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Water Polo, Men's Final - And finally: it's Serbia!

Gergely Csurka, FINA Media Committee Member

After twenty years of trying, Serbia finally made it. They had three bronzes and a silver in the past four editions, but

now they got rid of their Olympic demons. After a shaky start in the prelims, they blew away all their rivals in the

knockout phase, lastly their arch-rivals, the title-holder Croatians, in a one-sided final (the last day saw the largest

gap, +4, in the gold medal match). The bronze went to the Italians, while Montenegro had to settle for the 4th

Final

Game 4, 17.50: Croatia v Serbia 7-11 (2-3, 1-3, 2-3, 2-2)

Referees: Georgios Stavridis (GRE), Peter Molnar (HUN)

CROATIA: Josip Pavic, Damir Buric 1, Antonio Petkovic, Luka Loncar, Maro Jokovic, Luka Bukic, Marko Macan, Andro

Buslje, Sandro Sukno 3, Ivan Krapic, Andelo Setka 1, Javier Garcia 2, Marko Bijac (GK). Head coach: Ivica Tucak

SERBIA: Branislav Mitrovic, Dusan Mandic 4, Zivko Gocic 1, Sava Randelovic, Milos Cuk, Dusko Pijetlovic 2, Slobodan

Nikic 1, Milan Aleksic, Nikola Jaksic, Filip Filipovic 2, Andrija Prlainovic, Stefan Mitrovic 1, Gojko Pijetlovic (GK). Head coach: Dejan Savic

Extramen

Croatia: 2 for 12

Serbia: 2 for 6

Penalties

none

Mission completed. The Serbians finally made it and after 1988 they returned to the top of the podium, though that time it was the big Yugoslavia, Serbs and Croats together. Since that state broke up, the Serbs chased the Olympic glory in vain. Generation of fantastic players tried desperately, won world and European titles, they were close at the Games, but never succeeded. After an embarrassing 8th place finish in 1996, in 2000 they lost to Hungary 8-7 in the semis. In 2004 they lost to Hungary 8-7 in the final. In 2008 they lost to the USA 10-5 in the semis (a shocker). In 2012 they lost the semis once more, this time to Italy, 7-5. Their head coach, Dejan Savic was part of the first three painful journeys so he knew what to avoid in

order to reach the top.

The first week, however, was a nightmare for them. Two ties (v HUN, GRE) and a real shocking loss to Brazil which sent the mighty Serbs to the brink of elimination. A loss to Australia would have meant an end of their dreams and in fact it stood 7-7 with 5:08 to go, before the Serbs clinched it. In two days time they had to bounce back from 2-5 down against Japan, as their last scare in Rio, since then they were back to their devastating form which brought them the 2015 world title, the 2014 and 2016 European titles, four straight World League crowns between 2013 and 2016 and a World Cup win in 2014. In the quarters they downed Spain 10-7 (were 7-3 up already), beat Italy 10-8 (led 9-3 early in the fourth) and beat Croatia 11-7 on the last day.

It was almost as easy as last year's World Championships final in Kazan. There they won 11-4, led 5-2 at halftime, it was still 7-4 after three periods before the final surge blew the Croats away.

Here the Serbs, playing with one less field player as Milos Cuk had to sit out with an injury, quickly gained a 1-3 lead while the Croats missed two man-ups, though they scored from action a bit later. At 2-3 Croatia had a man-up in the second, missed it again and Slobodan Nikic made it 2-4 from a dying extra. Zivko Gocic's smart right-handed lob from the right wing was a real boost for the Serbs (2-5), and even though Anđelo Setka pulled one back from a man-up, an immediate answer arrived from Dusan Mandic.

It stood 3-6 at halftime, Damir Buric scored for 4-6 early in the third and after a killed Serbian man-up the Croats had a possession to come closer but Luka Bukic's shot was stopped by Branislav Mitrovic. As it turned out that was the last chance for the Croats to stay in the game. Who else, than Filip Filipovic blasted two devastating goals, in between two more Croatian 6 on 5s were denied, the damage was done at 4-8. At this point perhaps even the Croats were aware what the outcome had to be, especially after Dusan Mandic's third hit with 11 seconds from time in the third.

In their only final in the recent editions, in 2004 the Serbs led 7-5 before the last period against Hungary – it was 9-5 now, against a visibly broken Croatian team. Two goals came in the first minute of the fourth, one apiece, but the Serbs scored first so the psychological advantage remained on their side. And when Dusan Mandic made it 6-11 with 3:29 to go, it was over. After a save, with 2:30 minutes remaining, goalie Branislav Mitrovic began the celebrations and no one was against it, players at the bench started to congratulate each other. The remaining time quickly passed and when the buzzer went, wild jubilation erupted in the pool and at poolside, too.

One man was missing from the kisses and hugs in the water: head coach Dejan Savic insisted to not being tossed to the pool. He had never let his players throw him to the water so far, though was master of a series of gold medals in the past four years. Still, he usually says, after the pressure filled moments of the finals he just loves to sit back on the bench and watch his players celebrating their success. He did just that here in Rio. Historians recorded that the Soviets did the first coach-tossing back in 1972, in Munich. Since that edition, perhaps Savic is the first who did not bath together with his players in the pool after an Olympic triumph. Though history will only remember him as the first coach who managed to lead the independent Serbian team to the highest heights, the top of the podium at the Games.



They made it: the Serbs, reaching their ultimate goal, the Olympic gold - now in their hands - Credit: G. Scala,

Slobodan Nikic, player, Serbia:

"This is maybe the best feeling in my life. I feel like I'm flying. After winning so many golds except the Olympic Games, we showed our power in this tournament. These last three matches we played like a team and we deserve it."

"It's not the first time for us but this is special because we were missing the Olympic gold medal. For a few of us, maybe this was our last Olympics. That's why it's the best feeling and we feel so proud. We are one of the best water polo teams in history. Maybe the best."

"We need some rest, we need some beer and to chill. These eight matches were really hard for us and we need some rest because we were dreaming three or four years for this."

Filip Filipovic, player, Serbia:

"We trained so hard and so much. We suffered so much for this gold medal. This is it for us. Let's say it's game over."

"Why we are so strong? Maybe it's the food, water, the land, the girls we have in our country? I don't know but I hope the government will now see the opportunity to invest more in the sport, to see that we really have some great talent and some magnificent players."

"I don't want to promise anything. I just need some time to think about what I'm going to do next. This would be the best way for finish my national team career but I will speak with the team. I will see if I have more motivation for the future. I will definitely be in Tokyo but maybe as a spectator. We will see."

Dusan Mandic, player, Serbia:

"It feels like the whole team has reached eternity. These guys are unbelievable and this a unique team. This is a fantastic success for Serbia. I still can't believe what just happened. We are the world, European and now Olympic champions. There is no better feeling and we are just in shock."

Andrija Prlainovic, player, Serbia:

"We played tremendously. We made only a few mistakes, which isn't usual for a final. In the last one and a half days I really felt ready for this moment; that we were going to achieve the most memorable moment of our careers.

"The vast majority of this team will continue playing but for a few guys this will be their last competition and their crowning glory."



Croatia, the first title-holder which finishes runner-up in the following edition since 1948

Ivica Tucak, head coach, Croatia:

"Serbia was the better team. We tried everything we had against them but they were just too physical and strong. The result shows that."

"Right now we have a very young team. This team is already set to start the next Olympic cycle. I believe that 10 or 11 players on this team will play in Tokyo. I'm very optimistic about our chances in Tokyo."

Marko Bijac, goalie, Croatia:

"At this moment I feel a little bit disappointed because we had the ability to be better in this match. I think though that when my emotions aren't as strong I will be satisfied with the silver medal. It's a great success for our country."

"I hope I can go until Tokyo. I can promise I will do my best and train harder. I also think that most of us will be able to get back to Tokyo and win the gold medal there."

Bronze medal match

Game 2, 13.00: Montenegro v Italy 10-12 (1-2, 3-3, 3-4, 3-3)

Referees: Boris Margeta (SLO), Sergey Naumov (RUS)

MONTENEGRO: Milos Scepanovic, Drasko Brguljan, Vjekoslav Paskovic, Antonio Petrovic, Darko Brguljan 2, Aleksandar

Radovic 1, Mladan Janovic 3, Uros Cuckovic, Aleksandar Ivovic 2, Sasa Misic 1, Filip Klikovac 1, Predrag Jokic, Zdravko Radic (GK). Head coach: Vladimir Gojkovic

ITALY: Marco del Lungo, Francesco di Fulvio, Niccolo Gitto, Pietro Figlioli 1, Andrea Fondelli, Alessandro Velotto,

Alessandro Nora 1, Valentino Gallo 3, Christian Presciutti 4, Michael Bodegas, Matteo Aicardi 1, Nicholas Presciutti 2, Stefano Tempesti (GK). Head coach: Alessandro Campagna

Extramens

Montenegro: 4 for 14

Italy: 4 for 13

Penalties

Montenegro: 0 for 1

Italy: none

Italy claimed another medal after their silver in 2012, this time a bronze. At the same time, Montenegro went through another painful experience: just like in 2008 and 2012, they had to settle for the 4th place, losing the third Olympic bronze medal match in succession (perhaps a joint mental training with the Hungarian women would be essential, who achieved the same results at the past three editions). In the previous two they went down against the Serbs, in London they wasted a 4-goal lead – this time they weren't that close to the podium, they never led against Italy.

The Settebello quickly took a 0-2 lead but early in the second the Montenegrins levelled for 2-2, but soon it was 2-3 and later two fast goal exchanges kept the Italians in front – the last hit from Christian Presciutti came 4 seconds before the middle break (4-5). Mladan Janovic equalised from a dying man-up shortly after the restart but next came the Presciutti brothers: Christian put away an extra, Nicholas scored from the distance and for the first time Italy was two up at 5-7. The following 6 on 5s were all converted, though sometimes not within 20 seconds, but patience paid off as the Montenegrins netted both from the 'wall' (from the 2m line) while the Italians' finishes came from the lefties, Alessandro Nora and Valentino Gallo – both times Milos Scepanovic touched the ball but could not stop it. Zdravko Radic came in to the goal but scoring was also a problem for the Montenegrins at this stage, they missed their extra, then Ivovic hit the post from close range in the last second.

The Italian advantage was halved in no time in the fourth when Darko Brguljan put away a 6 on 5 for 8-9, but Nicholas Presciutti stunned Radic with a brilliant curved lob and in 52 seconds he added his fourth from a 6 on 5 and Montenegro seemed to be in trouble at 8-11. A missed penalty from Ivovic didn't help them either, later they wasted a 6 on 5 and soon Italy could have closed down the contest but a nonchalant shot cost them the man-up and all of a sudden the match heated up. After a time-out Ivovic's action goal and Aleksandar Radovic's blast from an extra brought the Montenegrins to the surface. It took 33 seconds to come back to 10-11, and they even had a possession to equalise but Stefano Tempesti came up with another great save with 62 seconds remaining. The Montenegrins might have counted on one last chance but something unexpected decided the outcome: Matteo Aicardi, the Italian centre-forward – still wearing his 'Zorro-mask' because of his injury from the first game – stayed on the outside perimeter, in the last second of their possession he let the ball fly from 7m and it perfectly bounced in from the left post, paving the way for the wild celebration of the Italians.



Zorro&Co. - Matteo Aicardi and his team-mates celebrate another medal after 2012

Alessandro Campagna, head coach, Italy:

"This medal means we are at the top of water polo, even if we changed seven players from London. I think we deserved it. When you finish the Olympic Games with victories, with a medal, it's always happiness."

"Christian (Presciutti) is a leader. He played excellent in all the games and also today because he scored four goals."

Stefano Tempesti, captain, Italy:

"We are so happy. We deserve this medal. We won against all the odds and against all the gods because Montenegro

is a great team with lots of strong individuals. But we played as a group, as a team, and that's why we won this medal."

"That's what happens when you have heroes, like Matteo Aicardi. Heroes do things like that. Things like the shot, things like them missing a penalty and all the stuff that happened in this final. That's why we deserved this bronze medal."

"I started with lots of problems here with my eye, all the surgery, everything. Day by day I had to learn how to come back to this Olympics. Winning this medal is the best reward for what I have gone through in the last few months."

Vladimir Gojkovic, head coach, Montenegro:

"This is the third time in a row we've played for third place. The results have always been the same, lose the semi-final and lose the third-place game. I feel really sorry for my players. I know they wanted it really bad and I think they deserved it. Unfortunately today, a lot of things didn't go our way."

"We are going to have some problems because this team started playing together in 2007. For most of our team this is their third Olympics. We are going to have to make some changes and get some new players but at this moment we don't have a lot of good young players. If we did they would be here now. We have to find a new generation of players."

For places 5-6

Game 3, 16.30: Hungary v Greece 12-10 (2-1, 4-4, 3-3, 3-2)

Referees: Mark Koganov (AZE), Joe Peila (USA)

HUNGARY: Viktor Nagy, Gergo Zalanki 3, Krisztian Manhercz, Balazs Erdelyi, Marton Vamos 2, Norbert Hosnyanszky 1,

Adam Decker, Marton Szivos, Daniel Varga, Denes Varga 2, Gabor Kis 3, Balazs Harai 1, Attila Decker (GK). Head coach: Tibor Benedek

GREECE: Konstantinos Flegkas, Emmanouil Mylonakis 2, Georgios Dervisis, Konstantinos Genidounias, Ioannis

Fountoulis 1, Kyriakos Pontikeas, Christos Afroudakis 2, Evangelos Delakas, Konstantinos Mourikis 1, Christodoulos Kolomvos, Alexandres Gounas 2, Angelos Vlachopoulos 2, Stefanos Galanopoulos (GK). Head coach: Theodoros Vlachos

Extramén

Hungary: 2 for 9

Greece: 5 for 13

Penalties

none



Though the 5th place was at stake, the fight was on from the beginning to the end - Credit: A Kovacs

A special feat: Hungary finished fifth, and perhaps this is the first time in the history of any big meet that a team has to settle for this position despite remaining undefeated in regular time in the entire tournament. Four wins and four draws the Magyars produced, after their last tie, however, a penalty shootout commenced in the quarters which they lost and their entry to the medal round was denied by the Montenegrins.

But they were back on the last day to save some pride and to repeat their London 2012 result at least and to avoid equalling their worst ever Olympic placement (6th, in 1992). At the beginning it was similar to the two sides contest from January: at the Europeans the scenario was almost the same, a clash in the prelims, ending in a tie (8-8 here and there as well), then a

match for the bronze there, won by the Magyars with ease. Here they rushed to a 4-1 lead early in the second period, Viktor Nagy kicked off the match with 4 back-to-back saves during the first Greek possession while some spectacular goals were netted in front. However, the Greeks started to gain ground soon, from 5-2 down they climbed back to 5-4 with 2:24 to go in the second. Gabor Kis scored another fine goal from the centre, but Christos Afroudakis also beat Nagy so it stood 6-5 at halftime.

Two quick blasts from Marton Vamos restored the 3-goal cushion but the Greeks came back again for 8-7 as the Hungarians faded a bit in offence. After a silence lasting 5:34 minutes, the other Hungarian leftie, Gergo Zalanki did the damage but Alexandres Gounas had two shots in a man-up, and after a saved one he was on target (9-8).

Turning into the last quarter, Zalanki found the back of the net again, soon after a 6 on 5 expired, but the response came immediately, Emmanouil Mylonakis also delivered in a man-up. Both sides missed a respective 6 on 5, then Zalanki completed his hat-trick with another rocket-like shot for an 11-9 lead. Afroudakis sent the ball home from a 6 on 5 with 1:54 to go, but Goddess Fortuna took the hand of the Magyars in their last man-up. A shot was saved, but the ball rebounded to Balazs Harai who had a virtual back-handed dunking to put an end to the contest.

Tibor Benedek, head coach, Hungary:

“At least we completed our journey here with another win and remained undefeated in regular time, a good message from our side. Our game came together for this Olympics, I can’t demand any better from my team. Of course, we had a couple of ups and downs here, and I won’t say that we had two weaker periods against Montenegro and that cost us the medal round. We reached a level I wished to see, especially in offence, we played great water polo, something people got used to from Hungary.”

For places 7-8

Game 1, 11.40: Brazil v Spain 8-9 (1-3, 2-1, 1-2, 4-3)

Referees: Vojin Putnikovic (SRB), Ivan Stefanovski (MNE)

BRAZIL: Slobodan Soro, Jonas Crivella, Ruda Franco, Ives Alonso, Paulo Slaemi, Bernardo Gomes 2, Adrian Baches 1,

Felipe da Costa 2, Bernardo Rocha 1, Felipe Perrone, Gustavo Guimaraes 2, Josip Vrltic, Vicinius Antonelli (GK). Head coach: Ratko Rudic

SPAIN: Vicente Aguilar, Alberto Munarriz 1, Marc Roca, Ricard Alarcon, Guillermo Molina 1, Marc Minguell 2, Balazs

Sziranyi 2, Albert Espanol 1, Roger Tahull 2, Francisco Fernandez, Blai Mallarach, Gonzalo Echenique, Dani Lopez (GK). Head coach: Gabriel Hernandez

Extramem

Brazil: 0 for 6

Spain: 2 for 11

Penalties

Brazil: none

Spain: 0 for 1

A must-play game at least for the teams arriving here with high hopes, like the Spaniards who won their group in the prelims but had two losses since then. For Brazil, it was a fine opportunity to bid a fitting farewell at the end of their miraculous fortnight – an assessment from captain Felipe Perrone – and the hosts really tried to come up with their very best on this last occasion.

Spain, with more quality players and experience in the team, was in front for most of the time, but the enthusiastic Brazilians kept coming back. After 1-3 they bounced back to 4-4 early in the third. Then came three connecting Spanish goals, the third already in the fourth, but there was still way back for the home side after 4-7, two fast goals in 44 seconds, then, after 6-8, two more in 76 seconds, and it was 1:26 to go at 8-8 (credits to the Brazilians that they could do that without the goals of their best player and captain Felipe Perrone, whom the Spaniards marked really heavily as he played there for long years). Still, Spain had the last laugh: a classical centre-goal from Balazs Sziranyi with 71 seconds from time and the last two Brazil possessions generated only noise on the stands, but nothing notable in the water.

Final classification

1. Serbia
2. Croatia
3. Italy
4. Montenegro

5. Hungary

6. Greece

7. Spain

8. Brazil

9. Australia

10. United States

11. France

12. Japan

