A 113 year long success story

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Eva Novak in the 1950s
The history of Hungarian swimming has been a story of excellence since the beginning of the modern sporting era. The winner of the first Olympic gold medal, in 1896, at Athens, was in fact a Hungarian - Alfred Hajos, in the 100 metres freestyle. He won also a second gold medal over the distance of 1200 metres, and went home with two of the three gold medals at stake. Later, Hajos became an architect and designed Budapest's finest competitive swimming pools, in which Hungary trained its next great champions.

Over 113 years, Hungarian swimming has built up a long tradition, made up by dozens of medals won at the Olympic Games, the World Championships and the European Championships, and by a considerable number of world records.

A tradition perhaps not as prestigious as that built up by their compatriots in water polo, but enough to secure little Hungary a spot among the world's major powerhouses. In Hungary, swimming is strongly rooted; probably it is the first among the sports practised by the Hungarians.

Here, in a quick survey, we aim to recall the major protagonists of Hungary's swimming saga, apologising for the inevitable omissions.

The 1988 Olympic Games saw the explosion of possibly the greatest Hungarian female swimmer ever, Krisztina Egerszegi: although she was versed in all four swimming strokes she had the ideal physique for backstroke.

In the ultra centennial virtual relay, Zoltan Halmay appeared soon after Hajos. He won 10 medals at the Olympics, between 1896 and 1908, including the 100m freestyle gold medal in 1904. Istvan Barany – the 100m freestyle silver medallist at the 1928 Olympics (also a relay bronze in 1932) – was the first European swimmer to break the minute in the 100m freestyle, the second overall after Johnny Weissmuller. He was the best European swimmer of his time. After retirement, he ran the Hungarian National Swimming Federation, coached the national team and wrote many books about swimming.

Ferenc Csik became the third Hungarian to win the 100 freestyle, in 1936 at Berlin (he also won a relay bronze), coming from an outside lane to defeat the world record holder Peter Fick (USA). In his career Csik also won some European championships and set some continental records.

The post-war scene saw the rise of the Hungarian female swimmers as the world’s super powers. They dominated the 1952 Olympic Games, in Helsinki, in a way no country has done before, winning seven out of the eight gold medals available. Kato Szoke and Judit Temes were first and third in the 100 metre freestyle; Valeria Gyenge and Eva Novak went 1-2 in the 400 metre freestyle while Eva and Ilona Novak, Szoke and Temes won the 4x100m freestyle relay. Eva Szekely and Eva Novak won gold and silver medals in breaststroke. Eva and Ilona are the only sister team to win gold medals in Olympic swimming. Obviously these women also dominated at the European level and set a conspicuous number of world records. A few
more words about Eva Szekely: in her favourite 200m breaststroke event she was fourth in London in 1948, won the Olympic gold in Helsinki in 1952 and the silver medal four years later, in Melbourne. Eva set 10 world records and over 100 national records. Later she married the water polo star Deszo Gyarmati and coached their daughter, Andrea Gyarmati, to world (one) and European (21) records.

Actually, twenty years later Andrea won two medals at the 1972 Olympics: a silver in the 100m backstroke and a bronze in the 100m butterfly, setting a world record in this last event. She also won a medal at the Worlds (a bronze in the 200 backstroke in Belgrade 1973), and more medals - three gold and a silver - at the 1970 European Championships. The whole family is honoured at the International Swimming Hall of Fame (ISHOF).

Among the great Hungarian coaches of the time there was Istvan Hunyadi, the coach of Szoke and of the Novak sisters, who later became Olympic coach of Italy (1956, 1969 and 1965) and later again, in 1965, emigrated to the United States where he coached Sharon Wickham to the 200 metres backstroke gold medal at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico.

The seventies saw the beginning of a long winning streak of the swimmers – all males - coached by Tamas Szechy, the Hungarian national head Coach, nicknamed “the Pope”. Szechy had a predilection for the individual medley and for breaststroke (he invented the “rolling breaststroke”) and most of his swimmers excelled in these two specialties. Andras Hargitay and Zoltan Verrasztó were the first of the line.

Hargitay (born March 7, 1956) won the 400 IM Olympic bronze in 1972, at 16; he followed up with two consecutive World Championships gold, in 1973 and 1975: in Cali he also took gold in the 200m IM. His last World Championships medal was a bronze, at Berlin 1978 (in all he collected six titles between the World and European Championships). He was the world record holder between 1974 and 1976.

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Zoltán Verrasztó was born a week after Hargitay (March 15, 1956). He also excelled at the European level. His best achievements at the Olympics were a silver medal in the 200m backstroke and a bronze in the 400 IM, at Moscow in 1980.

In the Russian capital, the men’s 200m backstroke gold medal was conquered by Sandor Wladar, another of the Szechy pupils. Sandor won a silver in the 200m backstroke at the 1982 World Championships. The previous year he took gold in the 100m and 200m backstroke at the 1981 European Championships in Split, and the following year a silver in the 200m at the 1983 Europeans in Rome. His brother Zoltan was also a member of the national team.
Then Tamas Darnyi came along, one of the greatest swimmers ever. In almost every meet, Darnyi’s victories came in pairs - the 200m IM and the 400m IM. Three European Championships: Sofia (1985), Strasburg (1987), Bonn (1989) and two World Championships: Madrid (1986), Perth (1991). The Olympic gold medals came in Seoul (1988) and Barcelona (1992), where two of his races were world records and one was an Olympic record. Darnyi set six world records in the individual medley (and another in the 200m backstroke, short course). His world records lasted until late 1994. He was selected World Swimmer of the Year in 1991.

Along with Darnyi there was József Szabó, the best interpreter of the “rolling breaststroke”. At the European Championships 1987 he won gold in the 200m metres breaststroke and silver on the 400m medley. The next year he claimed the Olympic gold in his favourite event, the 200m breaststroke. In 1989 he took bronze at the European Championships, also in the 200m breaststroke.

The 1988 Olympic Games saw the explosion of possibly the greatest Hungarian female swimmer ever, Krisztina Egerszegi (born August 16, 1974). Laszlo Kiss, the other national coach at the time of Szechy (who, differently from his colleague, liked to coach women) began training Egerszegi in 1986: although she was versed in all four swimming strokes she had the ideal physique for backstroke and Kiss refined her natural ability and her technique.

Krisztina won the Olympic gold medal in her favourite 200m backstroke three consecutive times: at Seoul in 1988 (also a silver in the 100m backstroke) when she was just 14, at Barcelona in 1992 (she also took gold in 100m backstroke and the 400m individual medley) and at Atlanta 1996 (also a bronze in the 400 IM). She retired at only 22 years, already a legend. At the 1991 World Championships she won both the 100m and 200m backstroke. In these events, Krisztina also held the world records. Through her eight golden years (1988-1996) she obviously dominated the European scene. In Athens (1991), Sheffield (1993) and Vienna (1995), Krisztina won every race she entered, which included the 100m and 200m backstroke, 200m butterfly and 400m individual medley.

The next generation prominent female swimmer developed by Laszlo Kiss was the breaststroker and medleyist Agnes Kovacs (born on July 13, 1981). Agnes competed in her first Olympics in 1996 (the last Games for Egerszegi), winning bronze in her favourite 200m breaststroke. Then she won gold three
consecutive times: at the 1998 World Championships, at the 2000 Olympics, and at the 2001 World Championships (in Fukuoka she also won bronze on the 100 metres). At the European Championships she won her first medal at Vienna in 1995, a bronze in the 100 metres (plus a silver in the medley relay), when she was fourteen. Agnes won seven gold and silver in all three breaststroke events (50m, 100m, 200m) medals at three successive European Championships. After shadowing for a few years she re-emerged in 2006, with three bronze medals at the Budapest European Championships.

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Norbert Rozsa, a typical breaststroker, also a Szechy boy, was active through the nineties, reaching his peak in 1994 (gold over both the 100m and 200m, bronze in the 4x100 medley relay at the Worlds) and 1996 (Olympic gold in the 200 metres). Four years earlier, at the Barcelona Olympics, he had claimed silver in both the 100m and the 200 metres, while at the 1991 World Championships he took gold in the 100 metres and silver in the double distance. He earned more medals at European championships and his last World Championships medals were obtained in 1998 (two bronze, in the 200 metre and the 4x100m medley relay).

Contemporary to Rozsa was Attila Csene, bronze in Barcelona 1992 and gold in Atlanta 1996 in the 200 metres medley. With Rozsa and others he won the 4x100 metres medley relay World Championships bronze in 1998. On his honours list there are also some medals at the Europeans.

More or less of the same time was Károly Guttler, also a breaststroker. Coached by Laszlo Kiss, Guttler amazingly won the 100 metres silver medal both at the 1988 Olympics, in Seoul, and eight years later, in Atlanta. At the 1994 Worlds he claimed silver in the 100 metres and bronze in the 200m. Although he managed to win gold only at the 1993 European Championships, over the 100 metres, he is to be considered among the great Hungarian swimmers of all times. At the Europeans, he also won several silver medals and some bronze. For three years, between 1993 and 1996, he held the 100 metres world record.

Laszlo Cseh (born December 3, 1985) and Daniel Gyurta (born May 4, 1989), again a medley specialist and a breaststroker, are the best of the latest generation of top Hungarian swimmers on the men’s side. Cseh surged to notoriety for winning three silver medals -- in the 200m and 400 metres medley and the 200 metres butterfly - at the 2008 Olympic Games, in Beijing, behind the phenomenal Michael Phelps. Cseh’s father,
Laszlo Cseh, Sr., competed at the 1968 and 1972 Olympics in the 100m backstroke and swam in the finals of the 4x100m medley relay in 1972. In 2008, Cseh claimed gold in both the 200m and 400 metres medley at the European Championships (long course). He won bronze in the 200m medley at the 2007 World Championships. That same year, he won gold in the 200m medley, 400m medley and 200m butterfly at the European Championships (25m-pool). At the 2009 FINA World Championships, Cseh won a silver in the 200 metres and a bronze in the 400 metres medley. Cseh competed in his first Olympics in 2004, with a broken bone in his foot, managing a bronze in the 400 metres and a fourth place in the 200 metres medley.

Dániel Gyurta (born May 4, 1989) was only 15 when he won the silver medal in the 200 metres at the 2004 Olympics. He claimed gold also at European Championships (SC) and again at the 2009 World Championships in Rome. His best weapon is his irresistible finish.

Finally we find a freestyler (who also manages his way in the medleys), Gergő Kis (January 19, 1988). He won gold in the 800 metres at the 2008 European Championships, silver in the 400 IM at the 2008 SC Europeans in Rijeka and also silver in the 1500 metres at the SC Europeans in 2007. At the 2009 Worlds, in Rome, he was sixth over 400 metres.

On the female side, the latest star is Katinka Hosszu (May 3, 1989), three medals – a gold (400m IM) and two bronze (200m IM and 200m butterfly) at Rome in 2009. Katinka’s explosion was almost unpredictable. Previously she had walked on the podium only twice, both times at the European Championships: a bronze in 2004 and a silver in 2008.