

Carolyn WALDO

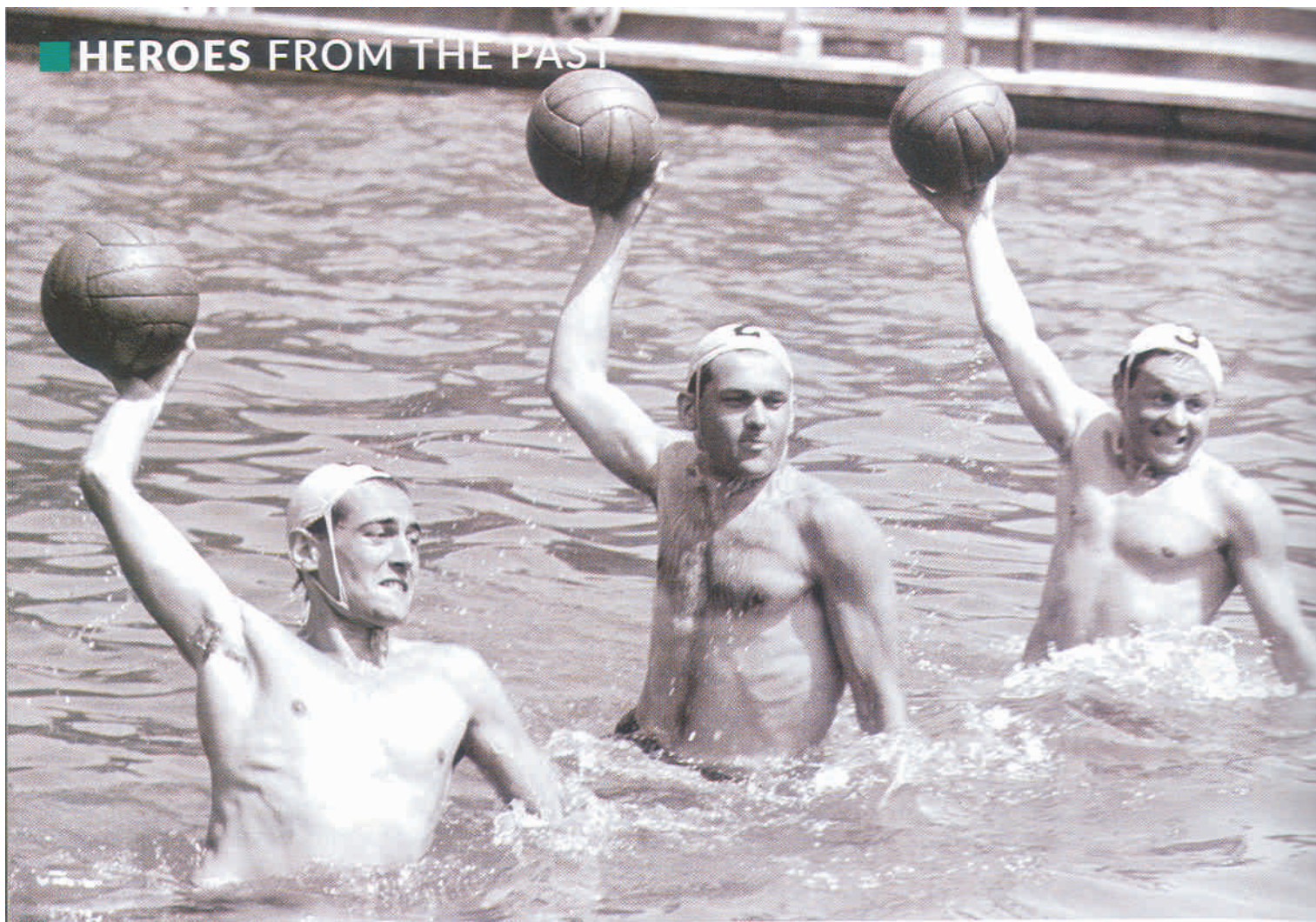
*This time our two heroes are connected by their status within their respective disciplines: both are living legends. Canada's synchro star Carolyn Waldo was the outstanding performer of the 1980s, while Hungary's Gyorgy Karpati is one of the few who belong to an exclusive club of water polo players with three Olympic titles.*

# HEROES FROM THE PAST



Gyorgy KARPATI





By Gergely CSURKA  
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(HUN)

## Gyorgy KARPATI (HUN – water polo)

Legends of the leather-ball era  
(from the left): Kalman Markovits,  
Tivadar Kanizsa and Gyorgy Karpati,  
owners of seven Olympic gold medals  
between them

# A life of goals, golds – and fun

Back in the 1990s, shortly before a general assembly of the Hungarian federation, Gyorgy Karpati entered the conference room and looked around. A row of chairs was booked for the former greats of water polo – Hungary had an army of them – clearly marked: “Olympic champions”. Karpati looked around then told the people standing nearby: “OK, this is fine. But where are the seats for the three-times Olympic champions?” And he smiled his unmistakable smile which he is still so famous for, even now, when he’s just celebrated his 80th birthday.

Photo: LASZLO MIKO / MTI

Of course, his achievements in the pool earned him the real recognition. By winning three Olympic crowns, in 1952, 1956 and 1964, he and that other legend, Dezso Gyarmati, became the first triple gold medallists of the sport since the British ruled a notably narrower field back in the 1910-20s. It took a further 44 years to match their feat – naturally, the hat-trick was done by Hungarians again, between 2000 and 2008, adding six more players to the exclusive club of triple Olympic champion water polo players.

Karpati, known as ‘Gyurika’ (‘Little George’) in his native Hungary, is someone who never stops creating fun. He’s always cracking a joke or two. Or three. For example, he has usually summed up his great Olympic results as follows: “In 1952, I won all the swim-offs for the ball, so the others only had to score. (Back then it was an important feat, since swim-offs were held after each goal and there was no possession time – writer’s note) In 1956, I was the top scorer of the tournament, I guess there is no need to add anything. Then, in 1964, Zoltan Domotor was able to score the title-winning goal in the last minute because I drew the attention of two Russian players. Thus he was left unguarded.” It was a perfect summary. We have heard it a hundred times, usually followed by applause... Then, after a couple of decades, during a gathering Dezso Gyarmati raised his finger... “You know, I’ve been listening to this statement of Little George’s for ages. Now let me tell you, I can clearly recall that in 1964, at the very moment of that fantastic goal of Domotor, Little George was just sitting next to me on the bench. However, being aware of his capabilities, I can still imagine that he managed to draw the attention of two Russians even from there...”

Their fantastic careers were knotted together once and forever – success was related to their names wherever they played. And later they worked together as coaches to shape another triumphant period for Hungarian water polo in the 1970s.

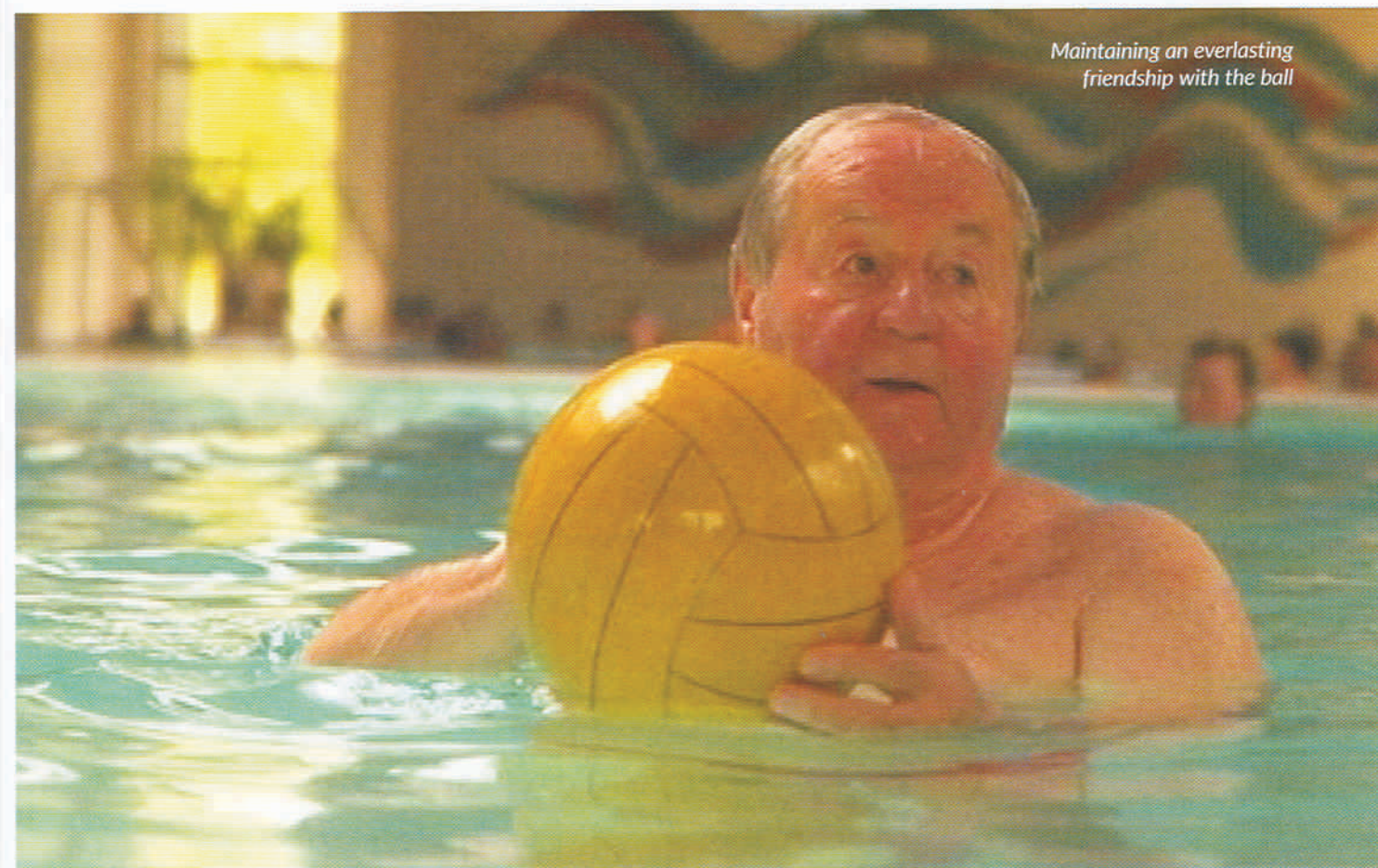
## And he pushed Puskas to the microphone

Gyurika, Little George, was and is small indeed. In the water (polo) world of giants he is the outstanding exception. Or rather ‘down-standing’... But even being 168cm (5ft 6ins) tall, he was skilled and smart. His brain always searched for tricks. Whenever, wherever, whatever. Fool the opponent, the referee, and after the game the team-mates, the president, the coach, anyone. He learned everything in the pool, as he was the son of the poolmaster at the Margaret Island (the old chap was known as Uncle Chicken). There was no better school in town – at least for learning the tricks of the game and for reaching the same level as the big boys in terms of verbal debates.

No other nation ever had such a huge pool of talent as Hungary had in the 1950s. Still, Karpati became such a good player so early that he made the Olympic team in 1952 as a 17-year-old. And he scored the most important goal of the tournament, the equaliser against Yugoslavia. After that the team went on to capture the title with a better goal difference.

“It was a bit of a different atmosphere at the Games,” he recalls. “It wasn’t about life

Maintaining an everlasting  
friendship with the ball



and death. We just enjoyed playing, and as soon as the victory ceremony was over we rushed to the football stadium to watch the last minutes of our football team’s final.”

Those were the days: on the pitch players like Ferenc Puskas, Sandor Kocsis, Nandor Hidegkuti also won Olympic gold. The two teams celebrated together in the dressing-room. Amidst happiness, Puskas shouted through the place: “Hey, Little George! In the evening we will look for some girls, all right?”

“I stood there, all those national heroes looked at me and burst out laughing. Imagine how red my face got,” Karpati says with a broad smile. Soon they became life-long friends, he and Puskas, one of the greatest football players ever, a household name in the sport. But life totally changed after the revolution and the ensuing Soviet invasion in 1956. Puskas didn’t return to Hungary, joined Real Madrid. The communist regime considered that a betrayal – and from then on he was persona non grata, his name was not allowed to appear in the press and he was forbidden from re-entering the country. But the ties of friendship were never cut. In 1973 Puskas attended the very first edition of the FINA World Championships in Belgrade to watch a couple of games of the water polo team, and the Hungarians ended up winning the title. Gyorgy Karpati was there as the assistant coach...



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"After the last game every one of us was in euphoria, including our legendary radio commentator, Gyorgy Szepesi, who had been the voice of our sport since the 50s. He commented on the football team's matches as well, he was a true friend of Puskas... So we were just standing around him, together with the players. He was doing the live interviews, when all of a sudden another brilliant idea crossed my mind... Puskas was also standing there. I grabbed him from behind and pushed him in front of Szepesi's microphone. In that situation there was no way back. 'And here is our former great, Ferenc Puskas,' Szepesi said after a moment of hesitation, while 'Ocsi', as we all knew him, was a bit disturbed but was able to say a couple of sentences about how happy he was to see the guys winning. And it had happened: after 17 years the voice of Ferenc Puskas sounded on the national radio. It was a shock back home. But with the world title in our hands no one dared to say a word."

This is how life was in those years, decades in Hungary. It wasn't a bed of roses behind the Iron Curtain. Still, sporting success offered a better life and secured more excuses if one failed to comply with the 'system requirements' in all fields.

With long-time friend, Bud Spencer – they had terrific clashes back in the 1950s when the film star played for the Italian national team under his original name, Carlo Pedersoli

## 1956

However, what happened in 1956 – to return to that famous year – couldn't be inserted anywhere in any system. It was unique, it was extraordinary, it was history. A large book wouldn't be enough to summarise what happened in Hungary from October in that year. An uprising against the Soviet empire and its local representatives, eight days of joy, a never-experienced feeling of freedom, then the brutal reality: Soviet tanks and troops invaded the country, turning it into bloodshed.

During those days of turmoil the Hungarian team was to travel to Melbourne, for the Games of the XVI Olympiad. "We were waiting in the Buda hills, in a training camp," Karpati remembers. "Months earlier the sports leadership made a deal with the Dutch airlines, booked a charter flight and paid everything in advance. However, when the revolution broke out, KLM sent a message that the aircraft would not land in Budapest in these circumstances. Long discussions started, while we kept praying for Dezso Gyarmati, who was a real rebel: he was in the middle of the heaviest fights, built barricades and waited to clash with the enemies... Thank God, a couple of former greats found him and told him: 'Dezso, don't be stupid, don't let yourself be shot dead, go back to the boys, travel to Melbourne and win the Olympics. This is the best you can do to help this nation.' So he rejoined us and soon we got on four buses and drove to Prague where we boarded the planes and flew to Australia."

At that time a journey to Melbourne lasted four days. When they reached

their final destination, the news of the Soviet invasion also reached them. Gyarmati entered the arrival hall of the Melbourne airport with a black ribbon attached to the national flag.

Thousands of miles from home, no one was able to focus on the upcoming Games. "You know, most of our athletes had a family back home, wives, husbands, kids or just parents," Karpati says. "But it was almost impossible to phone home, so everyone felt absolutely insecure. Has anything bad happened to our loved ones? And just as importantly: how will our country look when we get home? For the older ones these were really crucial questions and answers were barely available."

Long days passed, almost everybody tried to find out what the next step should be. Practice? Not a single one was held for the water polo teams. Fellow athletes could not train as effectively either. The female swimmers, who were simply overwhelming in Helsinki 1952 and two years later at the Europeans in Turin, failed to win a gold. The world-famous middle-distance runners, who had bettered a clutch of world records in the preceding years, couldn't reach the podium due to the lack of normal training before and after the travelling.

It was the head coach, Bela Rajki, who brought the water polo team together again. He wasn't a classical expert of the game: he was a great manager, a kind of service-provider and the one who saved the team from the stupidity of the regime back home – and left the coaching part to the best players of the team, Gyarmati and Kalman Markovits, who were the true masterminds behind the successes. "It was an emotional meeting with two weeks to go until the start. Bela gathered us and held a great speech. He said, guys, we are here, let's do our job, win the title – it would bring some joy for those back home and perhaps make your future life easier as well. He added: Heaven knows what will happen once the tournament is over, but until the last moment we have to focus on this single task: playing water polo and winning matches."

## The Bloodbath of Melbourne (as it's called...)

It had an effect. The team came together and started to practise again. When the tournament started, they were close to their top shape. And on 4 December 1956, the most famous game ever in water polo history started: Hungary vs. Soviet Union.

"You know, we were good friends with the Russians, especially with Mishi Mshvenieradze.



At the time this photo was taken, none of them could have guessed how the Olympics would play out on the end of the year – an all-smiling Hungarian team during preparations on 19 October 1956, just four days before the historic uprising against the communist regime began in Budapest

Photo: LASZLO PETROVITS / MTI

But that day was different. As we usually recall it: they had the same four letters on their uniforms – CCCP – that were seen on the side of the Soviet tanks invading the streets of Budapest a month earlier," Karpati says. "The game was played in front of 4,000 spectators, half of them were Hungarians who had emigrated after the World War. You can't find suitable words to describe the atmosphere in the pool."



**In those years it was a miracle. It was away from reality – just scoring 14 was, but to do it against the Soviets!**

The partisan crowd created a perfect environment for Hungary's revolutionary tactical move: this is less known but this game was historical from another aspect as it saw the advent of the zonal defence, created by Kalman Markovits just the day before, in order to double-guard the enormous Georgian centre-forward, Mshvenieradze. With this move, the furthest Soviet attacker, approximately 7 metres from goal, was left unmarked – which was a total surprise in the game which had only known hard pressing, nothing else. The Russians simply couldn't find a way to attack against this system. After this the unguarded player started to shoot from distance. "With those heavy leather balls it was more than a challenge to hit the top corners from seven metres, and added to that there was the tension, created by thousands cheering for your rivals, and our goalie, Api Boros, was also in tremendous form with his huge arms, he even waved to the Russians, shoot again, shoot again..."

Hungary won 4-0 but the contest ended a bit before the end of regular time. "It was just a simple water polo accident, a Russian player, Prokopov, elbowed Ervin Zador's face and hit him above his eye. It was a relatively small cut, but you know, from that area, where the skin lies directly on your skull-bone, blood usually pours out quite intensely. When Zador got out from

the pool and reached the half-line, his wet upper body had already been covered with blood. The crowd went wild, hundreds were ready to jump the fences, rush to the pool deck and lynch the Russians. Not enough back in Budapest, you do the same here, in front of us??? Something like this went through their minds. The ref found it better to halt the game and the security guards escorted them to the dressing-room while we celebrated the win. And the legend of the Bloodbath of Melbourne was born."

Still, the crown was a game away and it appeared to be an even tougher clash with Yugoslavia. Still, the team passed this test as well, thanks to Karpati who scored the winner for 3-2. It was a golden goal indeed and also made the little magician the top scorer of the team – a magnificent feat among those brilliant players.

## The Freedom Tour around the US (with 14 suitcases)

Next came the dilemma. What could they do, even with a gold medal around their necks? Team leaders let everyone decide on their own. There were representatives of the old-new regime but they didn't dare





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to give orders in remote Australia. Thus a couple of members chose to return to Hungary, while a handful of the players joined the so-called Freedom Tour, organised by Sports Illustrated which was quick to help the Hungarian athletes, backed by the US government, being ready to support any kind of demonstration in the middle of the Cold War.

Of course, Gyorgy Karpati was keen to take part in any kind of adventure and opted to go with the group. "It was great, we travelled around the US, first went to Hawaii, later we spent two weeks in New York, where, together with a couple of Romanian fellows who also defected, we even formed a team and played an exhibition game against a local team, and part of it was broadcast on the Ed Sullivan Show. Wherever we went, we were offered either jobs or scholarships. However, together with my friend Laszlo Jeney, the second goalie of the team, we speculated the same way: once we reach Washington in a month's time, we'll alert our embassy that we would rather go home. We received the news that an amnesty had been announced for those who returned to Hungary before 31 March 1957. Actually, we just wanted to look around in the famous USA but never thought of staying there. Others did, not us. I had my fiancée back home, I missed Margaret Island, my family and friends. For us, this tour was about fun..."

Once they were in Washington, the pair called the consul by phone and set up a meeting in the Hotel Willard. "He came with another guy from the embassy but as

Gyorgy Karpati is still part of all the important events held around the pools – or the to-be-pools: here with Hungarian political leaders and top FINA officials at the laying of the cornerstone of the new swimming complex to be built for the 2017 FINA World Championships

soon as they stood up to greet us, 14 more people did the same, surrounded us and announced that they were from the FBI. Our consul left immediately, waving back, 'this is their home, do whatever they demand'. We were taken to a local bureau. On our way there Jeney was able to catch a couple of words as he spoke English. He said that the agents laughed at the consul, saying 'they thought we wouldn't bug them...' We were questioned and we admitted we wanted to go home. They didn't oppose this, just asked if we wished to think again. Then they said they wouldn't let us return to the tour until our travel was settled, otherwise we might have harmed the atmosphere there. So they booked a large suite for us in a nearby hotel, we were guarded by FBI agents with whom we built a great relationship in three days. On the eve of our departure we drank whiskey together..."

As they had left Hungary with an Olympic Identity Card and not with a passport, when they landed in Vienna, the Austrians couldn't handle their case quickly as the US hadn't informed them who these two guys were and where they were to go. So until the Austrians had found out the proper way to send them home without a valid passport, the pair were sent to a jail to spend the night there.

"You know, that was tremendous... We were in one large room with other Hungarians – all had crossed the border without documents to leave the country. Gosh, a mixture of fallen members of the state defence authority, the most brutal organisation of the communist era, freedom fighters who wished to escape the criminal courts, other poor folks who just wished for a better life – and us, standing there and heading in the opposite direction. But we didn't dare to mention this, to avoid any harassment... Next day we were freed, a bus came for us, so we got on, together with our 14 suitcases..."

## Scoring 14 against the Soviets

Karpati went on playing for almost a decade and a half. He still holds an outstanding record: not a single member of the next generations could earn three Olympic AND three European Championship titles. "You know, this is me. Unique in all sense," he laughs.

He was, indeed. At the 2nd University Games, in 1961 in Sofia, he punched his opponent quite hard. The other guy's face started to bleed, the referee started to whistle and Karpati knew that he was in trouble, so he quickly went under water and bit his own mouth. It was a brutal bite – but at least he could show he was also a victim of the brawl: take a look, his mouth was also bleeding... Perhaps this was his only trick ever which didn't work out properly as he was ejected from the game and even had to go to hospital where four stitches were needed to heal his mouth.

He had another great story from the following University Games, held in Porto Alegre, Brazil. "Since international tournaments were a rarity in those years, everyone used every occasion to play with the best team. For the University Games almost all the players had become students in one way or another, in order to keep the team's key members playing together. The Soviets were especially good at fielding their senior team at the Universiades as well. This was the case in 1963. Why do I say that? Because we beat them 14-6. In those years it was a miracle. It was away from reality – just scoring 14 was, but to do it against the Soviets! Now, for the first time, I can reveal something here, only for your readers. To score as many goals we needed a little help, too. Aladar Szabo, who had the strongest shot ever in Hungarian water polo history – goalies used bandages for the practices Aladar took part in – emigrated to Brazil after 1956. He worked there, coached teams, but here, in the final he was the timekeeper. And he stopped the clock when no one noticed with little pushes. Later he said, 'Guys, you played so well that I wanted to enjoy every moment of it. It's been long since I've seen such great water polo and just wanted to watch it a bit longer than usual'."

## Who is doing the head coach's job?

Well, the number of stories is simply endless. We can hardly find an hour when nothing special happens to Gyorgy Karpati, even today. He became assistant coach alongside Dezso Gyarmati in the



One of the last photos as an active player: from 1964, when he became an Olympic champion for the third time

national team from 1971: that side won three Olympic medals including gold in 1976, the famous 1973 world title which brought back the voice of Ferenc Puskas

## Medal tally

### Olympic Games

**Gold**  
1952, Helsinki  
1956, Melbourne  
1964, Tokyo

**Bronze**  
1960, Rome

### European Championships

**Gold**  
1954, Turin  
1958, Budapest  
1962, Leipzig

As assistant coach of the national team he was part of further successes: Olympic gold (1976), silver (1972), bronze (1980), World Championships gold (1973), silver (1975, 1978), World Cup gold (1979), European Championships gold (1974, 1977)

to Hungary, and two European titles. And it produced another flood of stories with Karpati in the spotlight as he was keen to play the role of the team's clown in order to ensure a fine atmosphere among the huge egos of the players and the head coach. And he was also ready to do his special tricks. At a friendly game in Budapest, televised live, he noticed that the camera showed the team during the breaks. At that time no microphone was used to broadcast what the coach told the players – and the camera angles were different, it was more like a total picture of the poolside. Gyarmati just went over to the players, didn't have too much to say as they were superior as usual. It was just a kind of "yeah, we'll go on like this" stuff. However, this time, just a little behind, Karpati stood up and gestured with huge movements of his arms. Not a single word did he say, just imitated as if he was explaining something. Next day all their friends called Gyarmati: "Dezso, who is doing the head coach job at the team in reality? We saw Little George giving the instructions while you were just there with the boys..."

Later he did some coaching in Australia, where he returned from time to time, sometimes toured around with Puskas and the legendary Hungarian boxer, the first triple Olympic champion of that sport, Laszlo Papp. The Hungarian colony Down Under was keen to offer them a little financial help – and guess

who topped the others by collecting the most funds? Karpati played a simple trick. Whichever city they travelled to, upon arrival he quickly hinted to the organisers that that very day was his birthday. After the fifth occasion Papp had had enough and told him: "Little George, if I hear again at the party that you have your birthday today, I will be ready to punch you in the middle of your ugly face so you can spend your earnings on a new nose..."

And we could go on and on with anecdotes like this... Well, Karpati, with the help of a great sportswriter, former player Pal Peterdi, put together seven books on the tales of his adventurous life. Few books can make one's day brighter than these.

Today, even though he is past 80, Karpati is still active. He is the chief advisor of the Prime Minister in sport matters, Chairman of the Immortal Hungarian Athletes' Association and he is also member of the distinguished circle of the greatest ones: he is one of the 12-member club called Sportsmen of the Nation (they receive a substantial monthly stipend from the state).

And whenever you meet him at the pool, at some point in your conversation he will ask: "And have I told you that story of..."

And then there comes another piece of brilliance, fun and history.

So... Perhaps, to be continued in one of our next editions... ■

