



# HELSINKI 1952 - THE WATER POLO TOURNAMENT

## How FINA Lost Its Face!

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Υδατοσφαίριση  
Water Polo

Most Olympic historians regard the Games of the XV<sup>th</sup> Olympiad, Helsinki 1952 as one of the best organised Olympics. And generally speaking, they were.

However, there is a little known black mark on these Games as well, as can be seen from the following research.

### New Rules for Water polo!

On January 1, 1950, new rules were applied to the competitive sport of water polo. These rules completely changed the sport from a rather static one into a very dynamic sport.

In the old days, when the referee blew his whistle to stop the play, every player had to remain in exactly the same place where he was at that particular moment. That was the rule in those days, but quite often it took the referee a lot of time to have players return to their approximate place, as many of the players used the opportunity to 'drift' to a better position, for the restart of the game.

In the period after the London Olympic Games in 1948, a small FINA commission made proposals to completely renew the rules for water polo. These proposals were a unique effort to make the game of water polo more dynamic as it abolished the restricting rule of static play and allowed the players to constantly move around during the match. There were more changes proposed in the water polo rules, and all changes were tested for the first time during the European Championships in Vienna in 1950. Most players of that championship were then enthusiastic about the new rules.

It was then decided that the water polo tournament of the 1952 Olympic Games in Helsinki would be played according to the new rules.

The water polo tournament of the 1952 Helsinki Olympics started on July 25<sup>th</sup>, with only one problem and that was that no first round matches could be played at the sea-swimming areas at Uunisaari and Humallahti, owing to the low temperatures of the sea water. All matches

were rescheduled to be played in the Olympic Swimming Stadium.

The first problems occurred on July 27, 1952, when the German referee DAHMEN allowed the Argentines too much foul play in their match against the Dutch team. After that match the much too lenient DAHMEN did not referee one more match in Helsinki and was allowed to go home.

The next day, July 28, the match between the Netherlands and Yugoslavia made more headlines, and unfortunately very negative ones too!

For that match, a much more wellknown referee was chosen, Mr. A. Tons" DELAHAYE from Belgium.

Already in 1928 in Amsterdam, DELAHAYE refereed water polo matches between France and Malta; Hungary and France, and even the match for third place between France and Great-Britain. So one can be sure that Mr. DELAHAYE was certainly no novice to this sport as he already refereed 128 international water polo matches during his long and distinguished career.

History today tells us that already before the match, he requested the FINA Board to replace him as referee for this particular match, as he had received signals that the Yugoslavians were opposed to his person, thinking that he would be using his whistle in favour of the Dutch team. However, both FINA President R. de RAEVE (BEL) and Jan de VRIES (NED), President of the *Dutch Swimming Association* and a boardmember of FINA, with whom DELAHAYE had discussed this problem denied these signals and so the FINA maintained Fons DELAHAYE as arbiter for this important match.

In this respect it should also be known that Fons DELAHAYE, together with his Dutch colleague Jan de VRIES, actually rewrote the rules for the game of water polo.

After a hard and very rough battle, the Dutch team won the contest with 3 – 2, and it must be agreed that DELAHAYE was not very much in top form that day.



Water polo  
referee  
A. 'Fons'  
DELAHAYE

He, for instance, even allowed a Yugoslavian goal, which was scored after he had stopped the game for a fault. The game was a hard one, especially the Yugoslavian players did not shun physical violence.

To quote a famous Dutch reporter who watched the match: *"the Olympic Spirit, who was supposed to be in the swimming pool, could only be tracked down by a message over the police-network"*.

After the match, the Yugoslavian team officially protested against the mistakes made by Belgian referee Fons DELAHAYE and against his overall leadership of this match.

So the match was to be continued, not in the water of the stadium, but now in the closed surroundings of the board meeting of the FINA Water polo Board.

The Water polo Board in those days consisted of Mrs. Jan de VRIES (NED), president; Sam ZUCKERMANN (SWE); RIGAL (FRA); SCOTT (GBR); NEGRI (ARG) and CASALNOE (ITA).

After hearing both parties and the referee, the Board would report to the *Jury d'Appel*, consisting of Mr R. de RAEVE (BEL), president of the FINA; R.M. RITTER (USA); W.B. PHILLIPS (AUS); B. SÄLLFORS (SWE); J. LINDQUIST (FIN), LARSEN (USA) and S.B. GRANGE (AUS).

Because of his duties as "Chief Water polo referee" for this tournament, and to avoid partiality, Jan de VRIES (NED) did not wish to attend the meeting of the Water polo Board, in spite of the fact that he had been nominated as president of the Board because of his great knowledge of the rules and regulations governing the game of water polo.

The Chef de Mission of the Netherlands, Mr. Karel LOTSIJ, a wellknown Dutch sports official and a longtime member of the Board of the *International Football Association* (FIFA), had received a letter from the Water polo Board, signed by Mr. SCOTT from Great-Britain, advising the *Jury d'Appel* about this matter. In this letter the Board stated that the referee certainly had made mistakes, but that the protest should be denied.

Strange enough, the *Jury d'Appel* of the FINA decided otherwise: their decision was that the match between Yugoslavia and the Netherlands had to be replayed and another referee appointed.

This decision was based on the fact that, according to the Yugoslavs, the Belgian referee

had been partial to the Dutch team. The Yugoslavs based their protest on two technical mistakes made by Fons DELAHAYE, both of them observational errors.

One of these concerned the fact that he had allowed a wrong player a free ball; while the other concerned the fact that he had allowed the previously mentioned Yugoslavian goal, after he had stopped the match (which was obviously in favour of the Yugoslavian team, who then got back in the match).

If we look today at the original rules, which should be applied to the match then played, we see that article 7 of these rules state(d):

*"The referee is in absolute control of the game and his authority extends until he leaves the precincts of the bath after the match. He must be provided with a thrill whistle by which he starts the game. He must declare all goals, a goal-throw, corner-throws [whether signaled by the goal-judge or not] and all infringements of the rules. With him rests the decision on all these points. Every infringement of the rules must be signaled by the referee by whistle.*

*The player who is awarded a throw must bring back the ball into play from the spot where the fault has been committed.*

*The taking of the free throw must not be interfered with. If he so wishes the player who is awarded a free throw, may dribble the ball.*

*As soon as he throws the ball in front of him he may be tackled.*

*In the mean time all players are allowed to change position.*

*All decisions of the referee on questions of facts are final. His interpretation of the rules must be obeyed during the game. The referee may refrain from a foul if in his opinion such action would be advantage to the offending team. He may alter his decision providing he does so, before the ball is in the play again. He has power to order from the water a player for misconduct of disobedience."*

[Underscoring by the author].

The conclusion after reading this article 7 cannot be otherwise than that the *Jury d'Appel* of the FINA completely repudiated their own referee, who, as stated above in a career of 40 years had refereed 128 international matches in water polo and who should have been protected against this blatant political move by the Yugoslavian officials.

Mr. Karel LOTSIJ did not immediately accept this verdict by the *Jury d'Appel* of the FINA. He contacted Erik von FRENCKEL, president of the Organizing Committee for the

1952 Olympic Games, but with no success.

The replay [on July 31] went according to the wish of the Yugoslavian officials, they now won from a mentally disappointed and humiliated Dutch team with 1 – 2.

Before this match, the Dutch Chef de Mission Karel LOTSIJ informed the international media as follows:

*"Mr. Karel Lotsij, chef de mission of Holland, states that only out of respect to Finland had the Dutch water polo team agreed to the re-play of their Yugoslavian match. After Holland's winning goal the Yugoslavs protested against the Belgian referee: the Water polo Board rejected the protest but FINA approved it. Under the circumstances the Holland team decided to return home immediately, but upon reconsidering the matter and not wanting any misunderstanding that Finland were in any way responsible for FINA's action, they finally agreed to a re-match with Yugoslavia."*

But before the replay of this match, more incidents happened, starting on July 30, 1952, when Spain protested against the referee leading their match against Italy and their protest involved two technical mistaken decisions by that referee.

That same day Hungary played against the Dutch team and the strong Hungarian team took the initiative in the match and shortly after the break were leading with 1 – 4. But the Dutch team (who had won the European Championship in 1950) had a very strong finish and in the very last minute of the match equaled the score 4 – 4.

Hungarian players and officials immediately after the match surrounded the Italian referee ROGIONE and told him in no uncertain terms what they thought about him. The Dutch Chef de Mission Karel LOTSIJ was insulted and spitted at. Even Chief Water polo referee Jan de VRIES was called dirty names like "scoundrel" and "bastard".

Once again the Olympic Spirit was nowhere to be found!

The result of these two unsavoury incidents was that the FINA Board that same day wrote a letter to the Hungarian officials, stating that a repeat of such incidents would lead to expulsion from further participation in the tournament.

The conclusion of the facts above are simple. The FINA did not do anything (or at least not enough) to protect the referees who were appointed by them, even though the rules were quite explicit in their simplicity.

The FINA should have been more much more attentive or maybe we should say "on guard" with regard to the implementation of the new rules, with which both players and referees had only two years experience.

Even though, when international referee of long standing Fons DELAHAYE warned the FINA President and the "Chief Water polo referee" about the smear-campaign against him by the Yugoslavs, the FINA took no action and left him in charge of the match, with the then following disastrous results.

The most capital mistake made in the whole process was that the Dutch representative on the Board (Jan de VRIES) had refrained from joining in the important meeting, when the final mistaken decision was made.

Could it have been stupidity, exaggerated correctness, naïvety, or maybe even a completely mistaken judgement of the political situation?

Most likely, he, at the time, overlooked the fact that for many (much larger) countries the influence of the two smaller countries Belgium and the Netherlands in the international world of swimming/water polo had been a thorn in the side. Now had come the time to put them in their place, where they belonged!

Unfortunately, the sport itself suffered most of all!

The final conclusion can only be that the FINA itself was to blame for these incidents, as a result of which the Dutch water polo team was robbed from an almost certain Olympic medal.

The final results of the water polo tournament in the 1952 Olympic Games were:

1. and Olympic Champion:  
HUNGARY
2. Silver medal:  
Yugoslavia
3. Bronze medal:  
Italy
4. United States
5. The Netherlands
6. Belgium