

## THE DECADE OF SERBIAN WATER POLO

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### **Abstract**

Water polo was originally developed in the British Isles. The colloquial term “aquatic football” was quickly adopted in many countries and their sport systems. With the adoption of the first rules (1929) the development of technique and tactics was intensified, and the philosophy of the game itself deepened. An important development factor was the founding and the work of the International Swimming Federation (FINA, 1908) and its water polo board (1929), as well as the affirmation through the Olympic Games program (Paris, 1900), European (Budapest 1926) and World Championships (Belgrade 1973). Water polo appeared in Serbia at the beginning of the last century, when the students from Sombor who studied in Budapest “transferred” the essence and the appeal of this game to Serbia. The students - the players of Sombor sports society won the first Kingdom of Yugoslavia National Championship in water polo held in Bled (1921). The primacy was quickly obtained by the teams from the sea coast, primarily the “WPC Jug” from Dubrovnik, and from the 1960s also the teams from the continental part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, primarily Partizan and Mladost. The water polo organization played a significant role in the development of water polo in the SFRY and ensured the conditions for the development of “the Yugoslav school of water polo”. The successes of the national team and the clubs during the period of the SFRY, continue in today’s Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia. The national independence of the Republic of Serbia (2006) did not affect the national team’s results. The teams of the Serbian Water Polo Federation, from 2006 to 2016 have accomplished extraordinary sports results, and today, at the end of 2020, the Serbian senior national team is ranked first on the FINA's list of national teams. This paper addresses the golden decade of Serbian water polo (2006-2016). It aims at analysing the factors considered to have influenced the development of the water polo game, primarily, the players - their talent and hard work, coaches, the efficient national organization, sports officials, science and scientific methods... all of them who together encourage the improvement and development of the water polo game through individual contribution - the Serbian players' ethos.

**Key words:** WATERPOLO / DEVELOPMENT/ YUGOSLAVIA / SERBIA/

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## **WATER POLO - DISCOVERING THE MEANING OF THE GAME**

Water polo is a team sport of smart and intelligent outplaying in water. It is a sport where male and female players have unique swimming abilities and shooting skills, exceptional physical fitness, and developed coordination skills. Today's water polo is a game of high pace and tempo, however, at the same time, a static water polo prevails in the positional part of the game with numerous fouls, contacts, and "on the verge of incident" duels, with little diving and little tactical combinatorics during the attack phase (Hrastić, Bebić, Rudić, 2012). This paper of the Croatian authors followed the notational analysis of the results at the World Championship in Rome (2009), where the Serbian national team won the gold medal. They have concluded that the male matches are characterized by the divergence between tied and suspenseful matches...because of which the game of elite male water polo matches has to be analysed in regards to certain margins that led to victory, and not through victory and defeat. In that sense, the authors concluded that in those tied games, winning was based on a large number of ejections of the opposing team, while winning of the matches with unquestionable results was developed on the team's defensive game (Lupo, Condello, Tessitore, 2012).

Water polo is amongst the oldest sports games in the modern Olympic Games program (the demonstration match at the OG program in Paris, 1900). The first Olympic winner was Great Britain's National team. The first European Championship was held in 1926 in Budapest. The Hungarian national team won the Championship, as well as the First World Championship held in Belgrade (1973).

The history of water polo has taught us that its' cradle is Great Britain. It is recorded that the Glasgow Daily announced that "aquatic football" was being organized for the occasion of the swimming pool opening. Two teams of British sailors competed, and the match abounded in pushing, sinking, and "running aimlessly" after a football ball that was floating on the water. Although the competition looked more like a circus, this game is considered to be the beginning of water polo. "The aquatic football" had been accepted by many, thus the game became popular in many countries, and, thanks to the British sailors, on many continents, primarily in British colonies. The unclear rules during the initial development phase of the game were the biggest problem, which resulted in their different interpreting. Therefore, due to inconsistencies in the rules, from the very beginning, water polo was presented as a rough game, similar to rugby. The early versions of the game allowed brutalities, wrestling, and holding an opponent under the water. The original rules and propositions dictated the size of the field, the dimensions of the ball and the goal, the number of players (goalkeeper and six players), as well as the rules limiting walking and midfield players using the floor of the pool to propel themselves (Donev, Aleksandrović, 2008). Although the rules of the game were the essence of advancement in water polo development, the misunderstandings of them, at the beginning of this sport's affirmation, as well as today, have not stopped. It is clear that this game, just as well as others, developed through the development of the rules, from the original ones, established by the Metropolitan swimmers association (1876) to the current rules, with the latest update in 2018. Regardless of when the rules were formulated and adopted, in every version of the game, the philosophy of wise and chivalrous competition existed, and it is still alive today.

The rules changed in order to improve the game or to keep up with technological advancements. However, in the beginning, as well as in modern water polo, there were periods when the rules hindered the game's development. It can be said that the real harmonization and direction of the rules towards the progress of the game itself began in 1929 when the technical board for water polo was formed at the World Swimming Federation (FINA). This board consisted of four Britons and four FINA members. The purpose of this board was to create a unique set of rules that makes the game more dynamic and gives better results (Donev, Aleksandrović, 2008). It could be summarized

that all the changes in the rules, including the last ones from 2018, brought a change in the dynamics of the game, its acceleration, shortening of some time intervals, but also referee objectivity. In addition, the changes in the rules have achieved no less importance in the sports and medical protection of athletes, their health, and the extension of their sports careers. This is how Game Video Monitoring should be understood, as an objective way to, among other things, identify brutalities during or after a match (Mountjoy, Miller, Junge, 2018).

Changing the rules affected the dynamics of the game itself, but also all forms of competitive preparation, tactics, and strategy. Although the rules of the game have been significantly improved and chivalrously ennobled during a century of the game's development, nevertheless, from the very beginning this sport has constantly remained extremely "physiologically" demanding, even today. In the scientific review of the same, a lot of attention has been paid to the technical and strategic elements of the game. However, despite the potential to improve athletic performance and maintain athletes' health, few studies have been published on physical and physiological requirements and adaptation to water polo training and competitions (Smith, 2012). However, studies have concluded that a high level of fitness is necessary for water polo, due to its association with superior technical and tactical efficiency and a smaller decline in physical or technical performance in the game (Botonis, Toubekis, Platanou, 2019). Through the historical development of water polo, Hrastić and associates (2012) identified five developmental stages and predicted the next, hypothetical stage in the development of the game, through the application of "new" rules based on encouraging the structure of the game in terms of achieving a balance between attack and defence in two basic game states, the position, and the transition. With the new philosophy, the game could clearly experience new dimensions of attractiveness and creativity (Hrastić et al, 2012).

In addition to the rules, an important factor in the development of this game and sport are competitions. The history of water polo competitions is filled with events through the program of the modern Olympic Games. The games, with their mission and vision of the development of sports, encouraged the water polo organization to change the game in the direction of its attractiveness but also its "television" appeal.

### **WATER POLO - A MODERN SPORT IN THE KINGDOM OF SERBIA**

Water polo appeared in Serbia at the beginning of the last century, when the students from Sombor who studied in Budapest "transferred" the essence and the appeal of this game to Serbia. By adopting this game, the Sombor Sports Association became the Serbian and Yugoslav cradle of this game. As in similar situations around the world, the voluntary sports association affirmed the idea of changing society through modern sports and the mass culture of citizens. The mass culture in Bačka showed that Serbia is a part of the World and that in and in it society can develop through the sports scene, that is, through "intellectual drives that have produced the modern idea of state systems, economic relations, and human nature" (Kretchmar, Dyreson, Liewellyn, Gleaves, 2017).

Students - players of the Sombor Sports Association won the provincial championship of Hungary (1913), and at the First State Championship in water polo in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in Bled (1921), they won first place and became the first state champions in water polo. The second state championship was held in 1922 in Belgrade. All participants were greeted by posters that read in large letters: "Unseen in Belgrade! Football in water played with hands!"

The Yugoslav water polo national team played its first official international match on August 27, 1927, and beat Poland 8-0. The next day, also within the All-Slavic Championship, they played a 2-2 draw with Czechoslovakia and won first place. (Colundia, 2020). The golden age of the "Jug" from Dubrovnik, which won fourteen titles of the state champion of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, will remain in the club competition.

## **CONTINUITY OF WATER POLO DEVELOPMENT IN STATE DISCONTINUITY**

### **Water Polo Federation - a Shining Example of Sports Organization**

The development of water polo through the profession and policy of water polo federation, throughout all periods of SFRY, FRY, and the state union of Serbia and Montenegro (until 2006), as well as the state independent Republic of Serbia (since 2006), can today be discussed from the position of half a century legacy of building the "Yugoslav School of water polo". The subject of this paper includes the facts from the sports organization of water polo that made this game the number one national sport, both during the federal periods of the former SFRY, and in Serbia, Montenegro, and Croatia today. The second field of analysis belongs to the course of international sports affirmation of the Yugoslav school of water polo, as a legacy of importance for the development of Serbian water polo, while the third space of analysis refers to the national structure and club water polo from 2006 until today. It can be concluded that the Yugoslav School of Water Polo was the cornerstone for the game's development and the sport of water polo, according to which this analysis includes this school's specifics. In other words, as with any school, athletes, programs, coaches, and outcomes were analysed. Special attention has been paid to mentoring as a model for educating coaches.

### **Water Polo Federation in Socialism - The Period of Foundations**

It is difficult to remove sports from society, especially the social system in which it is organized. Following the end of the Second World War until the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the USSR and SFRY, an intensive phase of the development of water polo and its associated organization took place. During the half a century of development in socialist Yugoslavia, the essence of the organization was the club infrastructure, noting the uneven territorial development or better said, the inaccessibility of this game and sport in most of the continental SFRY. Immediately after the Second World War, in a socialist society, as well as during the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, clubs from the sea (Jadran and Mornar from Split and Jug from Dubrovnik) had the upper hand in club organization. Thanks to the conditions for training and competition in the warm sea, the coastal inhabitants have adopted the meaning of the game and the way of training to the peculiarities of the Dinaric-Mediterranean type, its mentality, or in a word ethos filled with habits, skills, behaviour but also a talent for play and outplaying based on adaptation, improvisation learning and practicing, but also on the "unpredictability of our players, their cunning, twists, risk, collectivism and individualism together" (Paunić, 2007). When the conditions for the development of water polo in certain continental parts of the country were created, the movement of players towards university, economic, political centres took place, primarily towards Belgrade and Zagreb. A large number of players from coastal teams moved to the continental part of the country. Thus, students Orlić, Arsić, Trumbić, Čukvas, Belamarić, Rudić, Marović, Dabović, Radan, Perišić, Depolo, and others found themselves in this great water polo migration from the sea coast (<http://www.yugopapir.com/2014/07/istorijat-vaterpola-kako-se-domaci.html>) future bearers of the player and professional philosophy of water polo. Very soon, Partizan from Belgrade and Mladost from Zagreb took over the role of leading clubs and became the leaders of water polo development. The epilogue is known, in the period from 1962 to 1979, i.e. for 18 consecutive years, Partizan and Mladost took turns over the first place in the state championship, with Partizan winning 14 (from 1972 to 1979, 8 in a row), and Mladost 4 championship titles. The dominance of the teams of these two clubs spread to the continent, thus Partizan won 6 titles and Mladost 4 titles (a total of 10 titles) of the European club champion. The good national and international results of the two "continental" teams and the danger of constant migration of players and coaches, encouraged clubs from the sea to plan in terms of their own sustainability, which, in a way, established rivalry between the coast as a source of good players,

coaches, ideas and innovations, and the users of those talents, i.e. clubs from university and economic centres. By learning, designing, planning, in a word, guided by the principles of sustainability of the sports organization, continental clubs also start their own water polo schools. The starting point of their development was the transfer of programs and philosophies of coastal schools, by which a special meaning - the ethos of seafarers' game "swam" in the continental part, both in the program, training, and in the part of professional work. The example of VK Partizan speaks best in support of this multifaceted influence of coastal sensibility. At the beginning of the sixties, Vlaho Bata Orlić, a medical student, came to Partizan as a player and a coach. Partizan, then a member of the Second Federal League, won first place and became a member of the First National League. In the first season of the First League (1962/63), Partizan, under the coaching leadership of Orlić, won first place, and the following season (1963/64) the first European Champions Cup. The appearance of a coach and an organizer, such as Vlaho-Bata Orlić had been, was not only important for the water polo club Partizan, but also for water polo in the former Yugoslavia, and therefore in Serbia. Creating a collective such as the water polo club Partizan established the foundations for the progress of water polo and a more efficient territorial representation of the water polo organization. With the opening of the Sports and Recreation Centre Banjica (1973), conditions were created for the organization of a school that soon became, according to many, the best water polo school not only in Serbia and Yugoslavia but also in Europe and the world. With the school of water polo, planning the athletes' development, water polo team Partizan became a source of internationally recognized talents (Andrić, Milanović, Šoštar, Vasović, Savić, Ikodinović, Šapić Ćirić, Gocić, Nikić, Filipović, Mitrović, Jakšić ...). In addition to the conditions that the players and coaches had for training, the organization of the club, from the management to the training process and monitoring the players from their earliest age to their senior days, made Partizan become the driving force of Yugoslav and Serbian water polo. During that period, the entire water polo organization advanced, since the construction of the pool ensured the conditions for organizing competitions throughout the entire year. Intentionally or not, the construction of swimming pools of appropriate dimensions in larger hotels on the sea (Solaris near Šibenik, Amfora in Hvar, Kupari near Dubrovnik, Kantrida in Rijeka) enabled teams that geographically gravitated to these pools to train and organize competitions, i.e. for national selections to prepare in facilities with a complete sports service, including quality sparring and learning through training with their equal and-or better. Water polo began to organize competitions throughout the year (season 1972/73, the First National Championship that started in the fall and ended in the spring), players trained in a more organized manner, training methods became better, and clubs from the sea became more competitive in competitions. A value was acquired that included leadership, planning, training methodology, a base of young players backed by talented coaches, a dedicated local community, and the support of social enterprises.

Although the optimal conditions for training and competition had to be waited for, still, the water polo organization managed to recognize the originality of the Yugoslav area, shaped it within the special meaning of the game, and affirmed it as competitive on the international competition scene, i.e. already at the Olympic Games in Helsinki, the Yugoslav national team played in the final and won a silver medal. After the Olympic debut, in the following periods of the Yugoslav, and then the national teams of the FR Yugoslavia and DZ, Serbia and Montenegro won medals at the Olympic Games (1952, 1956, 1960, 1968, 1980, 1984, 1988, 2000, 2004), the world (1973), 1978, 1986, 1991, 1998, 2001, 2003, 2005), and continental championships (1950, 1954, 1958, 1962, 1966, 1974, 1977, 1985, 1987, 1989, 1991, 1999, 2001, 2003).

The talent of the players and coaches, as well as the efficient organization, were enough for the national team to always be at the top in major competitions. Naturally, as in every sport, there were occasional falls in water polo as well, from which the organization learned and came out stronger. The first among the greatest sporting successes, water polo players achieved in 1968 at the

Olympic Games in Mexico. The gold medal is the result of a great generation of players from two "mainland" clubs. Sandić, Janković, Marović, Perišić and Dabović from Partizan, goalkeepers Šimenc and Hebl, Bonačić, Trumbić and Lopatni and Poljak from Mladost. The coaching duo were Vlaho Orlić and Aleksandar Sajfert. After these Games, it was expected that the path to success was a lesson learned, especially since the clubs Partizan and Mladost were almost unbeatable in Europe. However, the result of the national team was missing in the next two Olympic cycles (two fifth places in Munich and Montreal). The cessation of participation in the finals of Olympic tournaments is connected with the appearance of a new generation of players who, along with several more experienced players (Rudić, Belamarić ...) and a new coach, Trifun Miro Ćirković from Kotor, won the silver medal at the Olympics in Moscow (1980). The new coach with new energy had a large selection of younger players who matured in clubs that developed during the seventies and came closer to Partizan and Mladost in terms of quality. The distribution of quality by clubs created a competition that led to a national league of 12 teams. In other words, the development of the water polo organization enabled the coach to choose and form a team that indicated a potential for future competitions.

Since its Olympic debut in Helsinki, the water polo organization seems to be secretly striving for an Olympic string of titles. On that path and with the idea of stringing together titles, in 1983, Ratko Rudić took over the national team as a head coach. A great player, winner of several European club titles in the Partizan cap, a silver Olympic medalist in Moscow, a player with a lot of bad luck and injuries before major competitions, and a player accused of doping at the World Cup in Kali (1985), in a process that has never been officially proven. Rudić replaced his career of a player with one of a coach, in the next thirty years went on to win, first with the Yugoslav national team (two Olympic gold medals - Los Angeles and Seoul and one world gold medal - Madrid, 1986), and later with other national teams with which he worked, everything that can be won. After the Olympics in Seoul the string of gold medals was continued by Nikola Stamenić from Belgrade as a national team head coach, winning a gold medal at the World Championships in Perth and, for the first time, a gold medal at the European Championships in Athens with the Yugoslav national team in the same year (1991).

During the periods of respite of successes at the Olympics, a real "harvest of medals" took place at the world and continental championships. The first gold medal at the World Championships was won in Madrid (1986) and confirmed in Perth (1991), while the first gold medal at the Continental Championships was won in Athens (1991). Although the Yugoslav national team won ten medals before Athens, the brightest one was awaited for a long time, forty-one years. It is a measure of the quality and value of water polo in Serbia and Montenegro because for the first time there were no players from Croatia in the national team, who left the national team at the request of their national leadership. The memory of the famous sports journalist of "Politika", Ivan Cvetković, will remain documented. "In 1991, the European Championship in Athens was awaited for, but two weeks before the championship, the Croats carried out the secession both on land and in the pool. They left the national team. Half of the players left. Šimenc, Bukić, Bezmalinović were important, and the philosopher Stamenić said, without any concern: "I don't understand why the panic. We'll be the European champions!" How, when Yugoslavia was left with half a team? What did Stamenić know that kept him afloat? And why was he so self-confident, and it was well known that he was not a prophet? What is the secret of water polo that turns Serbs and Montenegrins (author's addition) into eternal champions? How has water polo become a sublimation of everything that Serbs and Montenegrins (author's addition) like to think about themselves and claim to be? And that then, they were: brave, persistent, moral, and honest. And the best in the world? In fact, Stamenić knew the key formula. Croatian Šimenc played, but he had an equally good replacement, the great Gočanin. Šimenc had the advantage because he was only a percentage or two better players, but that is a small difference that only Stamenić and Rudić could recognize at the time. That is why Stamenić was so

calm. He knew that water polo is a perpetuum mobile, a Serbian and Montenegrin (author's addition) magical machine of ultimate creation and endless movement towards victory, that is regenerated by itself.

#### **Water polo organization in the time of social and sports challenges (1991-2006)**

Players of Serbian and Montenegrin clubs who were members of the national team in the period from the Olympics in Helsinki to the breakup of the SFR of Yugoslavia (1991), or until the state independence of the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Montenegro (2006) made a great contribution to winning medals at major competitions (Olympic Games, World Championships, European Championships, World Cup). After the great success in Athens, the disintegration of the SFRY took place, but also a new challenge for the water polo organization of the imposed sports sanctions of the United Nations against the sports of the FR of Yugoslavia. Water polo players, as well as other national teams, did not participate in the program of international competitions for the next three years. During that period, a large number of competing players sought engagements in foreign clubs, which, due to circumstances, created space for young players who trained in the country. During the period of sanctions, new generations of players have matured, so it can be said that the water polo federation, especially its clubs, did a lot to recognize the distinctive growth of new players and "win" and improve training methods that would lead to top water polo players without an international program. This was not written about, maybe it was not even thought about, but it was obviously a challenge and innovation that ensured the preservation of the competitiveness of Serbian and Montenegrin water polo, through training and without competition in the international program. After the lifting of sports sanctions, the first major competition was the Atlanta Olympics (1996). Unfortunately, due to problems, primarily in the water polo federation itself, the selection of FR Yugoslavia won the 8<sup>th</sup> place, which is the weakest placement at the Olympic Games ever. To improve the situation, the water polo federation reappoints Nikola Stamenić as the head coach, who rejuvenates the team and wins the first silver medal at the European Championship in Seville (1997). Two years later, he won the 7th place in Florence, so the head coach position was given to Nenad Manojlović, who gathered the best players from domestic and foreign clubs and won medals at the Olympics in Sydney (2000) and Athens (2004). These, as well as the medals at the next world and continental championships, speak to the continuity of the quality training process, as the strength of the water polo federation that has established its mission on knowledge, sports, personal and organizational values.

#### **WATER POLO - THE ORGANISATION OF THE INTELLIGENT AND THE PRAISEWORTHY**

Due to the influence of prominent sports workers in international water polo organizations, above all, Ante Lambaša, a long-time member of the FINA Board of Directors and its President from 1980 to 1984, as well as the President of the European Swimming Federation (LEN) from 1982 to 1986 (he was the only president of both organizations at the same time and their lifetime honorary member), as well as Miša Radan, a member of the Technical Commission of the FINA Water Polo Committee, Belgrade was entrusted with organizing the First World Championship in swimming, water polo, diving, and artistic swimming.

The development of a water polo coach is a process that takes several years, which for most coaches begins during their career as a player. Analyses of national water polo systems in Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia, Hungary, Italy, Russia ... indicate that former water polo players are at the head of national teams, as well as at the head of numerous clubs competing at the national and international level. These coaches acquired knowledge, skills, attitudes about the training and competition process in water polo through their previous sports careers, but also through training (continuation of non-

formal education through courses, seminars ...) and schooling (formal education at educational institutions). What these national water polo systems have in common is mentoring as a way to spread knowledge and encourage coaching efficiency. Mentoring contains the principles of good practice and it is a method that supports the work of coaches with water polo players of all levels of competitive results and ages. "Not all water polo coaches can be top experts, but any coach can improve their knowledge and skills and thus become a better coach." In the above-mentioned systems, training and competitions are places for learning, but water polo coaches also learn through the organization of various seminars, workshops, technical camps, published professional material, and today also through the organization of websites and building a coaching network. Mentors help in the very complex process of coach transition during their development of several years (Table 1). In other words, the basis of mentoring is situational and problem-based learning which, as science confirms, creates the highest level of knowledge and builds preconditions for their application in practice (Radojević, Grbović, Jevtić, 2019). In the former Yugoslavia, mentoring was nurtured both at the level of the national system and at the regional level. Vlaho Bata Orlić was the main mentor. Vladimir Pavlović Paja also achieved no less influence and importance, as a fitness coach he introduced innovations in the swimming preparations of the players.

**Table 1** Coach development through mentoring (updated according to Pivotta, 2011)

<b>Coach development levels through mentoring</b>	<b>Role of the mentor</b>
<b>Initiation phase</b> , the beginning of shaping a young coach through the analysis of training and competition activities for a given age and level of competition. Work in relation to standards in working with athletes. This is the phase of accepting and applying examples of best practice in gaining personal experience and respecting standards and guidelines related to the safety and security of an athlete, growth, and development, psycho-social well-being of the sport...	Provides examples of the optimal model, makes analyses of the coaches' work, encourages conversation with examples of personal and good practice. The mentor deals with observation, analyses and draws conclusions about the activity of the trainer, directs him towards the sources of non-formal and informal education...
<b>Competent phase</b> , within which the coach increasingly uses the experience gained through previous coaching practice and working with a mentor, but also the knowledge gained through forms of non-formal and informal education. ...	Supports examples of personal and good practice in training and competition activities of the coach. The mentor directs the coach towards expanding knowledge, but also the analysis of experience on the basis of reflection on what has been done..
<b>Reflective phase</b> during which the coach relies heavily on the reflection of personal experience gained through previous coaching activity and work with a mentor, a continuation of non-formal and informal education. ...	The mentor encourages the coach to be objective in self-reflection as well as encouraging new coaching curiosity ...
<b>Autonomy phase</b> during which the coach independently shapes his further development creates the contents of non-formal and informal education ...	The mentor becomes a partner, they cooperate and stimulate each other towards further development...

The International Swimming Hall of Fame and Museum (ISHOF), founded in 1962, recognizes athletes and sports workers from 39 countries who are credited with the development and affirmation of aquatic sports. Among them are players from Croatia and Serbia. On this list Serbia is represented by Igor Milanović as the best center of all time, Mirko Sandić for his success at the Games in Tokyo (1964), Mexico City (1968); Aleksandar Šoštar for two Olympic gold medals in a row (1984, 1988)...

## **WATER POLO IN THE FIRST DECADE OF SERBIAN INDEPENDENCE**

A large number of medals at all international competitions indicates that water polo is the most successful competitive sport in the Republic of Serbia. Although there are problems, both with a small number of clubs and in the organization of national competitions, the national senior team continues to string medals on its gold chain and its image of the most successful selection in the FINA



ranking (for the period 2016-2020). Three medals were won at the Olympic Games, one gold (2016) and two bronze (2008, 2012). Three medals were won at the world championships, two gold (2009, 2015) and one silver (2011), as well as the placement in the fourth (2007) and seventh place (2013), respectively. Participation in the European championships was exceptional, with almost perfect results. Four gold medals (2006, 2012, 2014, 2016), one silver (2008), and one bronze medal (2010) were won at six championships. The World League is the most recent competition established as the successor to the World Cup. In the period from 2006 to 2016, 11 final tournaments were held. The Serbian team participated in 10, where they won 9 first and one-third place. This competition has a particularly important place in the pre-Olympic year as a qualifying and/or control competition. It is also a competition in which young players have tested and affirmed themselves.

In total, in the period from 2006 to 2016, the Serbian national team participated in 24 competitions and won 16 gold medals, 2 silver medals, 4 bronze medals, and won one fourth place and one seventh place. This quantity of medals puts water polo sport in the first place in terms of success in Serbia, i.e. in the leading place in the FINA ranking for the period 2016-2020.

In order to achieve the aforementioned results, a systematic work of many years was necessary both within clubs and the national team. Water polo club Partizan was an example of organizing a club and creating conditions for training. On the other hand, the organization of training and the program of preparations in the national team relied, primarily, on the effects of training both in WPC Partizan and increasingly in foreign clubs where the largest number of national team members trains and competes. Through this, let's name it a hybrid model, the conditions have been created for superior mastery in outplaying in the water. Young players, the product of a long-term training process in WPC Partizan, above all Filipović, Gocić, Nikić, Pjetlović, and Prlainović have been irreplaceable members of the national team since 2006. Savic, Ikodinovic, Vujasinovic, Ciric, and Udovicic, in symbiosis with the younger generation, were the bearers of the game in the 2005-2008 Olympic cycle. In the 2009-2012 cycle, at the London Olympics, Vanja Udovicic led a team of experienced young players that won a bronze medal. At the Rio Olympics (2016), the team led by Filipović rounded off the golden string with an Olympic gold medal. This golden string carries gold medals from the World Championships in Kazan (2015), the European Championships in Antwerp (2016), and the World League in Huizhou (2016). The golden string of results was not created by accident. During their career, the Serbian national players played for the best domestic or foreign teams, which were led by quality coaches through training and competition. However, the fact to remember is that almost all players in some period of their career trained and played in WPC Partizan, where they went through the system of the practice of proven training. The practice that dictated that all potential national team members have to be in joint preparations, at least two months before a competition, also affected the development of each individual, especially younger players who, motivated to become standard members of the first national team, participated in preparations and got accustomed to the system. People most responsible for the results of the Serbian water polo are well-known internationals, led by the national team head coaches, Dejan Udovičić (2006-2012) and Dejan Savić (since 2012). Both coaches are WPC Partizan players. What is interesting is that in the period from 2006 to 2016, a total of 25 players passed through the national team, that is 4 goalkeepers and 21 field players. The biggest generational change was made after the Olympics in Beijing when as many as 6 players ceased playing for the national team (goalkeeper Šefik, Vujasinović, Savić, Ćirić, Šapić, and Peković). Such a radical generational change was an incentive for young players to prove and affirm their talent through a national selection.

Everything achieved between 2006 and 2016, is primarily the result of systematic work in water polo from the earliest age - water polo school, to the senior category. Most of the players originated from the Partizan water polo school, but there are players from Novi Sad and other Serbian clubs. It has already been mentioned that the largest number of players spent a part of their career in

the Partizan senior team. Many years of playing together practically turned the national team into a team that everyone was happy to come to after a long and hard club season. The biggest problem was and still is the control of endurance and training programs during the shift from the international clubs to the national team activities. This, perhaps the most complex process of the endurance shift, has been entrusted to Vladimir Pavlović, a long-term fitness-swimming coach in Partizan and the national team. One of the important factors that influenced the achievement of top results in the mentioned ten-year period, in addition to the undeniable talent and top skills of the players, is also the top physical preparation. The fact that in big competitions the team mostly played in the same line-up, and that the changes in the team, if there were any, were not conditioned by injuries, but by the coach's desire to try some younger players and some new tactical-strategic ideas, properly affirms the top sports preparation and overall performance for each competition. The fact is that superior physical and swimming fitness is the best injury prevention (Mountjoy et al, 2018).

The phenomenon of the national team's duration is a consequence of numerous thoughtful actions and experiences of the whole system. The motive of national recognition and awards established by the Republic of Serbia for medals at the Olympic Games, world and continental championships should not be neglected. The players who won medals in the period beginning in 2006 are, primarily, confident and highly motivated for sports... with a clear goal to achieve most in every competition.

### **WATER POLO IN DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN PERIODICALS**

The desire to explore the being that is water polo and the meaning of the game itself has conditioned, in addition to creating better training conditions and improving coaches and training aids, the change in training methodology and introduced new training technology in all training and competitive categories. Levels of training methodology were reached filled with professional answers, how and how much training is taking place. Recovery, prophylaxis, and overall care for the health of athletes (physical, affective, social ...) occupy a high place in the agenda of water polo coaches and water polo federation. The imperative of training perfection is a player who is adequately prepared - rested for each subsequent training. The answers to these, as well as other important questions for the water polo game development, were provided by national and international researchers, following, most often, different spaces of training work and different positions of players' competitive activities. The characteristic of the research approach, for which it can be said to have a holistic approach, is the phenomenon of maintaining a top sports result of players who, chronologically, are getting older (Dopsaj, Matković, 1994; Dopsaj, Matković, 1999; Bratusa, Matković, Dopsaj, 2003; ...) up to the phenomenon of building assumptions for the affirmation of the talents of the upcoming age categories (Bratuša, Dopsaj, Peranović, 2006; Bratuša, Dopsaj 20010, 2012a, 2012, b; Bratuša, Dopsaj, Milenković, 2014...). In other words, water polo training that leads to top results has become a complex process that takes several years of planning. The knowledge gained by the researchers following the activities of the players was put into a function of the game itself, the position in the team (Dopsaj, Bratuša, 2006), biomotor development of young people, and the specifics of swimming and outplaying in a horizontal and vertical position (Bratuša, 2000, 2002; Bratuša, Dopsaj, Stirn, Peranović, 2008; Bratuša, Perišić, Dopsaj, 2010). A large number of studies was based on monitoring the activities of age categories, as a base within which it was necessary to teach players general and water polo specific skills, develop their abilities, convey the meaning of the game and outplays ..., which, as preconditions for development, meet the programs agenda for the development and affirmation of personal talent in the role of building a player and his placement in a top team.

Tracking players in training is not a simple learning process. The aquatic environment is difficult for reliable measurements. Accordingly, it was necessary to design measurement flows with

data that are valid, reliable, objective. The research was moving in different directions. A number of researchers have dealt with the morphological characteristics of players (Aleksandrovic, Radovanovic, Okicic, Madic, 2005) and-or their interpretation within a function of a specific motor task in water (Dopsaj, 2010a and b). Some analysed the structure of the game, which required a certain methodology of observation and analysis, while a number of them dealt with the players' skills and abilities in the horizontal and vertical position in the water. This type of research required special preconditions, so the measuring equipment and tests were standardized to measure the abilities and skills of players in the water during specific water polo movements.

Over time, as the game became more dynamic, researchers increasingly monitored the structure of the game (Dopsaj & Matković, 1999) and horizontal physical fitness (Matković, 1998; Bratuša, 2002; Bratusa, Dopsaj, 2006; Aleksandrovic et al., 2007; Bratusa et al, 2003; Perišić, Bratusa, 2009; Bratusa et al, 2010; Bratusa, Dopsaj, 2010; Dopsaj 2010; Ozkol et al, 2010). The analysis of the game's structure showed that the vertical position is the dominant one during the competition (Dopsaj, Matković, 1994), according to that fact, extensive research is being done on the abilities and skills that ensure player's stability, mobility, and efficiency, i.e. the ability to initiate and perform numerous movements and actions such as jumps, shots, etc., from that position. In general, over time, with the development process of the game and its dynamics, more and more attention is devoted, above all, to the technique of working the legs in a vertical position that enables the performance of the mentioned actions (Bratuša, 2015).

## CONCLUSION

Water polo in Serbia has a tradition of over 110 years. The level of competitive results that the water polo organization achieved through the Yugoslav society, and especially during the independent Republic of Serbia, is the result of a well-reflected practice which, as such, is shaped, organized, and strategically realized through the national water polo school.

The personification of the wise and, above all, good practice of the water polo sport and game, is the Partizan Water Polo Club. With the arrival of Vlaho Bata Orlić to Partizan, in two years the club went from a champion of the Second National league to a national and first winner of the European Champion Cup. The organization of the club in all segments enabled the achievement of top results, and the construction of Sports and Recreation Centre Banjica, which was the home of WPC Partizan, conditions were created for organizing work from the youngest senior categories with special emphasis on shaping national team players and outstanding individuals who won numerous Olympic, world and European titles, but who, above all, as good people and successful individuals were and still are the nation's pride and source of motivation for achievement to citizens.

During the range of 67 years, from 1952, when the first medal was won, until 2019, the senior national teams of the Water Polo Federation won 60 medals at the most significant international water polo tournaments, 29 of which were gold, 17 silver, and 14 bronze medals. From 2006 to 2016, 22 medals were won, 16 of which were gold.

The results do not come by themselves, they are the sum of many factors. Shaping an athlete is a patient, thought-out, and systematic process that takes several years.

The knowledge system describes the water polo federation that nurtures water polo and leads players, coaches, and sports officials to success in the country and abroad.

A big question that remains is how it is possible to maintain the state of the achieved results. It is not a simple answer, it can be found in every element of the structure of the water polo federation, from the players, their families, the educational and the sports system itself, peers, coaches, teammates... In order to maintain the results, a strong national championship is necessary, a

competitive high-quality competition through which young players and young coaches can be affirmed.

Talent is born but, above all, it is created and affirmed through the national model of water polo. Coaching is one of the oldest professions for which talented individuals are being educated and trained today. New times require creative and educated experts in the environment of athletes, in the club, national organization, but also international sports organizations that shape and direct the development of water polo as a sport!

The scientific method applied in the study of water polo has an orientation towards the biomotor capacity of players and the professional potential of coaches and organizations in order to turn it into cognitive, methodological, and competitive value. The research results so far are an added value and confirmation of the academic being of this sport. However, the sport of water polo, as a specific expression of the player and a method of learning and training in Serbia, is a characteristic of the ethos that requires cognitive steps for the purpose of its scientific and cultural affirmation.

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