

Six thousand people on the stands, legendary water polo players in the pool...

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If you stage a FINA Masters World Championships in Budapest which features a team fielding 14 Olympic champion players, don't be surprised to see fans flooding the stands.

Regarding participation, FINA's largest event is the World Masters Championships – here in Budapest more than 9,400 athletes take part. Attendance figures have not been recorded in the past as this competition usually doesn't attract such a big attention from the public...

But Budapest is different. It was proved during the previous fortnight, at the FINA World Championships, just recall the athletes' feedbacks, especially the foreign stars like Sarah Sjöström, Caeleb Dressel or Adam Peaty who were amazed by the atmosphere.



The Worlds are over, we have the Masters now... And the locals haven't stopped flooding the stands. This Sunday the magnificent synchro venue welcomed 2,000 fans who wanted to take a last look to the pool before its closing and of course to celebrate another Hungarian gold, courtesy of the BVSC Zuglo free combo team in the 25-39yrs category.

However, the last chapter of the big story was yet to come in the evening, on the Margaret Island. It was the final of the men's 40+ age-group category, featuring the Millennium team. The name reflects on the first big

success, the Olympic triumph in Sydney 2000. Followed by two more, back-to-back titles in 2004 and 2008, these players wrote history by clinching three Olympic crowns in a row. Of course, they have become the darlings of the nations. All of them are legends, though the six “three-timers”, Tibor Benedek, Peter Biros, Tamas Kasas, Gergely Kiss, Tamas Molnar and Zoltan Szecsi stand out as they were part of all three victories. All of them joined the show which proved to a blockbuster for five evenings.

More than 5,000 people turned out at each match but the Sunday final saw 6,000 filling all possible space. Roof-terraces of the old pool building, used for sunbathing on ordinary days, accommodated loads of standing spectators, many sat on the steps and the neighbouring fan zone also welcomed capacity crowds in front of the giant screens where the live TV coverage (yes, there was one) was shown.

Hungary’s love affair with water polo is eternal – but these players enjoy a special place in the people’s heart. Led by their legendary coach, Denes Kemeny – who is currently the president of the WP Federation – they presented the Magyars with an endless series of magnificent memories. Besides the three Olympic titles they were world champions and in fact it’s exactly the 20th anniversary of their first big win, at the 1997 Europeans in Seville.



Capturing this Masters title was the easiest of all. They sailed through the field, the only real challenge came in the semis when they met another Hungarian side, Oasis, lining up with a couple of fine players. Many of them achieved success with these great boys back in the junior events but later couldn’t make the big stage (talent, perseverance, willpower, work-ethic – this separates the best players from the good ones). Still, the champions won 18-9 (until then they produced a 46-10 goal difference in three matches), then in the final they blew their Russian rivals away. Though St. Petersburg fielded some players (like Irek Zinnurov and Aleksei Garbuzov) who played thrilling matches with Kasas&Co. in their heydays. It was a one-sided match but the difference wasn’t about just talent and skills.

Some of the Millenium players were still active last season (they were simply too good even at the age of 38-39-40 so they were still able to boost their respective club’s game), and in this sport speed and strength decide the outcome.

Those who had become coaches, including the former and the current head coach of the national team, Tibor Benedek and Tamas Marcz and also the others kept themselves fit even after calling it a day. So it was easy

to get back to shape...



For Tamas Marcz it was perhaps the best way to erase the bad memories from the last Saturday of July when his team lost to Croatia in the World Championships final. For Tamas Kasas it was an addendum to his truly unique tally. Till date this genius is the only player in water polo history who possesses each and every available international titles in all categories: in age-group championships (youth and junior world and European titles), gold medals from the big events (Olympics, World Champs, World Cup, World League, Europeans) and titles from the three international club competitions. Now the Masters title would make to catch him up almost impossible for the future generations.

But it wasn't just an adventure. They really entertained the crowd. Just as in the good old days, they gave the respect to their respective opponents through playing on their highest level from the beginning to the very end. The fire came back and these brilliant players held a demonstration of their skills. Also, a telling scene was when Tibor Benedek wanted to deny a Russian counter and tried to catch the other player by swimming after him with full gear to press him while taking a shot... And he managed to disturb Zinnurov enough and let his goalie to make a great save. This happened in the third period when Hungary was 12-3 up... And note that Benedek was the oldest in the pool, aged 45.



It finished 16-3, so it was time to throw the head coach to the water – it happened many times in the past but for the first time in front of a home crowd. And the celebration was loud and joyful, the fans were thankful to their heroes.

Standing on the top of the podium was something they got used to – however, this time something special happened, also a kind of proof that you couldn't turn back time. When they first took gold medals in 1997, almost all of them were promising youngsters. Twenty years on, their kids were invited to the podium, multiplying the number of persons appearing in the team photo. The bonus chapter has been written to the history book.

It was as good as the previous ones.
