In passing, I should like to pay this tribute to Hungary for having, right from the start, shown herself to be particularly understanding of the spirit of Olympism and for having remained one of its most loyal adherents right up to the present day.

Pierre de Coubertin

The beginnings of the Olympic Movement in Hungary go back further than the Games in Athens: Ferenc Kemeny, a great pacifist and member of the International Peace Bureau, was one of Pierre de Coubertin’s first kindred spirits, with whom he struck up a friendship in the 1880’s. He took an active part in the Congress for the re-establishment of the Games held in Paris in 1894 and was one of the founder members of the IOC. A teacher at the modern school in Budapest, Kemeny, who wrote a number of textbooks and was a contributor to the Hungarian Pedagogical Encyclopaedia, founded in 1895 the Hungarian Preparation Committee for the Olympic Games, ancestor of the NOC which is celebrating its centenary this year. When, in 1907, he handed over his important work at the head of the Hungarian sports organization to Count Géza Andrássy in order to devote himself to his educational research, Hungarian sport had already won some very fine victories.

In Athens, the Magyar athletes cut a fine figure, proving that sport in Hungary had already won its spurs. The swimmer Alfred Hajós, who had obtained with the greatest difficulty a dispensation from his studies to attend the Games, won, with the 100m and 1200m freestyle, the first two gold medals in Hungarian Olympic history. This was no mean feat in a sport whose competitions took place in the chilly waters of the Bay of Zea, some 10 - 12°C. On his return, Hajós presented himself proudly to the Dean of the Polytechnical University, who, far from congratulating him, had this to say: Your medals are of no interest to me, but I am eager to hear your replies in your next examination. He passed it with flying colours, becoming in later life the well-known architect to whom Budapest owes its grand stadium.

In Athens, the Hungarians also distinguished themselves in athletics with Nándor Dáni, who won silver
Olympic Tradition

in the 800m flat race and Alajos Szokolyi who won bronze in the 100m and a fourth place in the triple jump. At the finish of the first marathon in history, another Hungarian, Gyula Kellner, came in third. The results in Paris were not so flattering, it must be said, with a single gold medal won by discus thrower Rudolf Bauer. In Saint Louis in 1904, the delegation led by Kemeny, who was officially representing Pierre de Coubertin, counted only four competitors, among them Zoltán Halmay, who repeated Hajós’ exploit by winning gold in the 50 and 100 yards. His success was all the more deserved as he had to swim the 50 yards twice, the judges being unable to decide who was first and who second. The Games in 1908 made history with the introduction of the opening and closing ceremonies. This time, the Hungarian delegation was sixty-strong and embarked on its series of successes in fencing. The sabre team won hands down under the leadership of Jenő Fuchs, who was to lead them to victory again in Stockholm. In fact, over the period from 1908 to 1960, Hungarian fencers won nine out of eleven team titles and ten out of eleven individual ones. One can indeed speak of dynasties of fencers. And let us not forget the other Hungarian gold medal won in London, that of heavy weight Greco-Roman wrestler Richard Weisz who, after a fight lasting over an hour, scored a victory as surprising as that of Sandor Prokopp in shooting four years later in Stockholm, where the Hungarian gymnasts attracted attention for the first time by taking the second place in the free exercises on apparatus.

As one of the countries defeated in the first World War, Hungary was not allowed to send a delegation to the Antwerp Games in 1920. But in Paris in 1924, we find the Hungarian fencers and marksmen present once more. More memorable are the results of 1928, when the sabre team took the gold from the Italians with, in addition, a fine result in the individual event: Odón Terstyanszky won gold by defeating his compatriot Attila Petschauer. Among the unexpected victories, we find that of lightweight Greco-Roman wrestler Lajos Kerseztes and flyweight boxer Antal Kocsis. Finally, in the artistic sphere, the first time the Hungarian colours flew at these Games in Amsterdam was to mark the gold medal won by distinguished sports historian Ferenc Mező for his poem “The history of the Olympic Games”.

The high spot of Hungarian Olympic history between the wars was undoubtedly the Games in Los Angeles in 1932. There, the Hungar-
of travel. The sabre team, led by Piller György, equalled their previous successes. And, for the first time, the waterpolo team, using learned Swedish methods of training, emerged from the tournament in first place. Gymnast István Pelle won two gold medals on the apparatus and boxer István Énekes came fifth.

The sporting feats performed in Berlin betoken a total mastery. The waterpolo team and Endre Kabos and his fellow-sabre athletes conserved their first place, but these victories, hardly a surprise, caused little stir in the anxious Hungary of 1936. The divine surprise was Ilona Elek. The newspapers snatched up her portrait and the country had eyes only for this girl who, with the tip of her foil, had dislodged the first Hungarian gold medal to be won by a woman. Many years later, in 1952, she was to become one of her country’s oldest Olympic medallists. Three further Hungarian victories marked the Berlin Games: Csak-Csik-Lörincz, one woman and two men whose names were on everyone’s lips for months afterwards; high-jumper Ibolya Csak, Ferenc Csik, the swimmer who won the 100m freestyle ahead of the great Japanese favourites, and the Greco-Roman wrestler Márton Lőrincz. All three returned to Budapest with a gold medal and the admiration of the crowds, as their achievements came at a difficult moment. Two other wrestlers also won gold: Károly Kárpáti and Ödön Zombori in freestyle, but, finally, with ten gold medals, the public was sated and only the tremendous victory of boxer Imre Harangi after a bloody and epic struggle was able to kindle national fervour.

**OLYMPISM, AN AFFAIR OF STATE**

The first editions of the modern Olympic Games thus saw Hungarian sport go from strength to strength, thanks to exceptional stars whose feats made its reputation. After the war, sport and physical education were taken in hand by the state and, in the aftermath of the war, the Hungarian Scientific Society for Physical Education was formed. Physical training and sports competition became a daily requirement. Soon, the entire country was mobilized, dragooned into sports clubs and associations and competitions at all levels. Results at international level were not slow in coming.

In April 1945, the first publication reflecting the democratization of sport appeared under the title “The People’s Sport”. The difficulties grew but the love of sport remained. Already, the future Olympic champions of 1948, wrestler Gyula Bóbis, hammer-thrower Imre Németh, gymnast Ferenc Pataki and marksman Károly Takacs were top in their specialities. The fencers too were present in London to further boost the people’s pride. Aladár Gerevich, a veteran of 1932, led a delegation of sabre fencers which was to top the rankings—Rudolf Kárpáti and Pál Kovács too were there on each occasion—until the Games in Rome in 1960. Thereafter, younger men took their place on the podium. Foil-fencer Ilona Elek was there too, and successfully defended her 1936 gold.

In women’s track and field, long jumper Olga Gyarmati became Olympic champion like her pre-war compatriot, the great high-jumper Ibolya Csak. Back in 1945, László Papp, a twenty-one-year old middle-weight many consider to have been the greatest amateur boxer of all time, had hit the headlines when his fight with the Austrian Nessler had marked the two countries’ history. In London, he embarked on a career which was to bring him three consecutive Olympic titles. A record which proves yet again that Hungarian champions are no nine-day wonders. The proud waterpolo team had, however, to admit defeat before the Italians, to whom they lost again in Rome, though not out of politeness. Tremendous efforts were made, sports halls and stadiums were built and rebuilt, and the results lived up to the people’s hopes, especially in team sports with the victory of the Hungarian football team at the Games in Helsinki, equalled only by the great Hungarian come-back in waterpolo and the triumphant arrival of the pentathletes. They were to conserve their title up to the Games in 1972. Two women made their mark in gymnastics, not for the last time by any means: the great Ágnes Keleti in the floor exercises, who was eventually to retire with six medals, four of them gold, making her one of the most bemuddled Olympic athletes ever, and Margit Korondi at the bars, who was to win six medals overall and the greatest ever number of bronze medals for Hungary. In the pool, too, the women’s turn had come: a whole team of swimmers took gold after gold: Katalin Szöke in the 100m, Valeria Gyenge in the 400m freestyle, Eva Székely in the 200m freestyle,
breaststroke and a young quartet in the 4 x 100m relay. This is hardly surprising, as Budapest is swimming-pool city. The results of left-handed marksman Karoly Takacs, who left his disciple Szilard Kuns the silver, and of boxers Miklos Szilvasy and Imre Hodos, no surprises these, brought the tally of gold medals won in Helsinki to sixteen, an unprecedented success which, however, seemed to toll the knell of a more open policy.

In 1956, the Melbourne Games opened on the Hungarian drama. As a sign of solidarity, some countries stayed away, and blood flowed in the Melbourne pool during the waterpolo match which pitted, by pure chance, the team of the Soviet Union against that of Hungary. The match was a ruthless one but did not prevent the gold medal from remaining in Hungarian hands. Gymnastics and fencing did not disappoint the counters of medals, but the surprise came from the canoe-kayak, with the victory of two young lads in the wake of the efforts to democratize sports and make them accessible at low cost. Laszlo Fabian and Janos Uranyi were the first of a fine lineage which, with Deme and Ratkai in Munich and, in Montreal, this time with Bakó and Szabó, was to prove by its successes that it had made good use of the hours of training in the test pool of the Budapest Sports Centre and the competitions on the river Danube.

GOLD FOR THE EPEE

Rome can hardly be a happy memory for the Hungarian delegation. Every thing had changed; doubtless the trauma of the political clampdown was reflected in the results, and the postwar buoyancy seemed to have gone. Just one boxer and one canoeist added to the gold medals won by the fencers and pentathletes.

Four years later, there was a virtual renaissance. The Tokyo Games were the scene of intense competition. The cold war was at its coldest but, paradoxically, the confrontation between The United States and the Soviet Union seemed to pale into insignificance before the emergence of new nations in Africa and Asia. A great gathering of a new and effervescent world, in which Hungary was to participate actively and with brio.

Waterpolo and football resurfaced. And, to everyone’s surprise, the Hungarian women won in épée and team foil, winning the team gold for the first time; only one sabre fencer, Tibor Pészsa, brought back gold. The team was wiped out. The pentathlon brought another disappointment: Ferenc Török too won the only gold. The young and inexperienced pentathlon team took only third place. The most richly deserved medal undoubtedly went to the Greco-Roman wrestler Imre Polyak, who had previously had to make do with silver. Istvan Kosma, also in Greco-Roman wrestling, added his victory while a young marksman of twenty, Lázló Hammerl, made his modest mark by winning gold in his first international competition. In track and field athletics, particularly in the women’s events, the results exceeded expectations. In 1964, silver flowed for hammer-thrower Gyula Zsivotsky, who had to await the Games in Mexico in 1968 to add gold to his silver medals from Rome and Toyko. Javelin-thrower Marta Rudas won only silver in 1964. Four years later, it was Angela Németh who won gold in this discipline. Hungary’s throwers have a proud tradition: in Montreal, the javelin gold went to Miklos Nemeth, son of Imre Németh, hammer-throwing champion in 1948.

FAMILIES OF CHAMPIONS

More than elsewhere, perhaps, families of champions have grown up in Hungary. The examples are many and prestigious: Dezso Gyarmati, captain of the waterpolo team, married Eva Szekely, Olympic swimming cham-
pion in 1952. Their daughter, Andrea Gyarmati, followed their example, becoming herself an Olympic champion. Ildikó Bóbis, daughter of wrestler Gyula Bóbis, Olympic champion several times over, won three Olympic medallists in her sport of fencing.

The Hungarian surprise of the 1968 Games in Mexico was the second victory of the team of épéistes, who were to keep the title for two further Olympiads with a victory in Munich, while the sabreurs had to console themselves with two successive bronzes. There were two fine golds in canoe-kayak and one in football, a sport in which Hungary has distinguished itself in the past and continues to do so. But then the fires went out. The prodigious Hungarian team of the fifties was no more. We find its exploits in the huge Football Encyclopaedia, produced by Arpad Csanadi, an eminent IOC member from 1964 to 1983. The football epic familiar to all fans. Waterpolo, too, was running out of steam. In 1960, it was second place, third in 1972, followed by a return to the limelight in 1976, but the title was not retained as it was bronze again in Moscow. On the other hand, thanks to András Balczó, who won gold and led the team on to the podium, the pentathlon found its form again in Munich. After a perceptible drop in the results in Montreal, Moscow saw a return to the Mexico level. Although the pentathletes ultimately lost to the Russians, who were at home, it was a step up from the bronze in Montreal. In the individual contest, Tamás Szombathelyi took silver like his predecessor in Mexico.

SEOUL AND BARCELONA, TWO ASTONISHING OLYMPIADS

Over the next two Olympiads, the Hungarian results continued to astound. They were particularly impressive in Seoul, as if Hungary were seeking to make up for its absence from Los Angeles with a superabundance of triumphs, and in Barcelona, it was as if she had set out to prove that political changes were not going to affect her sporting results. In swimming, in particular, the medals piled up, with Krisztina Egerszegi, specialist in the 100m (silver) and 200m backstroke (gold). She was to do even better in Barcelona, where she was to obtain first place in these two disciplines plus another gold medal in the 400m freestyle, taking her place among the female champions most covered with gold. Among the men, too, the young Tamás Darnyi proved no less remarkable a phenomenon, taking gold in Seoul and becoming the first swimmer to defend successfully his title in the 400m freestyle. He was also to defend his title brilliantly in the 200m freestyle. Despite this exploit, Norbert Rozsa’s two silvers in the 100m and 200m breaststroke in Barcelona might almost be overlooked. And yet this discipline too is one in which the Hungarians excel. In Seoul, Joszef Szabó had won gold in the 200m and Károly Guttler silver in the 100m breaststroke. Having long dominated international swimming, Hungary remains a competitor to contend with. In gymnastics, Zsolt Borkai won silver on the horse in Seoul and Henrietta Onodi in the floor exercises in Barcelona.

Despite the excellence of well-rooted traditions, Hungary today seems less
four-man kayak, which brought silver in Seoul and gold in Barcelona, where the young Rita Koban won silver in the 500m and the two-man kayak the bronze. Finally, canoeist Gyorgy Zala also took bronze in the 1000m.

With its solid traditions, Hungarian sport has trained over the century a prestigious procession of champions who have enabled it to improve its standing and who go on surprising us in the international arena.

Denis Echard