

Interesting Facts from the History of Hungarian Women's Competition Rowing. The Hungarian Rowing Association is 125 Years Old

Érdekességek a magyar női verseny történetéből. A Magyar Evező Szövetség 125 éves

Anna Alliquander,¹ Tímea Tibori²

¹Semmelweis University Institute of Public Health

²Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Social Research Centre, Institute of Sociology

alliquander.anna@med.semmelweis-univ.hu, ttibori@t-online.hu

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Abstract

The aim of our study is to reveal the factors hindering the spread of women's rowing in the history of the 125-year-old Hungarian Rowing Association and to show women's opportunities for engagement at the beginning and its progress. We will present the greatest successes and their background, as well as the architects of success. We used the volumes of the Hungarian Rowing Association's sports history collection in our study. In addition, we have gained a lot of knowledge from the "eyewitnesses", the great champions of the past seventy years, with whom we had the opportunity to carry out structured deep interviews. Furthermore, with the help of the "Arcanum Digital Science Collection", we have been able to research the writings of the print resources of Hungary's past dealing with women's rowing and, at the same time, "check" any obscure details.

Keywords: women's rowing, rowing history, women's equality

Kulcsszavak: női evezés, evezés története, női egyenlőség

Introduction

One hundred and twenty-five years ago, on 12 March 1893, at 11 am, the National Association of Hungarian Rowing Clubs gathered for their first general assembly. Immediately after its formation, awareness of the association also developed abroad, as indicated by the fact that the secretary of the International Rowing Association (FISA, from the French "Fédération Internationale des Sociétés d'Aviron"), Giovanni Giorguli, wrote a letter asking the Hungarians to join FISA. That happened in 1913, following two long decades of contemplation (Keresztes 1943). These 125 years have meant a time of triumphs, failures, celebrations and losses, but also, in the most difficult historical times, outstanding sporting achievements, among them the Hungarian rowing successes, ensured for the nation confidence and recognition throughout the world. The purpose of our study is to present the milestones and interesting features of the period of these six generations from the rowing women's point of view. In what form could they join the rowing community and what difficulties hindered their competition opportunities? What were the greatest successes and who were the "architects of success"?

Method

For our present study, since they also served as useful and interesting examples in our previous experimental research (Alliquander 2011, 2013, 2014 and 2017), we used the volumes of the Gusztáv Götz¹ legacy from the sports history collection of the Hungarian Rowing Association. Of the volumes available (nearly sixty in all), four are specifically dedicated to women's rowing, but almost all volumes contain references to female athletes, whether it concerns replenishment, winter training, competitive tactics, or even sports nutrition. In addition, we have gained a lot of knowledge from the "eyewitnesses", the great champions of the past seventy years, with whom we had the opportunity to carry out structured deep interviews. Additionally, with the help of the "Arcanum Digital Science Collection", we have been able to research the writings of the print resources of Hungary's past dealing with women's rowing and, at the same time, to "check" any obscure details.

The Spread of Rowing Sport in Hungary

According to research from English sources, around the year 1760 princes, earls, barons, lords and nobles, who lived in the upper reaches of the Thames, hired barks to have themselves transported to London for their parliamentary sessions or perhaps in order to take care of other business. At that time, the number of rowers in the bark signified rank. The king's bark with ten rowers was driven by "the king's watermen" and this old tradition can still be found in England" (Götz 1943). Rowing sport spread rapidly: first in English-speaking countries (such as the United States, Canada and Australia) and then throughout Europe (Germany, the Netherlands, France and Italy). Count István Széchenyi became acquainted with rowing as sport on his journey to England in 1823 and became so fond of it that, in 1826, he ordered a boat from England and embarked on serious rowing tours with it. Along the lines of the English rowing clubs, in 1841 Széchenyi founded the first Boat Association, also known as the "Csolnakda", and the following year he organized the first Hungarian rowing competition with the boats he owned. Thus, we can call him the founder of Hungarian rowing. But the struggle for independence took away people's energy and the period of dictatorship following the defeat of Hungary's 1848-49 War of Independence made any civil initiative impossible. At the beginning of the 1860s, however, rowing clubs began to evolve: after the capital, Bratislava (to use its present name), Győr, Szeged, Temesvár and Arad were the most prominent rowing bases. In 1861 the Budapest Boat Association was founded in memory of Széchenyi, who had died a year earlier (Domonkos 2004: 9). Danube rowers became an important factor in the rise of the middle class. Thus from the exclusive clubs of the aristocrats, rowing was slowly transformed into a middle-class sport (Siklóssy 1928).

Engaging Women in Rowing: Boat Race for the Ladies' Award

Organized several times a year, the Pest regattas have always been a great sight and attracted many spectators to both banks of the Danube (Takács 2009). Since social customs "expected" a ladies to be shy, weak and dependent on others, it was unthinkable for women to compete in a regatta. Therefore, initially their intended role at the social and sports events was that of a spectator (Bodnár 2003). This is evidenced in the paper "Hungarian women and physical culture", written by Dr. Ferenc Mező, who won a gold medal in the art contest of the Amsterdam Olympics in 1928, and published in the magazine *Uj Idők* (1933: 779), which depicted amazons, persistent ladies and duchesses with strong nervous systems and physiques, but explained that "ladies also have another role in Hungarian sports. Led by their noble hearts, they are present everywhere where support and help is needed. (...) In their colourful clothes, they glitter at almost every

¹ Gusztáv Götz (1900-1970) was a European rowing champion, then master coach, international referee and vice president of the Hungarian Rowing Federation. He collected the international and domestic rowing literature with amazing care, bound together the results of national and international competitions for each year, and included articles published in Hungarian, German, English, French, Russian, as well as Italian daily newspapers and sports magazines. He dedicated separate "volumes" to the history of women's rowing, as well as to the presentation of the women's European championships.

race, their sunny smile provides the exhausted men with strength... They create awards to boost the competitive edge. At the 1863 Boat Race of the Budapest Boat Association, rowers competed for the Ladies' Award, an excellent silver trophy. (...) They also participate in sports festivals and enhance the glory of the festivities this way. No flag can be inaugurated without them. (...) But men are also expressing their gratitude! During flag inauguration, our ladies are invited to become 'flag mothers' and, in the rowing society, it is an old tradition to give female names (Juliette, Desdémona, Tünde, Karolina) to boats, most of the time." And his final conclusion: "All this is beautiful. Still, an acknowledgement of truth must be given to the Transylvanian poet László Tokaji when he sings: A silver medal is nice and a golden one is even more so, but, believe me, the most beautiful medal you can win is a lady's heart." Likewise, the racers of the coxless pair at the Whit Sunday Regatta in 1874 could compete for the "Ladies Award". The "Ladies' Award for this year consisted of an egg cooking device and a set of silver cutlery. A tasteful item suitable for sportsmen", reported the *Hunting and Competition* magazine (1874: 151). The growing number of rowing races and the increasing number of races made it necessary to create a regatta regulation, to unify the rules and to establish the national rowing association. However, the regatta committee formed in 1866 to organize the tournaments quietly disappeared, and the meeting convened in 1883 for the creation of the National Rowing and Sailor Cooperative also failed. A decade later, it was thanks to the undying merit of Kálmán Fülepp, director of the Hungarian National Boat Association, and Tivadar Miháلكovics, chairman of the Boat Association of Győr (Győri Csónakázó Egylet) that the Hungarian National Association of Hungarian Rowing Clubs was established. It held its first general assembly involving eleven clubs in 1893 (Keresztes 1943).

The First Women's Rowing Regatta, the First Ladies' Rowing Club

The work started, the popularity of the sport gradually grew, and as early as in 1894, the event of female coxed quad was included in the Szeged Regatta, where the trial of strength between the Temesvár and Torontál units promised to be exciting, at least according to *Herkules*, the fortnightly sports magazine (1894: 103). From the perspective of 125 years, we know that, above all, this was a "publicity stunt" to attract attention, and it was not that the rowing ladies who recognized the social problem inherent in the patriarchal relations had begun to fight for gender balance (Dunning 2002). In Hungary, women could not practise rowing in clubs or compete until as late as the early 1930s. At that time, the Jánosházy Rowing School was founded. The training and "exercises" were managed by János Jánosházy, an architect and a member of the Rowing Club of the University of Technology. Soon the idea of forming a club was born and in 1935 the constituent assembly of "Juventus First Hungarian Ladies' Rowing Club" was held in Hungary, as we know from the narrative of Dr. Klára Czögler Zarándy Aladárné, its former founder and vice president, who deceased three years ago at the age of 104 (!) (Alliquander 2011). Typically, neither the volume celebrating the 50 years of the Hungarian Rowing Association, nor the 1935 *Hungarian Sports Almanac* of the Hungarian National Physical Education Council mentioned the constituent assembly of Juventus Ladies' Rowing Club, but the latter, at least, reported about the major rowing competitions in 1935, where, at the Budapest International Regatta, the team of the Jánosházy Rowing School (which became Juventus) won in the women's eight (Zuber, 1936: 82). The Juventus ladies, who often competed against themselves (running several teams), were able to recruit other opponents after the 1940s. At that time, women's rowing began in Szeged, Szentes and Szolnok, too. The first women's competition was announced in 1943, organized by the Hungarian Rowing Association. In 1945, Juventus merged with the Public Servants' Sports Association and competed as KaSE Juventus First Hungarian Ladies' Rowing Club in 1946, in 1947 against the lady rowers of Postás SE, Hitelbank, Police Athletics Club, Ferencváros TC, Budapest Rowing Club, Győri Egyetértés and the Marosvásárhelyi EK. However, in 1948-49 the emerging new political system labelled rowing as an "aristocratic sport", banned the time-honoured clubs with a long history (MAC, Pannonia, Hitelbank, Sirály, Neptun, Hungária, National Boat Association) and made the functioning of others impossible by

administrative means, merged and nationalized them (Alliquander 2011). Ilona Somkúti, alias "Cica néni" (1919-2002), as a former Juventus lady, was one of the main organizers of the revival of women's rowing after World War 2. She collected the remaining boats and carried out training on training rafts. On the other hand, the communist sports leadership realized that the profitability of competition sports, including the profitability of women's competition sports, could be used in order to legitimize the system. Thus, it supported the associations approved by them (Bakonyi 2007: 42).

Hungarian Female Rowers at International Competitions

1954 saw the first women's European Championships (ECs). In 1974, women were allowed to compete at the World Championships (WC) for the first time and the Montreal Olympics (1976) was the first where women rowers could participate. This "delay" was due to several reasons. On the one hand, FISA members, delegated sports physicians from different national associations, judged the effect of rowing on female health in different ways. The traditions of sports history were also different in each country. Italy and Switzerland simply did not want to hear about women's competition rowing. FISA Congress was also rather slow in adopting women's international competition rules, where the minimum weight of the coxswain and the length of the race was decided, which, until 1985, was 1,000 metres as opposed to the 2,000 metres for men. So it is no wonder that it was difficult to reach a consensus regarding the date of the first women's EC and later on that of the WC. It was also hard to convince the International Olympic Committee of the necessity of including women's rowing in the Olympic programme, but Thomas Keller, the highly respected Swiss FISA President, who led the International Rowing Association from 1958 until his death in 1989, established a FISA Women's Committee, with the beautiful, slim, four times European champion, multilingual, Hungarian Kornélia Pap among its members.² Although it was revealed during the interviews that the Hungarian sports management did not approve of her committee membership and withdrew her before the expiry of her term, she believes she was able to contribute to the fact that the women's committee made a good impression on the members of the IOC, finally achieving women's participation in 1976.

The list of the "biggest" women's rowing successes should start with the already mentioned Kornélia Méray Jenőné Pap, who won the Open Europe Championship in coxless pair in four consecutive years: in 1958 in Poznan, 1959 in Macon, 1960 in London and 1961 in Prague (and won the third place twice: in 1955 in Snagov and 1956 in Bled)! In 1965, Hungary's women's quadruple (Mária Pekanovits, Zsuzsa Szappanos, Ágnes Salamon, Mária Fekete, coxswain Margit Komornik) won the EC gold medal. In the 1960s, Hungary's women's coxless pairs "collected" two bronze medals, the fours 3 silver and 2 bronze medals, the double scull three bronze medals, the quad scull 4 bronze medals and the eights 2 bronze medals. Then, at the 1975 World Championship, Mariann Ambrus got a silver medal, and bronze medals in 1977 and 1978. Katalin Sarlós won the bronze medal at the 1989 World Championship (Kisfaludi 2010). Paradoxically, the only adult female world champion of rowing, Vanda Kolláth, made a triumph among men, since she was the coxswain of the unit of Béla Simon and Adrián Juhász, who won the World Championship in 2017. As the change in the rule (whereby women could steer in men's units) was introduced last year, Vanda is the first and only female world champion in a male event in the history of rowing sport.

Contemporary Coverage and Telephone Reports about the Gold Medal Winners of the European Championship

² During her athletic career, Kornélia Méray Jenőné Pap won the Open Europe Championship in four consecutive years: in 1958 in Poznan, in 1959 in Macon, in 1960 in London and in 1961 in Prague. She won the third place in 1955 in Snagov and in 1956 in Bled. After her sports career, Kornélia Pap worked for the Hungarian sports magazine *Nemzeti Sport* for 26 years as a sports journalist. Her autobiographical book about her sports career, *Vizek szabadja lettem* (I Became Free on the Water") has so far been published twice. Ever since she stopped competing, she has been active (rowing, kayaking, skating, cycling and skiing). Her way of life could serve as an example for the upcoming generations.

24 August 1958, Poznan, Poland. Kornélia Méray Jenőné Pap's First Gold Medal

"Our women rowers secretly kept mentioning that they would like to hear the Hungarian anthem once again at the European Rowing Championship this year (for the first time since 1947). In hope, they even brought along a record with the anthem... And, after 11 years, the Hungarian anthem was played once again at the female rowing EC. Our rowers really wanted it, and this great will has brought its fruit. This victory was achieved by Mrs Jenőné Papp (sic!)³ of almost girlish stature against her much stronger and more experienced opponents. Mrs Jenőné Papp (Kornélia Méray) has been riding the EC's waters since 1955. She finished third in Snagov, Bled and Duisburg, but now has achieved the brightest success ever." (Szabó 1958a) "A telephone report from our delegated staff member. – Poznan, 25 August. (...) They set off. She was only watching the dreaded rower on her left, Vogt of Germany. It was easy, she only had to glance a little to the left. Vogt's wide back was about 8 metres away from her. Up to 500 metres, she did not even dare to look up. Then she pulled on the oar with full strength twenty times and glanced back to the right. There were four of them there, so nobody was rowing in front of her. These moments flashed through her mind like lightning, but now she couldn't pay attention to anything else anymore. She reached the sprint. She concentrated all her willpower and skills into the remaining oar strokes, when a voice distracted her from this state of mind. Sika, her Austrian opponent, spoke from her own boat: 'Stop, you've already won.' This scene, however, occurred about twenty metres after the finish line. The recording ends here. 'I still cannot believe this,' Mrs Papp said raising her head. (...)" (Szabó 1958b)

16 August 1959, Macon, France. Pap Jenőné Méray Kornélia's Second Gold Medal

"The start in the finals was successful, and Sika of Austria had a leading position. However, at 250 metres the Hungarian, Austrian and Soviet competitors were already in a great struggle for the leadership. Mrs Pap carried her ship forward in an almost ethereal way, while the other two fought for the leading positions in a struggle with each other and with the wavy water. Mrs Pap moved away from them, leading the field, which in the meantime had split into three. Kornélia Pap led by more than 1½ boat lengths. Muchina and Sika fought for second place, while Luderus and Camu fought for the third. Kornélia Pap defended her title of European Champion obtained in 1958. Muchina came second, Sika third, Luderus fourth and Camu fifth."⁴

14 August 1960, London, England. Pap Jenőné Méray Kornélia's Third Gold Medal

"Mrs Pap is known by many from the previous European Championships. The first question is whether she can defend the title again this time, at her third European Championship. (...) At 500 metres, the competition was close with the leadership of the Soviet female competitor, and with the Hungarian, the English and the Austrian in that order, up to 800 metres, only the English fell back to the fourth place, while Mrs Pap followed Rakitskaia closely, on 900 metres, together and then ahead of her with strong strikes. 50 metres before the finish, Kornélia Pap was sure to win. Everyone was aware of Mrs Pap's thorough work and diligence; she deserved the unmatched performance of the third European Championship. Not just herself, the audience was also moved to tears when the Hungarian flag was raised to the sounds of the nation's anthem. Ernő Bartók, a master trainer who, with the best of his knowledge, helped Kori to win this victory, was happy to hug his pupil at the celebration of the champions, which, at the same time, was a moment of recognition for his work."⁵

³ Kornélia Pap is the right way she herself writes it, it is typical of the matter that in many cases it is written with double "p-s" even "Népsport" [People's Sports magazine] would only write it correct after her fourth gold medal.

⁴ From the "volume" of Götz Gusztáv entitled *Női evezés, E.B. 10 éve* (Women's Rowing, Ten Years of the European Championship).

⁵ From the "volume" of Götz Gusztáv entitled *Női evezés, E.B. 10 éve* (Women's Rowing, Ten Years of the European Championship).

20 August 1961, Prague, Czechoslovakia. Kornélia Méray Jenőné Pap's Fourth Gold Medal

"A telephone report from our delegated staff member. – Prague, 20 August. For the fourth time, success in Prague! For the fourth time, Jenőné Pap proved that there is no better competitor on the continent in female single scull. After Poznan, Macon and London, on Sunday afternoon, the Hungarian anthem was played in Prague as well. To be honest, it was hard to believe in success. A weaker boat, three weeks of illness during the most precious time of preparation, then in Prague, on the spot, another illness... And... she made it! (...) Jäger started on the first track, Postlová on the second, Mrs Pap on the third, Rakickaja on the fourth, Chuter on the fifth. At 500 metres, the Czechoslovak woman seemed to lead. Then there was a dramatic struggle, up to 600 metres, a killer, head-to-head battle was fought between her and Mrs Pap. In the long rush, our champion lady got rid of her Czechoslovak competitor stroke by stroke. Just before the goal, Mrs Pap was at her best strength: she ran first with a one and a half boat length's advantage." (Szabó 1961)

22 August 1965, Duisburg, Germany. Mária Fekete, Zsuzsa Szappanos, Ágnes Salamon, Mária Pekanovits, Coxswain: Margit Komornik; Coxed Quad

On 22 August 1965, at 4:01 pm, the female runner-up of the coxed quads started at the EC. As the referee of the competition, Gusztáv Götz had the opportunity to accompany the final. What follows are some lines from his report. "The Germans had the best start, but after 200 metres the Soviet team took the lead and the race was close up to 500 metres and the water gap could not be established. Up to 900 m, our women's team was third behind the leading Soviet and Czechoslovak team and it seemed almost unbelievable that the series of Soviet victories could be stopped. (...) The unprecedented final struggle of the last 100 metres and the Hungarian team suddenly accelerating from third position not only warmed our heart but also caused a huge ovation on the part of the spectators. We were really looking forward to the finish photo being developed and we were moved by the news of victory, which for us, Hungarians, meant the first team gold medal after the individual victories of Hungarian women."⁶

ICO Agenda 2020

Nowadays, Olympic Agenda 2020, the reform programme of the ICO is having a big impact on rowing since, due to the principles of "gender equality", a new female event will be added to the Olympic programme (women's four) at the expense of men's lightweight four. The aim is to enable men and women to compete in the same number and in the same events at the Olympics. This principle is followed by FISA at the WC, as well as the EC, so from this year onwards, the same number of medals will be distributed between male and female rowers. The national federations of many countries apparently disagree with this, especially the rowing experts of the countries with excellent lightweight fours excluded from the Olympic programme, but in the long run it helps to promote the development of women's rowing and enhances the professional prestige and recognition of professionals working with women – whether they themselves are women or men.

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⁶ From the "volume" of Götz Gusztáv entitled *Női evezés, E.B. 10 éve* (Women's Rowing, Ten Years of the European Championship).

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