



A prodigious life

Alfred Hajós (1878-1955)

first Hungarian Olympic champion in 1896

by Mihaly Kocsis

Having obtained his professorship in physical and sports education, Mr. Mihály Kocsis, of Hungarian nationality, naturally turned to teaching and in particular became director of his country's Central Sports College.

Upon his retirement he decided to devote himself totally to the service of the Olympic movement. "My experiences as a lecturer at the International Olympic Academy, the generous behaviour of the IOC leaders, and the effective Olympic activity of my friend and colleague Dr. Arpad Csanadi, IOC member for Hungary and Secretary General of the country's NOC, inspired me to take this decision", he told us.

Thus, to show young athletes the true nature of an Olympian, Mr. Kocsis set himself to retracing the exemplary story of the life of Alfred Hajós, Olympic champion in 1896.

We thank him for entrusting the "Olympic Review" with the publication of this study.



Olympic sport constitutes the most democratic mass movement in the world. The administrators of this moral movement are institutions whose members, past or present, contribute by their example to the progress of Olympism.

Can the great athletes of the past encourage young people of today by their exemplary careers? I believe the answer is yes. To support this theory I am presenting the life of a surprising Hungarian athlete. His name is Alfred Hajós, the first Olympic champion of his country in swimming, and also the only athlete in the history of the modern Olympic Games to hold a medal in the art competitions.

When the first Olympic Games of the modern era were convened Ferenc

Alfred Hajós, European swimming champion at Vienna (Austria) in 1895.

Kemeny¹, Baron de Coubertin's Hungarian colleague, published a proclamation concerning this event². At that time a young student at the Budapest Polytechnical University, Alfred Hajós was greatly impressed by this piece of news. He had practised swimming since the age of four and a half and was one of the capital's most well-known swimmers. Devoted to his training, he always walked to the university or the city's covered swimming pool, yet he managed to reconcile his studies with sport.

Finally he was selected to take part in the first Olympic Games of our era. When he asked the Dean of his Faculty for leave of absence, he was received very coldly and told, "Only frivolous

people practise sport instead of studying.» Nevertheless at Athens the young man won two Olympic titles³ by coming first in the 100 m. and 1200 m. freestyle in Zea Bay. The city's newspaper «Akropolis» nicknamed him «the Hungarian dolphin». On his return the champion proudly went to see his Dean, who firmly stated, "Your medals leave me indifferent, I am just impatient to hear how you reply in your next exam!" Two months later, brilliantly passing his examinations, Alfred was warmly congratulated by the intransigent professor⁴. Since then Alfred Hajos constantly devoted himself to sport and work for society.

In 1954, at the age of 76, Alfred Hajós himself recounted this anecdote from

¹ Ferenc Kemeny (1860-1944). School Director, founder member of the IOC, pioneer of Olympism in Hungary.

² The sports periodical "Sport-Vilag" launched an appeal in its edition of 24th February 1895 with a view to participation in the Olympic Games. The daily paper "Pester Lloyd" published Ferenc Kemeny's article under the title "Olympia Rediviva" in its 7th August 1895 edition. "Sport-Vilag" reprinted this article in Hungarian on 1st July 1896.

³ Hungarian honours list at the 1896 Olympic Games. — 100 m. freestyle (1 min. 22,2 secs.): Olympic champion Alfred Hajós; 1200 m. freestyle (16 mins. 22,2 secs.): Olympic champion Alfred Hajós; 600 m. flat (2 mins. 11,8 secs.): 2nd place Nandor Dani; 100 m. flat (12,6 secs.): 3rd place Alajos Szokolyi; triple jump (12,30 m.): 4th place Alajos Szokolyi; marathon (3 hrs. 6 mins. 35 secs.): 3rd place Gyula Kellner.

Hungarian athletes participating in the first Olympic Games. Alfred Hajós, in city clothes, is seated.



his youth at an investigation organised by a sports club of Budapest's largest industrial zone. This was sadly to be his last public appearance. He strongly emphasized that competition sport and physical education did not exclude, but on the contrary, encouraged creative intellectual activity. Through his own example Alfred Hajós bequeathed the most wonderful lesson to the young sportsmen of his country, who should endeavour to emulate him.

Now let us attempt the impossible, to paint a conspectus of this rich and intense life.

The first signs of his genius

In 1882 his father entrusted the child of four and a half to a swimming master. A few weeks later Alfred was swimming better than his friends and also better than his father.

At school he by chance met a modern gymnastics instructor aiming to encourage open-air sports⁵. In spite of his prowess in the water Alfred remained a thin and rather weak boy. For example, in a gym lesson he was not able to climb the pole and was left out of the exercise, and therefore took up the practice of physical exercises to grow stronger. He applied himself so well that he became the teacher's favourite pupil.

⁴ Lajos Ilosvay (1851-1936). — Chemistry professor, Dean of the Budapest Polytechnical University. First Professor-President of the Polytechnical University's Athletic and Football Club (MAFC). Later appointed Secretary of State for the Ministry of Culture. Member of Hungarian Academy of Sciences, great scholar of Hungarian chemistry.

⁵ Dr. Jozsef Otto (1861-1921). — Gymnastic professor at the school in Budapest's 5th district. Founder of the Budapest Gymnastic Club (BTC). Board member of the first Hungarian Olympic Committee. Eminent physical education specialist.

Similarly, geometry and drawing were not his favourite subjects. His sports master reproached him and asked him to take them more seriously. Alfred took his advice and of course soon progressed, to such an extent that his geometry teacher one day even believed that he had asked a good draughtsman to do his homework for him and, telling Alfred off, refused to correct the exercise. He then realised his mistake and predicted, "One day you'll become an excellent architect!"

His career as a swimmer

Alfred Hajós's first competition appearances were at the origin of Hungarian swimming. Right from the Hungarian Swimming Association's first international meeting in 1895, his performances attracted attention. In Vienna the same year he came first twice, second once and third once. He won the 100 m. freestyle at the first national championship at Siofok and thus took the first title of swimming champion of Hungary, and in Vienna took the titles of European champion in 1895 of the 100 m. freestyle and Austrian champion of the 100 m.

At the Athens Olympic Games in 1896 he won the 100 m. freestyle in 1'22"2 on 11th April, and the 1200 m. freestyle in 18'22"2. In the same year he also took part in the 100 yards at Siofok and the 100 m. at the European championships in Vienna, coming first. However he only came second in the Hungarian championships, and therefore ended his career as a swimmer to take more interest in other sports.

The all-round athlete

As we have already mentioned Alfred Hajós trained at school to become an all-round athlete on the advice of a far-



The first Hungarian football team (BTC) on 31st October 1897, on the occasion of its match with the Viennese team, the "Vienna Cricketer and Football Club", Alfred Hajós fourth from the left, holding his beret.

sighted gymnastics teacher and in a modern scholastic atmosphere.

This school also produced two other Olympic champions, Zoltan Halmay (two gold medals at St. Louis in 1904) and Richard Weisz (gold medal in wrestling at London in 1908).

Hajós was junior champion of Hungary in the 100 m. flat and national champion in the 400 m. hurdles and discus throwing in 1898. He was also third in the pentathlon and member of the 4 x 100 m team.

"I was fortunate enough to find myself among the pioneers of Hungarian football; I was an active footballer for five years, that is, during the period when this sport was becoming popular in Hungary", wrote Alfred Hajós.

Hajós played as a forward in the first international meeting at Budapest between the Vienna Cricketer and Football Club and the BTC (Budapest Gymnastic Club). With the BTC he won the national title in 1901, 1902 and 1903. In addition he wore the national team's colours

against the English and the Austrians.

The sports leader

At the age of 24 Alfred Hajós put an end to his career as an active athlete, but maintained several links with the sports life of his country. In the BTC he was in succession Director of the Football Section, Vice-President and then Joint President. In the Hungarian Football Federation, after occupying important administrative positions, he became Vice-President, and President of the Selection Committee in 1920.

The journalist

He also went down in the history of the Hungarian sports press; from 1902 to 1904 he was editor, and then editor-in-chief of "Sport-Világ" (the world of sport).

At the same time he wrote the sports column of the capital's important daily paper "Pesti Napló". His activity as a

publicist was considerable and his propaganda articles in favour of sport innumerable.

The architect

At the age of 21 Alfred Hajós received his degree in architecture from the Budapest Polytechnical University.

In 50 years of work he created several sports constructions—the Ujpest stadium in Budapest IV, the Budapest Millenium velodrome, the Ujszeged, Miskolc, Pápa and Kaposvár stadia, the Csaszarfürdő aquatic stadium in Budapest, the Miskolc, Győr, Szeged, Balassagyarmat, Monor and Kisvárdá swimming pools, the Margaret Island aquatic stadium, and the Ujpest, Megyeriút, Szabadság Mount and Pünkösdfürdő beaches.

He also put his talents to use abroad; we owe him in particular the aquatic stadia of Bartfa in Czechoslovakia and Lodz in Poland. And let us not forget the many schools, hotels (the Arany Bika Hotel in Debrecen, well-known within the country), banks, factories, churches, theatres, and cinemas completely conceived, designed and built by him. Let us note his intense activity for the creation of a national stadium. In 1913 he presented a vast project of a sports complex for Budapest composed of a main stadium able to hold 4000 spectators, a 50 m. competition pool, a physical education college, a covered pool and a sports palace.

In 1924 he presented the study of a stadium, drawn up in collaboration with Dezső Lauber, an equally famous athlete, at the art competition of the Paris Olympic Games. The first architecture prize was not awarded, but with the silver medal he beat the 13 other participants. Thus 28 years after his swimming gold medal, Alfred Hajós renewed his contact with Olympic champions.



The Arany Bika Hotel (Golden Bull) at Debrecen. Architect: Alfred Hajós.



The swimming stadium at Margaret Island.



Stadium entrance from the prizewinning study at the Paris Olympic Games (1924).

In 1929 he won the Hungarian Architects' and Engineers' Association Grand Prix with a swimming pool study.

In 1930 he created his chef d'œuvre, the Margaret Island aquatic stadium. The technical solutions—avant garde at the time—which he proposed received the praise of specialist Hungarian, Czechoslovakian, American, German, Italian, English, Austrian, Swedish, Spanish and Japanese periodicals. In that year the Hungarian Architects' Federation awarded him the title of Master for his "extraordinary creations".

After the Second World War the construction of a national stadium was reconsidered, and this time Alfred Hajós's dream came true at the very spot he had proposed forty years earlier. He participated as an adviser in the study and creation of the Budapest Popular Stadium.

In 1949 he received the gold diploma from the Budapest Polytechnical University in recognition of his career as an architect. At the age of 75 the International Olympic Committee awarded him the Olympic Diploma of Merit and he received the Hungarian gold medal for sports merits.

A short extract from his memoirs: "I owe both my sporting and professional success to my inflexible desire to transform my practical experiences into a value". At the request of his friends he wrote a brief autobiography⁶ in which he appeared concise and modest, yet thrilled by social activity.

Memories of his career and success are deeply rooted in the whole country. His old apartment has been made into a "Hajós commemoration hall".



Alfred Hajós working at his desk.

A "Hajós Promenade" on Margaret Island calls to mind the constructor of the aquatic stadium, where swimming contests dedicated to Hajós are held periodically. His memory should be implanted in the heart of every young athlete.

Conclusion

I think that every nation affiliated to the Olympic movement has witnessed similar illustrious lives, which should be made known so that their example may contribute to the education of the sporting youth of the world.

A very important and precious fundamental state of mind is thus accumulated in the history of modern sport. Although it constantly forms the image of the sports movement, it only takes the shape of powerful underground activity, "tectonic" so to say. It would perhaps be useful to discover the laws of this action, and bring out more clearly its hidden values. The IOC's action in this field (perhaps by creating a modern "Pantheon") could thus encourage the young sportsmen of the world.

M.K.

⁶ "This is how I became an Olympic champion" (Igy lettem olimpiai bajnok by Alfred Hajós; publishers: Sport-lap és könyvkiadó, Budapest 1956, 96 p., 24 illustrations.