



Hungarian, Soviet Water Polo Teams Meet

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BUDAPEST, Hungary (AP) - More than four decades after it began, one of the most famous water polo matches in history came to a symbolic end Saturday when Hungarian and former Soviet players reunited to close a chapter in Cold War history.

The water polo duel between Hungary and the Soviet Union at the 1956 Melbourne Olympics in Australia was so fierce it became known as the "Blood in the Water" match. Rife with political symbolism, the match was held just weeks after Soviet forces invaded Hungary to crush an anti-communist revolution. The referee ended the match with less than a minute to go, fearing the bloody fight in the pool would spread to the stands. Hungary, ahead 4-0 when the match was called off, was declared the winner and went on to win the Olympic gold medal.

On Saturday, 12 of the players in that match — eight Hungarians and four ex-Soviets — met in Budapest to reminisce. The meeting, the first between the players since the game, was organized by the makers of "Freedom's Fury," a documentary film about the match and the Hungarian revolution. Gyorgy Karpati, 66, said he and his Hungarian teammates considered the Soviet players symbols of an oppressive regime. "In the strained political situation we were in, it was a body-to-body encounter with our opponents," he said. Karpati said he believed Hungary, the defending Olympic champion, was the favorite. "Now I have to admit that I'm convinced even the referee was pulling for us," Karpati said. "We were from a small country battling the huge Soviet Goliath."

Hungary's Dezso Gyarmati set the tone for the match by hitting his Soviet defender while scoring the first goal. Then Hungarian star Ervin Zador, who scored two goals, was sucker-punched by Valentin Prokopov and suffered a deep gash under his right eye. The image of Zador leaving the pool bleeding profusely was published in newspapers around the world.

The documentary's director, Colin Gray (The Sibs), played water polo at the University of Michigan under coach Ben Quittner, a Hungarian native who now is a technical consultant for the film. "Besides the sports angle, the political aspect was utterly riveting," Gray said. "The West failed Hungary by not supporting a revolution which had a large impact on other freedom movements."

Gray hopes to release the documentary in time for the 50th anniversary in 2006. On Saturday, the players discussed medical histories and bodily ailments, but also found time for friendly arguments about the match. "I'm curious about how the others have aged, about who has collected more illnesses," said Karpati, who won three gold and one bronze medals at four different Olympics. Zador, 66, who along with other 1956 Hungarian Olympians received political asylum in the United States, said the match never turned personal, despite its political overtones. "It should be clear that we never had any ill feelings toward the Russian people. It was just a match at the wrong time and the wrong place," Zador said.



Soviet team captain Pyotr "Misi" Mshvenieradze said the Soviets, too, were under pressure. "We also had to face our own difficult factors, including 8,000 fans cheering only for Hungary," Mshvenieradze said. "But the Hungarians were better anyway and would have beaten us under any circumstances."



Hungarian and Soviet members of the water polo team of the 1956 Olympic Games met again after 46 years in Budapest, Hungary, on Saturday June 01, 2002. Hungarian Ervin Zador, left, shares memories with Russian Boris Markarov, right, water polo player.



Hungarian and Soviet members of the water polo team of the 1956 Olympic Games met again after 46 years in Budapest, Hungary, on Saturday June 01, 2002. Hungarian Ervin Zador, left, shakes hand with Russian Yuri Schlyapin, centre, and Russian Boris Markarov, right, water polo players. At the 1956 Olympics an infamous match between Hungary and the Soviet Union took place as the two nations faced off in the semi-final. One month prior the games, Soviet troops invaded Hungary, and suppressed the anti-communist revolution. The game had turned into a battleground, with players brawling and bloodied. (AP Photo / Bela Szandelszky)