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## Hungary mourns Olympic legends Gyorgy Karpati and Tibor Benedek

Gergely Csurka, FINA Media Committee Member

In a shocking series of events, Hungary lost two of its greatest-ever water polo players in 24 hours. Both belonged to the elite club of three-times Olympic champions: Gyorgy Karpati, 85, was the last living member of the legendary team winning the title in Melbourne 1956 – he was also part of the 1952 and 1964 gold medallist sides. A left-handed icon of the 90s and the new millennium, winner in Sydney 2000, Athens 2004 and Beijing 2008, Tibor Benedek was only 48 but a dreadful disease terminated his wonderful life way too soon.

Karpati was a true all-round player. Though water polo is considered a sport of giants, he was one of the few players who could make highest circles despite being relatively short but his extraordinary swimming speed, brilliant technique and outstanding smartness made him a perfect fit for the Hungarian national team in the 50s. It was a time of unprecedented abundance of talent in the pool; thus making the squad was a challenge itself for a handful of outstanding players, but Karpati usually appeared in the playing VII in an era when substitution was not allowed during the games.



Gyorgy Karpati (sixth from the left) with the 1964 Hungarian Olympic gold team, in a photo with the then IOC President Avery Brundage

He was only 17 when he could celebrate his first Olympic title in Helsinki 1952, followed by a series of fantastic triumphs. The highest rated of all came in 1956, just weeks after the freedom fight in Hungary was suppressed by the Soviet troops. Perhaps it was the most famous water polo clash in history in Melbourne, when the Hungarian team beat the Soviets 4-0 in the match which would be known as the 'Bloodbath of Melbourne'. Karpati was in the pool in that game and contributed a lot to the great march of the Magyars. He played at two more Olympics, earned a bronze in Rome 1960 and added a historical third gold in Tokyo. Soon he was back, from 1972 till 1980 he worked as the assistant coach of his great friend Dezso Gyarmati to lead the team to three more medals at the Games, including gold in 1976. A man of brilliant humour and outstanding charisma, Karpati later held important roles in the national federation and in the executive board of the National Olympic Committee and was an adviser on sport matters to the Prime Minister.



Gyorgy Karpati: one of the best Water Polo players of his generation

While he was given a full circle of life, another three-time Olympic champion Tibor Benedek passed away this morning, just weeks before his 48th birthday, to send waves of shock around the world's water polo community. He was a true icon of the sport who had an outstanding playing career, only to match it by his achievements as a coach.

"I wasn't the most gifted player, I didn't have the greatest skills and I didn't have the usual big size. But I wanted it more, much more than anybody else. Perhaps this was the key for my success" he said in an interview, quoted afterwards thousands of times to demonstrate that dedication, iron will and commitment can bring anyone to the highest of heights.

The left-handed hero took part in five Olympics as a player between 1992 and 2008 and reached the top in the second part of his illustrious career. He became Olympic champion in 2000, 2004 and 2008, world champion in 2003, World Cup winner in 1995, World League winner in 2003 and 2004 and European champion in 1997 but stood on the podium on numerous occasions at other major events and claimed a series of trophies with his clubs.



Tibor Benedek in action - Photo by gettyimages

Perhaps the most telling story of his commitment is from 2008 when as an already fully-decorated player, aged 36, he took extra lessons in the pool from a swimming coach in order to perfect his freestyle technique. He knew that his original style would result in a loss of energy which he wanted to avoid to be in top shape both physically and mentally for the Games where he led the team to an unprecedented third straight Olympic title as captain.

Soon he re-joined the national side as an assistant coach to Denes Kemeny in 2011-12, then took charge as head coach from 2013 and he immediately managed to stun the sport in that summer by leading his newly shaped team to a world title in Barcelona. In the first two seasons they reached 5/5 finals at the majors but the second part of his tenure brought less success as they lost two extremely tight quarterfinals in Kazan 2015 and Rio 2016. While 5th place has never been an acceptable result in the top nation of water polo, this time the whole community insisted that he should stay at the helm but he opted to resign instead and started to coach youngsters. His last miracle came earlier in this season when he led his club to the top eight in the national league though the team featured only teenaged players. However, soon he had to announce that he should leave water polo once and for all for private reasons – and today the country and the aquatic family had to learn the agonisingly painful truth behind his decision.

A role model for many for his work ethics, dedication and clear view on the game – Tibor Benedek will be badly missed by not only the Magyars but the entire world of water polo.

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