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FIP European Padel Championships, Björkman: "Sweden ready for Italy, it's the rematch of Marbella 2021"

It took three matches and six hours of battle against **Belgium** before celebrating qualification for the quarter-finals at the **FIP European Padel Championships**. The **Swedish men's team** experienced one of the most epic nights in its history in **Cagliari**, after losing the first match of the tie and then coming back with two thrilling matches. *"Sometimes it's more beautiful to win without playing the best padel, as happened to us, but we were very strong mentally and fought together"*, says **Jonas Björkman**, the team captain. The former world number 4 tennis player has led the team from the bench without ever losing concentration, which he still maintains now, just a few hours before the match against Italy: *"After a very tough group stage, I believe we are now in a better position because Italy is the favorite, and they will feel all the pressure. We will be the underdogs, and that suits us just fine: we will have nothing to lose and can play without too many worries. For sure - he continues, we want to bring the best padel possible to the court"*.

YOUNG TEAM For the Swedes, one of the top seeds in the tournament, the match against Italy also represents an important test to understand the growth of young talents: *"Among us, there are players aged 18, others 22 or 24. A few years ago, the national team was mostly made up of older former tennis players, now we have a generation that has grown up with padel and many young players who are doing well. Just think of the second place achieved at the **FIP Juniors World Padel Championships** last November, behind only Spain. It was a huge success, confirming the good work we are doing in the country for padel"*, continues **Björkman**. The progress is also confirmed by the numbers: according to data from the **FIP Department of Research and Data Analysis**, Sweden is the fourth country in the world in terms of padel clubs and courts (in Europe it is third after Spain and Italy) with over 1.050 facilities - more than 230 of which are affiliated with the Swedish Padel Federation - and 4.200 courts.

TOWARDS THE REMATCH On a more personal note, Björkman describes what it is like to experience such an important tournament as a coach and not as a player, he who on the court has fought and won many glorious battles: *"It's harder to live these matches from the bench because you don't have direct control over what happens. When I played badly, for example, I knew I could only blame myself. Being a coach is really nerve-wrecking"* he explains. *"I think they called me to lead the national team because there was a bit of a lack of team spirit, and they wanted me to bring some of the spirit that Sweden had in tennis when it won the Davis Cups. We needed to have more fun, train together, and create a team spirit, even if then in tournaments you play against each other. This has been my goal, besides making these guys understand that moments like this are the best of their careers. You play for your country. You have to be proud of this and never give up"*. Pride and team spirit will also be needed today against Italy:

*"It will be a bit of a rematch after the **2021 European Championships in Marbella**, when Italy defeated Sweden in the semi-final 2-1. Even if the crowd is not on our side, there will be the right atmosphere, and this is the moment to play".*

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