

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

M18 EHF EURO 2026

29 July—9 August 2026

Martin Schwarzwald / Tournament analysis





M18 EHF EURO

SERBIA • 29 JULY – 9 AUGUST 2026

CONTENTS

Tournament - facts & figures	4
Competition	4
Team performance	5
All-star Team	7
Tactics - defence	8
General defence aspects	8
Defence systems	9
Goalkeeper cooperation	10
Tactics - offence	11
General offence aspects	12
Tactical aspect	13
Transition	14
Technical	15
Players to watch	17





The M18 EHF EURO 2026 Qualitative Analysis offers an in-depth look at the performances of the 24 teams participating in the competition and the players who took part in the tournament. The M18 EHF EURO 2026 was held in Belgrade, Serbia from 29 July to 9 August.

Extending beyond the final results, this analysis explores the technical and tactical trends that shaped the tournament, using data and insights from Handball.ai and the XPS Network. These findings are brought to life through select video clips from the M18 EHF EURO, which provide a closer look at key situations and recurring patterns of play.

The report also connects the identified technical trends with practical coaching approaches, offering coaches valuable insights and ideas that can be applied directly to training and match preparation.

EHF ANALYST

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- EHF Expert and handball coach with 26 years of coaching experience
- Coaching and analysis experience from youth and senior handball up to the German women's Bundesliga

TOURNAMENT – FACTS & FIGURES



COMPETITION

Competition format

The 24 teams started in six preliminary round groups of four. The top two teams in each group progressed to three main round groups, while the remaining teams entered three intermediate round groups. Quarter-finals, cross-matches and placement matches determined the final ranking from first to 24th place.

The tournament was staged in Belgrade from 29 July to 9 August in Aleksandar Nikolic Hall, Prof. Dr. Branislav Pokrajac Hall and UVC Sumice. It was the 18th edition of the competition and only the second with 24 participating teams.

Tournament totals

- 96 matches and 5,950 goals
- 62.0 goals per match, or 31.0 per team per match
- overall goalkeeper save rate: 27.9 per cent
- top scorer: Yonathan Pelach of Israel with 97 goals
- MVP: Jaka Podvrsic of Slovenia

Final ranking

		Germany	13		Sweden
		Slovenia	14		Serbia
		Denmark	15		Poland
4		Spain	16		Faroe Islands
5		Iceland	17		Switzerland
6		Hungary	18		Norway
7		France	19		Slovakia
8		Croatia	20		Finland
9		North Macedonia	21		Czechia
10		Israel	22		Italy
11		Portugal	23		Montenegro
12		Austria	24		Türkiye



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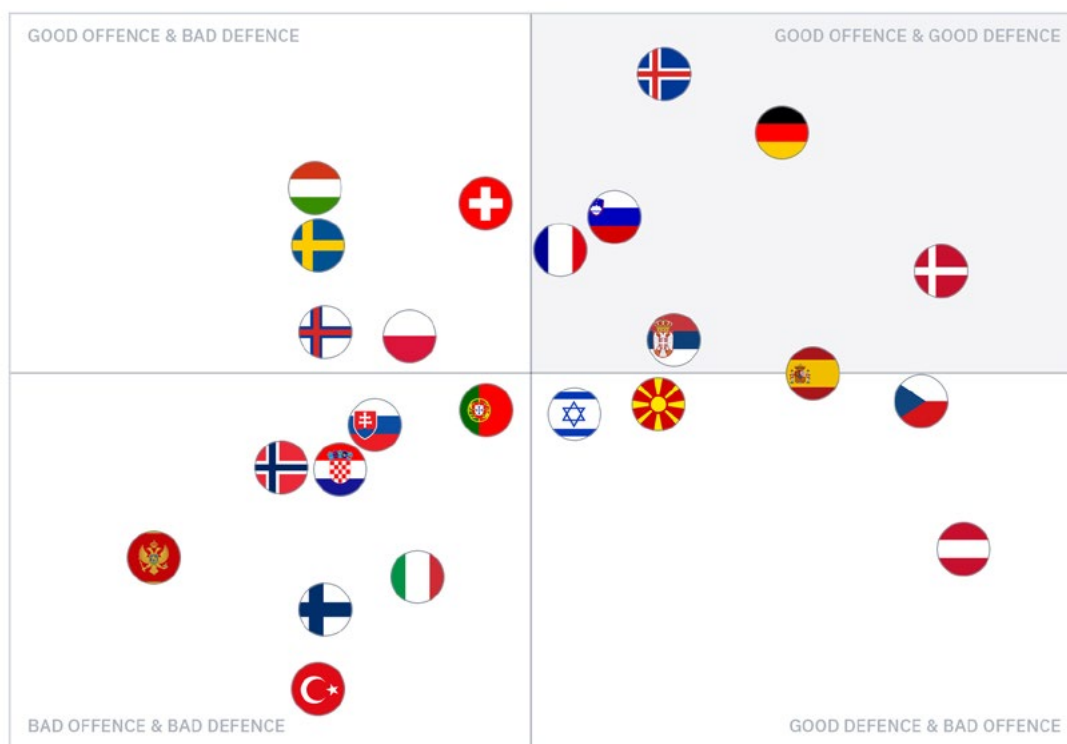
TOURNAMENT – FACTS & FIGURES



TEAM PERFORMANCE

The data show several routes to success. Germany paired the second-most efficient attack with one of the tournament's five most efficient defences. Denmark recorded the strongest defensive profile among the medallists, while Iceland led the attack efficiency ranking. Austria and Czechia showed that strong defensive figures alone do not guarantee a high final position.

Goals scored per 50 possessions vs goals conceded per 50 possessions



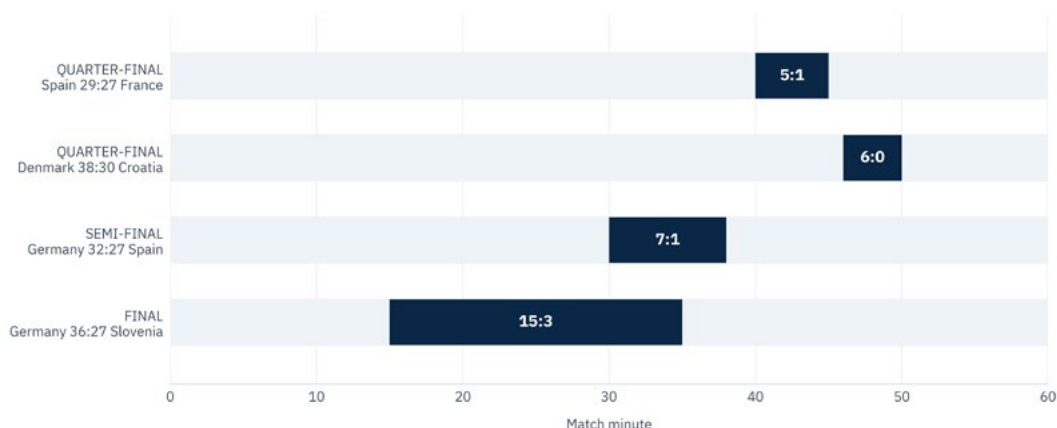
The chart analyses goals scored and conceded per 50 possessions, calculated as goals scored/conceded divided by the total number of possessions, multiplied by 50. The intersection represents the tournament average, with standard deviation used to define the four performance areas. This shows which teams performed above or below average in offence and defence and by how much.

Germany's road to gold

Germany's route was not linear: Two narrow main round defeats were followed by three knockout victories and their strongest performances coming when the title was decided.

The knockout stage was repeatedly shaped by short momentum windows. These phases linked defensive stops with rapid scoring runs and altered games more decisively than uninterrupted statistical dominance.

Short phases decided knockout matches



TOURNAMENT – FACTS & FIGURES



ALL-STAR TEAM

Germany and Slovenia supplied six of the 10 award winners. The selection combined high-volume scorers with efficient specialists and players whose influence was particularly visible in decisive matches.

The indicators below were selected according to the demands of each position rather than applying the same statistical profile to every role.

GOALKEEPER Tjorven Knackstedt 		RIGHT BACK Adrian Sola Basterra 	
LEFT WING Alex Unnar Hallgrímsson 		RIGHT WING Maks Ilc 	
LEFT BACK Julius Eisend 		DEFENDER Tjas Erculj 	
CENTRE BACK Emil Kvistgaard Bak 		TOP SCORER Yonathan Pelach 	
LINE PLAYER Malte Martin Elze 		MVP Jaka Podvrsic 	



DEFENCE GENERAL ASPECTS

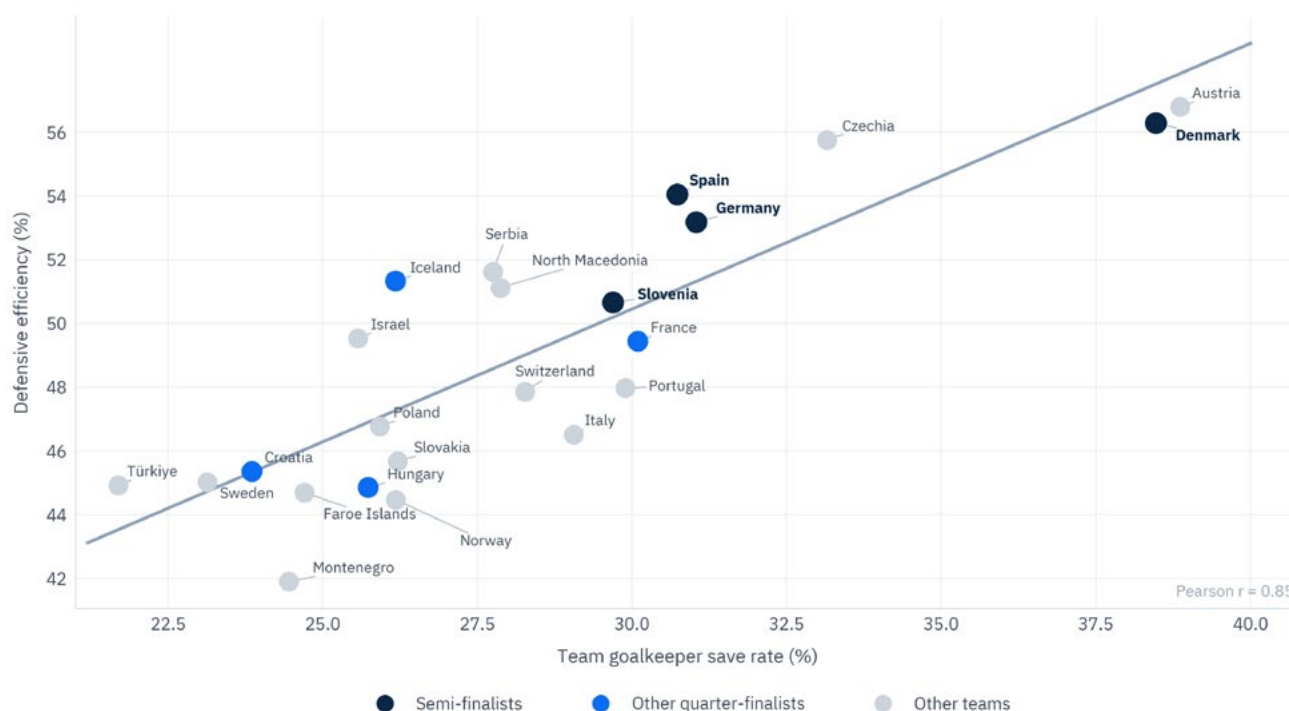
Across the tournament, goalkeeper performance and overall defensive efficiency were closely related (Pearson $r = 0.85$). The finalists also demonstrated the importance of goalkeeper depth in decisive matches. Germany combined a 53.2 per cent defensive efficiency with a team save rate of 31.0 per cent. Tjorven Knackstedt stabilised the semi-final with 11 saves, while Tobias Dengler made 10 saves at a rate of 37 per cent in the final.

Slovenia recorded a 50.7 per cent defensive efficiency and a team save rate of 29.7 per cent. Their goalkeeper unit made complementary contributions: Lian Kamenica changed the momentum with two seven-metre saves before half-time in the semi-final and Mai Miklavcic finished the match with 14 saves at a rate of 47 per cent.

Iceland were a notable exception to the overall relationship. Their defensive efficiency of 51.3 per cent exceeded what their combined goalkeeper save rate of 26.2 per cent alone would suggest. Video review showed an intelligent and active outfield defence that repeatedly disrupted attacking rhythm, provoked technical faults and drew an unusually high number of offensive fouls. These actions limited the quality and continuity of opposition possessions and help explain why Iceland's defensive output was stronger than their save rate alone would indicate.



Goalkeeping explained much of the defensive performance



Note: the regression line shows the defensive efficiency associated with each team's goalkeeper save rate across the tournament. Teams above the line defended more efficiently than their save rate alone would suggest, while teams below the line depended more heavily on goalkeeper performance. The relationship does not fully separate goalkeeping from outfield defence because shot quality, blocks and forced turnovers influence both measures.

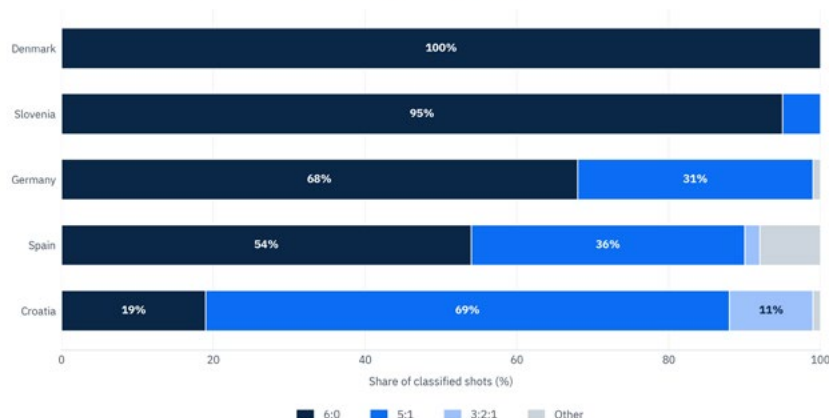
DEFENCE SYSTEMS

Defensive structures in modern handball are fluid. The distinction between 6-0, 5-1, 3-2-1 and 3-3 often depends on ball position, the behaviour of the advanced defender and the moment at which the action is classified. Many teams therefore used hybrid structures rather than remaining in one rigid system throughout an entire possession.

- Denmark: all classified shots were faced under a 6-0 structure. Denmark generally defended in a compact, traditional 6-0 with a strong focus on cooperation between the central block and goalkeeper. Against attacks involving the wing, the outside defenders often stayed with the wing to deny a wing shot, even if that left more space for a back-court player to break through.
- Slovenia: approximately 95 per cent of classified shots were faced under a nominal 6-0. The two half defenders nevertheless stepped out high and repeatedly directed the attack towards the centre, where All-star defender Tjas Erculj played a central role.
- Germany: approximately 68 per cent of classified shots were faced under 6-0 and 31 per cent under 5-1. Germany frequently used the 5-1 to place the opposition under greater pressure and retained the structure even when France attacked seven-on-six. All-star left back Julius Eisend used his physical qualities effectively as the advanced defender.
- Spain: approximately 54 per cent of classified shots were faced under 6-0 and 36 per cent under 5-1. Their characteristically proactive 5-1 aimed to disrupt the intended receiver before the catch and accepted the additional space created by this approach. Spain retained the system against attacks with four back-court players.
- Croatia: approximately 69 per cent of classified shots were faced under 5-1, 19 per cent under 6-0 and 11 per cent under 3-2-1. The country's traditional 3-2-1 was often difficult to distinguish from a 5-1 because of the high position of the advanced defender. When a wing moved into the back court, the traditional 3-2-1 became clearer: The advanced defender held the central position while the middle defender shifted towards the ball side.
- Israel: an additional example was their very high 3-3 defence. Israel adapted to a physical disadvantage by defending far from the goal and, in some phases, extending the system into a one-on-one defence.



Defensive formations reflected different tactical profiles



Note: formation shares show the proportion of classified shots faced in each defensive structure. They indicate which structure was visible when a shot was taken, not how often it was used across complete possessions or how efficiently it performed. Possessions ending without a shot are not included. As modern defensive systems are fluid, the classifications should be understood as observed structures rather than rigid tactical systems.

TACTICS – DEFENCE

GOALKEEPER PERFORMANCE



Austria and Denmark recorded the strongest combined goalkeeper performances. Based on shots attributed directly to goalkeepers, Austria saved 129 of 326 shots for a combined rate of 39.6 per cent. Sergej Novakovic carried almost the entire workload, recording 123 saves at a rate of 40.7 per cent. His +52.4 saves above expected was the highest individual value in the dataset. Nelson Mabyeka contributed six saves from 24 shots.



Denmark reached a similar combined rate of 39.8 per cent, but distributed the workload more evenly. Alexander Hafstrom-Krusentjerna recorded 92 saves at a rate of 41.4 per cent and finished +35.6 above expected. Kalle Nissen Moller added 38 saves at a rate of 36.2 per cent and was +11.4 above expected. Together they produced 130 saves and a combined +47.0 saves above expected.



The comparison illustrates two different routes to elite goalkeeper performance: Austria were led predominantly by one high-volume goalkeeper, whereas Denmark could rely on two highly effective options. The Danish pairing demonstrated its depth again in the bronze-medal match, combining for 15 saves.

DATA NOTE

The combined goalkeeper save rates above use only shots attributed to an individual goalkeeper. Empty-goal scores and other goals without an assigned goalkeeper are excluded, which is why these rates differ slightly from the team-wide save rates shown elsewhere in the report.



TACTICS – OFFENCE



GENERAL OFFENCE ASPECTS

Iceland led the overall attack efficiency ranking, while Germany combined high efficiency with a comparatively low turnover rate. The leading teams achieved similar output through different phases of attack rather than through one common model.

Top five attacking efficiencies by phase



Bars show goals per possession in each phase. Turnover rate is the exception: it shows turnovers per possession and ranks from lowest to highest.



TACTICS – OFFENCE



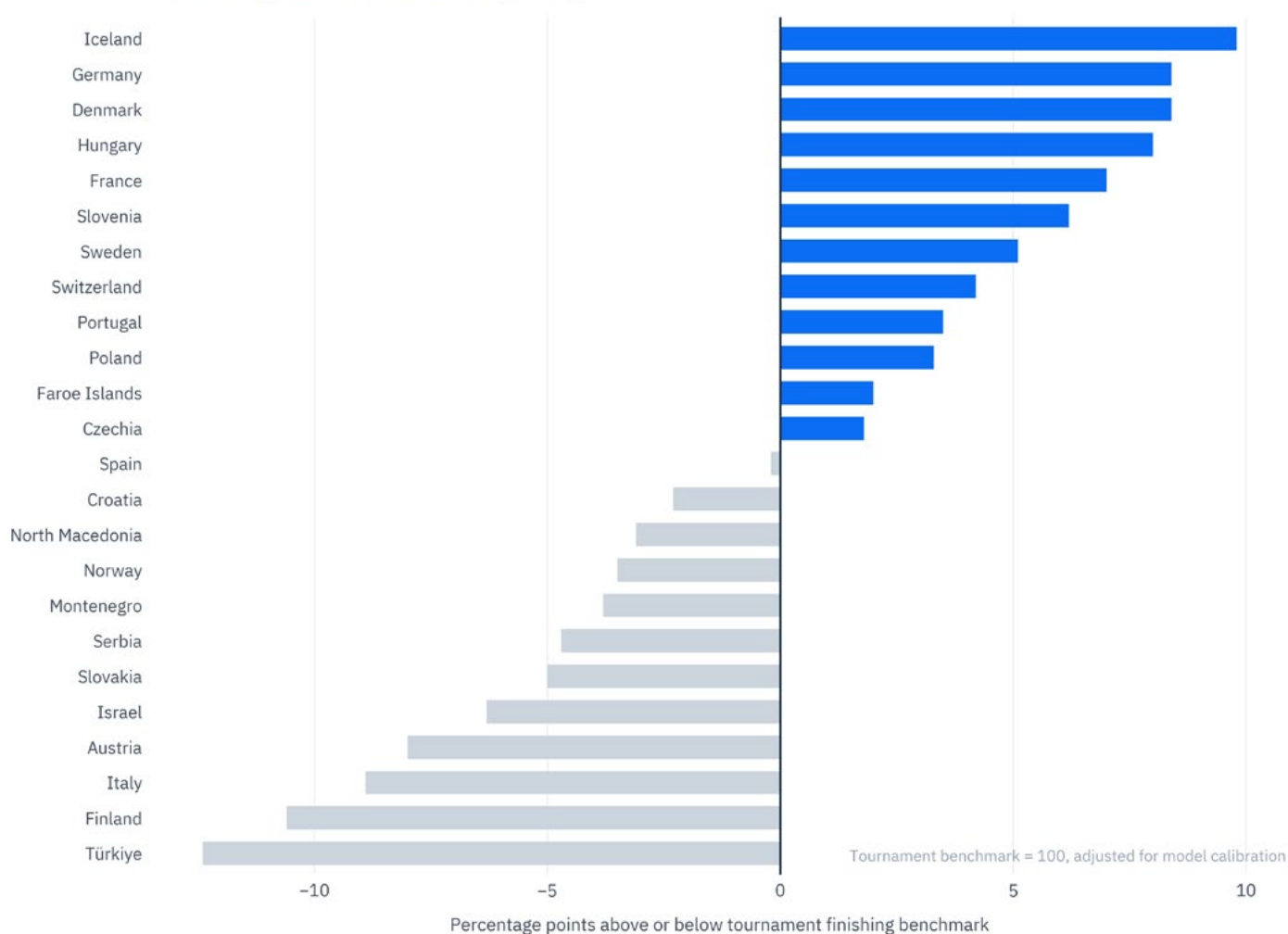
GENERAL OFFENCE ASPECTS

The chart compares efficiency rather than usage. Iceland and Switzerland converted the highest share of their fast-break possessions, while Czechia generated the highest share of their total scoring through fast breaks. Austria and Poland recorded the highest attack efficiency in numerical superiority. Across the five indicators, the leading teams achieved their output through different strengths rather than one common phase profile.

Yonathan Pelach scored 97 goals for Israel. Boas Ellefsen á Skipagøtu followed with 94 for the Faroe Islands. Their output demonstrates a high concentration of responsibility in teams finishing 10th and 16th respectively.

The expected goals (xG) model estimated 6,327 goals, compared with 5,950 goals actually scored. As the model predicted more goals than were scored across the tournament as a whole, an absolute xG difference of zero would not represent a neutral benchmark. Team finishing was therefore assessed relative to the tournament-wide conversion level. On this adjusted basis, Iceland, Germany, Denmark and Hungary recorded the strongest finishing performance. The relationship between final ranking and finishing relative to xG was substantial (Pearson r approximately -0.67), while total xG volume alone showed virtually no relationship with final position.

Finishing relative to shot quality

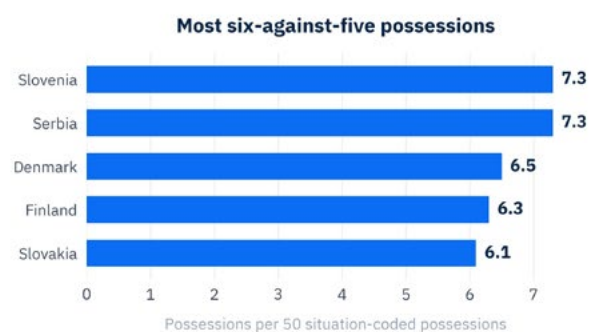
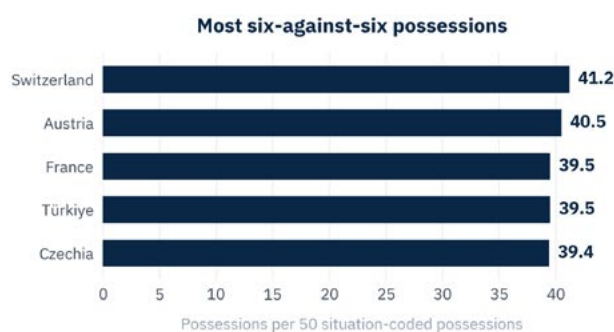


TACTICAL ASPECT

Numerical equality and superiority

Tactical volume tells a different story from efficiency. Switzerland, Austria and France recorded the highest rate of six-against-six possessions in numerical equality. Slovenia and Serbia experienced the most six-against-five possessions in numerical superiority relative to their situation-coded volume, although this measure also depends on opposition suspensions

How teams structured their attacks



The data identify several contrasting attacking profiles:

- Czechia: high overall pace combined with a pronounced transition orientation
- Sweden: the highest transition-action rate despite only the 12th-fastest overall pace
- Switzerland: the strongest equality six-against-six volume and the highest fast-break efficiency, illustrating that structured attack and efficient transition can coexist

Seven-on-six

The Faroe Islands (129 possessions), Finland (122) and Italy (79) used the additional court player most frequently. The four semi-finalists used the tactic only selectively, while Slovenia recorded no classified seven-on-six possession. The Faroe Islands also continued to use an additional court player when the opposition received a two-minute suspension, creating a seven-on-five attack. This approach is familiar from the country's senior men's national team.



Among teams with at least 20 classified seven-on-six possessions, Norway recorded the highest attacking efficiency at 57.1 per cent. Rates based on only a few possessions are not suitable for ranking teams.



TACTICS – OFFENCE

TACTICAL ASPECT

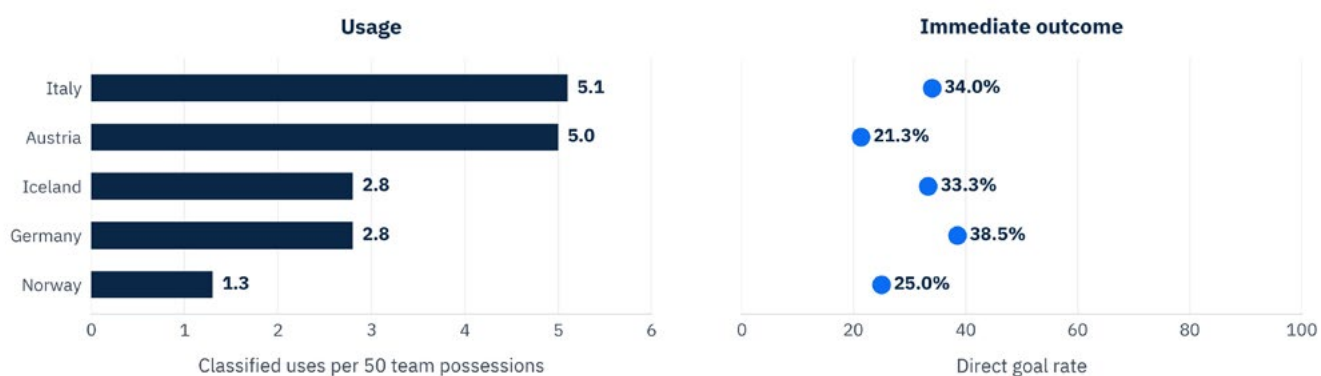
Four back-court players

Attacks with four back-court players were classified 193 times across 11 teams. Italy and Austria used them most frequently, at approximately five classified actions per 50 team possessions. Iceland and Germany followed at approximately 2.8. Germany scored directly from 10 of 26 classified actions (38.5 per cent), while Italy scored from 18 of 53 (34.0 per cent).



The direct goal rate does not represent the full tactical value of the structure. A foul, seven-metre shot, suspension or continued possession can be a positive outcome without an immediate goal. The classification may also overlap with other tactical tags and should therefore be interpreted as an action-based indicator rather than a count of mutually exclusive possessions.

Attacks with four back-court players were used selectively



Top five teams by usage. Eleven teams recorded at least one classified action; 13 recorded none.



TACTICS – OFFENCE



TRANSITION

Transition profiles varied considerably. Czechia recorded the highest fast-break goal share at 35.4 per cent; Switzerland and Iceland followed at roughly 28 per cent. Germany and Sweden also exceeded 23 per cent. By contrast, Hungary (11.7 per cent), Portugal (12.8 per cent) and Norway (13.3 per cent) relied more heavily on other phases. Czechia's high pace reflected a clear attacking intention. They consistently developed pressure through the central corridor, prioritised the shortest route to goal and expected their line players to move up the court quickly to provide early depth in transition.

Matches involving Türkiye recorded the highest pace, followed by Czechia and Italy. Türkiye illustrated why match pace should not be equated with attacking intent: The team finished 24th and also recorded the tournament's highest turnover rate. Turnovers, opposition fast breaks and frequent throw-offs after conceding goals can shorten possession cycles and raise the number of possessions without indicating a deliberately fast attacking concept. Transition actions per 50 team possessions are therefore a more useful indicator of a team's transition orientation.

Sweden recorded the highest combined rate of fast-break and counterattack actions, while Czechia combined the second-highest match pace with the second-highest transition activity. The moderate relationship between the two measures (Pearson $r = 0.41$) confirms that they describe related but distinct aspects of the game.



Fast-break goal share combines several forms of transition and does not distinguish between first wave, second wave and fast throw-off. It should therefore be read as a broad measure of transition scoring rather than as a direct measure of one specific transition concept.



TECHNICAL



The collaboration between EHF and Learn Handball brings the findings from the EHF YAC Analysis Reports directly into practice. Key insights from the tournament are connected to practical exercises, giving coaches the opportunity to apply the findings directly in their training sessions and turn analysis into action.

Want to explore it yourself? Learn Handball offers a 14-day free trial, so you can discover the platform, try the exercises, and see how it can support your coaching. Click the logo below and give it a try!



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The tournament displayed a broad technical repertoire among back-court players. Beyond conventional jump shots and straight-line breakthroughs, players varied their release height, timing and body orientation through hip and underarm shots, jump-shot fakes, spin moves and attacks towards the weak side.

Their passing solutions were equally diverse, including backhand passes to the wing as well as overhead and disguised passes to the line player. Effective movement without the ball created additional space and favourable one-on-one situations. This variety highlighted that modern back-court play depends not on one dominant technique, but on the ability to select and adapt different solutions under defensive pressure.

Underarm hip shot

Learn Handball: underarm/hip shot — Mathias Gidsel



Jump shot fake

Learn Handball: double jump feint — Sander Sagosen



PLAYERS TO WATCH



Sergej Novakovic

Position: Goalkeeper
Year of Birth: 2008
Club: FC Barcelona (ESP)
Saves: 123 (40.7% efficiency)



- Novakovic recorded the tournament's leading individual goalkeeper figures. He combined the competition's highest save rate among goalkeepers with a regular workload, the highest individual workload and the highest positive difference between saves and expected saves. His performance was particularly notable because Austria finished outside the knockout stage.



Boas Ellefsen á Skipagøtu

Position: Centre Back
Year of Birth: 2009
Club: Hondboltssfelagid H71 (FAR)
Goals: 94 (61.0% efficiency)
Assists: 46



- Skipagøtu carried an exceptional share of the Faroese attack. He combined 94 goals with 46 assists and remained the central decision-maker across positional attacks, transition phases and seven-on-six situations. His influence extended beyond scoring to ball progression, rhythm changes and the creation of opportunities for teammates.



Nuno Sousa Marques

Position: Centre Back
Year of Birth: 2010
Club: AA Águas Santas (POR)
Goals: 58 (72.5% efficiency)
Assists: 24



- Sousa Marques presented a different profile as a centre back. He operated at a lower volume than Skipagøtu but recorded greater shot accuracy, scoring 58 goals from 80 shots. His combination of finishing quality and 24 assists made him a reliable scorer and an important creative presence in Portugal's attack.





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