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# Extremely happy Easter for USA, Russia, Spain and Italy

Gergely Csurka, FINA Media Committee Member (HUN)

The scenario didn't change much since 2012: from Europe the same teams booked the Olympic spots as four years ago. Russia, Spain and Italy were also among the quarter-final winners in Trieste (there Hungary joined them – now the Magyars qualified from the continental event). Here, in Gouda the US team, playing in this tournament for the first time, also made the cut as expected. Greece lost to Russia in the most heart-breaking way, in the penalty shootout, while the host Netherlands went down against Spain after trailing in the entire game. A bit unexpectedly, Italy's clash with Canada ended amidst dramatic circumstances but the Setterosa prevailed.

**Game 1 – 12.00, Quarter-final: United States v France 19-0 (5-0, 7-0, 3-0, 4-0)**

Referees: Svetlana Dreval (RUS), Marie-Claude Deslières (CAN)

USA: Samantha Hill, Madeline Musselman 1, Melissa Seidemann 1, Rachel Fattal, Caroline Clark, Margaret Steffens 4, Courtney Mathewson 1, Kiley Neushul 1, Aria Fischer 3, Kaleigh Gilchrist 1, Makenzie Fischer 6, Kameryn Craig 1, Ashleigh Johnson. Head coach: Adam Krikorian

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

*Extramen*

USA: 4 for 6

FRA: 0 for 6

*Penalties*

USA: 1 for 1

FRA: none



*The flight has been booked: the US team poses with the virtual ticket to Rio, courtesy of the Dutch organisers – Credit: G.*

*Scala&P. Mesiano / Deepbluemedial / Inside*

It was one-way traffic in the pool for the most of the time but not quite unexpectedly: the US side is the team to beat in any competition. Collecting all but one major titles since 2012 including the Olympic and 2015 World gold medals, they arrived to Gouda as the outstanding favourite and performed accordingly on each day. In this first quarter-final they outpowered the French by all means: indeed, besides the ‘magnificent seven’ – the strongest teams in the field – only one QF spot seemed to be available for the other sides and that was booked by France. The first shutout of the week just mirrors what is the difference between the strongest and the weakest team in the best eight – especially after five connecting matches, on the sixth day of a cruelly challenging tournament.

## **Comments**

**Adam Krikorian, head coach, USA**

*“We are a certainly talented team but I don’t think it can be underestimated how hard this team works. Today they were*

*able to earn the awards for that. I feel sorry for France, they played at nine in the evening yesterday now they have to start*

*effort.”*

**Filippos Sakellis, head coach, France:**

*“We couldn’t do much today. Yesterday we had a tough match, finished at 9PM, now we faced the best team in the world at*

*noon. We tried to give our best but this was the maximum we could achieve. Congratulations for the US team, they are a*

*really great team.”*

**Maggie Steffens, captain, USA:**

*“It feels amazing, we’ve worked so hard, trained for nine months and now we have the opportunity to play at the Olympic*

*important day. Every person on this team deserves everything for the hard work – we have a new mission now.”*

**Game 2 – 13.45, Quarter-finals: Greece v Russia 10-10 (5-3, 1-2, 1-2, 3-3), penalties: 2-3**

Referees: Gabriella Varkonyi (HUN), Jaume Teixido (ESP)

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

RUSSIA: Anna Ustyukhina, Tatiana Zubkova, Ekaterina Prokofyeva 2, Elvina Karimova, Maria Borisova 1, Olga Gorbunova, Svetlana Kuzina, Anastasia Simanovich 3, Anna Timofeeva, Evgeniia Soboleva 1, Evgeniya Ivanova 3, Anna Grineva, Anna Karnaukh. Head coach: Alexander Gaidukov

*Extramen*

GRE: 3 for 5

RUS: 1 for 12

*Penalties*

GRE: 2 for 3

RUS: none



*At several stages, the Greeks were the happier side... For the last time 19 second before the whistle which was supposed to*

*be the final...*

Back in January, in the prelims of the Europeans in Belgrade, the Russians practically blew the Greeks away (16-6) – just a week later, the game for the 5<sup>th</sup> place brought a totally different outcome as Greece won in the penalty shootout (12-13), a fine demonstration how things can change in the elite of women's water polo.

And that was quickly mirrored right in the first period in Gouda. The Russians jumped to a 1-3 lead with three fine action goals, including two from the centre by Anastasia Simanovich. The Greek missed a penalty in the meantime, but when they converted the second it rocketed them to another level and they scored three more goals for a 5-3 lead, the last two came when only one second was left on the shot-clock.

Evgeniya Ivanova brought the Russians closer from a classic counter, then they denied a Greek extra but hit the post from their 6 on 5. Soon the world-class Greek centre-forward, Alexandra Asimaki earned the third penalty with a fine turn and Roumpesi put it away again. Soon they had a man-up after a time-out to go +3 but failed to make it, though the Russians couldn't come closer either as the Greek defence denied them twice in man-ups and Simanovich hit the post this time from the centre. But a late Greek error in front and a quick counter lifted the Russians' spirits as Ivanova put the ball away with 3 seconds left from the period (6-5).

It cost them a lot: soon after going for a 7-4 lead they found themselves 6-7 down as Ekaterina Prokofyeva's wonderful goal from a counter and, in a minute, Ivanova's fine shot from a dying 6 on 5 put the Russians ahead. And it could have been more but they missed connecting man-ups and the Greeks made theirs with Eleni Xenaki's left-handed blast, so it was 7-7

instead of 6-8. The Russians committed the same mistake soon, they had two 6 on 5s within one possession but couldn't make them as Chrysoula Diamantopoulou came up with great saves – so the sides stood even before the last eight minutes.

Greece began with two promising lobbs, both hit the post, Russia missed another man-up – they made 0 for the last 5 – and paid for that: Tsoukala netted an easy one from action from the wing for 8-7, with 4:21 to go. The following Russian 6 on 5 also went down the drain, unlike the Greeks', Roumpesi finished it off for a 9-7 lead with exactly 3:00 minutes remaining on the clock.

Then, almost from nowhere, Maria Borisova netted a lobb from the wing and in 33 seconds it was even again (9-9), as Prokofyeva scored from another trademark counter! And on their very next possession Simanovich remained alone in front of the goal – the Greek defenders messed it up – her lobb beat the keeper but a couple of millimetres was missing for the goal... Still, we were far from the end of the drama! A magnificent move in the centre and Alexandra Asimaki scored what seemed to be a game winner for Greece with 19.3 seconds left. But that time was enough for the Russians to deliver a fine combination and this time Simanovich was on target from close range – 4.4 seconds from time!



*The faces tell it all... The Russians before a penalty shot...*



*And after it...*

It ended 10-10 and the Olympic qualification was decided the cruellest way: in the penalty shootout. And it favoured the Russians, thanks to Anna Ustyukhina who stopped three shots. The Russians were also tense they hit the post twice – after 2-2 four consecutive shots were missed – but on the last attempt Maria Borisova found the back of the net, sending Russia to the seventh heaven and, of course, to Rio. They were overjoyed, they are now maintaining their run at the Olympics as the only European nation taking part in each edition since 2000 while Greece failed to reach the Games for the second straight time. They bowed out in the most heart-breaking way, missed the Rio flight by 4.4 seconds virtually – instead, they left the pool with a flood of tears watering their faces...



*Heart-broken... The Greeks, after it was over...*

## **Comments**

**Athanasios Kechagias, head coach, Greece**

*experience to become a better team for the next years.”*

**Andrei Belofastov, coach, Russia**

*“It was a fantastic game which we started really well as we attacked the Greeks’ zonal defence exactly the way we planned.*

*But then we committed some mistakes in the back, it resulted three penalties so we had to change our defence as well. This*

*worked for most of the time but we have to admit that the Greek team played extremely well, just like in the whole*

*tournament. We feel really sorry for them, they would have deserved to go to Rio. Some people said that based on the*

*preliminaries Russia wasn’t ready for making the qualifications, now we proved that our team is good enough to go to the*



*They made it again: Russia as successful in all five qualification tournaments so far – a real feat*

**Game 3 – 16.00, Quarter-finals: Spain v Netherlands 10-7 (4-1, 2-2, 2-2, 2-2)**

Referees: Daniel Flahive (AUS), Alessandro Severo (ITA)

SPAIN: Laura Ester, Marta Bach, Anna Espar, Beatriz Ortiz, Matilde Ortiz, Jennifer Pareja, Paula Leiton, Pilar Pena 2,

Judith Forca 3, Roser Tarrago 2, Maica Garcia 1, Laura Lopez 2, Patricia Herrera. Head coach: Miguel Oca

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

### *Extramen*

ESP: 4 for 13

NED: 3 for 8

### *Penalties*

ESP: none

NED: 0 for 1



*The pool was full with host supporters – but the Spaniards handled the pressure: Pilar Pena celebrates one of her fine goals*

Not a single square-millimetre was uncovered in the tiny Groenhovenbad as almost a thousand spectators filled the stands, the temporary ones, too, stood on the steps, sat on chairs behind the starting blocks... This was a tremendous match-up, the clash of the 2013 world champion and the 2015 world silver medallist, a rematch of the 2014 European final and this year's semi-final – which was decided in a thrilling 7-round penalty shootout. And only one of them could survive this day...

The Spaniards took a flying start with goals which would even earn high praises for any male players for the brilliant techniques used. Judith Forca's wonderfully knuckled ball from close range was followed by Pilar Pena's backhanded shot from the wing for a 2-0 lead. Holland's first positive experience came when they denied a Spanish 6 on 5 but they failed to deliver on the other end. The hosts missed two counters and two extras, then, after Pena scored another one from action, a third 6 on 5 also gone for the Dutch. And to make things worse for them, Forca's fine lob made its way to the net, stunning the crowd as Spain rushed 4-0 ahead, with four left-handed goals. Catherina van der Sloot brought the Dutch back to life as she managed to score at last, still in the first period, with 0:04 to go.

Vivian Sevenich's one-timer pushed the hosts one closer early in the second but a great action goal from Laura Lopez re-set the three-goal cushion immediately (5-2). It could have been more but the Spaniards missed two 6 on 5s – while the Dutch went on struggling in front. A nicely tailored man-up gave them some hope, Miloushka Smit converted it, still, the response came immediately with Maica Garcia's trademark goal from the centre.

And from a 6 on 4, taking over from the second period, Spain went 7-3 up as Roser Tarrago put the ball away (while in 6 on 5). Decisive moments came, Spain missed two 6 on 5s, the hosts one, too, in between, but most painfully for the locals, van der Sloot's penalty was well saved by Laura Ester. And only four minutes left from the third, when Forca's fine shot in a 6 on 5 gave Spain a commanding 8-3 lead. Maud Megens pulled one back immediately, then from a counter and an ensuing man-up Naomi Stomphorst made it 8-5 in a span of 44 seconds. The Dutch came to live, denied a Spanish man-up, led two fast counters but couldn't score from either so the gap was still substantial before the last period (8-5).

The fourth was launched by van der Sloot's great blast from the wing and after Spain was denied in a 6 on 5, then in the 6 on 4, Miloushka Smit's shot in a dying man-up brought the crowd to their feet as it stood 8-7. However, Tarrago's magnificent shot from the distance – while six on six – with a couple of seconds left on the shot-clock was a virtual game-winner, especially after Lopez blocked the Dutch shot in a man-down with 3:25 to go. And she was the one who netted a 6 on 4 finally for 10-7. When Smit's shot was saved by Ester with less than two minutes left it was over for the hosts. The score didn't change then, the Spaniards could celebrate another qualification for the Games, while the Dutch, who made the finals in three consecutive majors previously – 2014 Europeans, 2015 Worlds, 2016 Europeans – failed to make the semis in the most important tourney, at home waters...

Where did they miss it? In Belgrade when they paraded through the event, reached the final but after 7-7 they lost the last period 0-2 to the Hungarians thus missed the direct qualification? Here, when they were 8-4 up against the Russians with one quarter left but went down 0-4 in that period? Or against Italy when they couldn't hold on after 6-4? Obviously, a QF against Canada might have been less challenging... Anyhow, after winning in Beijing 2008, they couldn't book their berth for the Games in 2012 and this year either. A great team left the scene, extreme sadness sat on the players' faces, while the Spanish virtually flew all over the place – despite two defeats in the prelims they are through now. Coming from the third place, just like the Russians.



*Like in a triumphant gold medal game... Spanish head coach Miguel Oca ended up in the water after the win*

## **Comments**

**Miguel Oca, head coach, Spain:**

*"I'm really satisfied with the team's performance. We really started the game well, our will was really there, we were really*

**Arno Havenga, head coach, Netherlands:**

*“I don’t know if it’s the pressure or something else. We didn’t played on the level we used to, especially in attack we made*

*series of mistakes, our 6 on 5 didn’t work either.”*

**Anna Espar, player, Spain:**

*“We proved again that our team is really strong, especially our mentality. We can handle the pressure pretty much, we*

*played three finals in three years, won two of them so we are really good at playing in the most tense moments. Today we*

*were great right from the beginning and held on till the end.”*

**Game 4 – 17.45, Quarter-finals: Canada v Italy 7-8 (2-4, 2-2, 1-2, 2-0)**

Referees: Natacha Florestano (BRA), Adrian Alexandrescu (ROU)

CANADA: Jessica Gaudreault, Krystina Alogbo 2, Katrina Monton, Emma Wright, Monika Eggens 2, Kelly McKee, Joelle Bekhazi 2, Axelle Crevier, Carmen Eggens, Christine Robinson 1, Hanna Yelizarova, Dominique Perreault, Nicola Colterjohn. Head coach: David Paradelo

ITALY: Gulia Gorlero, Chiara Tabani, Arianna Garibotti 3, Elisa Queirolo 1, Federica Radicchi, Rosaria Aiello, Tania di Mario, Roberta Bianconi 1, Giulia Emmolo 3, Francesca Pomeri, Aleksandra Cotti, Teresa Frassinetti, Laura Teani. Head coach: Fabio Conti

*Extramen*

CAN: 1 for 6

ITA: 1 for 13

### *Penalties*

none



*Canada made it really hard for the Italians: Joelle Bekhazi celebrates her goal with goalie Gulia Gorlero in the back*

Italy quickly jumped to a 2-0 lead and for a while the gap was always around 2-3 goals. The Setterosa was 6-4 up at halftime when Jessica Gaudreault started to get on fire and posted a couple of tremendous saves. Still, Italy went 8-5 ahead before the last period after two extraordinary blasts, courtesy of Arianna Garibotti and Giulia Emmolo.

The drama unfolding in the last eight minutes was a bit unexpected. It started with a fine goal from Krystina Alogbo, who pushed in a rebound from the centre on the very first attack and soon a great shot from Monika Eggens brought the Canadians pretty close. It stood 8-7 and there were still 6:44 minutes to go. Italy could have settled it but missed three man-ups in a row, including a real one-on-one when Teresa Frassinetti hit the post from 2m... On the other end the Canadians weren't really close to score, they were denied to earn any man-ups in the entire fourth period and their shots weren't as sharp as in the earlier stages. In the dying seconds tensions ran high, a player from both sides and the Canadian head coach got red card but the result didn't change.

The Italians, just like four years ago, went through after winning by a single goal (that time against the Netherlands) – the Canadians, just like in Trieste 2012, lost by one (that time to Russia). That's what makes the difference: laughter at one corner, tears – even in the coach's eyes – in the other.



*The happy Italians, after the usual nailbiter in the quarters...*

## **Comments**

**David Paradelo, head coach, Canada:**

*“I don’t want to comment this game.”*

**Fabio Conti, head coach, Italy:**

*“I told the players yesterday that this kind of match is totally different. Even harder than playing in the Olympic final.*

*Under the pressure you can't play really good water polo, though we could have closed down the match a bit earlier.*

*Congratulations to Canada, they had a couple of weaker matches but today they were up to the task, probably they came to*

*this game with a much freer mind, shoot the ball with more ease than us. I really hope that from the next Olympics the*

*women's field can be extended to 12 teams as we got proof once more that we have at least 11 really good women teams,*

*those who couldn't make it today, like Greece, the Netherlands and Canada are all equal to the others and can win at any*

*promotion of water polo.”*

**Tania di Mario, captain, Italy:**

*“We knew that this match would be really hard as play in real tension. We prepared for that, still, it was a tough match.*

*Towards the end we couldn't deal with- the Canadians' pressing – perhaps it was a bit harder than usual –, but after all the*

*result is what counts here so we are really happy and now our minds are already on Rio.”*

**Schedule, Sunday**

12.00, Places 5-8: France v Netherlands

13.45, Places 5-8: Greece v Canada

16.00, Semi-finals: United States v Spain

17.45, Semi-finals: Russia v Italy

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