

‘Happy to see our flag’: Russian athletes return to the pool as protesters slam government



[Iain Payten](#), July 22, 2026, Sydney Morning Herald and The Age

There has long been debate about whether sport and politics should mix, but when it comes to water polo in Australia, it's often difficult to keep them apart.

One of water polo's most famous moments came at the 1956 Olympics in Melbourne, when Hungary played the Soviet Union just a month after Soviet tanks rolled into Budapest to crush an anti-communist uprising. The eyebrow of a Hungarian player was cut open via a Soviet punch in the fiery Olympic clash, and the [“Blood in the Water” match](#) was etched in history.

In 1997, members of the Australian women's water polo team turned up at Sydney Airport in their cossies to embarrass the then heads of the International Olympic Committee and world swimming's governing body FINA into making their sport an Olympic event in 2000. The placards and public pressure paid off: water polo was added to the schedule and Australia's women went on [to win a famous gold medal](#).



On Wednesday afternoon, in the same Homebush pool where Australia won gold 26 years ago, another uneasy blend of water polo and politics played out with the return of a Russian Federation team at the Women's World Cup finals.

Having lost the ability to compete under their national flag since the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russian Federation athletes have been competing as neutrals.

But a decision by World Aquatics in April to allow Russian athletes to resume competing under their flag resulted in the Russian women's water polo team taking on the Netherlands in a World Cup quarter-final in Sydney.

It was a controversial decision, given the war in Ukraine is not only still raging but Russian attacks have recently intensified.

A small but vocal group of Ukraine supporters outside the Sydney Olympic Park Aquatic Centre waved flags, displayed pictures of some of the 650 Ukrainian athletes and coaches who have been killed in the war, and slammed the Australian government for allowing the Russian team into the country.

The visas of Russian athletes, coaches and support staff were all approved despite warnings from Ukrainian community leaders that members of the delegation have links to sanctioned entities, Moscow's security apparatus and institutions associated with the country's state-sponsored doping program.

Several players, including captain Ekaterina Prokofyeva, are contracted to Kinef-Surgutneftegas, a club funded by sanctioned Russian oil company Surgutneftegas, while others play for a club affiliated with Russia's Dynamo sports society, which the Australian Federation of Ukrainian Organisations says maintains institutional links with the country's security and intelligence agencies.

The AFUO also raised concerns about the employment of the team's coach and medical staff by Russian government institutions, and notes the Russian Aquatics Federation is chaired by oligarch Dmitry Mazepin, who was individually sanctioned by the federal government.

"This is not sport, this is the Kremlin in water polo caps," said pro-Ukraine speaker Anton, who withheld his surname.

Andrew Mencisky, of the Ukraine Council of NSW, said it was an "outrageous example of sportswashing" and that vision of their women's water polo team in Sydney had proved to be a big "propaganda win" in Russia.

"What is happening today is wrong on many levels," he said. "These are state-directed, state-funded athletes that have deep connections to the Russian military and the Russian secret service."

Despite an elevated police presence and internal security, there was no sign of a protest inside the venue. Framed against a big screen with a blue, red and white flag, Russian athletes linked arms for the State Anthem of Russia before diving in the pool. The only support came from a few team officials in the stands.

But it provided ample motivation for the Russians against the Netherlands, a nation that was co-incidentally one of the first to boycott an Olympics when they withdrew from the 1956 Games due to the Soviet invasion of Hungary.

The world No.2 Netherlands were upset 11-6 by Russia, who have progressed to the semi-finals on Saturday.

Post-match, after a Russian media minder had requested no questions be asked beyond the water polo, Prokofyeva said playing under the flag and hearing the anthem had brought “great pride”.

“It is a great honour to compete for our country,” the captain said.

Coach Sergey Markoch was pleased with the big win over a strong Netherlands side, saying: “It was like a big feast for us because we play our first game in four years, and it’s our first tournament.”

Asked about his feelings after competing under the Russian flag and hearing the anthem again, Markoch said: “I’m happy to see our flag [and hear] our anthem, because for a long time don’t see and don’t hear. And of course, it’s friendly atmosphere.”

When asked what he would say to people who oppose Russia playing under their flag, Markoch was initially advised to not answer, but the coach later returned to the question, saying: “I want to think about water polo and about this tournament, and about how we gonna play water polo, nothing more.”

Meanwhile, the Australian women’s team claimed a thrilling 15-14 victory over Italy, and progressed to a semi-final clash with the USA on Friday.

In a see-sawing clash, the sides went goal for goal through most of the match but goalkeeper Gabby Palm stepped up in the last quarter with a handful of major blocks denied Italy the chance to draw level and take the game to a penalty shoot out.

Palm finished with eight saves, and Tilly Kearns top scored with four goals.