

World League Group 2 preview: Henno makes France comeback

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France caused quite a stir ahead of the 26th edition of the FIVB Volleyball World League with Hubert Henno returning to the fold as the Group 2 favourites announced their squad for the competition. Now 38 years old, Henno retired from the national team after a disappointing run at the FIVB Volleyball Men's World Championship in 2010. Five years down the road, he has agreed to a possible comeback with "Les Bleus".

"I am happy that he has declared himself willing, in principal, to play for the national team," said French national coach Laurent Tillie. "If Hubert is needed, he will be ready." The same goes for Pierre Pujol (30), who put his international career on ice in the summer of 2013.

The French team's magnificent showing at last year's World Championship has obviously given the two former stars - both of whom have played over 200 internationals - a reason to return. However, Tillie's primary focus remains on the team which qualified for the Group 2 finals at last year's FIVB World League.

The outstanding Earvin Ngapeth, top hitter Antonin Rouzier and Jenia Grebennikov, who was named best libero in the dream team at the FIVB Volleyball Men's World Championship Poland 2014, are men on a mission. "We want to achieve promotion into Group 1 of the FIVB World League," said Tillie. Last year, the "Blues" missed out when they suffered a surprise defeat to outsiders Australia. In 2015, they are out to secure victory in Group 2 and participation in the final round at the Maracanãzinho in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, from July 15 to 19. To pull this off, they must first win the Final Four for Group 2 in Bulgaria from July 10-11.



France players Jenia Grebennikov and Earvin Ngapeth celebrate winning a point at the FIVB Volleyball Men's World Championship Poland 2014

Group 2 consists of Pools C, D and E. Bulgaria will take on Cuba, Canada and Argentina in Pool C. France, Japan, South Korea and the Czech Republic make up Pool D, while Pool E includes Belgium, Portugal, Finland and the Netherlands.

Bulgaria are also among the favourites, host the final round and are joint organisers of the European Championship later this year. Plamen Konstantinov, who is making his coaching debut in the FIVB World League, has named the Bratov brothers and Nikolay Nikolov, who did not play at the World Championship in 2014. As usual, the biggest name and star of the Bulgarian team is Tsvetan Sokolov.

The star coach in Group 2 is arguably Argentina's Julio Velasco. The man who led Italy to World Championship titles in 1990 and 1994 has again left Ivan Castellani out of his squad this year. Velasco is keen to build a young and promising team around lynchpins like Facundo Conte. The squad includes the talented Gonzalo Quiroga (22), Rodrigo Quiroga's younger brother.

The Netherlands are looking to return to past glory with new coach Gido Vermeulen. Vermeulen, who has switched from the ladies' national team, has convinced key players like Rob Bontje, Bas van Bemmelen, Kay van Dijk and Jan-Willem Snippe to return to the national team after time away from the international scene. The erstwhile Olympic champions won the FIVB World League back in 1996.

Another country with a rich volleyball tradition is Japan, whose squad is spearheaded by top points-scorer Kunihiro Shimizu. Yu Koshikawa does not feature. Japan is the organiser of this year's FIVB Volleyball World Cup, another highlight on the volleyball calendar this year.

Group 2 also features another former winner of the FIVB World League (1998) in the form of Cuba. The powerful team from the Caribbean were promoted to the group after winning Group 3, and once again lines up with a young team captained by Rolando Cepeda. National coach Rodolfo Sánchez has even gone so far as to name a 15-year-old in his squad – Luis Elian Estrada Mazorra. That is an incredible 24 years younger than Daniel Lewis, who takes his place in a Canadian squad led, as usual, by point-scoring machine Gavin Schmitt.

The 26th FIVB Volleyball World League is set to be the biggest ever: it all began with just eight countries, who took part in the inaugural competition in 1990. In 1991, the number of participating teams rose to 10, while 12 nations competed from 1992-2000 and 2004-05. The field featured 16 teams from 2001-2003 and 2006-2012. 2013 saw 18 different countries participate, rising to 28 teams in 2014 and the new record of 32 this year.

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