

Women's Handball WChs (IV) (Nearly) always Russia

The first title contests of the new millennium were held in Italy that in fact did not set the standards in women's handball but had good experience in hosting major events, as the European men's title contests had been staged on the Apennines Peninsula three years before. 24 teams participated again and four preliminary round groups composed of six teams each were fixed followed by the knock-out phase. The field of participants alone proved the global presence of women's handball. There were 15 European nations which had qualified for the final tournament added to those were African teams from Angola, Congo and Tunisia, Uruguay and Brazil representing South America and Greenland from North America. China, South Korea and Japan represented Asia. Many of those teams managed to advance to the eighth-finals, however, the Europeans were on their own again in the quarter-finals. And then the Russian team was supposed to prove the predominant side. 'Sbornaja' first eliminated host Italy in the knock-out phase then Olympic runners-up Hungary, Denmark did not prove a real stumbling block in the semi-finals, and in the final Norway either failed to spoil Russia's clean sweep. The final score after 60 minutes of high-speed handball was 30:25. Yugoslavia underwent overtime to claim a 42:40 victory over Denmark in one of the high-scoring matches in WCh history and thus to gain third place.



The knock-out system as from the eighth-finals did not meet with unanimous acceptance in the world of handball. Consequently the next title contests staged in Croatia in 2003 saw a new competition format. The 24 teams first competed in four preliminary round groups composed of four teams each as before. A main round followed whose advantage was obvious: A bad day did not necessarily spoil a team's overall appearance. This format revealed some vagaries though as evidenced by the main round. France lost to South Korea 25:27. A result to keep in mind: The Frenchwomen secured a close 20:19 victory over title

defender Russia in their last main round match to finish at the top of that group. Thus the Russian women only ranked fourth in that main round group; a win over the 'Equipe Tricolore' would have brought them the top rank of that group to advance to the semi-finals. The second main round group proved similarly exciting. In the very end three teams had gained 7:3 points to occupy the three top ranks.

Profiting from its preliminary-round victory over Norway surprising Ukraine ranked second. France beat the East European side in the semi-final while Hungary prevailed against South Korea. And similar to the Olympics two years before, Hungary failed more because of its lost nerves than because of the opponents. So a 32:29 final victory brought the Frenchwomen their first ever WCh title. South Korea secured the bronze.



Two years ahead St. Petersburg invited to the WCh final round. All 24 teams competing at one sole venue came up as the innovation of that tournament. The "Venice of the North" provided several halls as the competition sites – those were arenas where ice hockey clubs or tennis players used to play. As a special highlight host Russia presented a new arena for the finals accommodating 12,000 spectators.

And the hall was filled well, as host Russia was well in shape after its bust two years before to perform at top level again. Russia and Romania alike made a clean sweep in the preliminaries and the main round too. In the semi-final Denmark was unable to seriously challenge the protégés of coach Jewgeni Trefilov. The Scandinavian side was outclassed 31:24 by Russia that looked forward to



adding another big triumph to its glorious handball history. Romania was its final opponent at the 12,300 audience St Petersburg Ice Hockey Arena. And the South East Europeans did not prove a major stumbling block to the host team. Russia won by 28:23. After their WCh titles in 1982, 1986, 1990 (USSR) and 2001 the Russian ladies climbed on the top of the rostrum

again. They had gained five WCh titles to become the new record WCh title holders ahead of Germany's female handball players (4). Yet, this victory only marked the beginning of an outstanding series...

... that continued two years ahead when France welcomed the world's best female handball players to the WCh's final tournament. Regulations were subject to change, as the 24 teams competed in a preliminary round before splitting up the field of participants. That change was due to the President's Cup introduced in 2007 in order to enable weaker teams beyond the world's twelve top teams to compete in a tournament that does not just include the preliminaries. As expected the world's top met in the main round groups. Only Austria and Ukraine had to settle with the President's Cup. The four top teams of the main round, or the 'intermediate round' so to say, advanced to the quarter-finals. As from that stage on the knock-out system was used, and Norway, Germany, Romania and title defender Russia made their way. A remake of the 2005 final against Romania, who had eliminated host France in the quarter-finals, secured Russia an easy 30:20 victory to bring them to the final. In contrast, Norway had to fight hard and long to beat Germany 33:30. The 'seven' from the DHB (German handball federation) finally gained the bronze. The final saw a match between the Scandinavians and the Russian ladies. Norway either failed to cope with the Russians. A year before the Scandinavian side had overcome Russia 27:24 at the European Championship final staged in Sweden whereas the women from Moscow, Togliatti, Volgograd and Rostov proved predominant in France. Russia won by 29:24 to grab another WCh title. The handball world travelled to the Far East in 2009. China welcomed the handball nations to the province of Jiangsu where the WCh tournament was staged.. The competition format was the same as two years before, however, the quarter-finals excluded. Consequently the teams longing for medals had to rank at least second in the main round groups. Four European teams out of 11 in total among whom were title defender Russia, France, Norway and Spain managed to do so. The classical handball clash of that era took place as part of the semi-finals already – and Russia again easily overcame Norway 28:20 thanks to a powerful first half during which, with the score at 17:12, "Sbornaja" paved the way to the final where it faced France that had won by 27:23 against Spain. But still, the final was a Russian affair again. Russia's final 25:22 victory was a cause for celebration. It was its third WCh title in a row, WCh title number 7 in total. At World Championships the Russian team obviously provided a benchmark for women's handball in the first decade of the 21st century.