

# HENRI PADOU: THE TOUGH MAN OF FRENCH WATER POLO

by Eric Lahmy, *L'Equipe*

Henri Padou: the tough man of French water polo - The Olympic champion of 1924 earned his living as a butcher. And was not so kind in the water, either...



Henri PADOU

Henri PADOU was a member of France's water polo team, which won the 1924, Paris Olympic tournament. PADOU was the leading French swimmer as well as water polo player between the two World Wars. He was born on May 15th 1898 in Tourcoing and entered the "*Enfants de Neptune de Tourcoing*" early on. He never strayed from his passion – continuing to swim at least twice a week until weeks before his death – he passed away at Tourcoing November 19th, 1981.

For 27 years, Henri remained a member of the French water polo team, beginning in 1919 against Belgium and concluding in 1946 against Switzerland. His son, Henri jr. followed in his father's footsteps by competing in the 4x200 metres freestyle relay in 1948 and winning the Olympic bronze medal. Thanks to Henri sr.'s long career, father and son were able to swim together for the French national team.<sup>1</sup> For some years, between 1948 and 1952, Henri jr. was ranked number two seat for France in the 100 meters just behind Alex JANY (the world record holder in 1947) and ahead of Aldo EMINENTE (Olympic finalist in 1952 and 1956) and "*like his Dad*" a member of the French water polo team, which did not end up competing in the Olympics.

PADOU was known by many French supporters as the man who swam with Johnny WEISSMULLER, the American hero of the Paris

Olympic Games. WEISSMULLER had many fans in France and actually returned to Paris, (around 1930), to work for a few months as a life-guard at the Molitor swimming pool. In many ways it might be said that Henri Sr. was to water polo what Weissmuller was to swimming. It is of no surprise that Padou was voted the best water polo player in the world after the 1924 Games.

Henri had two other sons, Alain, who preferred fencing and then motor-cycling, while Bernard took up swimming for personal pleasure.

Henri PADOU became a knight of the Legion d'Honneur for his military record, as well as being an officer of the national order of merit.

"*I did not become a movie star, like Johnny Weissmuller*", said Henri PADOU, who bore the nickname of "*le grand canard*" (the big duck). He was, 6'3" (1,90m) and 220 pounds (100 kg) hence the term "big"; and duck, not because he was a natural in water, but because of his very long feet, which of course helped a lot in his swimming.

PADOU worked as a butcher all his life. He was not as popular as the Tarzan of Hollywood, but was able to boast of a degree of fame after a letter, sent from China, found its way to him with only : "Henri Padou, France" written on the envelope. He was friendly, with the tough no-nonsense traits of a fierce water polo player. Characteristics that were to run in his family.

One Parisian water polo player, Jacques MESLIER, told me about a match between the *Racing Club de France* and Tourcoing. MESLIER played for Racing and there met for the first time Henri PADOU jr. Within the first minute of the game, PADOU gave him a strong punch in the face. Half groggy but always friendly, MESLIER went to speak to Padou : "*But why did you punch me?*" "*I didn't do anything to you,*", was what Le Grand Canard's son replied, and added, "*but you*

<sup>1</sup> As a 48 years old, in 1946, Henri sr competed in his last match as the captain of the French team, as Henri jr, 18 years old, was chosen for his first international appearance.

*see what happens when you don't do anything. So guess what will happen if you play hard ball with me."*

The Tourcoing team was renowned for its roughness and it was always difficult for PADOU to finish his matches: the referees kicked him out regularly before the end of a game. Henri SIMON, a Parisian water polo player, remembers, in 1952, warning a friend of his who was scheduled to play Tourcoing the next day, to watch out for their aggressive playing style. *"Oh, they cannot be so terrible,"* answered PATAK, a Hungarian, who was considered to be an easygoing guy. The next day after the match he got off the train visibly displaying the results of the encounter: one black eye.

In another light, he was considered very generous. In 1952, Pierre GÉARD, a Belgian journalist was in love with a Hungarian swimmer, the Olympic champion Eva SZEKELY. And it was none other than than Henri PADOU who went with GÉARD to "kidnap" the willing Eva at the Hungarian Olympic quarters.

Henri PADOU was 57 times French champion between 1919 and 1948, of water polo and swimming, over 100 meters, 200 meters, 400 meters, 400 meters medley. The Olympic victory in water polo was no accident. The year preceding the Games, Paul BEULQUE the Tourcoing coach, and his players traveled from Tourcoing to Paris to workout with the best Parisians every week. They would head for the station after finishing their day jobs, take the train to Paris, compete, and return in the evening. This way, Paul BEULQUE could get his players playing together and create the spirit that made a super team with solid individuals.

The French swimming titles of Henri PADOU:

100 meters: 1921, 1922, 1923, 1924, 1925, 1927.

400 meters: 1922, 1923, 1924, 1925.

200 meters medley: 1923.

250 meters relay: 1920, 1921, 1922, 1923, 1924, 1925, 1926.

200 meters medley relay: 1922.

Water polo: from 1919 to 1928.

PADOU beat 5 French records at 100 meters, 5

at 200 meters, 2 at 300 meters, 1 at 400 meters.

Out of the pool, PADOU was a friendly guy. Monique BERLIOUX remembers, in August 1939, that she had lost her "carte alimentaire" (food card), a system that had been inaugurated only days before the beginning of the World War. Henri found her crying and without an explanation left her only to return moments later holding a large basketful of ham which he distributed to everybody. *"He had an angelic smile",* remembers Monique, *"but was capable of holding an opponent under water with his legs, while having both hands raised in sight of the referee. He knew every trick of the game and made abundant use of it."*

Henri PADOU had a very peculiar way of thinking. He prohibited Henri jr. for a long time from signing contracts or swimming competitively, thus preventing him from having the best conditions for peak performance. It was the result of a Jansenist philosophy, whereby one had to determine what was important in life and what was not. For Henri work and not sports was essential above all else. Sports, he thought, made you good friends and gave pleasant memories but offered little money and no career.

So that is why, at 16, Henri jr worked for twelve hours a day at the family's butchery. Unhappily, at the end of the 1980's, a heavy price was paid for this work ethic. His lumbar vertebrae became crushed by half a century of carrying oxen carcasses. Henri jr could not even walk, and ended his life in a wheel-chair.

Photos of PADOU senior demonstrate the type of man he was: very tall, long limbed, bony, quite strong and powerfully built. He did not possess the kind of big muscles shaped



by body-building, but had the brawn and strength of an athlete acquired through the many hours toiled in the butcher shop.

Sometimes, he was thought to be a very funny man. In Paris, one hour before a very important match against Hungary during the 1931 European championships, he went up the bleachers of the Tourelles swimming pool (the one used for the 1924 Olympic Games) to greet a friend from northern France. He was faced with a problem when wanting to return to the part of the pool destined for the competition. A stubborn policeman who was obviously unaware of the popularity attained

by the Olympic champion, decided that his goal was to prevent PADOU from rejoining his friends. *"Well, it is an emergency, I have something to say to a friend, but I promise I shall return very fast, and as a proof of my good faith, I give you my hat."*

The policeman took the hat, and waited, waited, waited. PADOU played and three hours later, they met again in the pool manager's office. Henri Padou, the no-nonsense, tough, kind hearted champion, very politely thanked the policeman for having kept an eye on his property.

## OLYMPIC SPEED SKATING LAKE PLACID 1932

by Ture Widlund

### Why Clas Thunberg did not enter

In the obituary of John "Jack" SHEA in no 2-2002 Steve HARRIS is writing *"when he [Clas THUNBERG] was told that the race would be run under North-American Rules Thunberg angrily dropped out of the competition"*. When reading this you get the impression that Clas THUNBERG did not learn about the mass start until in Lake Placid and then angrily dropped out. That was not at all the case.

Clas THUNBERG, FIN, was probably the greatest skater in the inter-war period and one of the all-time greatest skaters. 5 times World Champion, 1923, 1925, 1928, 1929 and 1931, 4 times European Champion, 1922, 1928, 1931 and 1932, 5 Olympic Gold medals and 1 Silver and 1 Bronze medal (in spite of abstaining from the 1932 Games), 8 World Records and unbeaten for more than 10 years on his favourite distance, 1.500m.

At the congress of the International Skating Union ISU, in Vienna May 1931, an important rule change had been adopted. The new rule permitted the use of a mass start in International Competitions on a single track. The Amateur Skating Union of the United States, the ISU member organising the speed skating events of the III Olympic Winter Games, voted in favour of the North American racing rules, called pack style, and announced that mass start over a single track would apply,

not the conventional ISU rules.

Clas THUNBERG was well in advance of the 1932 Olympic Winter Games aware of this, that the races should be conducted, not under the conventional ISU rules but, under the North American pack style rules.

Clas THUNBERG had been in USA and Canada in 1925 and had then gained experience of the pack style. He knew that it was not the fastest skater over the distance that won the race, but the one with the best tactical skill over the last lap, with fair means or foul, like pushing, elbowing, interference and shirt pulling, which won the race. Even if there were rules against such unfair methods these rules were seldom enforced. He knew that the Europeans, with no pack style experience, would stand no chance against the Americans and Canadians unless they did something to



Clas THUNBERG