

THE TEAM OF '56

As Britain celebrates its imminent return to Olympic water polo after 56 years, Ian Gordon looks back at the last GB team to appear in the world's greatest sporting festival – at Melbourne in 1956, which also produced the most famous match in history

For water polo aficionados, the tournament held during the Melbourne Olympiad of 1956 has legendary status because of the acrimonious game between the Soviet Union and Hungary, but for home fans of the sport it is remembered as the last time that a British team qualified to compete in Olympic competition.

The recent announcement by the BOA that both GB men's and women's water polo teams will take part next year at the London Olympiad means that, after a gap of 56 years, the country that invented the game and has a great historical record at world level will again contest Olympic water polo matches.

It thus seems a good time to look at the events of 1956 and how Britain fared in their last appearance in what was then a solely male Olympic sport. The Melbourne Games were held in December 1956 against the backdrop of the invasion by Soviet tanks and 200,000 troops into Hungary to quell the popular uprising or revolution against the Soviet puppet government the previous month.

'Blood in the Water'

The match between the two countries on December 6 thus had a much greater significance than that between the reigning Olympic champions (Hungary) and another leading water polo nation (Soviet Union). The game has gone down in Olympic history as the 'Blood in the Water Match' which, although a slight exaggeration, certainly did involve considerable violence. The picture of the Hungarian player Ervin Zador leaving the water with blood pouring from under his eye after being punched by a Soviet player is one of those iconic Olympic images and an abiding memory of Melbourne 1956.

The large crowd was highly partisan following the political events of the previous month and the Hungarian team was roared on to a



deserved 4-0 victory. The game was in fact abandoned before the final whistle because of the fear of crowd violence but awarded to the Hungarians.

Such is the status of the game in Hungary that documentaries and a full-length film have been made showing the Hungarian Revolution through the eyes of one of the team that would go on to retain their Olympic crown. Zador is credited with saying: 'We felt we were playing not just for ourselves but for the whole country.'

Good pedigree

How then did the British team fare in their last Olympic water polo competition?

Their pedigree up until 1956 had been very good. It is generally accepted that water polo was invented in Britain in the 1870s and when the game was included in the Olympics in 1900 a club team from Manchester Osborne SC

representing Britain won the gold medal.

This success was repeated by British teams at the 1908, 1912 and 1920 Olympics (there was no British representation in St Louis in 1904) and it wasn't until the Paris Olympiad of 1924 that a British team was defeated in an Olympic match. Even then it took three periods of extra time before they succumbed by 6-7. Their conquerors on that occasion were Hungary, who would become the dominant polo nation, winning the Olympic titles in 1932, 1936, 1952 and 1956.

Between 1924 and 1956, water polo remained a very popular game in Britain and Jack Jones, the GB team captain in 1956 and legendary Cheltenham player, remembers lock-outs at the old Alstone Baths, Cheltenham, with crowds of over 1,000 spectators inside. The core of the 1956 British team had been brought together after the 1948 Olympics from the dominant teams in the country - Cheltenham, Plaistow United, Polytechnic, Sutton & Cheam and Penguin of Hammersmith.

Great Britain were drawn in the tough Group B with matches against the USA and then Hungary with the top two teams in each group advancing to the next stage. After a narrow defeat by the Americans 5-3, the GB team was comprehensively beaten by the eventual



Above: Blood pours from Ervin Zador's eye after he was punched by a Soviet player

Left: The 1956 Olympic team lineup is believed to be (back, l-r): Jack Ferguson, Arthur Grady, Peter Pass, Cliff Spooner, Gerry Worsell. Front: Bob Knights, Ronnie Turner, Bill Price (TM), Terry Miller, John 'Jack' Jones

winners Hungary 6-1. However, they made amends in the consolation matches defeating Singapore, Romania and Australia to be ranked a creditable seventh overall.

To the *Swimming Times* reporter of the day, it was apparent that the superior fitness of the Hungarian team coupled with their superb ball-handling skills, very fast attack and counter-attack caused the downfall of the British team, who were a more static outfit.

He advocated that the selectors 'get down to the task of discovering young, fast players in time for the Rome Games of 1960' but sadly the rising standards of the rest of the world meant that this was the last time a British water polo team would qualify for an Olympic competition.

Automatic choice

The most experienced member of the team was the skipper, Jack Jones, of Cheltenham S&WPC, whose participation in Melbourne was his third Olympic appearance. A proficient freestyle and backstroke swimmer (he won Western Counties titles) as well as second row forward for Cheltenham Rugby Club, this solicitor was for eight seasons the automatic choice as captain of England and Great Britain. His brother, Phil, also a water polo player, was ASA president in 1996. Even his father was a noted figure at Cheltenham games as timekeeper on the halfway line, armed with an umbrella! A rival team member from Otter SC remembers how big an attraction water polo was in the town with posters in all the shops and Jack very much the 'white knight' against the opposition.

The GB goalkeeper was Arthur Grady of Plaistow United who, at the age of 34, had seemed to get better with age, being named as the best 'keeper' at the Turin European Championships of 1954. By all accounts he had a good tournament in Melbourne. A Thames lighterman by occupation, he was nicknamed 'Chopper' by his club-mates.

Jack Fergusson, who played as a forward, was a member of the strong Motherwell team which dominated Scottish and British swimming in the years after the Second World War. A PE teacher, he was also a proficient gymnast and gave diving displays as part of the Motherwell Circus that toured Britain.

Ronnie Turner, of Penguin SC, a forward, had already played at the 1952 Olympics and was honoured with selection for the Rest of the World Team that played Hungary after the Games. He served his club as captain, masters player and administrator up until his tragic death while cycling in 2007. He was 79.

Gerry Worsell, of Sutton & Cheam, another 1952 Olympian, played as a back. The best story about Gerry relates to how, when playing for Liverpool University, where he studied history, he was penalised in the UAU final against Loughborough for standing - in the 10ft 6in deep end of the pool! He later attained the rank of squadron leader in the RAF.

Cliff Spooner, of Newport SC, a forward, was the sole Welshman on the team. He was a blacksmith at the time of selection but later worked as baths manager at Imperial College. His son, Cliff, followed him as a water polo international for Wales.

Terry Miller, another veteran of the 1952 Olympics, was a giant 6ft 4in forward with a long reach and he once scored a record 309 goals in one season of water polo with his club, Plaistow United. Contemporaries rate him as probably the most talented and outstanding British player of his generation, a view confirmed by continental teams. He worked for Lloyds Bank and was later principal of their training college.

The relative youngster on the 1956 team was Peter Pass, of Polytechnic SC, who, when he finally retired in 1971, had represented Great Britain a record 54 times. The following year he became the first water polo player to be honoured with an MBE.

Bob Knights, like Peter Pass, was a member

Great Britain men's Olympic water polo team 1956

John Shaw 'Jack' Jones
Cheltenham Swimming & WP Club
Captain - midfield
Solicitor

Arthur Robert Grady
Plaistow United SC
Goalkeeper
Thames lighterman

Gerald Albert 'Gerry' Worsell
Sutton & Cheam SC
Back
RAF

Ronald 'Ron' E Turner
Penguin SC
Forward
Engineer with Napier's

Peter Walton Pass MBE
Polytechnic SC
Back
Engraver

Terry Charles 'Terry' Miller
Penguin SC
Forward
Lloyds Bank

Edwin Clifford 'Cliff' Spooner
Newport SC
Forward
Blacksmith and later baths manager

John Andrew 'Jack' Ferguson
Motherwell AS and WPC
Centre forward
Schoolmaster

Robert 'Bob' Edwin Knights
Polytechnic SC
Reserve
Travel shipping business



of Polytechnic SC, the dominant British club from 1969-77. He travelled to Melbourne as team reserve. He died in March this year.

One thing is certain: whatever fortunes await the Great Britain men's and women's water polo teams next year in London, they can be sure that Hungary, the most famous winners in Olympic history in 1956, will continue to provide formidable opposition. **[E]**

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Freedom's Fury DVD

This inspiring and thought-provoking DVD depicting the role of Hungary in the 1956 Olympic water polo tournament, against a backdrop of suppression, was reviewed in the April 2009 edition of *Swimming Times*. It is well worth watching - an intriguing mix of sport and politics - and is still available to purchase from internet outlets

