Beach Handball jumps inside Youth world

Eight years after the premiere of the Beach Handball Championships, the decision was taken to open the Championships to younger age categories, and the chosen age group was the under 18’s (born 1990).

The 1st Youth European Championship was awarded to the Hungarian Handball Federation that organised the event in the wonderful city of Nagyatad, which was located away from a coast for the first time in the history of BH Championships and that, in itself, was a challenge. Analysing this aspect, it has to be said that, possibly due to the incredibly fine weather, the distance of sea was even not noticed: the venue was good, the three courts were perfectly adherent to the best technical standards, even if the sand was not so soft to begin with, after a few matches the condition of the imported sand had markedly improved. The presence of nearby swimming pools and all types of recreational activities and services were highly appreciated by all the participants.

The line system used on Court 1 has to be noted: it was of great visual effect and the players appreciated it, from my personal point of view I think that the lines have to be of smaller dimension, in order to allow the ball to go out of the court instead of stopping inside because the ball has bounced against the line system, this would reduce the problems created for the referees and players; who have to run on and over the line system. Nevertheless, the overall reaction to this line system is extremely positive and that is surely a good indicator.

The evolution of the matches saw on the three courts 44 matches over three days of competition with the presence of 8 men’s teams divided in two groups and 6 women teams in one single group, most of the matches were broadcasted through internet live streaming.
All the nations with a women’s team was present with the corresponding men’s team (DEN, HUN, NOR, SRB, TUR, UKR), only RUS and SUI were represented just with the men’s team.

Technical Developments in the game

As already noticed in the last two senior BH EChs no new technical solutions were observed during the matches. This was a surprise; in fact I expected from such young players a lot more imagination in comparison to their older counterparts. This means that coaches are, in my personal opinion, introducing them too early to only those features that they think are needed to obtain two points actions. Therefore the coaches’ education is very important for developing the real spirit of creativity and independent thinking that was at the basis of this sport.

The only team that was expressing something if not different but at least more creative was the Swiss men’s team, but we will speak about them when analysing the teams performances.

The level was clearly very different between the men’s and the women’s matches, while in fact the men expressed a real spectacular and attractive Beach Handball absolutely not at all that different to the senior teams, the women for various reasons were in general, with the exception of Hungary, of a much lower technical level. The Hungarian team made a choice different to all other teams but we will touch upon that later in this report.

As in the past, teams that had no time or possibility to train too much at home, Norway e.g., were greatly increasing their performances match after match, showing that if players are technically correct, Beach Handball may become an easy and attractive sport.

The great balance shown during the men’s matches was proved by the 11 matches out of 24 that were decided by with a shoot-out situation (46%) while just 5 of 20 were decided in the same way in the women matches (25%). From these figures, it is noticeable that in the men’s competition from cross matches to the finals and placement matches the shoot-out accounts for 63% (5 out of 8 matches), in stark comparison to the women’s competition where the shoot-out accounted for 20% (1 in 5 matches).

In this younger age category, it was even more difficult for women to express technically well performed spin shots and naturally most of them drove the players to clear “goal area violations”. The eventual and, in any case, lesser development of physical strength with particular focus on legs muscles in women must drive coaches to different strategies for their players as already pointed out after the 5th European Beach Handball Championships in Italy. The Hungarian team realised this issue very early in their preparation for this Championship, in my opinion, and their choice was to have “lighter” and smaller players with great speed and coordination abilities that could allow them at this age to easily overcome the more structured and powerful adversaries. It is clear that this team was very well assembled to achieve the best result in this championship; however, not all of them may have a great future in senior Beach Handball, despite excellent
players such as Kitti Grosz (MVP of the Tournament) who has for sure a shining future in this discipline.

Refereeing and FAIR PLAY

The young age of the players helped to keep the entire event in a great fair play atmosphere, but the very exciting and balanced matches we had in particular, as said before, in the men’s competition showed that coaches and players are really ensconced in the real spirit of beach handball.

There were no disciplinary cases during the Championships. The correct mix of referees of long and proved experience, like the Polish referees, working together with less experienced referees, such as the Hungarian or Ukrainian couple, allowed for a general improvement of referees performance throughout the tournament. The starting line was immediately very good even though most of them had not whistled in a lot of matches before the competition; a common line was very clear from the first match.

Anyway the problems noticed in all the previous Championships arose soon even in Nagyatad: tremendous difficulty in judging correct spin shots from incorrect ones, increased by the problematic of numerous “goal area violations” after spin shot in the women’s competition.

This is a very problematic situation that is difficult to resolve and in the end, the solution is always the same: increase the tolerance line allowing almost all the spin shots as 2 points actions (almost 90% of them). This solution removes the referees from the equation; however, it is not fair in comparison to the players that worked hard to develop a correct shooting technique. A real and definitive clarification of rules in this field is needed and that will be in support either of referees or the coaches. The coaches will have clearly to increase their work on this direction as they know that the tolerance line is set definitively by a clear rule.
Speaking of rules, match after match all the officials involved in the Championships, referees and delegates alike, slowly arrived at the conclusion that many rules have to be rewritten. The general problem facing the area of rules is that the Rules of Beach Handball were not written from the beginning but simply there was an adaptation from the Rules of Indoor Handball. In some cases, with the fast development of technique and tactics in the last 2-3 years, is now necessary a clarification or a total rewriting. Examples may be found in the penalty shots: some teams using the rule that allows players to stay just one meter away from the shooter, hardly interfere with the shot. That is not possible in regarding the rule in principle, but referees in that situation have no weapons because in no part of the rules is there a clarification to that particular situation.

Many situations were faced during technical discussions as well as during the meeting with coaches at the beginning of the Tournament (I avidly recommended to have at least two of these meetings during the Championships, they are very important for discussion and clarification), but the general principles are not enough: the moment for real Rules of Beach Handball has arrived.

**Team Performances**

No doubt that the supremacy of Hungary in the women’s tournament was predetermined from the first match, the difference between the young Hungarian players and the other teams in preparation and personal skills was too big; only Norway created some problems for Hungary in the semi-final, all other matches were clear 2 - 0 victories.

This situation was not reflected for the Hungarian men’s team, they were good but suffered a little in the beginning, possibly due to the pressure of getting a result at home, and of course the general higher and more balanced level of the men’s competition. Their play was based on spin shots (69% compared to a 31% of specialist shots) with a very little number of in-flight shots attempted (10 in six matches), only the fast play of Swiss team beat them in the group matches.

The Swiss team was in fact the greatest surprise of the tournament, a very balanced play, a great team spirit and a great team efficiency in the building up many different spectacular actions, using the specialist mostly in the development of the action (as the former Spanish national team was doing in the ECh in Cuxhaven) than in concluding the action. At the end of the tournament only 33 shots were taken by the specialist in six matches: clearly the lowest number compared with other teams tactics.
At the end of the tournament, they ranked in fourth place losing two matches between semi-final and final in the shoot-out, but the semi-final against the Serbian team will remain for sure in the eyes of the spectator as the best match of the entire tournament.

Serbia was absolutely the most powerful team of the men’s competition, with tall and strong players, and a play based on the Russian team with the specialist shots (53 shots in comparison to 55 shots played by the Russian team) and with a balanced play between spin shots (55%) and in flights (45%).

The women’s team from Serbia did not have the same success as Denmark was present with tall girls, nevertheless with limited technical and coordination skills due to the earlier physical development not being adequately supported.

Both Norwegian teams managed to win the bronze medal, even though this result could not be foreseen after the first day of matches. Their play improved day after day, as said before, but this was possible because other than a physical presence, their individual technical skills were great and allowed them to improve easily through exerçitation of their abilities during the matches. More in detail both teams were mostly using the spin shot and specialist shot (129 of 154 attempts of two point actions for men and 136 of 152 for women) with a big prevalence of one-point actions: 33 for men in six matches and 67 for women in seven matches, showing a not great handling of classic beach handball situations.

Turkey and Ukraine had a customary tournament with the great performance from the Turkish women’s team, supported by a high percentage of one-point actions (100 in seven matches that were the 50% of all their shots) that anyway allowed them to gain the vice-champion title due to a better attitude in playing on the sand than all other teams.

Russia participated in the entire tournament playing their traditionally good and balanced beach handball, attempting only 5 one-pointers from a sum of 176 shots in six matches (the lowest number compared with any other teams, men and women), to testify that the Russian school has a clear trend to the development of beach handball skills, far away from indoor attitude.

**Conclusions**

This first Youth Beach Handball Championship showed us that time is right for starting a new era in the development of beach handball within the younger age categories. The solution of starting with Under 18 group was correct but in my opinion an Under 20 or Under 21 Tournament to be run parallel to the Under 18 at the same venue may be of more technical interest for the National Federations because it is an age closer to the senior competition and more specific work can be done through that age in preparation for being on the senior teams.
Moreover the clear and sharp difference between women and men that became evident in this tournament was to introduce a better observance of female athletic potential and how to develop this taking the physical differences into consideration and addressing them to the best technical and tactical solutions.

More EHF courses for coaches, even during such events as is already planned for indoor European Championships, are desirable. Education of coaches has now to be addressed on two levels: youth activity and senior activity. These two areas have their own priorities and even in beach handball specific work for difference age groups has to be introduced.

Regarding the final results of the Championships one clear reality came out: in regards to holiday destinations, the Mediterranean countries have been almost replaced by countries were sea is a “dream”. This signal was starting to become apparent during the last senior Championships, but now it is evident that beaches and sea are not the preconditions needed for high level beach handball. Perhaps this will introduce a new era with a stronger and larger presence of all those countries that until now saw beach handball just as a seaside sport. This consideration will certainly increase, over the next few years, the level of the European competition and we must be aware and ready to give them clear rules and means for development in the way of fair play and creative spirit development.

Meet you on the sand..........😊

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