THE FOUNDATION OF THE ATHLETIC CLUB FROM KOLOZSVAR AND ITS FIRST COMPETITIONS

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Abstract

The idea of founding an athletic club in Kolozsvár occurred 125 years ago, when the current of English athletic belief reached our city. Thus a well-organized and well-managed athletic club opened its gates for the students of Kolozsvár and everyone who really believed in the unquestionable and multiple benefits of practicing sports. The association gathered famous names: well-known professors, officials, aristocrats as both members of the managing committee and competition organizers, which made it unique on the territory of Hungary.

The new sports association soon became determining for the athletic life in Transylvania, and remained such until World War II, the moment of its obtrusive closing down. It raised outstanding champions, who made a name for themselves and for the Athletic Club of Kolozsvár (ACK) both before and after World War I. The first athletic champion of Kolozsvár was György Borbely, a great athlete, tourist and cyclist. Besides him, two other young students won champion title as well: János Kolosváry and Béla Gollner.

Key words: Athletic Club from Kolozsvár, Athletic Meetings, György Borbely

The Foundation of the Club and its first Competitions

In 1875, after his return to Budapest, Count Miksa Esterhazy, the Monarchy’s ambassador in England committed himself to the support of the English athletic beliefs. As a result of his efforts, in 1875 the Hungarian Athletic Club (HAC) was founded as the first athletic association in Hungary. The flourishing of sports life in Budapest marked the elementary provincial sports life, as well; numerous sports clubs were founded all over the country, among others in Kolozsvár, too.

We evoke the circumstances of the foundation of the club from Kolozsvár from the director committee’s 1883-1885 annual report. According to this, Dr. Hugo Baintner, the former secretary of the

1 Kolozsvár, Cluj-Napoca – after 1870 Kolozsvár became the cultural center of Transylvania and one of the most important cities of Hungary. The so-called “capital” of Hungary was the cradle of culture and education having a university, two academies and seven major high schools, theatre, opera, and cultural associations. Kolozsvár was also renowned as a medical and industrial centre. Its reputation as world class city was strengthened by the fact that it had a railway station which played an important role in establishing connections with the rest of Europe. In 1869 the city had a population of 25,000 and in 30 years this number had been doubled. After 1918 Transylvania became part of Romania and the official name of Kolozsvár was transformed into Cluj.
Hungarian Athletic Club started to revive the idea of an athletic club and in the autumn of 1883 held a conference under the presidency of Sandor Pall, which appointed a committee of 12 members under the presidency of Dr. Lajos Felmeri. On 11 November, this committee organized a walking race from Kolozsvár to Szaszfenes and back in order to popularize athletics. Besides this, they designed the statutes project of the club.

This appeal stirred a movement among university students resulting in a May picnic combined with athletic exercises. In the autumn of 1884 the youngsters militated for the foundation, so on 12 October they organized a meeting with about 30 participants, where they agreed upon the statutes of the Club.

They appointed a committee of 7 members under the presidency of Mihaly Kovary. This committee organized a walking tour from Kolozsvár to Apahida and back on 5 November 1884 and at the same time they managed to start the exercises as well.²

Finally, with the reinforcement of the statutes by the Home Secretary, the Club could convocate a foundation meeting on 8 February with baron Lajos Josika as the elected president, Mihaly Kovary and Dr. Hugo Baintner as the vice-presidents and Istvan Kuszko and Sandor Illing as secretaries.

The leadership of the club was thus in the hands of famous and hard-working people. Baron Lajos Josika, the chairman of the club, was highly respected in our city, and he was present at every race, where he was needed, he also taught fencing, in other words, he bore the brunt of the development of sports life in Kolozsvár. He retired from presidency in 1888.³

Dr. Hugo Baintner’s expertise was the key to success, after he had left Budapest, Kolozsvár became the center of Hungarian athletics. Besides his vice-presidency, he was also a trainer and taught boxing in his spare time. Istvan Kuszko was an outstanding character in the Club as well, who edited the three annuals of the Club, which represent great value today and which gave an accurate account of the activity of the club.

As a curiosity we can mention that 19 racers took part in the propagation race organized from Kolozsvár to Szaszfenes and back. The first to reach the finish was Mihaly Schopf in 1 hour and 39 minutes. Another 6 racers took part in the race from Kolozsvár to Apahida and back, Gyorgy Borbely won the first place with a result of 3 hours and 25 minutes on a distance of 29.5 km. The winners were handed awards of honor.

The sportsmen of the new sports club were mainly students of the Ferencz József University founded in 1872. At first sight, this could mean warranty for the Club, but the ACK was supported by the intellectuals of Kolozsvár as well. We can find famous personalities both among the members of the board, the jury and the court of honour of the club: Dr. Lajos Felmeri – professor at the Science of Education Faculty, Dr. Karoly Haller – professor of Austrian civil law, Dr. Aladar Rozsahegyi – professor of public health, or Dr. Dezso Concha –

² 4th Annual of the Athletic Club of Kolozsvár, Kolozsvár, 1886, 3-5.
³ Siklóssy L., One Thousand Years of Hungarian Sport, Budapest, 1929, III, 225.
professor at the Political Studies Faculty. In addition to them, aristocrats, like Count Kalman Esterhazy, Count Akos Bely, state officials, lawyers, and patrons organized the life of the young association with their enthusiastic work. It is a fact that the ACK was the biggest association in Hungary between 1885 and 1891, while in Kolozsvár it was known as the center of sports life. Unfortunately, in 1891, due to serious internal conflicts, the club disappeared from the national athletic life for more than 10 years.

**Athletic Meetings of the ACK**

At the foundation meeting, the program of training was set as well. According to this, since the club could not afford to pay trainers, members were asked to train the teams, members who lead the teams with ardor worth of appreciation.

The physical exercise team was led by sports teacher Karoly Albert, the fencers by Zoltan Paska and the boxers by Dr. Hugo Baintner. Baintner had a special merit in organizing the athletic meetings, long distance walks, tourism and sport shows, he spread the sport enthusiasm in Kolozsvár. Later the cycling and ice skating sections were also founded.

Besides the trainings, the club started preparations for the organization of races, and in shortage of suitable tracks they organized two types of races: walking races on short distances and races on tracks. The first public athletic meeting of the ACK was organized in the yard of the Public Shooting House (at the end of the Central Park). Gyorgy Borbely was the winner in the two-British mile contest; he won silver medal and league candidature. According to the first rules, the first prize winner was awarded silver medal, while for a title of championship the sportsperson had to win three consecutive competitions, with a result above a previously set level. Zoltan Velits won in the 100 yard, Kalman Galfy in putting the shot, Arpad Szullo in 220-yard hurdles, and Albert Deak in long jump.

The second athletic meeting was organized in the autumn of 1885, then the Kolozsvár-Szamosujvar walking race, where Borbely won the first place again, defending his league candidature, and later, with his winning of the third athletic meeting in 1886, he won the ACK title of championship definitively – he was awarded life membership of honor, a gold medal and a silver cup.

There was an entrance fee to these competitions, but they were popular due to their success and brought considerable profit to the club. Seeing this, the shooting club also raised the rent, which the club was unable to pay, thus in the autumn of 1886 the fourth athletic meeting took place in Des. Janos Kolozsvari reached the club’s best time in the 100 yards, Dr. Vendel Balogh in the 220-yard hurdles, while Zakarias Donogany in long jump. After the competition, in late autumn, the ACK organized the Transylvanian walking race between Kolozsvár and Marosvasarhely. Kolozsvary came in first in the 104-km race in 15 hours and 2 minutes.

The 5th athletic meeting was organized in 1887, for the last time in the yard of the shooting house. Sandor Illing jumped 533 cm, which was an outstanding result. The 6th athletic meeting took place in Marosvasarhely, where the pole-vault was introduced for the first time among the events. Simon Gall was the hero of the meeting; he won both the long jump and the pole vault and also won the league candidature. He defended this in the spring.
of 1888, at the 7th athletic meeting, which was organized on the large meadow in front of the anatomical faculty of the university. At this meeting Janos Kolosvary, too, won the league candidature.

Kolosvary defended his league candidature at the 8th athletic meeting organized in the autumn of 1888, in Kolozsvár, and with his 1889 victory, he became the second champion of the ACK. The 1889 meeting was successful also because Bela Gollner became the candidate for championship (he had outstanding results in long jump) and Albert Sissel managed to bring the new record in the one-yard, for the first time in Kolozsvár, under less than 6 seconds. At the next meeting, the 10th meeting, Gollner demonstrated his skills again; his 619-meter jump was acknowledged as the second national best. This meeting could already be organized on a new track, since a new running track had been built in the central Park with a circumference of 333.5 m, a 5 m wide runner, a 110 m long sprint runner and a 50 m long jump track. The new establishment was located on the banks of the Szamos River, parallel with the lake.

The club also organized walking races on a regular basis: in the autumn of 1888, Sándor Móssocz finished first, 120 km in 17 hours and 12 minutes on the route Kolozsvár-Beszterce, while in the following year Lajos Szkalszky became the walking champion of Transylvania, on the route Kolozsvár-Szaszvaros.

At the 11th athletic meeting on 18 May, 1890, Gollner won for the third time, becoming the third (and unfortunately last) champion of the club. He was known as the young athlete who had the longest jumps in Kolozsvár. After winning silver and gold medals he became Kolozsvár’s third champion. Gollner’s outstanding results are also proved by the fact that he was invited to Budapest, to the athletic meaning of the Hungarian Athletic Club, where no one dared to compete with him in long jump.

The autumn of 1890 brought a break; two meetings got cancelled, which forecasted a serious internal conflict. What was this internal conflict? It is still unclear today, and we might not be able to find out more about it ever, but the fact is that after Baron Lajos Josika’s retirement, there was no one with a character strong enough to hold the club together.

Despite all the problems, on October 5, 1891 they managed to organize the 12th and last ACK athletic meaning, which turned out glorious from every point of view, since three new records were achieved by the club members. István Ember in 100 meters, Gábor Boer in pole vault and Henrik Fehrenteil in 0.5 yard hurdles. After the athletic meeting they also organized a walking race won by Ferenc Kiss.

Gyorgy Borbely – the first champion

Many of the champions of the Hungarian sports associations retire quietly from the track when they have won the highest awards, the “title of champion”, so that a potential defeat would not eclipse their title. Borbely did not do this. After his champion triumph he participated in all the athletic meetings of the club, wrote István Kuszko, the secretary of the ACK from Kolozsvár about the champion in 1886. However, since fewer and fewer people

7 Competition Records of the UAC 1890s Public Athletic Meeting, Kolozsvár, 1890, 14.
8 Siklóssy L., One Thousand Years of Hungarian Sport, Budapest, 1929, III, 227-228.
remember him today, on the 75th anniversary of his death, I considered that the champion of Kolozsvar deserves his life and career to be recalled.

Borbely was born in Aranyosrakos in 1860, in medium landowner noble Secler family. He began his studies in Torda and continued them at the Unitarian Theological High School in Kolozsvar, finally graduating in Debrecen. This was the place where he first encountered organized sports and exercise, where he started participating in walking races, which he frequently won. He continued his university studies in Kolozsvar and during his stay here he was an ardent attendant of athletic exercises. He got his teacher’s degree in Kolozsvar.

His first “trainings” were connected to Kolozsvar. He walked to the athletic meetings, and after collecting all the awards, he left cheerfully and with a relaxed conscience towards his home, at 12 miles distance. He won all the walking races: Kolozsvar-Apahida and back, Kolozsvar-Szamosujvar, and in the long-distance flat-races, ex. 220 yards, and he did not only win in three consecutive races, but also reached the level set, and with this he won the ACK championship title. The club awarded him with life membership of honour, gold medal and silver cup. In 1887 he went on a walking tour from Kolozsvar to the Lomnicz summit (a 2634-m-high peak in the Tatra Mountains) and back. Training was only a secondary aim of this walk; the real aim was to learn about the geographical situation and the population of the country.9

Besides athletic meetings, cycling was Borbely’s “great love”. As member of the cycling department in the ACK, he took part in the 1889 competition in who makes the longest trip on bicycle in one year. Borbely won again, he rode from Kolozsvar to Paris and back, altogether 5549 km. The papers wrote about him that he did not only ride the bicycle, but also observed, contemplated and took notes. He filled several notebooks with his notes; he kept his many friends informed about his journey by letters. 26 of his travelers in 3001 lines appeared in dailies and learned journals, thus having something to say about almost every kilometer, which the readers were eagerly anticipating.

He started his teaching career in Torda. He was an active member of social life as well. Besides his teaching duties, he spent most of his time as a councilor, secretary of the teachers’ body in Torda-Aranyosgyeres county, secretary of the skating and several other associations and devoted member.

In 1886, he was transferred to Zalaegerszeg, where he continued his enthusiastic work. Between 1900-1917, he was the editor of the Hungarian Shield (Magyar Paizs) weekly; he was the one who proposed the erection of Laszlo Csanyi’s statue. He also compiled a Csanyi memorial volume, and organized sporting events. He died on 8 February, 1930.

This is how Istvan Kuszko characterized his club mate and competitor: “Proud, like a pure-blooded Hungarian, hard-working like a German, perseverant like a Briton. Besides this, modest, like a man who doesn’t need to rely on empty boosting in order to enforce appreciation.”10

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9 2nd Annual of the Athletic Club of Kolozsvar, Kolozsvar, 1888, 105-108.
The ACK after World War I

After the 12th Meeting, at the end of 1891 the ACK disappeared for a short time from the life of athletic clubs; a wonderful period of athletic life in Kolozsvar got to its end. After some years of stagnation, at the beginning of the 1900s the athletic life revived thanks to Lajos Vermes, fencing-master at the university. Vermes realized that the decaying ACC was not suitable for university athletic life, and urged the foundation of a university sports club in Kolozsvar, too, after the model of the University Athletic Club of Budapest. Therefore, in May 1901 he organized a university athletic competition. Although the number of competitors was quite small, after the competition the upholders of sport admitted that Vermes was right, and in 1902 the University Athletic Club of Kolozsvar (UACK) was founded, becoming the third university sport club in Hungary and defining the sports life in Transylvania for a long time ahead. Later, Dr. Istvan Somodi, the association’s outstanding competitor won Olympic silver in London.¹¹

The club was reorganized after World War I, when Dr. Istvan Somodi started the reorganization of the Hungarian athletic life in Kolozsvar. It was a difficult job both from a political and human point of view, since the new Romanian administration was not happy about the upswing of the ACK, and besides this, there was a shortage of talented sportsmen, capable of reaching outstanding results. The communist leader obtrusive closed down the club in 1945, by this, putting an end to a great era.

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