



CULTURE COURSE

Hungary at the Olympics

10 Chapters

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Hungary at the Olympics

Course 1 · Chapter 1 · Why Hungary and the Games? Scope & Sources

Hungary has about ten million people, and its Olympic record is far better than that number would suggest. It is routinely placed high in the all-time medal tables and, on a per-head basis, close to the top (check the current ranking). This opening chapter looks at that claim, shows how medal tables are counted and why the counting matters, and lists the sources to use for the rest of the course. Names, figures and rankings are from general knowledge and flagged for checking, since medal counts change with every Games.

The Claim

The claim has three parts, and each needs separate checking:

In total

Hungary is often said to rank among the top ten nations of all time in Summer Olympic medals, with well over a hundred gold medals (check the exact rank and totals, which depend on the table used).

Per head

Measured against population, Hungary is placed near the very top of the all-time tables among larger nations (check, and see below on why this is a delicate comparison).

In a few sports

The success is concentrated in particular sports: fencing, water polo, swimming, canoeing and a handful of others (Chapters 3 to 6).

How a Medal Table Is Counted

The same Games can produce several tables, depending on the rule used (check each):

- **Golds first, or total medals.** The most common order ranks by gold medals, then silver, then bronze. Some tables rank by total medals. A nation can move several places

depending on the rule.

- **Team events.** A team medal counts once as a medal for the nation, not once per team member, so a nation strong in team sports is not inflated by squad size in most tables (check, since individual medal counts do count each athlete).
- **Mixed and early Games.** The early Games included events that are no longer held, and the status of some results is disputed (check the 1900 and 1906 Games in particular).
- **Reallocation.** Medals are sometimes reassigned years later after doping tests, so a table can change after the event (check).
- **Boycotts.** Nations that missed Games, as in 1984, have lower totals as a result (Chapter 8, check).

Why Per-Head Tables Can Mislead

Dividing medals by population produces a striking list, with small countries near the top, but the number needs care:

- **Denominator.** Which population? Today's, or the population at the time of each Games? It has changed (check Hungary's figures).
- **Small numbers.** A very small nation with a single medal can top a per-head table, which tells us little.
- **Selected sports.** A nation that concentrates on a few sports with many events (swimming, athletics) can gain medals more easily than one in a sport with a single event.
- **Successor states.** Totals for countries that no longer exist, such as the Soviet Union and East Germany, are counted separately or merged, and this affects rankings (check how each table handles it).
- **Resources.** Medals reflect money, training and tradition as well as population, and per-head figures hide those differences.

The right question

A better question than "is Hungary the best per head?" is "what has Hungary done especially well, and why?". The chapters that follow answer that sport by sport, with a final chapter returning to the per-head figures once the evidence is in.

Sources and How to Check Them

- **The IOC.** The International Olympic Committee publishes official results and medal tables (check the site and how it handles historical changes).
- **Olympedia.** A detailed independent database of results and biographies, widely used by researchers (check).
- **The Hungarian Olympic Committee.** Publishes the national record, histories and biographies, and is the main source for Hungarian detail (check the organisation's current name and archive).
- **Histories and biographies.** Books and articles on individual sports and athletes; treat popular lists with the same caution as in Rubik's Cube and Hungarian Inventors 1.

A British comparison

Britain's medal haul since 1996 is often discussed in terms of funding, with National Lottery money directed to elite sport (check). Hungary's record has a different history, with long-established traditions and, in the communist period, state support (Chapter 8). Comparing the two shows how tradition and funding can each explain success.

Check the details

Medal totals, rankings and per-head figures change with each Games and each reallocation, and differ between tables. Verify against the IOC or Olympedia before quoting any number.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain how the same set of medals can produce different rankings in two tables.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Give three reasons why a per-head medal table can mislead.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Choose a medal-count claim you have seen about any country and list three things you would check before repeating it.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **The claim:** high in the all-time table, near the top per head (check)
- **Counting:** golds first or total; team medals count once
- **Per-head cautions:** denominator, small numbers, sport mix, successor states
- **Sources:** IOC, Olympedia, Hungarian Olympic Committee
- **Better question:** what has Hungary done well, and why?

Hungary at the Olympics

Course 1 · Chapter 2 · The Early Years: 1896 to 1936

Hungary was present at the very first modern Olympic Games, and the pattern of its success, in the water and on the fencing piste, was visible early. This chapter covers the Games from Athens in 1896 to Berlin in 1936, with one man, Alfréd Hajós, standing at the head of the story. It also covers the break caused by the First World War, which kept Hungary out of the Games for a time. Names, dates and results are from general knowledge and flagged for checking.

Athens, 1896

The first modern Olympic Games were held in Athens in 1896, organised by Pierre de Coubertin. Hungary sent a small team, and a Hungarian, Ferenc Kemény, was among the founding members of the International Olympic Committee (check the details and the date of the Hungarian committee's founding). Hungary competed as its own nation, though it was part of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy (check how the team was entered and how the IOC records it).

Alfréd Hajós

A swimmer, born Arnold Guttman in 1878 (check), who won the 100 metres and the 1200 metres freestyle in the Bay of Zea in cold, rough open water (check the events and conditions).

Other 1896 results

Hungarians also took part in athletics, gymnastics and other events, with a small number of medals (check the list).

The team

A handful of athletes, mostly from Budapest clubs, many of them students (check).

Hajós: Swimmer and Architect

Hajós is a good guide to the period because his life links sport and the city. He is said to have been moved to swim by the death of his father, who drowned in the Danube when he was a child (check the story). After his Olympic victories he trained as an architect, and designed sports

buildings in Budapest, including the swimming stadium on Margaret Island that bears his name (the Hajós Alfréd National Sports Swimming Pool, check). At the 1924 Paris Games he won a silver medal in the art competitions, in architecture, for a stadium design with a partner (check the details). Olympic art competitions were held until 1948 and are no longer part of the Games (check). See Hungarian Architecture for the setting of such buildings in the city.

The First Strengths

- **Swimming.** Beginning with Hajós, and helped by the Danube and a growing number of clubs (Chapter 5).
- **Fencing.** Sabre, in particular, was already a Hungarian specialty at the 1900s Games, with team and individual success (Chapter 3, check). The tradition came from military and aristocratic training in the monarchy.
- **Athletics and others.** Early successes also came in athletics, including the discus at the 1900 Paris Games (check), and in shooting and wrestling over the following decades (check).

The Games at Paris in 1900, St Louis in 1904, Athens in 1906 (the intercalated Games, now not counted by the IOC, check), London in 1908 and Stockholm in 1912 brought steady, if modest, medal totals (check the figures). The sabre team won gold in 1908 and 1912 (check), and a number of the pattern's later champions began to emerge.

The Break: 1920 and After

After the First World War the monarchy collapsed and Hungary lost large territories and population under the Treaty of Trianon in 1920 (check). Hungary, like the other defeated nations, was not invited to the Antwerp Games of 1920 (check which nations were excluded). It returned to the Games in 1924 in Paris. The effect on the sports clubs and the athletes' training is hard to judge (check), but Hungarian sport survived and soon revived. The course describes the events and does not take a side on the larger political questions.

The Interwar Games

- **1924, Paris.** Return to the Games, with fencing success (check).
- **1928, Amsterdam.** A solid result, with fencing, wrestling and other medals (check).

- **1932, Los Angeles.** A strong Hungarian showing, with golds in several sports, including the first Olympic gold in water polo (check; see Chapter 4) despite the long and expensive journey for European teams.
- **1936, Berlin.** Hungary finished high in the medal table with ten gold medals, among them water polo, fencing and canoeing (check the number and the events). The Games were held under the Nazi regime in Germany and have a complicated place in Olympic history (check, and note that the course describes the sporting record only).

The pattern emerges

By 1936 the shape of Hungarian Olympic success was visible: concentrated in a few sports where tradition, clubs and coaching had built up, and not spread evenly across the programme. The later chapters follow each of those strands.

A British comparison

Britain hosted the 1908 and 1948 Games and had its own early strengths in athletics, rowing and cycling. As with Hungary, the early strengths came from clubs and traditions in particular sports, not from a national plan (check the comparison).

Check the details

The 1896 entries, Hajós's details, the status of the 1906 Games, the excluded nations of 1920 and the medal counts for the interwar Games are easy to misstate. Verify against the IOC or Olympedia before quoting.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Summarise the career of Alfréd Hajós and say what it shows about Hungarian sport.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Explain why Hungary missed the 1920 Games and when it returned.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Name the sports in which Hungary had early success and suggest one reason for each.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **1896:** Athens; Hajós wins two swimming golds (check)
- **Hajós:** swimmer, then architect, silver in the 1924 art competition (check)
- **Early strengths:** swimming, sabre fencing, athletics (check)
- **1920:** Hungary not invited; back in 1924 (check)
- **1936:** Berlin; ten golds (check)

Hungary at the Olympics

Course 1 · Chapter 3 · Fencing: The Sabre Tradition

No sport is more closely tied to Hungary's Olympic reputation than fencing, and within fencing, the sabre. For long stretches of the twentieth century Hungary won team sabre gold at almost every Games, a record that has few equals in any sport. This chapter describes the weapon, the school that grew up around it, its best-known champions, and some of the explanations for the dominance. Names, dates and results are from general knowledge and flagged for checking.

The Weapon

Fencing has three weapons at the Olympics, each with its own rules (check the details):

Sabre

A cutting and thrusting weapon, with hits scored anywhere above the waist. Fast, with strict right-of-way rules for attacks. The historic Hungarian specialty.

Epee

A thrusting weapon with hits scored anywhere on the body, with no right of way. Hungary has had strong epee teams in some periods.

Foil

A thrusting weapon with hits scored on the torso, with right of way. Hungary has had successes here, especially among women (check).

The Hungarian School

The sabre has deep roots in Hungary, where a cavalry tradition and a culture of duelling and swordsmanship existed in the nineteenth century. The modern school is often traced to the arrival of Italian fencing masters in the monarchy, most often credited to Italo Santelli, who taught in Budapest from the 1890s (check the name and role). His methods and those of his Hungarian pupils became the foundation of a distinctive approach (check how it is described),

and fencing clubs in Budapest, often linked to the army, the police or universities, kept the tradition going.

- **Coaching lines.** Master-to-pupil lineages passed techniques on, which gave continuity (check).
- **Clubs.** Budapest clubs offered training, competition and a route to national teams (check which).
- **Prestige.** Fencing had social standing, and champions were well-known public figures (check).

Champions

- **Jenő Fuchs.** Won individual and team sabre golds at both the 1908 and 1912 Games (check), and set the pattern for what followed.
- **Aladár Gerevich.** Won gold medals in the team sabre at six successive Games from 1932 to 1960, plus an individual gold in 1948, a span of nearly three decades (check the numbers; this is often cited as one of the great Olympic careers).
- **Pál Kovács.** A member of the golden team sabre sides of the 1950s (check) and winner of several medals.
- **Rudolf Kárpáti.** Won individual sabre gold in 1956 and 1960 (check).
- **Ilona Elek.** Women's foil gold in 1936 and 1948 (check), a reminder that Hungary's fencing success was not only male.
- **Later names.** Áron Szilágyi, individual sabre gold in 2012 and 2016 (check), and the epee successes of the late 1960s and 1970s (check).

The run of team golds

Hungary's men won the Olympic team sabre title at a long series of Games from the 1930s into the 1960s, with a few gaps (check the exact list). It is the sort of record that makes a nation's reputation, and one reason why fencing is so central to Hungarian Olympic memory.

Why Sabre?

Several explanations are offered, and none is proven (check each):

- **Tradition.** A long cavalry and sword culture in the monarchy.
- **Coaching.** Skilled masters and a clear teaching method, passed down through lineages.
- **Concentration.** A small country can dominate a sport with few serious competitors, and sabre was less widespread internationally than foil for much of the century (check).
- **Institutions.** Army, police and club support, and later state support (Chapter 8).
- **Style.** The Hungarian approach to sabre, said to emphasise speed and attack (check the claim).

The caution of Chapter 1 applies: the tradition could not be counted on to persist, and the Hungarian lead was narrowed as other nations improved their training and as rules changed (check, for example the introduction of electric scoring for sabre in the 1990s).

Recent Years

Hungary has remained a leading fencing nation, with strength in sabre and some success in epee and in women's events (check the current position). Results change from Games to Games, and the course gives the pattern and not a current table.

A British comparison

Britain has a long fencing tradition too, with success in the early Games and again in recent years in individual events, but never the sustained team dominance seen in Hungary (check the comparison). The contrast shows how a tradition of clubs and coaching can concentrate a small nation's success in one weapon.

Check the details

Names, the number of team golds, individual results, and the history of Santelli and the school are easy to misstate, and records change. Verify against the IOC or Olympedia before quoting.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Describe the three Olympic fencing weapons and say which is Hungary's historic specialty.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Choose one champion from the chapter and say why their career matters.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Give two explanations for Hungary's sabre dominance and one reason to doubt each.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Weapons:** sabre, epee, foil
- **School:** Italian masters such as Santelli, Budapest clubs (check)
- **Champions:** Fuchs, Gerevich, Kovács, Kárpáti, Elek, Szilágyi (check)
- **Record:** a long run of team sabre golds, 1930s to 1960s (check)
- **Explanations:** tradition, coaching, concentration, institutions

Hungary at the Olympics

Course 1 · Chapter 4 · Water Polo: The Pool as Battleground

If fencing is Hungary's most traditional Olympic sport, water polo is its most beloved. Hungary is the most successful nation in the men's Olympic tournament, with a long run of golds, and the sport is followed in Hungary with something close to the passion given to football. This chapter covers the sport, the golds, the famous match of 1956, the players and coaches, and the sport's place in the national culture. Names, dates and results are from general knowledge and flagged for checking.

The Sport

Water polo is a team game played in a deep pool, in which two teams of seven try to put a ball in the other's goal. It is physical and tactical, with a good deal of the contest hidden beneath the surface (check the rules, which have changed). It began in Britain in the nineteenth century as a form of water rugby, and spread to Europe, where Hungary took it up with enthusiasm (check the history). The sport has been in the Olympic Games since 1900 for men and since 2000 for women (check).

The Golds

Hungary's men have won a large number of Olympic titles, more than any other nation (check the exact figure, which is usually given as nine). The pattern, in broad terms (check each):

The 1930s

Gold at Los Angeles in 1932 and Berlin in 1936, the first Olympic titles (Chapter 2, check).

The 1950s and 1960s

Gold in 1952 at Helsinki and 1956 at Melbourne, and again in 1964 at Tokyo (check).

1976

Gold at Montreal, after other nations had taken the titles in between (check).

2000 to 2008

Three successive golds, at Sydney, Athens and Beijing (check), under a long-serving coach.

In the years between, other nations, especially Italy, Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union and later Croatia, Serbia and Spain, took titles, and Hungary won many silver and bronze medals (check). The picture is of continuity at the top level more than of unbroken victory.

Melbourne, 1956

The best-known match in Hungarian sport history is the semi-final of the 1956 Games in Melbourne between Hungary and the Soviet Union, played in December 1956, only weeks after the Hungarian Revolution had been crushed by Soviet forces (check the date and the political context, which Chapter 7 covers). The match was fiercely contested and became violent. Hungary won (check the score, often given as 4–0), and the image of a Hungarian player, Ervin Zádor, with blood streaming from a cut over his eye, gave the match its name in the press: the "Blood in the Water" match (check the details and who struck whom, which accounts present differently). Hungary then won the final and took the gold medal (check).

Sport and symbol

The match is remembered in Hungary as more than a game, because of its timing. The course records what happened in the pool and how it is remembered, and discusses the political side in Chapter 7. Accounts vary on how much the players saw it as a political act, and a fair reading separates what they said at the time from how it was later told.

Players and Coaches

- **Dezső Gyarmati.** A player who won Olympic medals at five successive Games from 1948 to 1964, including golds in 1952, 1956 and 1964 (check). His wife, the swimmer Éva Székely, and their daughter Andrea Gyarmati, also an Olympic swimmer, made it a sporting family (Chapter 5, check).
- **György Kárpáti.** A star of the 1950s and 1960s teams (check).
- **Later players and coaches.** The 2000s teams included players such as Tamás Kásás and Tibor Benedek, and their coach, Dénes Kemény, is credited with the successive golds

(check the names and roles).

The Sport in Hungarian Culture

- **Following.** Large television audiences and crowds for important matches, and the sport's results are national news (check).
- **The pools.** Water polo is played in the city's pools, many of them linked to the baths of Thermal Baths & Budapest Spa Culture 4 and 5, and at clubs across the country (check).
- **The clubs.** Budapest and provincial clubs have supplied players for generations, and the national league is a major competition (check).
- **The women's game.** A women's team has won Olympic medals since the sport was added in 2000 (check), though not on the men's scale.

A British comparison

Water polo began in Britain, which won early Olympic titles in the sport (check), but the game has a much lower profile there now than in Hungary, where it is a mainstream sport. The contrast shows how a sport can move from its birthplace and find a different home.

Check the details

The number and years of Hungary's golds, the 1956 score and incidents, and the names and roles of players and coaches are easy to misstate. Verify against the IOC or Olympedia before quoting.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Summarise Hungary's pattern of Olympic water polo success, and say where the pattern was interrupted.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Explain why the 1956 semi-final is remembered, and how a fair account of it should be written.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Compare water polo's place in Hungarian and British culture, and suggest two reasons for the difference.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **Hungary's men:** the most Olympic golds in the sport, about nine (check)
- **Eras:** 1930s, 1950s to 1960s, 1976, 2000 to 2008 (check)
- **1956:** "Blood in the Water" semi-final against the USSR (check)
- **People:** Gyarmati, Kárpáti, Kemény (check)
- **Culture:** a mainstream sport in Hungary

Hungary at the Olympics

Course 1 · Chapter 5 · Swimming and the Water Generation

Swimming runs through Hungarian Olympic history from the first Games to the present, with Alfréd Hajós at the start (Chapter 2) and a succession of champions since. Where water polo is a team tradition, swimming has been a story of remarkable individuals, many of them women. This chapter covers the champions, the women's team of the 1950s, the training culture and the pools that supported them. Names, dates and results are from general knowledge and flagged for checking.

From Hajós to the 1950s

After Hajós's golds in 1896, Hungarian swimmers won medals at a steady pace through the early twentieth century, helped by the growth of Budapest clubs and pools (check). The breakthrough in women's swimming came after the Second World War. At the Helsinki Games of 1952 Hungarian women won several medals, including golds (check the list), and the team became known for its quality (check).

- **Éva Székely.** Won gold in the 200 metres breaststroke at Helsinki in 1952 and further medals at other Games (check). She married the water polo player Dezső Gyarmati (Chapter 4, check).
- **Katalin Szőke.** Won the 100 metres freestyle in 1952 (check).
- **Their daughter.** Andrea Gyarmati, daughter of Székely and Gyarmati, won Olympic medals at the Munich Games of 1972 (check the events and medals).

Four Champions

Tamás Darnyi

Won the 200 and 400 metres individual medley at both the 1988 and 1992 Games, and set long-lasting world records (check). Often named among the great medley swimmers.

Krisztina Egerszegi

Won five Olympic golds between 1988 and 1996, including the 200 metres backstroke at three successive Games (check the events and numbers). She won her first title at the age of fourteen (check).

Katinka Hosszú

Won three individual golds at the Rio Games in 2016 and became known as the "Iron Lady" for her heavy racing programme (check the events and nickname).

László Cseh and Dániel Gyurta

Cseh won many Olympic medals over several Games without an individual gold, a source of regret and admiration in Hungary; Gyurta won the 200 metres breaststroke at London in 2012 with a world record (check both).

Individuals and systems

Swimming success is easier to trace to individuals than team sports are, but each champion also depended on a coach, a club and a pool. The Hungarian pattern is a succession of individual stars from a small pool of clubs, which suggests that the system produced the stars, and also that it depended on them (check).

The Training Culture

- **Clubs and schools.** Budapest and provincial clubs run swimming schools for children, and talented swimmers are identified early (check how it works).
- **Coaching.** Coaching lines, again, with respected coaches whose swimmers later became coaches (check).
- **Pools.** Facilities include the Hajós pool on Margaret Island, the thermal baths used for training and recovery, and indoor and open-air pools across the country (see Thermal Baths & Budapest Spa Culture 1 and 9, check what is used for training).
- **The Danube.** A river city with a swimming tradition, though open-water swimming in the Danube itself is not typical for training (check).

Challenges

As elsewhere, Hungarian swimming has had to face the problems of elite sport: the cost of facilities, the pull of foreign universities and the competition from larger countries with bigger programmes (check). Doping scandals in international swimming have also touched Hungary and its competitors, and the course returns to this in Chapter 8 in the Cold War context (check, and avoid assuming any individual case).

A British comparison

British swimming has produced champions such as Adrian Moorhouse and Rebecca Adlington, and relies on a mix of clubs, universities and national funding (check the comparison). Both countries show how a handful of clubs and coaches can shape results over decades.

Check the details

The events and medals of each swimmer, the relationships between the families, the nicknames and the training arrangements are easy to misstate. Verify against the IOC or Olympedia before quoting.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Describe the contribution of the Hungarian women swimmers of the 1950s.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Choose one champion from the chapter and summarise their Olympic record in two or three sentences.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Explain how a swimming tradition can depend on both individual stars and a system behind them.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **Start:** Hajós, 1896 (Chapter 2)
- **1952:** Székely and the women's team (check)
- **Champions:** Darnyi, Egerszegi, Hosszú, Cseh, Gyurta (check)
- **System:** clubs, swimming schools, coaches, pools
- **Family link:** Székely, Gyarmati, Andrea Gyarmati (check)

Hungary at the Olympics

Course 1 · Chapter 6 · Canoeing, Wrestling, Gymnastics and More

Fencing, water polo and swimming supply a large share of Hungary's Olympic medals, but they are not the whole story. This chapter covers the other sports in which Hungary has done well, including canoeing and kayaking, boxing and wrestling, gymnastics and modern pentathlon, and then asks where Hungary has been less successful, which is just as revealing. Names, dates and results are from general knowledge and flagged for checking.

Canoeing and Kayaking

Canoeing, and especially the sprint events on flat water, has been one of Hungary's steadiest sources of medals, helped by the Danube, Lake Balaton and other waters (check). Hungary has won medals in this sport from the 1930s to the present (check).

- **Why it fits.** A country with many rivers and lakes, active clubs, and a sport with many events and team boats that can multiply medals (check the number of events).
- **Champions.** Women's kayakers such as Katalin Kovács and Danuta Kozák have won several Olympic golds (check the names, events and totals), and the sport has produced stars in both sexes.
- **Mixed nationality.** Some paddlers who compete for Hungary were born elsewhere, which is an example of the nationality question raised in Chapter 1 (check the cases).

Boxing and Wrestling

- **László Papp.** Won Olympic boxing golds in 1948, 1952 and 1956, the first boxer to win three successive Olympic titles (check). In the 1960s he turned professional with the state's permission, an unusual step in the communist period, and became European champion (check the details).
- **Wrestling.** Hungary has had a tradition in the Greco-Roman style and in freestyle wrestling, with medals across the twentieth century (check the names and results).

Gymnastics

Ágnes Keleti was one of the great gymnasts of the 1950s, winning a number of medals, including golds, at the Helsinki Games of 1952 and the Melbourne Games of 1956 (check the count). After the Melbourne Games, in the aftermath of the Hungarian Revolution, she stayed abroad and later settled in Israel, where she worked as a coach (check the details and Chapter 7). She lived to a great age (check). Later gymnasts, such as Zoltán Magyar on the pommel horse in the 1970s, also won Olympic titles (check).

Modern Pentathlon, Shooting and Others

Modern pentathlon

A five-event sport (fencing, swimming, riding, shooting, running) that suits a country strong in fencing and swimming. Hungarians such as András Balczó won Olympic medals from the 1960s to the 1970s (check). The sport's format has changed over time (check).

Shooting

Hungary has had medals in shooting events over many decades (check).

Athletics

Notable throwers, including hammer throwers such as Balázs Kiss in 1996 and Krisztián Pars in 2012 (check), in an event where Hungary has strong coaching.

Winter sports

Few medals for a long time. A first Winter Olympic gold came in short-track speed skating, in the men's relay at Pyeongchang in 2018 (check).

Where Hungary Has Done Less Well

- **Team ball sports.** Apart from water polo and the football of 1952 (see The Golden Team & Hungarian Football), Hungary has won few medals in the large team sports such as basketball and volleyball (check; handball is a partial exception, check).
- **Cycling, rowing and sailing.** Fewer medals than in the strongest sports, though not none (check).
- **Large-population sports.** Sports where very big countries have deep talent pools make it harder for a small nation to win consistently (check).

The pattern supports the argument of Chapter 1: Hungary's success is concentrated in particular sports with a tradition, clubs and coaching, and a small country's totals depend on the number of medals available in those sports.

The event-count effect

Canoeing, swimming, fencing and wrestling offer many medals at each Games, so a nation strong in them can win more than one that is strong in a single-medal team sport. This partly explains Hungary's per-head record, and is a point to remember when reading any medal table (Chapter 1).

A British comparison

Britain's strengths in rowing, cycling and sailing, sports with many medals and heavy funding, show the same pattern of a country winning in sports where it invests (check the comparison). Hungary's equivalents are water sports and combat sports.

Check the details

Names, medal counts, event lists, the nationality of some competitors and the lists of weaker sports are easy to misstate. Verify against the IOC or Olympedia before quoting.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain why canoeing suits Hungary, and why it can produce many medals for a small country.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Choose one athlete from this chapter and summarise their Olympic achievements.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Name two sports where Hungary has been less successful and suggest a reason for each.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Canoeing:** a steady source of medals, Kovács and Kozák (check)
- **Boxing:** László Papp, three golds (check)
- **Gymnastics:** Ágnes Keleti (check)
- **Pentathlon:** fits fencing and swimming strengths
- **Weaker areas:** large team ball sports, winter sports (check)

Hungary at the Olympics

Course 1 · Chapter 7 · 1956: Melbourne and the Revolution

No Games in Hungary's history carries the weight of Melbourne in 1956. They opened in November, weeks after the Hungarian Revolution had begun and just as Soviet forces moved to crush it, and the Hungarian team that arrived in Australia did so in the middle of a crisis at home. This chapter sets out what happened to the team, the boycotts, the flag, the athletes who did not return, and the way the episode is remembered. The politics are contested, and the course describes the events and the disagreements without taking a side. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged for checking.

The Background

The Hungarian Revolution began in Budapest on 23 October 1956 with a demonstration that grew into an uprising against the government and Soviet influence (check the details). After a period in which it seemed that change might be possible, Soviet forces intervened in force in the first days of November, and the uprising was crushed with heavy casualties (check the dates and figures). Hundreds of thousands of people are said to have left the country in the following months (check). The Melbourne Games opened later in November, and so the revolution and its repression happened between the preparation for the Games and their start.

The Journey

- **The team.** A large Hungarian team had been selected and was preparing to travel (check the size). Some athletes were already abroad before the worst of the fighting; others left in the days of the revolution (check who and when).
- **The route.** Accounts describe a journey out of Hungary via Czechoslovakia and onwards by air, with the final party arriving in Melbourne only shortly before the Games (check the route and dates).
- **Uncertainty.** Many team members had little reliable news of their families, and the situation at home was changing fast (check).

Boycotts and Tensions

The Games themselves were affected by the crises of the year. Several countries stayed away, some in protest at the Soviet action in Hungary and others for different reasons connected with the Suez crisis and with the status of China (check which countries and why). The political tension was present in the Olympic Village and in the competition venues, and nowhere more than at the Hungary and Soviet Union water polo match (Chapter 4).

The Flag

An important detail concerns the flag. The Hungarian team in Melbourne is said to have flown the flag without the communist emblem, the red, white and green tricolour of the earlier period, in the Olympic Village (check the details and who decided). The choice of flag, at a time when the Hungarian government had changed hands, was a visible sign of the situation, and photographs and film from the time show it (check).

On the field

Hungary won a number of gold medals at Melbourne, including water polo and fencing, with swimming and other medals as well (check the totals).

Off the field

Athletes faced a decision about whether to return to a country in turmoil or to stay abroad.

At home

News of the results reached a country still in shock, and the athletes' successes were noted in a difficult time (check).

Those Who Stayed

A substantial number of the Hungarian team did not return home after the Games. Estimates vary, and figures of several dozen are often quoted (check). They settled in Australia, the United States, Britain, Israel and elsewhere. Ágnes Keleti (Chapter 6) is one of the best-known cases. The reasons differed: fear of what awaited them at home, opposition to the government, or the wish for better prospects, and the choice was not easy, because it meant leaving families behind

(check). Those who returned home were also in a complex position, and the course does not treat either choice as a measure of character.

Two kinds of record

The athletic record of Melbourne can be checked in the results. The human record, of who left, who stayed, what they felt and what they said, rests on memoirs and interviews, which differ and change with time. The course keeps the two apart, and treats the second with caution (check, and see Rubik's Cube and Hungarian Inventors 8 for the parallel with emigre scientists).

How It Is Remembered

- **In Hungary.** The revolution was officially condemned for decades and became openly commemorated after 1989, when 23 October became a national holiday (check). The sporting story of Melbourne is recalled in documentaries, books and anniversary events (check examples).
- **Abroad.** The episode is remembered in Australia and in emigre communities, with the Hungarian community in Melbourne marking it (check).
- **The interpretation.** Was the team's performance an act of defiance, an escape into sport, or both? Accounts disagree, and the athletes' own statements vary (check).

A British comparison

The Games have been touched by politics many times, from Berlin in 1936 to the boycotts of 1980 and 1984. Britain's own Olympic story includes the 1980 debate over whether to send a team to Moscow, where athletes were divided from their government's position (check the comparison).

Check the details

Dates of the revolution and the intervention, the team's journey, the number who stayed, the flag, the boycotts and the casualties are easy to misstate, and several are disputed or politically sensitive. Verify against reliable histories before quoting.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain in a short paragraph how the timing of the Melbourne Games relates to the Hungarian Revolution.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Describe the choice facing Hungarian athletes after the Games, and explain why a fair account avoids judging either decision.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Distinguish the athletic record and the human record of Melbourne, and say what kind of source each rests on.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **Revolution:** began 23 October 1956; Soviet intervention early November (check)
- **Games:** Melbourne, November to December 1956
- **Team:** travelled in turmoil; flag without the communist emblem (check)
- **Those who stayed:** several dozen, estimates vary (check)
- **Memory:** condemned, then commemorated after 1989 (check)

Hungary at the Olympics

Course 1 · Chapter 8 · The Cold War Years: State Sport

From the late 1940s to 1989 Hungary, like the rest of the Soviet bloc, treated sport as an affair of state. Athletes were supported, clubs were tied to state bodies, and Olympic medals were counted as national success. This produced strong results, and it also left a legacy of control, secrecy and doubt. This chapter describes the system, the results, the 1984 boycott and the questions about doping and fairness. The subject is sensitive and some of it is still disputed, so the course describes what happened and what is argued over, and takes no side. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged for checking.

How the System Worked

Under the communist state, sport was organised from the top (check the details of the structures and their names, which changed over time):

- **Funding and facilities.** The state paid for stadiums, pools, coaches and training camps, which made sport possible for many people (check the scale).
- **Talent selection.** Children were tested at school and talented ones moved into sports schools and clubs, where training was intensive (check how it worked in Hungary).
- **Elite support.** Top athletes were often given jobs, housing or army posts that left them free to train, so that they were nominally amateurs while in practice full-time athletes (check, and compare with the amateur rules of the time).
- **Control.** Travel abroad and contacts with the West were tightly managed, and athletes were expected to represent the system (check; Chapter 7 gives the example of 1956).

The Great Clubs

Honvéd

The army's sports club, which took in many of the best footballers and other athletes through military service (check; see The Golden Team & Hungarian Football).

Dózsa

A club linked to the interior ministry and the police, which also had large squads in several sports (check the name and links).

Ferencváros and others

Older city clubs that survived in the new system, with their own traditions and supporters (check).

The links between clubs and state bodies mattered because they decided who could train where, and with what resources (check). The older fencing, swimming and water polo traditions of Chapters 3 to 5 were taken into this structure and benefited from the support.

The Results

Hungary's Olympic results in this era were strong for its size (check each figure, and treat the pattern as more reliable than the numbers):

- **1952, Helsinki.** Hungary's best Games in the period, with a large number of gold medals and a place among the leading nations, including the football gold (check the totals).
- **1956 to 1968.** A steady flow of golds, in fencing, water polo, canoeing, swimming and others (check).
- **The 1970s.** A smaller but still respectable total, with other bloc nations, especially the Soviet Union and East Germany, taking an increasing share (check).
- **1980, Moscow.** Hungary competed in a Games that several Western nations boycotted (check the number of nations).

The 1984 Boycott

For the Los Angeles Games of 1984 the Soviet Union and most of its allies, Hungary among them, stayed away, in what is generally seen as a response to the Western boycott of the Moscow Games four years earlier (check the countries, the stated reasons and the dates). Hungarian athletes who had trained for four years lost their chance to compete (check the effect on named athletes), and the medal tables of that Games are difficult to compare with others. The Hungarian team took part instead in an alternative event for boycotting countries (check). The course describes the episode and takes no side in the Cold War dispute that caused it.

What the numbers cannot tell us

Medal counts from this era reflect both real ability and the effects of a system that put resources into elite sport. They cannot by themselves show how much of the success was due to talent, tradition, training or other factors. Boycotts, and the absence of the strongest rivals in some years, also distort comparisons.

Doping and Its Shadows

Doping in the Eastern bloc has been the subject of investigations and disclosures since the end of the Cold War, most strongly in the case of East Germany, where a state programme was documented (check). For Hungary the picture is less clear. Some Hungarian athletes tested positive in the period, and later accounts suggest that the problem was present in some sports (check), but the scale and organisation in Hungary are less documented and are disputed (check). The course does not assume any individual case and does not say that all or any particular medals were tainted. It does record that the question exists, and that the later reallocation of medals (Chapter 1) was one result of re-testing (check).

A British comparison

Britain's amateur rules and later funding systems also shaped its Olympic story. The contrast between a state-run system, with its advantages and risks, and one based on clubs, universities and later lottery funding is a useful way to think about what produces Olympic success (check the comparison).

Check the details

Club names and links, medal totals by Games, the number of boycotting nations, and all statements about doping are easy to misstate and politically sensitive. Verify against the IOC or Olympedia and reliable histories before quoting.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Describe how state support for elite sport worked under communism, giving one advantage and one risk.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Explain the 1984 boycott and why it makes comparing medal tables difficult.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Write two neutral sentences about doping in the Eastern bloc that state what is documented and what is uncertain.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **System:** state funding, early selection, supported "amateurs" (check)
- **Clubs:** Honvéd, Dózsa, Ferencváros (check)
- **Best Games:** Helsinki 1952 (check)
- **1984:** Soviet-bloc boycott of Los Angeles, including Hungary (check)
- **Doping:** documented elsewhere in the bloc, less clear in Hungary (check)

Hungary at the Olympics

Course 1 · Chapter 9 · After 1989: A New Landscape

When the communist system ended in 1989, the structures that had supported Hungarian sport changed with it. This chapter covers what replaced them, how Hungary has done at the Games since, the argument over spending on stadiums and events, the bid to host the 2024 Games and its withdrawal, and the Paralympic story. Funding and hosting are political questions, and the course describes the facts and the arguments without taking a side. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged for checking.

The End of the Old System

With the end of state control, the centrally planned sports system lost its guaranteed funding and its tie to the army, police and state firms (check what happened to each). Clubs had to find new sources of money, athletes lost their nominal jobs, and sports schools and facilities fell into different hands. Some of the older traditions survived, helped by their clubs and coaches, while others struggled (check the examples). The 1990s were a time of uncertainty for many sports (check).

Results Since 1989

Hungary has continued to win Olympic medals at every Games, though in smaller numbers than the peak of the mid-century (check the figures for each Games, which differ between sources). The general picture is of stability in the older sports, with some variation from Games to Games (check):

Fencing and water polo

Continued success in the traditions of Chapters 3 and 4, including the water polo golds of 2000 to 2008 (check).

Swimming and canoeing

Individual champions and canoe crews, including Egerszegi and Darnyi at the start of the period, and Hosszú and Kozák later (Chapters 5 and 6, check).

New names

Medals in sports such as shooting, modern pentathlon, athletics and wrestling, and a first Winter Olympic gold in 2018 (Chapter 6, check).

Hungary is typically placed in the middle ranks of the table by gold medals, and high on a per-head basis, in line with the argument of Chapter 1 (check the current figures).

Funding and Stadiums

From the 2010s the Hungarian state increased spending on sport, including on new stadiums and arenas and a corporate tax scheme that channelled money to team sports (check the scheme, its name and its changes). Major new venues in Budapest include a national football stadium and a swimming arena (check the names and dates). Hungary has hosted major international championships, including world championships in swimming and athletics (check which and when).

- **The case for.** Supporters argue that investment gives athletes better facilities, brings events and tourism, and builds national pride (check).
- **The case against.** Critics argue that the money could be spent on health, education or grassroots sport, that costs are high, and that contracts and political links raise questions (check).
- **The course's position.** It describes the spending and the arguments, and does not judge which side is right.

The Budapest 2024 Bid

Budapest announced a bid to host the 2024 Summer Games in 2015 (check). The bid was withdrawn in 2017 after opposition grew, including a citizens' petition that sought a referendum on the question (check the dates and the organisers). The government and the Hungarian Olympic Committee then withdrew the bid, and the Games were awarded to Paris for 2024, with Los Angeles taking 2028 (check). The episode is often used as an example of how public opinion can affect hosting plans, and arguments continue over whether the decision was right (check, and take no side).

Hosting as a question

Hosting the Games brings prestige and facilities, and also costs and risks that have led several cities to withdraw in recent years. Budapest's case is one of several, and comparing them is a useful way to think about what a city gains and loses (check the comparisons).

The Paralympic Story

Hungary has competed at the Paralympic Games since the early years of the movement and has won medals across a range of sports, with success in swimming, athletics, table tennis and others (check the details). The Paralympic movement was supported unevenly under the old system and has developed since 1989 (check). The course notes this as a strand of its own, and the limited coverage here reflects the limits of the general sources used (check).

A British comparison

London hosted the 2012 Games, with a legacy debated ever since. Hungary's debate over the 2024 bid and its stadiums echoes British arguments over the cost and legacy of London 2012 and of earlier events (check the comparison).

Check the details

Results by Games, the names and dates of venues, the funding scheme, the dates of the 2024 bid and its withdrawal, and the Paralympic details are easy to misstate and politically sensitive. Verify against the IOC, Olympedia and reliable reporting before quoting.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Describe what changed for Hungarian sport when the communist system ended, and one thing that continued.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Set out the case for and against heavy spending on stadiums and events, without taking a side.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Summarise the story of the Budapest 2024 bid in four or five sentences.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **After 1989:** state structures ended, clubs sought new funding (check)
- **Results:** steady in the traditional sports (check)
- **Funding:** more state spending from the 2010s, new venues (check)
- **2024 bid:** announced 2015, withdrawn 2017 (check)
- **Paralympics:** a strand of its own (check)

Hungary at the Olympics

Course 1 · Chapter 10 · Capstone: A Small Country, Big Medals

The course began with a claim: that a country of about ten million people has one of the best Olympic records in the world per head. After nine chapters on particular sports, years and arguments, this capstone returns to that claim with the evidence in hand. It sums up the pattern of Hungary's strengths, asks what turns a sport into a national tradition, gives a timeline and some places to look, and ends with a method for judging any per-head claim. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged for checking.

The Pattern of Strengths

Water

Swimming, water polo and canoeing, supported by the Danube, the lakes, the pools and the bath culture (Chapters 4 to 6, check).

Combat and skill

Fencing, boxing, wrestling and modern pentathlon, helped by coaching lineages and club traditions (Chapters 3 and 6, check).

Individuals

A succession of champions, from Hajós to the present, each tied to a coach, a club and a pool (Chapters 2 and 5, check).

The gaps

Few medals in large team ball sports and winter sports, until recently (Chapter 6, check).

The pattern matters more than any figure: Hungary's success is concentrated in particular sports where tradition, clubs and coaching have accumulated, and in sports that offer several medals at each Games.

The Per-Head Claim Revisited

Chapter 1 asked what the claim means and why per-head tables can mislead. The course gives the answer in four parts (check each against current tables):

1. **It is broadly true.** On most tables Hungary ranks high for its population, and well above what its size alone would predict.
2. **It is not a simple measure.** The ranking depends on the table, the population used and how successor states are treated.
3. **The sport mix helps.** The medal-rich sports in which Hungary specialises raise the total for a given investment.
4. **The cause is not population alone.** Tradition, clubs, coaching, state support at certain times, and geography each played a part, and nobody can separate their shares exactly.

The lesson of the course

A medal is the end of a long chain of coaches, clubs, pools, money, luck and politics. Per-head tables compress all of that into one number, which is useful for headlines and unhelpful for understanding. The honest summary is that Hungary has done well in particular sports for particular reasons, which this course has tried to describe.

What Makes a Sport a National Tradition?

- **Early champions.** Hajós and the first fencers gave later generations heroes (Chapter 2).
- **Clubs and coaching lines.** Skills passed from master to pupil (Chapters 3 and 5).
- **Places to practise.** The pools, the river, the lakes and the fencing halls (Chapters 4 to 6).
- **Memorable moments.** Matches and Games that become part of national memory, such as Melbourne in 1956 (Chapters 4 and 7).
- **Institutions.** Whether the state, the army or private money, someone has to pay (Chapters 8 and 9).

A Short Timeline

- **1896.** Hajós at Athens (Chapter 2, check).
- **1900s to 1930s.** Fencing and swimming strengths, the first water polo golds, exclusion in 1920 and return in 1924 (Chapters 2 to 4, check).
- **1952 to 1964.** The peak of the mid-century period, including the football gold of 1952, Melbourne in 1956 and a strong run in water sports (Chapters 4 to 8, check).
- **1970s and 1980s.** State sport, the water polo gold of 1976 and the boycott of 1984 (Chapter 8, check).

- **After 1989.** Reorganisation, new champions, new stadiums and the withdrawn 2024 bid (Chapter 9, check).

Where to See and Read

- **See.** The pools and venues named in the course, including the swimming stadium on Margaret Island, and sports museums in Budapest (check what is open and their current names).
- **Watch.** Recordings of the great fencing and water polo matches and the Games of 1952 and 1956, from archives and the Olympic channels (check availability).
- **Read.** The Hungarian Olympic Committee's histories, Olympedia's biographies and results, and the IOC's official results (Chapter 1, check).
- **Compare.** The Golden Team & Hungarian Football for the football story of the same era, and Thermal Baths & Budapest Spa Culture 4 and 5 for the pools of the water sports.

A Method for Judging a Per-Head Claim

1. **Which measure?** Gold medals or total, summer or winter, one Games or all-time.
2. **Which population?** Today's or the time of each Games, and how successor states are counted.
3. **How many medals, and how many events?** A small count or a sport with many events can change the picture.
4. **Which sports?** Concentration in medal-rich sports inflates totals.
5. **Which years?** Boycotts, reallocated medals and disputed early Games affect tables.
6. **What is the claim for?** Pride, tourism, politics or analysis.

A British comparison

Apply the same method to a British claim, such as Britain's rise in the medal table since 1996. The questions about which Games, which sports and which funding apply equally, and the answer is again a pattern of particular strengths and particular investments (check the comparison).

Check the details

Dates, names and medal figures throughout the course are from general knowledge and flagged individually. This summary inherits those cautions. Verify against the IOC or Olympedia before quoting any number.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Summarise in a paragraph the pattern of Hungary's Olympic strengths and one explanation for it.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Apply the six-question method to the claim "Hungary is the best Olympic nation per head".

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Choose a sport from the course and explain what turned it into a national tradition, using the five factors.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **Pattern:** water sports, combat and skill sports, a succession of individuals
- **Per head:** broadly true, but depends on the measure
- **Tradition:** champions, clubs, places, moments, institutions
- **Method:** measure, population, events, sports, years, purpose

- **Caution:** check figures against the IOC and Olympedia