2, Ashleigh Johnson. Head coach: Adam Krikorian

Extramen

RSA: 1 for 4

USA: 3 for 6

Penalties:

RSA: none

USA: 2 for 2



No room left... Aria Fischer steals the ball from Cary Wessels – Credit (all photos): P. Mesiano / Deepbluemedial / Inside

Playing five matches in as many days is a rather tough challenge for lower ranked sides like South Africa, fielding amateur players. And it's becoming a mission impossible if they have only 15 hours between two matches and the latter one is due against the reigning world and Olympic champion. The South Africans fought as they could and they didn't leave the pool empty-handed: with 1:55 to go they managed to score against the mighty Americans and as a fitting farewell, they received a huge applause from the enthusiastic Dutch crowd.

On the other end, the US side held a fine preparation for the quarters, each field-player scored at least one goal – it happened for the first time to any team in this tournament – and seemed to be pretty much ready for taking the final step towards Rio on Saturday.

Comments

Samuel Gareth, head coach, South Africa:

“We thought we could do a little bit better, obviously not qualifying just playing better in the respective games. For most part I'm pretty happy with, especially with our performance against Greece. The most important is that we tried to give our best in every game.”

Adam Krikorian, head coach, USA:

“We knew that this result didn't matter, but we don't take any team lightly. We are talking a lot about building good habits and we wanted those habits going, in order to help us in tomorrow's game.”

Game 2 – 14.00, Group A: Canada v Spain 6-10 (3-2, 2-1, 0-4, 1-3)

Referees: Daniel Flahive (AUS), Benjamin Mercier (FRA)

CANADA: Jessica Gaudreault, Krystina Alogbo, Katrina Monton, Emma Wright 1, Monika Eggens 3, Kelly McKee, Joelle Bekhazi, Axelle Crevier, Carmen Eggens, Christine Robinson 1, Hanna Yelizarova 1, Dominique Perreault, Nicola Colterjohn. Head coach: David Paradelo

SPAIN: Laura Ester, Marta Bach, Anna Espar 3, Beatriz Ortiz, Matilde Ortiz, Jennifer Pareja 2, Paula Leiton, Pilar Pena, Judith Forca 3, Roser Tarrago 2, Maica Garcia, Laura Lopez, Patricia Herrera. Head coach: Miguel Oca

Extramens

CAN: 2 for 12

ESP: 4 for 13

Penalties

none



Keeping up for a while but finally the Spanish prevailed, mainly thanks to Judith Forca (right), marked by Axelle Crevier

When Spain went 5-2 down deep into the second period, soon after missing a 6 on 4, one started to wonder if there was a way out from struggling so spectacularly. Nothing worked, especially in offence (besides the double man-up they missed three more extras) and bad luck also tortured them as three Canadian shots slipped in from the goalie, Laura Ester's hands.

A fine action goal from Roser Tarrago gave them some hope shortly before the middle break – which was enough to clean up the minds. They came back fresh and fast, in a span of 3:27 minutes they netted four goals so they went 5-7 up (from 5-2). Their defence was tightened, Canada pulled one back at the beginning of the fourth but that was the lonely goal they could score in the entire second half while the Spaniards hit three more (during these two periods they had a 1-7 rush altogether). Thus, the 2013 world champs can start

their quarters on Saturday with a confidence-boosting win in their back.

Comments

David Paradello, head coach of Canada:

“We are on the way to improve our team cohesion and this worked in the first half. In the third it didn’t, that was the reason for falling back. Still, this is just another stage of our path, we need to be ready for tomorrow.”

Miguel Oca, head coach of Spain:

“We had some problems in attack in the first half, but managed to overcome them and start to play as we can. Now our focus is on the quarters...”

Game 3 – 15.20, Group A: Japan v Greece 8-12 (2-3, 1-4, 2-3, 3-2)

Referees: Marcela Mauss (GER), Erwin Schaapers (NED)

JAPAN: Mivra Rikako, Sakanoue Chiaki 1, Inaba Akari 1, Maganiyama Shino 1, Nakata Moe, Takahashi Oyaka 1, Nakano Yumi 4, Hashiguchi Mitsuki, Hosoya Kana, Mori Tsuchasa, Jokumoto Marina, Suzuki Kotori, Aoki Miyun. Head coach: Kato Hideo

GREECE: Eleni Kouvdou, Christina Tsoukala 3, Nikoleta Eleftheriadou, Vasiliki Diamantopoulou, Margarita Plevritou, Alkisi Avramidou, Alexandra Asimaki 5, Antigoni Roumpesi, Christina Kotsia, Triantafyllia Manolioudaki 2, Eleftheria Plevritou 1, Eleni Xenaki 1, Chrysoula Diamantopoulou. Head coach: Athanasios Kechagias

Extramen

JPN: 1 for 5

GRE: 3 for 10

Penalties

JPN: none

GRE: 0 for 1



Another Greek goal – Japanese keeper Mivra Rikako did a fine job but the Greeks were too powerful

When the sixth game is the most important one and you had to play five in the preceding five days, the fifth less important match wouldn't push you to give your very best. This was clearly visible on the Greek players' approach: they wish to spare some energy, especially after the exhausting contest against the US a day earlier. In fact, the Japanese team was an unpleasant partner in the process as they play a fast-paced water polo, even though their skills and physics are inferior to the Europeans.

Accordingly, the start was shaky, Greece only led 2-3 after eight minutes but three goals in a little more than three minutes put that match on the right track. Building a 4-goal gap they only took care of maintaining that, the partial result of the second half (5-5) just shows they did it successfully. Still, Alexandra Asimaki's individual effort (5 goals) deserves the credit, just as Nakano Yumi who netted four.

Comment

Athanasios Kechagias, head coach, Greece:

"It's not easy to play a game like this when you have the next day in your mind. We tried to keep a certain level and not to use too much energy."

Game 4 – 16.40, Group B: Russia v Italy 2-6 (0-2, 1-2, 0-2, 1-0)

Referees: Adrian Alexandrescu (ROU), Jaime Teixido (ESP)

RUSSIA: Anna Ustyukhina, Tatiana Zubkova, Ekaterina Prokofyeva, Elvina Karimova 1, Maria Borisova, Olga Gorbunova, Svetlana Kuzina, Anastasia Simanovich, Anna Timofeeva, Evgeniia Soboleva, Evgeniya Ivanova 1, Anna Grineva, Anna Karnaukh. Head coach: Alexander Gaidukov

ITALY: Gulia Gorlero, Chiara Tabani, Arianna Garibotti 1, Elisa Queirolo, Federica Radicchi 1, Rosaria Aiello, Tania di Mario 2, Roberta Bianconi, Giulia Emmolo 1, Francesca Pomeri, Aleksandra Cotti 1, Teresa Frassinetti, Laura Teani. Head coach: Fabio Conti

Extramen

RUS: 0 for 6

ITA: 3 for 9

Penalties:

none



On the battle-field... Rosaria Aiello (in front) with Anna Grineva in the back

A match against Canada or Greece in the 'live-or-die' quarters – that was at stake. Based on the performances and recent experiences, the first one seemed a better option, a win was needed to take it. Long minutes passed without a sharper situation then Arianna Garibotti's shot from the distance broke the deadlock. Soon a series of man-ups were missed at both ends, but Tania di Mario found the back of the net at last: she was lucky to collect the rebound but it took some skills to make the shot in a hurry as she just beat the buzzer for a 0-2 lead.

Evgeniya Ivanova's fine blast led up the second period, few would have guessed that this would remain Russia's only goal until the last minutes of the fourth. Their attacks lacked the usual dynamic moves, their counters didn't work and they couldn't earn any man-ups as the Italian defence worked properly in the so-

called position game. The Italian attacks were also anything but sparkling, but they were effective at least, and Tania di Mario and Gulia Emmolo both put away the ball in the respective extras, the latter one was an extremely smart shot from the wing.

Though both keepers did a fine job, Anna Ustyukhina failed to have an easy catch on Federica Radicchi's shot and Italy jumped 1-5 up. Earlier the Russians showed that they could be dangerous even if being four goals behind (against the Netherlands, when they produced a 4-0 rush in the last quarter), this time another comeback wasn't in the cards. They played their 6 on 5s rather poorly, while the Italians made one for 1-6 so the last eight minutes didn't matter that much. The Russians got one late in the fourth, only to end their 20:43 minute-long draught, though it's even more telling that they could score once in 28:43 minutes. Of course, Gulia Gorlero also deserves every credit as she was tremendous in the Italian goal.



One of the series of fine saves Gulia Gorlero produced in the Italian goal

Comment

Fabio Conti, head coach, Italy:

“It’s not the score which counts but first of all the way we played, that our younger players also did their job. However, this win isn’t worth anything if we can’t win tomorrow. That is the game which matters, a once in four years opportunity.”

Game 5 – 18.30, Group B: New Zealand v Netherlands 6-9 (3-3, 1-1, 1-2, 1-3)

Referees: Gabriella Varkonyi (HUN), Yosuke Kajiwara (JPN)

NEW ZEALAND: Jessica Mihcich, Nicole Lewis, Kelly Mason 1, Ricci Ferigo, Simone Lewis, Annabel Harman 2, Alexander Boyd 1, Caitlyn Lopes Da Silva 2, Emma Stoneman, Ema Carevic, Casie Bowry, Liana Dance, Antouki Youna. Head coach: Angie Winstanley-Smith

NETHERLANDS: Laura Aarts, Miloushka Smit 1, Dagmar Genee 1, Catharina van der Sloot 1, Amarens Genee 1, Nomi Stomphorst 2, Marloes Nijhuis, Vivian Sevenich 1, Maud Megens, Isabella van Toorn, Lieke Klaassen 2, Leonie van der Molen, Debby Willemsz. Head coach: Arno Havenga

Extramen

NZL: 2 for 5

NED: 1 for 7

Penalties

NZL: none

NED: 0 for 1



Suffering – fitting a bit to this day of Easter-time... It took Dagmar Genee (right) and the Dutch team unexpectedly long to take down the brave New Zealanders

It was 3-3 after the first period. Well, sometimes it happens even with teams not in the same 'weight category'. Standing at 4-4 at half-time even stunned the capacity crowd in the Groenhovenbad, but almost everyone was convinced that the breakthrough would happen in the third as the New Zealanders should tire out... Still, the Dutch were only 6-5 up after three periods.

First of all, the hosts' concentration level was extremely low, or less sharp to be polite. They took loads of shots but most ended up destroying the woodwork or were not pinpoint ones, and the opponents' goalies were simply amazing, too: rarely you can see such performance from amateur keepers against powerful professionals (even a penalty was stopped) – all in all, 19 year-old Jessica Mihcich and 16 year-old (!) Antouki Youna were pretty much up to the task.

The Dutch were unable to speed up their game and the New Zealanders didn't start to fade. Naturally, at the end, though only for a smaller extent, the difference between the physical conditions became decided the outcome, the Dutch prevailed thanks to a couple of fine shots, but a deflected ball even brought their opponents a bit closer for 6-8 with 3:36 to go.

As the saying goes, every great team has an off-day in big tournaments – the Dutch surely had one in Friday. Time will tell whether it's good to have it 20 hours before the year's most important encounter.

Comments

Angie Winstanley-Smith, head coach, New Zealand:

"We've just showed we are not fit enough for this level. We can play water polo, we know what's needed to cause these guys problems. Today the girls did exactly what I asked, though sometimes I went crazy on the side, but it's because I'm really passionate for water polo, women's sports... I can't wait to watch four incredible games tomorrow and to see my girls' faces when they're going to experience that for the first time. They are hungry and I hope in four years time we come back and we'll going to be on the other side of the game, like the others we'll watch tomorrow. So you can take my word that we go home and will prepare really hard and come back next year to the World Champs, and whoever is the coach, whoever is the players, New Zealand will be ready as it's phenomenal how many talents we have."

Arno Havenga, head coach, Canada:

"Well, that wasn't the best way to prepare for tomorrow's game... We can say it was an off-day but it was way too off, our minds were already on the quarter-finals."

Game 6 – 20.00, Group B: France v Germany 9-5 (2-0, 2-1, 1-2, 4-2)

Referees: Natacha Florestano (BRA), Steve Rotsart (USA)

FRANCE: Lorene Derenty, Estelle Milot, Lea Bachelier 1, Aurore Sacre, Louise Guillet 2, Geraldine Mahieu 1, Marie Barbieux, Marion Tardy 2, Adeline Sacre, Audrey Daule, Lucie Cesca, Michaela Jaskova 3, Morgane Chabrier. Head coach: Filippos Sakellis

GERMANY: Felicitas Saurusajtis, Belen Vosseberg 1, Nadja Kreis 1, Bianca Seyfert, Claudia Blomenkamp, Sina van der Bosch 1, Anja Seyfert 1, Jamie Verebelyi, Jenifer Stiefel, Nadine Hartwig, Carmen Gelse 1, Anika Ebell, Liselotte Hurrelmann. Head coach: Milos Sekulic

Extramén

FRA: 2 for 7

GER: 3 for 7

Penalties:

none



Right to kiss your left... France's Marion Tardy, after her second goal which was crucial, then the other leftie, Michaela Jaskova closed down the party

Playing the fifth game in five days took its toll on these two teams: they haven't used to that load so it was inevitable that it was rather going to be a low-scoring battle where clear opportunities were rare and should be appreciated. France did clearly the better job in that respect, they went 4-1 up by half-time as they seemed a bit fresher.

The Germans brought to the pool what they are the best at: fighting towards the end – indeed they climbed back to 4-3 and at that stage they had a promising counter but the shot went wide and the French netted a crucial action goal from the wing in the very next attack and led 5-3 before the last period. And they were the one who scored first for 6-3 – it was the second great shot from left-handed Marion Tardy –, a gap hard to bridge in a game like this. The Germans pulled one back with 4:27 remaining on the clock but next came the other French leftie, Michaela Jaskova and made some wonders by netting three connecting action goals in 2:02 minutes, securing France's win and the last available spot in the quarters.

Comments

Filippos Sakellis, head coach, France:

"We reached our goal, made the quarters, tomorrow we have a game against the Olympic champion – no need to describe our chances, I think. Today we did a good job, we swam a lot, our 6 on 5 was a bit shaky

sometimes but after all we showed that we were the better team.”

Milos Sekulic, head coach, Germany:

“We started really badly, the girls were too nervous. Then we arrived to the game, did a good job but in the last period we committed some silly mistakes. We have a key point in defence: not to let the left-handed players shoot from position No. 5 – this is where we got three goals. After all, France was clearly the better side today so they deserved this win.”

Classification

Group A

1. USA 10, 2. Greece 8, 3. Spain 6, 4. Canada 4, 5. Japan 2, 6. South Africa 0

Group B

1. Italy 9, 2. Netherlands 8, 3. Russia 7, 4. France 4, 5. Germany 2, 6. New Zealand 0

Quarter-finals (Saturday)

12.00: United States v France

13.45: Greece v Russia

16.00: Spain v Netherlands

17.45: Canada v Italy
