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FINA IN MOURNING - Eugenio Martinez (CUB)

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Six-time Olympic referee Eugenio Martinez of Cuba has passed away on December 25, 2019 leaving a huge hole in the worldwide water polo community. We have lost another great to the game.

A former FINA Bureau member (2013-17) and four-time FINA Technical Water Polo Committee member (2000-2013, 2017-19), Eugenio was an affable, yet stern, personality whose control of water polo matches was legendary.

His staggering coverage of six Olympic Games (1972-1992) began with a clash between Germany and Netherlands and ended with the infamous Barcelona 1992 final between Italy and Spain that went to six periods of extra time. In 1976, he refereed the second-last day of Hungary v Romania that decided the gold medal and in 1984, he blew the 5-5 Yugoslavia-United States of America with Eugenio Ascencio.

Besides that incomparable Olympic accolade, he also officiated at every FINA World Championship from 1973 (Belgrade) until 1994 (Rome).

He controlled matches at every men's FINA World Cup until 1995 (excluding Thessalonika 1987). He also worked the FINA junior men's worlds at Barcelona (1983), Istanbul (1985) and Sao Paolo (1987).

He was awarded the FINA Silver Pin for his services in 1995.

Eugenio attended 10 Pan American Games, numerous Caribbean Games and four South American Games. Other accolades included honorary member of the International Association of Water Polo Referees (AIA). He has been a guest speaker and conducted referee schools at more than 30 countries worldwide. He also did a stint as national coach of Kuwait.

In an interview we had about 10 years ago, Eugenio spoke of his Olympic achievement, of which he was justifiably proud — he never ceased to remind me of his six Olympic Games in our many years of friendship.

“My first Olympics in 1972, I refereed Germany-Netherlands. My first match was perfect and the second terrible — Soviet Union v Yugoslavia. It was a physical game with fighting all the game. This was a very difficult day for me. We fight after the game with the players. Me, (brother) Guillermo, John Felix, supported me. We were fighting on one side of the swimming pool; we saw a Yugoslav player who came to me to attack me. We were fighting, boxing with the players, with three and four very big players.

“FINA punished the players for one game for fighting me. After that the committee trusted me and gave me more matches and gave me the bronze-medal game.

“Only one time. I think I excluded (a player) one or two times. One in the semifinal in Atlanta. (The coach) couldn't be on

the bench, but he was in the stand and was phoning the player on the bench,” Eugenio said.

I remember Bill Shaw (CAN) as the match delegate, halting the match then walking around the pool and confiscating the phone held to the ear by the second goalkeeper who was hiding it under his hoodie.

“The other top game was in Barcelona 1992 in the final and I did that with Fred Van Dorp (NED). We went to extra time, six periods. Two coaches from different countries —Rudic and Matutinovic. There was fighting after the game. It was a very good game, but an over-physical game with extra fighting in the extra periods. Italy beat Spain.

“We were in the middle, saying please go. We have to talk with the teams. Delegate Peter Montgomery (AUS) and we as the referees talked with the players. ‘You keep playing in this manner, we have to stop the game’ we said to the captains.

“We said something like that. ‘Take it easy, take it easy’. We couldn’t suspend the game, not just for the referees and the teams, but also for the public.”

Eugenio began his refereeing career after retiring as a player in 1968.

“The Cuban coach was Hungarian. He was a successful coach with Karoly Laqy the Cuban national team. I played 1963-68, the Pan American Games, Central American and Caribbean Games. I played the Pre-Olympic week, test event in January. I played the tournament, but not the Olympics as I injured the hand and couldn’t go to Olympics so took the decision to retire and work as assistant coach for Laqy.

“The coach was tough. I started to referee the training games. My first international was in 1970 CA&CG in Panama City. In 1971, I was at the Cali Pan Am Games then Olympics. Any time Cuba travelled, I was the referee. In 1976 and 1980, Cuba took part and then Cuba didn’t take part so I was a FINA neutral referee in 1984, 1992 and 1996.”

In 1974, when the first classifications came into play as FINA A, B and C, Eugenio was one of only eight in the world to be classed as an A.

Eugenio spoke about the former system of one referee.

“In 1972, there was only one referee. We were no better referees, but we had to improve more because we were alone. We had more chances. We had to cover the whole field of play alone. That’s why we improved. That’s why we could not say we were better. We were alone to take care of the game. We had to know how to walk, walk backwards to cover the whole field.

“Now the referees work to the centre and walk to 7-8m. Then I had to work to 2-2 right and left and running and running. The referee is standing at 8-9 metres and is ahead now. When you are in 2m line and the team starts a counter-attack, then you have to run and follow the player quickly. You were alone.

“Sometimes there was a brutality. We cannot look at the score bench because of brutality possibility. Today, referees arrive with a colleague.”

I asked Eugenio whom he claimed was the best referee he had encountered. His reply: “The best referee? There’s only one — Cornel Marculescu — nowadays FINA Executive Director. He also heaped praise on Alphonse Angella (FRA), Abe Fuchs (BEL), Eugenio Ascencio (ESP) and Zeljko Klaric (YUG). Why were they the best? “They were very correct, objective.”

Having been at the forefront of the sport for so long, it was worth getting his opinion on what makes a good referee.

“You have to play water polo. You have like the justice. You have to feel, not just know the articles of the rules to have some extra feeling for the game. In the game, many, many things happen and some moments you have to choose what to call.

“Maybe they pass the test, but they cannot whistle. You have to whistle the sense of the game. You cannot be afraid; you cannot be shy. You have to take responsibility, decide and quickly. Sometimes you make a mistake, but when you did not make many mistakes, players knew.”

Eugenio reflected on his six Olympic Games often as the first and only.

He was also proud of his seven trips to the Universiade — Moscow, Sofia, Mexico City, Edmonton, Bucharest and Kobe.

On the rules — and this was about 10 years ago — “We must keep the rules for a while, not change. People ask about

changing, but we must keep the rules, retain them and not just for one Olympic period. I remember when I was a referee, the TWPC changed the rules new people wanted to impose and then players, referees. We have to keep for a longer period. The game is active."

He also remembers when he whistled that there was only one ball "and we had to wait until the ball came out of the stand!"

On the changes he saw during his time as a top-level referee, he said: "Better training; players are in better shape; maybe only one centre forward. Now it is necessary to have at least six players; you need a team now; press and defending, taking care of the centre forward. You could give three fouls. Before if you had one good player you could do well. It was not so tactical. Now you have a chance for some teams, like Spain, which has not very tall players and became best in the world with the new rules."

He had recommendations for those wishing to reach a higher level in the game.

"Go to the pool as often as you can. Go every day for the training game. Day by day. I went every day as I was assistant coach. Not just a few competitions. You have to improve with the players. A referee will learn many things with the players. You will be involved with the feeling of the players and the coaches. You receive the comments, but you have to go."

My memories of Eugenio are many, including my 1000th FINA World Championships match in Gwangju, China earlier in the year, when he posed with me and the match officials as a FINA Delegate.

Water polo will be lesser for not having the two Martinez boys at a water polo event — Eugenio and older brother Guillermo, a FINA Honorary Member — as they were in Gwangju.

The man who resembled famous writer Ernest Hemingway — who also spent time in Cuba — has left a legacy much like Hemingway's "The Old Man and the Sea".
