Trieste, Day 1: Surprising wins for Canada and the Netherlands

Camillo Cametti, FINA Media Committee Chairman

The Men’s Olympic Qualification Tournament got underway today at the “Bruno Bianchi” Swimming Complex in Trieste, Italy, already the venue for a similar competition, the Women Olympic Qualification Tournament, in 2012. The eight-day competition will come to an end on 10th April. Twelve teams, divided in two Groups of 6, play for the last 4 places available for Rio 2016.

In Group A there are Russia, Slovakia, France, Hungary, Romania and Canada; in Group B Italy, South Africa, Spain, The Netherlands, Germany and Kazakhstan. The first 4 in each Group will qualify for the Quarter Finals, scheduled for Friday 8 April. The winners will go through the Semi-finals and will automatically qualify for the Olympic Games 2016.

Hungary, Italy and Spain appear favorites to go through while the fourth and last spot will be hardly fought among the other teams, with an unpredictable outcome. The final ranking of the first four besides deciding the medals will also determine their seeding for the Olympic Draw that will take place on Sunday 10th after the conclusion of the tournament.

The tournament is organised on behalf of FINA by the Italian Swimming Federation and develops under the supervision of Dimitris Diathesopoulos, FINA Bureau Liaison, and the direction of the FINA Technical Water Polo Committee, chaired by Gianni Lonzi. A short inauguration ceremony was celebrated at the presence of the Mayor of the City, Roberto Cosolini, with Paolo Barelli, president of the Host Federation and Honorary Secretary of FINA, pronouncing the welcome address.

Today the first six games of the Preliminary Round were played, according to the following schedule and results:
Sunday 3rd April – Day 1

13:50 (A) RUS-CAN 6-7
15:10 (A) FRA-HUN 7-13
16:30 (A) SVK-ROU 11-13
17:50 (B) ESP-NED 5-7
19:10 (B) RSA-GER 4-23
20:30 (B) ITA-KAZ 14-3

The major surprises were caused by Canada, who unexpectedly defeated Russia by one goal scored at 22 seconds from the end of the match, and the Netherlands who unpredictably defeated Spain.

Romania’s Tiberiu Negrean was the player of the day with 6 goals scored to Slovakia. The match with most goal, 27, was South Africa – Germany (4-23).

Game by Game

Game 1 (A) - 13:50 (A) Russia-Canada 6-7 (1-1, 2-2; 2-1, 1-3)


Russia was deprived of one of its main assets a few days ago when attacker Alexey Bugaychuk, of Dynamo Moscow, on March 30th – his 27th birthday - has been found positive to meldonium, which has been on the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) list of substances banned from use by athletes since January 1st this year. The player was immediately suspended pending further investigation.

Eventually the absence of Bugaychuk in Trieste proved a blow to the Russian team who lost the game in the final seconds by one goal.

With 10 goals the striker was the second best scorer at the European Championships in Belgrade last January (where Russia made the Quarter Finals, eventually finishing in 8th place).

It was a hard fought game, and a very balanced one. Russia scored the first goal and then was always up one goal with Canada managing to equalize for five times.

The first half time ended on 3 to 3. Then it was 4-4, but close to the expiration of the period, a penalty put Russia up one goal again. The 3rd period ended on 5-4 for Russia and game was still wide open. At 5.54 inside the last period, Russia scored the sixth goal (6-4) in what seemed to be the turning point of the match. It was not so.

A pair of great saves from Canada’s goalie Aleksic and three consecutive goals of the Canadians - at 5.07 Conway (6-5) then twice Boyd, at 3.35 from 2 metres (6-6) and at 22 seconds to the end gave Canada an unexpected victory (6-7). A dramatic development celebrated with joy by the North Americans.

Giuseppe “Pino” Porzio, the Italian coach from Naples, hired just a few months ago, expressed his satisfaction with these words: “We knew that Russia was a strong team. Indeed it was difficult to tame our opponents. I need to praise all my players. Until the last second they believed they could do it. They have never given up. It was a very good start in this tournament. I am happy, also because this was my first official match as Canada’s coach”.

Russia’s captain Dmitrii Kholod said: "It was a difficult match. Canada has one of the best coaches. When the score was 6-4 for us we tried to remain quiet and defend well, but they promoted their strength. Now we have to win all the next matches to be in the quarter final". 


Hungary did not need to be brilliant in order to win this match. Actually the Magyars were out to a fast start in what seemed to be developing as a one way game - they won the first quarter 6-0.

Although it could not stage any serious opposition the French side did not look resigned and in the second quarter it reacted outscoring their opponents 4-2.

The Magyars had certainly allowed themselves a pause of relaxation, not favoured by their coach Tibor Benedek, who used this match as a warm-up game to refine their preparation in this tournament and delivered his players the usual half time sermon. The effectiveness of it was seen immediately in the 3rd quarter, won by Hungary 3-0.

The last quarter was more balanced with the French managing to score two goals while the Hungarians netted three.

Hungary’s coach Tibor Benedek said: "We are the favorite team of this group and we have to show it. We started well taking us on 6-0 and closing the match. We had few difficulties in the second period. Canada has gained more confidence after their victory. At this point the direct match of tomorrow is already important".

So France’s coach Florian Bruzzo: "We reacted well despite our terrible first period. This is our first match and we won't forgive this lesson".
Game 3 (A) 16.30 – Slovakia – Romania 11-13 (4-3, 2-5; 3-2, 2-3)


Referees: Radaslow Koryzna (POL), Henk Smit (NED).

Notes - Ejected with substitution in the 3rd quarter Zatovic (S), in the 4th Durik (S), Goanta (R) and Ghiban (R). Extra man goals: Slovakia 3/10 + 1 penalty, Romania 4/12 + 1 penalty.
Another tight and attractive game, this one between two Eastern European sides. Slovakia went out fast with two action goals from Seman and Zatovic. Romania scored also on action with Chiovenau. Then both teams scored two goals each and the first period ended 4 to 3 for Slovakia. The second quarter, dominated by Romania, ended 5-2 for in their favour. Eventually the 3-goal gap in this period would result decisive for the final outcome as the last two quarters were tied 5-5: 3-2 for Slovakia the third, same score for Romania the fourth.

Jurai Zatovic, Slovakia’s captain: “It was a difficult match. We wanted to win it in order to start the tournament in a positive way, but we didn't manage it. We started well, then we got some easy goals and in the end we were unable to catch up the gap. We're only at the beginning of the tournament. We still have four games left in the group. We keep going.”

Antonio Esteller Serrahima, Slovakia’s coach: "We started very well but then we suffered the more aggressive play of Romania. They have a good defense and my team had some problems in attack. But it's only the beginning”.

Dejan Stanojevic, Romania’s coach: "I'm satisfied with the result but not with the game; we made some mistakes that a winning team shouldn't make, but luckily at the end we won. This tournament is very difficult because it's wearisome to play every day and one of the facts that can distinguish the winning team is the physical resistance”.

Cosmin Radu, Romania’s captain (2 goals): "We didn't play very well in the first period, but then we improve our level. A victory is a victory even with some mistakes. The next matches will be difficult, we know that, but we have to win them”.

Game 4 (B) 17.50 – Spain – Netherlands 5-7 (3-2, 0-2; 0-2, 2-1)


Referees: Joseph Peila (USA), Balasz Szekely (HUN).
FINA Delegate: Alan Balfanbayev.

Notes - In the second quarter Wagennar (N) saved a penalty to Espanol (S). Extra man goals: Spain 4/10 + 1 penalty, Netherlands 4/10 + 1 penalty.

Three straight goals from Spain in the first quarter. Then the Spanish striker seemed to have gone…on strike: no more goals from them in the 2nd and 3rd quarters.

On the contrary the Dutch shooters put the Spanish goal well into their gauntlet and scored six consecutive goals, concluding the 3rd quarter on 6-3. A disaster for the Iberians.

Spain managed to reduce the gap with an early goal 47 seconds inside the last quarter, 4-6, which seemed to revive the match, but at 4:50 the Dutch scored again declaring the game over (4-7). With three minutes left the Spaniards were unlikely to fill the gap of 3 goals. The Dutch deserved winning while the Spanish were incredibly disappointing. A last goal from the Spanish at less than 30 seconds to the final siren did not change the outcome. Final score 7-5 for the Dutch.

Curiously, as many as seven Dutch players in the latest two season have been playing in the Spanish championship.

Robin Van Galen, coach of the Netherlands, was at the seventh heaven: "It was a surprising victory but we played well from the beginning, made a good defense, then kept the confidence and deserved to beat a top team like Spain. I hope that we can continue in this way until game 6, because it will be the most important game. We must remain concentrated all the way".

Roeland Spijker, Netherlands’ captain: "It was a very good victory and it’s been long time since we beat Spain. I think last time was in 2006. We didn't expect to win this game so we're very happy and I guess that we have a good confidence for the rest of the tournament".

Gabriel Hernandez, coach of Spain, bitterly said: "Sometimes you lose but we have just to think of the game of tomorrow. Netherlands hasn't surprise us, we haven't yet understood the importance of this tournament. This tournament doesn't leave a chance to think about the past. We have to do better and win".

Guillermo Molina (Spain) with much fair play admitted: "This victory is all about to the Netherlands; this team has been able to take good advantage of our mistakes and they played with patience. We made an individual game, not a team's game; we can't afford this. We had not planned this defeat but this was just the first game and our goal does not change".
Game 5 (B) 19.10 – South Africa-Germany 4-23 (0-6, 2-4; 1-5, 1-8 )


Referees: Doriel Terpenka (CAN), Pascal Bouchez (FRA).
FINA Delegate: Manuel Ibern.
Notes – In the 3rd period Card (S) was ejected with substitution. Extra man goal: South Africa 2/7 + 1 penalty, Germany 9/12.

The German players had no mercy and buried the unexperienced South African side whose net was inflated 23 times. The Germans conceded only 4 goals to their generous opponents. In the end a gap of 19 goals was dividing the two teams. Bukowski and Preuss were the top scorers of the match with 4 goals each.

Heiko Nossek, German player: "We already knew that South Africa isn't on the same level of the other teams. We have to think about the next matches. Tomorrow we'll have to win against Spain. It will be very difficult but we have to try. The success of Netherlands gives me hope and I think that with our best game we can win. We expect a tough match but these are the qualifications to the Olympics Games and every match is like the final".

Paul Martin, coach of South Africa: "Unfortunately we don't have a solid team. It costs a lot of money to get a better preparation. We don't have of them. Most of players don't play high level for two-three minutes more. Our biggest problem is that we have low profile competition all the time: we play in Africa, we don't travel enough to have international experience. We came to this tournament to learn and grow and we'll be better".

**Game 6 (B) – Italy-Kazakhstan 14-3 (4-1, 3-0; 4-1, 3-1)**

A tonic Italian team was off to a strong start, with two goals already netted in the first 59 seconds, a penalty from Giorgetti and an action goal from Di Fulvio. These openers were followed up by one goal from Nora and another one from Figlioli. A minute and 35 seconds before the end of the first period Kazakhstan reduced the gap thanks a goal from Shmider (4-1).

The game developed according to the same plot and the final score reflected the reality seen in the field. Left hander Alessandro Nora was both the best player and the top scorer of the match with 4 goals.

Italy’s coach Alessandro Campagna was moderately satisfied with the performance of his team: “It was the first game and I cannot be dissatisfied, however we need to grow up. I expected a stronger opposition, a more physical opposition, perhaps our first three opening goals made our life easier than expected demotivating a little bit Kazakhstan”.

ITA vs KAZ - Photo by Giorgio Scala/Deepbluemedia