

SportsLetter Interviews

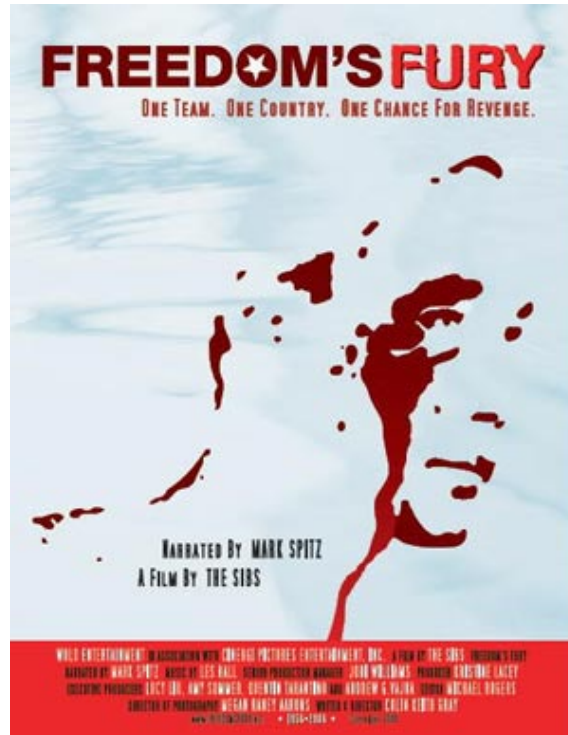
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Colin Keith Gray & Megan Raney Aarons

On December 6, 1956, Hungary and the Soviet Union faced off in the semifinal of the water polo tournament at the Melbourne Olympic Games. Hungary was the defending gold-medalist from the 1952 Helsinki Games. The Russians had beaten the Hungarians earlier in the year and were vastly improved since their seventh-place finish in 1952.

But this match was about more than supremacy in the water. Just weeks previous, Soviet tanks had rumbled into Budapest, crushing Hungary's populist bid for freedom and democracy and re-establishing Communist rule in the Eastern bloc nation. Thousands of Hungarians were killed, deported and jailed.

At Melbourne's Crystal Palace, Hungary-U.S.S.R. turned into a violent, foul-plagued affair. Toward the end of the match, with Hungary leading 4-0, Russia's Vladimir Prokopov brutally belted Hungary's star player, Ervin Zador, over the eye. Bleeding profusely, Zador was pulled from the pool; as police massed to quell a riot among spectators, the "blood-in-the-water" match was cut short and Hungary awarded the victory. Without Zador, Hungary beat Yugoslavia in the finals, with Russia taking third.



Now, some 50 years later after the bloodiest game in Olympic history, the brother-sister team of Colin Keith Gray (writer-director) and Megan Raney Aarons (director of photography) has produced “Freedom’s Fury.” Five years in production, the documentary revisits “the most famous game in the sport of water polo” within the context of the 1956 Hungarian uprising. The filmmakers used archival footage, both of the political and social turmoil in Budapest and the action in the water, and tracked down and interviewed surviving members of both teams. They also arranged and filmed a reunion of the two teams in Budapest in 2002. The result is a stirring, moving film that deftly examines the role of sport within the broader context of international politics.

SportsLetter recently interviewed Gray and Aarons by telephone from their office in the Venice, Calif. area.

— David Davis

SportsLetter: How did you hear about the Hungary-U.S.S.R. match?

CG: It started back in Canada, which is where we both grew up. One of our friends was Hungarian-Canadian whose family had fled Hungary in ‘56. Around the same time, I started playing water polo in high school. And, water polo in Canada is very influenced by Hungarian water polo because so many coaches and players fled in ‘56 and settled in Canada. That’s when we first heard about Hungarian prowess in the sport and were exposed to the political situation.

I first heard about the game after I continued to play water polo at the University of Michigan. My coach was a Hungarian gentleman by the name of Ben Quittner. It turns out that Ben was coached by the captain of the ‘56 team, Deszo Gyarmati. So, Ben was the one who first informed me about the significance of the game.

At the Atlanta Olympics in 1996, there was quite a bit of coverage of the 40th anniversary of the famous showdown in Melbourne. I clipped an article about the game, and it triggered a memory: that’s that game Ben always talked about. At that point, I had already written and directed my

first documentary, which also involved sports [Editor's Note: "Glory Days," about a reunion between two northern California high school football teams]. So, Megan and I started discussing the water polo project. We just thought the game was such an interesting way to unlock the larger story of the Hungarian Revolution and the people power movement.

SL: How would you describe water polo to someone who's never played the sport? And why is it so compelling?

CG: It's a contact sport in the water. I'd say it's like soccer in the water with the aggressive violence of ice hockey and football. For Europeans, I'd say it's like rugby in the water.

What I love about the sport is the combination of finesse and violence. That's where it's so reminiscent of ice hockey. You have the finesse, the passing, the technical skills, the break-aways, and then it's so physically demanding. That's why it's exciting to see it growing so quickly these days. Right now, it's the fastest growing sport on the college level among women.

MA: As someone who didn't play the sport - and from a cinematic point of view as well - the reason I love to watch water polo is the choreography involved. There's such a dynamic fluidity to the sport. So much of the game takes place under water. So for us to be able to film the sport - and film it underwater in a way that no one's ever seen before - makes it really exciting.

SL: Hungary has long been a water polo power. Your film notes that they've won eight Olympic gold medals, the most of any country (including, most recently, at the 2004 Athens Olympic Games). Why are they so good at water polo?

CG: It's sort of like Canadians and hockey — success breeds success. Hungary has been a powerhouse since the 1930s. In the fall, when the film was released in Hungary, we went to see two teams scrimmage one another at a local club in Budapest. In the side pool, at 10 o'clock at night, there's all these kids throwing the ball around. It's like going to any playground in America and seeing guys playing pickup hoops. That's what

water polo is like in Hungary: They live and breathe water polo.

MA: It's a mystery that this landlocked country excels in all things aquatic. I think it's in part because of the tradition of the Turkish baths there, leftover from the Ottoman Empire, and all the natural springs. Each pool really does taste different, and there's a real pride, in Budapest and throughout Hungary, about their water culture. Every interview that we had at a pool, there was never a moment when the pool was empty.

SL: At the time of the uprising, the Hungarian Olympic water polo team was isolated in training. Did they have any say in whether or not they would go to Melbourne?

CG: No. Athletes had no control over what they did or didn't do. They didn't have any control about who traveled or when they traveled. There were so many privileges associated with being a member of the national team — travel and prestige — that they shut up and did what they were told to do.

MA: In the film, Ervin [Zador] says that when he heard about the revolution, he told his teammates in Melbourne that he was going to stay. For him to publicly say that, that was treason. That was a very risky thing for him to say. It goes to show how shaken up everybody was that they let him play. They were still in shock about the events.

CG: We initially were going to try to make some links about how the team became politicized and got involved in the revolution. We couldn't make those links because, first of all, they were isolated in the training camp and, second, the athletes didn't want to rock the boat. They couldn't afford to because they would've been kicked off the team. None of them were overtly political. None of them had taken part in marching in the streets, but by the time the Olympics rolled around and by the time they met the Soviets in Melbourne, in the eyes of the world they became these symbolic freedom fighters. That's when they realized how the hopes and pride of an entire country were riding on their shoulders. Like it or not, the game became politicized around them.

SL: You located and interviewed a dozen players from both teams. How

difficult was it to find them and were they eager to talk about the '56 match again?

CG: It wasn't too difficult tracking them down. We found Ervin Zador first, living in California, and talked to him on the phone. He was just wonderful from the get-go. At the same time, we were speaking with the Hungarian Water Polo Federation and asking them to connect us to the '56 team. I traveled to Budapest in 1998-'99, to meet with everyone and talk about the film and lock in their participation. They wanted to make sure that we were serious about this. The players quizzed us before each interview to make sure we had our facts straight, to make sure we had done our research.

My coach at Michigan, who became our primary water polo consultant on the film, and his friend Tamas Wiesner, another Hungarian player, opened up a lot of doors for us. The minute the players heard that I was a water polo player, they were like, "Of course we'll participate." All of them turned out to be very gracious and cooperative from day one.

What was interesting was how the Russian team got involved. Initially, we were talking about trying to go to Russia to interview the players. But they were all in different cities. We sort of brainstormed: "Why don't we see if they'll come to Budapest?" We didn't think it would work out. But the presidents of both the Hungarian Water Polo Federation and USA Water Polo petitioned the Russian Water Polo Federation on our behalf. They asked all of the surviving players to come to Budapest, and all but one of them were able to come Budapest for the reunion. The Russians turned out to be really generous with their time.

SL: What was it like to be present at the reunion?

CG: It was magical. One thing we felt was that, whatever happened to the movie, we had been a part of giving these men a chance to re-connect as human beings and elite athletes. On the Hungarian side, they'd never all been together in 50 years. So, it's hard to put into words what it was like to watch them hug and smile and talk. And, when they jumped in the pool again, it was like the years washed off. They became like little boys again.

SL: Your film contains some amazing archival footage, including of the '56

Hungarian team in training and of the '56 uprising in Budapest. Was that difficult to locate?

MA: The research to find the archival footage was a huge challenge. Colin and our producer, Kristine Lacey, worked very closely with The Institute for the History of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, and they became a huge source of footage. The footage of the team in training, which we found at the Hungarian Film Archive, was a golden find. It gives the film authenticity because you can see the players in the water in their prime. That footage was actually shot by the coach of the '56 team, Bela Rajki-Reich, who was also an amateur photographer. He developed some of the first underwater housings and figured out a way to track down the pool, shooting the players in ways that had never been done before. He was such a visionary, and to have that all on tape — we kind of burst into tears when we saw that.

We also accessed a great number of stills from the Museum of Sport [in Budapest], and we collected footage from almost 15 archive houses and sources from around the world. For the match at the Olympics, that footage came from the Olympic Television Archive Bureau [OTAB]. We licensed that footage through the USOC and the IOC.

SL: What surprised you most as you were making the film?

CG: On a content level, what surprised me was the lack of animosity between the Hungarian and Russian players. Because they called this a grudge match and the “blood-in-the-water match,” I thought there was going to be bad blood between them. But both teams were remarkably philosophical about it, very able to recognize that they were all victims of their time. It brings an almost hopeful coda to the film, which was not anticipated. We had wanted to try to do the reunion, but we had no idea how it would come together. The fact that they were so eager to see each other again after 50 years was surprising. They both saw each other as victims of the same circumstances. Both had suffered under this oppressive totalitarian regime, but in different ways.

MA: The one other thing that I was most surprised about was that, in Hungary, there's never been a truth and reconciliation counsel, like in

South Africa and other places. A lot of the people have blood on their hands left over from the Revolution and the aftermath, and it's amazing how politicized and polarizing the Revolution still is in Hungary. And, that has impact in strange ways on everyday life there.

SL: I read a report that Ervin Zador, the star of the team who defected after the '56 Olympic Games, recently refused to return to Hungary for political reasons. Is that true?

MA: That's an example of how politicized the country is to this day. In fact, he was unable to travel because of his wife's health. It was a personal thing, but it was completely taken out of context and blown out of proportion by the Hungarian press.

SL: What was your biggest challenge in making the film?

MA: Finding funding for an independent film that is obviously not commercial and finding our way through the story.

CG: As story-tellers and filmmakers, trying to find the weave of the dual narrative of the film — the water polo journey and the historical-political backdrop — was challenging and humbling. It was a long process, and I think there were many points where we doubted we'd ever get to the end. We had about 150 hours of our own footage, 50-plus hours of archival footage, over 10,000 stills, plus articles and other information that we were trying to synthesize and distill into a cohesive 90-minute film.

SL: This film took five years to produce. What kept you going?

CG: What kept us going during the bleaker moments was a sense of responsibility. We felt privileged that so many people were willing to speak with us and share their very intimate stories and emotions about what they experienced in '56. There was no way we could just stop working on the film, even when we ran out of money, because we felt that we had a duty to do this story justice.

SL: You were able to enlist two big Hollywood names — Lucy Liu and Quentin Tarantino — as executive producers. How did that come about?

CG: Lucy and I went to the University of Michigan together. We met during a production of “Jesus Christ Superstar.” We become fast friends, and we started out in the business together. We went to New York at the same time and then out to L.A. I think that the seeds were planted for teaming up on this project in ‘89, when we became buddies and also became very politicized. In the spring of that year was the Tiananmen Square Massacre, a democracy movement that was brutally crushed. Later that fall was the collapse of the Berlin Wall. Years later, when we brought the project to Lucy, the minute we told her about this democracy movement in Hungary that had been brutally suppressed, she instantly saw the connection between ‘56 in Hungary and ‘89 in China. She said, “I would love to be involved, how can I help?” She ended up hosting our first fund-raiser in L.A., which was right when she was starting work on “Kill Bill.” So, she brought down Quentin to our first fund-raising event.

SL: Could you have finished the film without them?

CG: Absolutely not. They were vital. Quentin had heard very little about Hungary in ‘56 or about the water polo game and said, “It’s the best story never told.” He got very enthused about it and asked, “How can I help? Do you need cameras?” He came on with valuable financial support, as did Lucy. Lucy stayed hands-on throughout the entire process. The lion’s share of the editing of the film was done in her garage, and she helped us at the Tribeca Film Festival by drumming up support and media interest.

SL: You enlisted another big name, Mark Spitz, as the film’s narrator. How did that come about?

MA: We’d been struggling for a while as to who the narrator would be. We approached several interesting people, but it was this gaping hole in the production. Bruce Wigo, the head of the International Swimming Hall of Fame, was very supportive of the film, and he was on-set when we filmed with his son, [U.S. Olympic water polo player] Wolf Wigo. Bruce called in one day, and we mentioned that we were at an impasse about the narrator. He said, “What about Mark Spitz?” We said, “Yeah, what about him?”

So, Bruce made a phone call and set that up, and Mark came into the

recording studio and did an amazing job. When we were talking in the sound booth, he said, “You know, I’ve got my own connection to this.”

CG: We knew he was a high-school All-American in water polo, and that’s where we thought he was going. And he said, “You know, my first personal coach was Ervin Zador.” And, we were stunned. This was when Mark was about 11 or 12. As a swimmer, that’s an incredibly formative time. Ervin picked him up in his white Volvo and took him to practice every day. They hadn’t seen each other since then, and then reunited for the first time on the red carpet at Tribeca.

SL: Has it been tough to find an audience being that this is “a water polo film?”

CG: In some places, the topic of the Hungarian revolution and the water polo team immediately causes skepticism. People think that it’s a little obscure. Once they see the people involved — Mark Spitz, Lucy Liu, Quentin Tarantino — and then they hear that it’s about a struggle for freedom — that instantly resonates everywhere. The trick, of course, is to get them into the theaters. The minute people sit down and see it, they seem to be swept into the film. So, that’s the marketing challenge.

SL: The film has been released in Hungary. What are your plans for the film in the U.S.?

CG: It’s already been released in theaters in the States to qualify for the Academy Awards. Through December, we have a few dates set up in Ann Arbor, Chicago and Champagne. In 2007, you’ll see it in theaters in a number of countries around the world, and then a DVD release and TV broadcast.

SL: Is somebody working on adapting the documentary as a feature?

MA: One of our executive producers, Andy Vajna, who’s done everything from the “Terminator” series to “Basic Instinct,” teamed up with the screenwriter he typically works with, Joe Eszterhas, and they developed a feature called “Children of Glory,” based on our doc. It’s already been released in Hungary.

CG: They're very different films. "Children of Glory" follows the journey of the water polo team, but as a fictional film, it takes a lot of liberties with the story that we present in "Freedom's Fury." But it's so wonderful to see our documentary get the Hollywood feature treatment.