1st Part: Basic Statement

a. Basic Data

The 2013 EHF Women’s 19 European Championship was held in the cities of Kolding and Sonderborg in a nice and friendly atmosphere. The match and overall tournament organisation by the DHF was almost flawless.

Unfortunately there were not so many spectators in the halls. Primarily the matches, where the teams from Denmark, Netherland, Sweden, Hungary and Norway did not participate attracted only small numbers of spectators. However, the matched of the final round were transmitted nationwide on the Danish TV.

For the young players born 1994 & 1995 it was the third international tournament, after the EHF Women’s 17 European Championship and the IHF Women’s 17 World Championship. In the first two events DEN won - this time the team from RUS won the championship. The last top-event for these players will be the IHF Women’s 19 World Championship 2014 in CRO.

Taking this into consideration, it was to be expected that the teams have already found their structure and no extensive changes are expected within the next year, neither in defence nor in attack.

The following analysis is based on match-observation of a minimum of two matches per team; the more successful teams were under observation more often. However, not every match and not every aspect was in the focus; therefore the following statements are based on a short view, from which some general statements have been deduced.

In the 2nd part, “General trends”, I changed the topics of the analysis: starting with defence is - in my point of view - better, because the defence is responsible for the space and the options that are given to the attacking team. The attack has to react on the way the defence is working (open/active vs. close/reactive). Defence makes the difference, and all development in the history of handball started in the defence, and not in the attack.
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2nd Part: General Trends

c. Defence Basic Systems and Alternatives

Traditionally, many female teams operate with a 6:0 defence-system and this could be seen in this tournament too: 14 teams trusted in the 6:0 defence, with only very few variations.

The players from RUS were very agile and flexible in their defence-work. They used intense arm movements quite often in order to feint an attack against the ball-possessor.

The 6:0 from ESP is well-known from their Women’s National team with very offensive defenders against LB and RB. The basic idea in this 6:0 variation is to promote the attackers towards the centre. In many occasions the ESP defenders were able to win back the ball through their very aggressive style. The players were able to cooperate very successfully (EHF DEN 2013 active defence ESP 6-0.mp4).

All other teams used the 6:0 defence system in a very defensive way, mostly in the Scandinavian style, with four defenders very close to each other in the middle of the court and two isolated wing defenders. In the picture below, the large gap between the wing defender and the half-defender is clearly visible - however not many attackers were able to use this gap (EHF DEN 2013 open gap 1_2.mp4 and EHF DEN 2013 passive defence HUN.mp4).

Another point is that most of the players in the centre position of defence did not alter their movements and individual actions: they worked in a very passive way at the goal-area line, covering the pivot and maybe trying to block a shot - but never stepping out - even if the attackers
very, very often tried to shoot after crossing movements from a position inside the central area. As a special effect, some teams (RUS, ESP, SVK) tried to apply pressure on the CB-position by attacking this player with a half-defender (not the original-defender), to stop the play-maker.

SLO and POR were the only two teams that operated with a 5:1 defence as their basic-system.

Variations in defence were not often observed. Some teams nearly never changed their defensive system, even when behind with 5 or 6 goals: DEN, NOR, NED, SWE, AUT, GER, CRO, CZE and SVK. Although it is easier to make changes in defence than in attack, the coaches of these teams nearly never reacted.

Other teams tried some changes, e.g. to 5:1 (RUS, FRA & ESP), 3:2:1 (HUN & ROM) and 4:0+2 (NED). Only in numerical superiority (6 on 5) did several teams concentrate on the playmaker or the top scorer with 5:0+1-defence (EHF DEN 2013 active defence ESP 5-1.mp4).

On one hand, the defence work of all teams (except RUS & ESP!) was not very active, innovative or planned in a strategic structure. In very many games the coaches preferred “riding on a dead horse” instead of changing the defence.

On the other hand, this can work positively for the attack for two reasons: firstly, because nearly every team used the same style in defence and so the attackers did not need to adapt to different defence systems from one match to the next; and secondly, all teams preferred a defensive defence. Therefore, the attackers were forced to fight for their positions, they could easily get ball-possession, as there was nearly no pressure from the defence. As a result, attack combinations could be started without any interference from the defence.

d. Attack General Systems

In general all teams started their organized attack with three backcourt players (3:3 attack system). During the attack, some of the teams changed to a 4:2 attack system with two pivots. Nearly every team used the same or similar combinations in attack, with very few exceptions. The use of modern or up-to-date combinations in attack is one thing and how the teams applied this is another.

Thus, in the meantime certain elements are to be observed, as e.g. crossing-movements without the ball in the backcourt positions, crossing of the pivot with CB or crossing from backcourt players with wing players of the national team level until the lower leagues. Besides, women’s handball also takes no more special position - rather conceptual elements from the man’s handball are taken over directly. And also the so-called exotics in the world-handball are linked up meanwhile because of coaches from strong nations that adapt the top teams’ concepts in attack.

The result is that, even in international big events, certain uniformity is to be detected in the style of many teams. Dietrich Späte stamped on the occasion of the Men’s World Championship in 2011 in Sweden the formulation “Top Five conceptions” because certain attack elements belonged in the repertoire of nearly every team. The idea behind it is easily understood: “If THW Kiel is successful with it, it must be good - so we also play in such a way!”
Unfortunately, many coaches supporting this theory forget two important aspects: On the one hand, a top-team is successful with certain concepts because they have top-players in their squad. A concept does not guarantee successful goal shots because the ways of the ball and the players are fixed only up to a certain point. Then proper decision-making is needed, depending on the perception of the players (the so-called "key signals") and on the basis of the individual skills (= techniques). The players who do not perceive important information relevant for the decision (e.g., free players) will then make a wrong decision. The players who do not possess certain technical skills (e.g., distance throw or dribbling round the defender to both sides) in the competition cannot decide for this alternative (even if they recognise what would be to be done).

On the other hand, it can often be observed that concepts in the attack are played only for the concepts’ sake. There is no difference which defensive formation the opponent team plays, the players will play disregarding the specific situation and a shot will be taken where it is always taken in training, without considering the reaction of the defence to the concept. The players often do not seem to know what they are doing, merely following what the coach has told them.

As mentioned before, the situation for the attacking teams in this tournament was quite uncomplicated: nearly every team used the same system in defence, therefore the attackers did not need to adapt to different defence systems from one match to the next. And nearly all teams preferred a defensive defence with no influence on the attackers positioning, ball-circulation and use of combinations.

Under the circumstance, it was surprising that some teams were not able to develop good shooting situations. Even if they failed after a special attack combination, they did not change their style, but rather continued shooting repeatedly out of the same situation with the same unsuccessful results. A very good example was the match DEN - SWE in the main-round: SWE scored 4 goals from 9m, but they had made 22 attempts.

On one hand, this is a repetitive mistake by the players; on the other hand, it is the task of the coaches, to change the system in attack if it is not working out effectively. Especially young players in a team that are not constantly working together are highly dependent on information und guidance from outside.

Clever teams and clever players did not repeat their mistakes, but rather repeated their attack combination, when they were working successfully. A good example for this was the team from NED: Guided from their play-maker, Kelly Dulfer, they constantly repeated their successful attack combinations - and found new solutions when the defence reacted.

The top-eight attack combinations:
- Crossing CB with LB or RB,
- Crossing LB/RB with RB/LB (CB moving to the free position),
- Crossing without ball LB with CB (ball is with LW),
- Crossing without ball CB with LB/RB (ball is with RB/LB),
- Crossing CB with PP,
- Transition to 4:1-attack from RB or CB,
- Transition from RW (before give & go PP with LB) and
- Combination of Crossing in backcourt-positions & running-in from wing-positions.

e. Goalkeepers performance
The goalkeepers were the real heroes in this tournament. Almost every team has at least one outstanding goalkeeper; some teams even have two. As a result, a goalkeeper was very often chosen as MVP, even goalkeepers of the losing team.

On one hand, these girls were really strong in saving the shots, but on the other hand - as mentioned above - some attackers were repeating unsuccessful shots, which helped the goalkeepers in making successful saves.

NOR 1 - Maria Aarstad
DEN 1 - Ditte Vind
DEN 20 - Christina Elm
HUN 12 - Zsofi Szemerey
HUN 16 - Blanka Biro

f. Findings and Evaluation of the First Four Teams

RUS: RUS played with a flexible 6:0-defence. Very often the defenders tried to feint with arm movements and to confuse the attackers. In general, the players of RUS showed the best individual skills, variability and simple tactical solutions. They were the only team able to cooperate with the pivot in different positions (e.g. pivot using the gap between wing-defender and half-defender).

HUN: In comparison to RUS, HUN were not as active in defence; the style of the 6:0 defence, although traditional, worked well in cooperation with both goalkeepers. In attack, different variations of crossing were used and they often scored through strong ground shots from LB- or CB-position. In transition they tried to work with special concepts (LW or RW) moving to the other side), to create a free player.

DEN: The hosts had the best performance among the Scandinavian teams. Their defence was a little more aggressive than NOR or SWE. In fast-break they trusted on the individual skills of CB 10, who crossed the court by dribbling, (a very special action for Scandinavian players). In attack, the team depended on their strong shooters (LB 8 and CB 10).

NOR: NOR demonstrated many of the aspects that were previously mentioned in this report: defensive and passive in defence without variations, good goalkeeper performance, LW or RW moving to the other side after a quick throw-off, crossing-movements in attack with shooting from the positions in the centre of court, etc.

3rd Part: Summary, Conclusion, Trends

g. New elements in attack and defence
No new elements were observed, neither in attack nor in defence.

h. Special Players (excluding goal-keepers)

CZE 15 - Eliska Jackova: very good in 1on1-situations

NED 14 - Kelly Dulfer: a real leader of her team in defence and attack, very good in decision-making with max. playing time

DEN 8 - Anne Hansen: left back scoring with step- and jump shots from 11m

DEN 10 - Nadia Offendal: centre back with nice ground shots variations

HUN 13 - Gabriella Toth: left back with good 1on1-variations

RUS 14 - Polina Vedekhina: left back with good 1on1-variations

RUS 10 - Nelli Pankovichenko: centre back with good cooperation with pivot

RUS 30 - Alena Ikhneva: left back with good shooting-variations

RUS 13 - Anna Vyakhirava: right wing (basic position) with tricky actions when on backcourt-positions

i. Players for the Future

It is very difficult to nominate players in this category after having seen them only in one tournament. Additionally, “players for the future” should actually show that they already have the basics and the preconditions for the way handball will be played in future.

If we agree, that in the future handball will be a fast game, depending on strong individual skills and creative decision making, then a certain number of players from RUS are on a very good way. Another player that comes very close to those demands is Kelly Dulfer from NED. She is strong in defence and attack, she is able to read the game, to lead a team and to produce a high number of good decisions. She is playing tactically clever, e.g. by feinting three times in one direction and at the fourth time going around the defender in the other direction. Handball in the future needs players with such a profile.

j. Summary

The EHF Women’s 19 European Championship in DEN was a very well organized tournament in a very friendly and sporting atmosphere. RUS was the best team, with the best individual players and some modern elements in their concept.
All other teams were orientated at the concept of their female national team, but still some steps away from that. In a positive way, it could be said that those teams are on their way. However, very many aspects of modern handball were missed.

k. Future Trends

Considering the above mentioned aspects, it is better to rename this topic to “Future Wishes”, because similar to the missing “new elements in defence and attack”, there were no trends to be recognized.

But from my point of view there are some wishes for the future:
- more open, active, and ball orientated defence should be played;
- if needed, more varied defence systems during one match should be used;
- the players in attack should be individually better prepared, e.g. variability in 1on1 situations, different shooting-variations, etc.;
- the players in attack should use small-group cooperation more often, e.g. cooperation backcourt/wing and backcourt/pivot;
- the teams should change their attack combinations more often - instead of riding a dead horse.

Klaus Feldmann / September 2013