

## Aquatics review of 2017: Water Polo

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In a year when Budapest hosted and delivered on its promise of an exceptional [FINA World Championships](#) [1], water polo was dealing with a new hurdle looming on the horizon. The post-Olympic year is always a drawcard for new talent, new coaches and new ideas, none more so than the bullet fired by the International Olympic Committee when it decided to change the face of the code with an unexpected present earlier in the year.

The IOC decision, which included a net increase of 15 events, an overall reduction of 285 athletes from Rio 2016 and the highest representation of female athletes in Olympic history, lifted the women's water polo competition to 10 teams from eight.

While most applauded the decision to include two more teams, some saw it as not enough and still trailing men in the equality stakes.

### "Ten plus one is interesting"

Then the contentious issue of eliminating two players per team - men and women - meaning 18 fewer Olympic water polo players from the Rio de Janeiro edition, was aired with scepticism.

People asked what would happen in the months leading into the Tokyo Olympic Games when it came to playing a different style of game with the possibility of just one goalkeeper and 10 field players! There were suggestions that the new FINA Technical Water Polo Committee lobby for the extra two players and even for parity with men and 12 teams.

However, this is the fulcrum on which FINA is pushing for the inclusion of more women's teams and that is not increasing player numbers, thus the reduction in players from 13 to 11. "Hot bedding" was raised as a possible means of getting 12 teams by returning to the concept of women's competition one week and men's the next. Concern was also aired about "our game" and the need not to tamper with the 13-player version. FINA is still to come to terms with this decision and a conference has been called for mid-2018 to find ways to encompass what the IOC has initiated.

Adam Krikorian, the USA's Olympic-winning head coach, said in Shanghai at the FINA World League Super Final for women following the decision:

"There are two different sides. It's pleasing that the IOC is working towards gender equity. The women's sides go very deep and any of the top 10 is capable of winning gold medals. I'm concerned about the reduction, not just on the roster side, but also losing 18 athletes total. The rosters are already pretty slim. I am curious to see, moving forward, 10 field players and one goalkeeper. They have to be very specific to have it ironed out to make it work."

Hungarian head coach Attila Biro had similar sentiments:

"I'm disappointed. Everybody in Europe expected men and women to be equalised. That was the goal. At least the IOC is supporting women. I'm disappointed there are only 10 teams. I'm curious if it will be 11 players; I hope the teams and coaches can resolve 15, 16 and 17 exclusions a game like yesterday. Ten plus one is interesting. One goalie for one tournament will be very difficult. The goalie is the backbone in every sport and at least 60 per cent of defence is the goalie."

### **FINA World Championships: Margaret Islanders**

Whatever the outcome of proposals going forward, the elite national teams shoved that to one side when stepping foot on Margaret Island in Budapest during a normally sweltering July.



For two weeks we rallied to the flag, thrilled at the performances of individuals and teams alike and stood in awe as capacity crowds numbering 7,000 people packed and repacked the arena, even when Hungary was not playing.

It was interesting to note that while 7,000 managed to watch the men's gold-medal final at close quarters, 20,000 more were sequestered in the nearby athletic stadium before its doors closed and a further 18,000 milled around the periphery before Margaret Island itself was closed to foot traffic, possibly for fear the island would slip down the Danube and the match not go ahead.

It promised everything, following a terrific men's semi-final night in which two distinct seismic events had

the Richter Scale in meltdown.

Firstly, Hungary did what was expected of it, and booked a gold-medal berth with a 7-5 victory over Greece. Who could forget Norbert Hosnyanszky's seven-metre helicopter shot in the opening quarter?

This victory left florid-faced Hungarians with beaming smiles relaxing during the second semi-final in which the seemingly unconquerable Serbia came up against belligerent Croatia. No spectator was going to give up a seat for what would be a torrid, demanding and ultimately nightmarish encounter. Nightmarish for Serbia and triumph for Croatia.

Serbia made all the headway, with Andrija Prlainovic netting an incredible six times and Croatia equalising a staggering nine times before Maro Jokovic gave Croatia a winning 12-11 advantage three minutes from time.

Then came the all-important closure of the tournament when Hungary was expected to topple Croatia - or so the locals thought. However, Croatia, with the scalp of Serbia firmly tucked into its belt, went out to prove it was champion material, as if people did not already know this fact. At 4-0 by quarter time, the crowd was silenced. At the start of the second quarter it was tournament Most Valuable Player Marton Vamos who scored on the opening attack, sparking a Hungarian revival that brought the match level at 4-4, three minutes from halftime.



Javier Garcia Gadea struck twice, with his second from nine metres, becoming the first multiple scorer in the match. Sandro Sukno drew the margin to 7-4 at the beginning of the fourth only for Vamos, spurred on by a crowd with second wind, netting twice in two minutes to trail 7-6. On the next attack it was Sukno who struck home what was the 8-6 winner in a period where Hungary crumpled and Balazs Harai was red-carded.

The title stays in the Balkans, but Serbia, who had held all the crowns, had to settle for an 11-8 win over Greece to reach the unaccustomed lower step on the victory dais.



The women's competition was all about who could come close to the all-conquering USA.

Australia won that race with a 7-5 loss in the quarter-finals. USA toppled South Africa 24-2, Spain 12-8 and New Zealand 22-7 before clashing with Australia, then dusted off Russia 14-9 in the semi-finals and again beat Spain in a lop-sided final - 13-6.

Spain had two hurdles to the final - the USA loss in the group and needing a shootout to better Greece 14-12 in the quarters after levelling at 10 just five seconds from time through Judith Forca on extra-man attack. In the semi-final, Spain turned a 7-4 halftime lead into a 12-9 success against an in-form Canada, who claimed silver at the World League.

Madeline Musselman (USA) lifted for three goals in the final for a tournament tally of 16 - four shy of highest scorer Roberta Bianconi (ITA) - and was rightfully named Most Valuable Player.



Kiley Neushul had three goals in the bag at 7-4 as USA had a four-goal spurt in the third period that proved Spain's breaking point. Another four-goal haul lifted the match to 13-5, with Anna Espar reducing the margin by one within the last 100 seconds.

*The full length article is available in the latest issue of the FINA Magazine*

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