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The Hungarian Defence Sports Association

Abstract

In our joint study, we present the role of the Defence Sports Association and its achievements in the past period, in the complex system of patriotic and national defence education to make them available to the international scientific community. We also introduce the readers to the possibilities and plans for the future of the Association.

Keywords: patriotic education, shooting sports, Defence Sports Association, military sports

In addition to maintaining health and playful elements, sport shapes individuality, thus ensuring the harmonious unity of body and soul. It is no coincidence that with the spread of mass armies in the 19th century Europe, the issue of physical education at school and outside of school came into focus. During our research, it became clear that, in addition to improving the general health of the population, its main purpose was to prepare for military service. The influence of the military and warfare on the teaching of physical education in schools has varied in different countries and historical times. Examining the role of schools, paramilitary organisations and the armed forces in the implementation models, we can see an even more varied picture.³ In general, we can say that the armed forces and warfare had a stimulating effect on school physical education and sports life, as service members had to be physically strong and have good endurance for battlefield tasks. However, we also found deeper connections.

Sports and national defence

In military history, we can find many examples of the deep-rooted connection between national defence and sports. These show a number of positive and some negative aspects, but overall, they clearly show that the relationship between sports and military training has always been close, so below we present some important areas in detail.

Physical Fitness and Training: Both sports and national defence require individuals to be physically fit and undergo rigorous training. Athletes and military personnel both

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³ GABÁNYI 1921: 3–21.

need to develop strength, endurance, agility and coordination to perform at their best. Physical fitness is crucial in sports to enhance performance, while in national defence, it is essential for service members to endure the demands of combat situations.

Strategic Thinking and Planning: Sports and national defence involve strategic thinking and planning. In sports, coaches develop game plans, analyse opponents' strength and weaknesses, and make tactical decisions during matches. Likewise, military leaders must strategise, plan operations, analyse enemy tactics and make critical decisions on the battlefield. Both sports and national defence require individuals to think strategically and adapt to changing situations.

Discipline and Dedication: Both sports and national defence demand discipline and dedication. Athletes must adhere to strict training regimens, maintain healthy lifestyles and make sacrifices to achieve their goals. Similarly, military personnel must follow rules, protocols and adhere to rigorous training and discipline. In both domains, success often requires individuals to exhibit high levels of commitment and dedication.

Teamwork and Cooperation: Both sports and national defence rely on teamwork and cooperation to achieve success. In team sports, athletes must work together, communicate effectively and coordinate their efforts to achieve a common goal. Similarly, military operations require service members to work as a cohesive unit, following orders and collaborating to accomplish missions. The ability to function as part of a team is vital in both contexts.

National Identity and Unity: Sports can play a significant role in fostering national identity and unity. Sporting events, particularly international competitions like the Olympics or the World Cup, often bring people together and promote a sense of national pride and solidarity. Similarly, national defence can unite citizens under a shared purpose of protecting their country. Both sports and national defence can strengthen the bond among individuals and reinforce national values.

Technology and Innovation: Sports and national defence often drive technological advancements and innovation. In sports, equipment, training techniques, and sports analytics continuously evolve to enhance performance and gain a competitive edge. Similarly, national defence encourages the development of innovative technology, weapons systems and military strategies to maintain security. Advancements made in one domain can often find applications in the other.

The relationship between the military and sports is multifaceted and complex. While sports and national defence serve different purposes and operate in distinct contexts, they share common elements and principles.⁴ The overlap between the two lies in the physical and mental aspects, teamwork, strategy, discipline, and their influence on national unity and identity. Through sharing these values and working together, the bond between the two areas remains strong, contributing to both defence education and the physical and mental preparation of service members.⁵

⁴ SZABÓ–UJHÁZY 2023: 171–178.

⁵ MH Altiszti Akadémia – Sportszázad [Hungarian Defence Forces Non-Commissioned Officer Academy – Sport Company] (<https://mhaa.honvedseg.hu/sportszazad/>); International Military Sports Council s. a.

Approach from a historical perspective

In the next chapter, we would like to briefly present to the reader the main influences and the most significant stations that shaped and shape the patriotic education systems of the continent and within it our country. We do all this in order to shed light on the current mission and work of the Defence Sports Association in Hungary and compare it with organisations with similar tasks but operating in previous social systems from a historical perspective.

The ancient Greeks and Romans recognised the importance of physical activity and a healthy physical condition for military effectiveness centuries ago. The ancient Greeks already knew about physical education before the 5th century, and the ancient Olympic Games were also a celebration of physical and mental efforts. The Romans also took exercise seriously, and in the armed forces the physical condition of the service members was constantly improved and controlled.⁶

In the Middle Ages, the importance of physical exercise was determined by military efficiency, which ensured survival, rather than health status. In accordance with this spirit, gymnastics was not given as much emphasis in education and the education of young people as before.⁷

In the First World War, the armies placed more and more serious emphasis on physical exercise and healthy nutrition, with the aim that the service members could go to the battlefield as well prepared and healthy as possible. This new approach also had an impact on the teaching of physical education, along with regular physical exercise, which began to be seen as an important means of maintaining health. As a result, in some countries already earlier, but in the wake of the known bloody experiences, by the 1920s, in almost every country in Europe, the military national education of youth was organised, of which several sports were an inseparable part.⁸

Hungary did not exempt, and could not exempt itself from the influence of the spread of sports and military spirit. The pioneer of domestic aspirations was Miklós Szemere,⁹ who was committed to the patriotic education of the youth. He laid the foundation for this by building a modern, European-level sports and military shooting range, and organised shooting competitions and shooting courses for students with his own funding.¹⁰

Due to the consequences of the peace treaties ending the First World War, military exercises were completely removed from the life of Hungarian schools.¹¹ At the same time, in line with national aspirations, the issue of military pre-training of youth received special attention.

Since national defence training was also restricted, the opportunity to educate physically and mentally prepared young people emerged through the wider and more

⁶ KYLE 2014.

⁷ CONTAMINE 2014: 216–217.

⁸ Magyar Királyi Honvédelmi Minisztérium 1940: 4; GILLEAUME 1905: 7–47.

⁹ Imperial and Royal Chamberlain, Member of Parliament (1856–1919).

¹⁰ SZEMERE 1902: 1–66; SZABÓ 2021: 144–152.

¹¹ SZABÓ–SZIKORA 2004: 122.

lively practice of sports. Thus, from 1921, a law prescribed compulsory military training for boys between the ages of 12 and 21.¹²

Among the sports practiced in the “Levente” movement, marksmanship was the most popular. As a result, temporary shooting ranges were built one after another throughout the country.¹³

The Second World War swept away everything, and as a result of the historical changes in Hungary, in the period following the Second World War, new sports and youth training organisations were created on the Soviet model. After several transformations, a national paramilitary mass organisation, the Hungarian National Defence Association (Magyar Honvédelmi Szövetség, MHSZ), organised mass sports and leisure activities between 1948 and 1990.¹⁴

The Ministry of Culture, the Hungarian National Defence Association and the Association of Hungarian Pioneers started organising shooting clubs for the 5th–8th grades of elementary school students, and within a few years the sport became available in every fifth Hungarian primary school.¹⁵

From the point of view of national defence, the most valuable elements in the shooting activities of the Hungarian National Defence Association were the training of people in various forms of military pre-training and mass shooting sports, but in addition to these, other national defence-related sports, mass competitions and technical sports prepared the youth for mandatory military service.

The system change created a new situation in all areas. The liquidation of the old power and political structure swept away the Hungarian National Defence Association as well, but expectations related to educational tasks also changed greatly, moral education, and especially patriotic and national defence education, came under a different assessment. In a few years, national defence education fell behind the public education system; the process was intensified by the termination of the paramilitary organisation and then the suspension of compulsory military service (2004). The transformation of the armed forces to an all-volunteer force began and Hungary joined NATO (1999). As a result of all this, the relationship between the armed forces and society was also transformed in these decades.¹⁶

However, the nation still needed and still needs active and reserve service members who are able to fight and fight for the country, but their national defence education and then their military training must be ensured within a new framework.¹⁷ Sport still plays a key role in this, as nowadays, in the age of computers and robots, modern armed forces still require at least the same level of fitness as was expected from the service members of previous centuries.¹⁸

¹² 1921. évi LIII. törvénycikk a testnevelésről [Act LIII of 1921 on physical education].

¹³ GERGELY-KISS 1976: 65–82; TORNAY 1935: 83.

¹⁴ *Repülés* 1973: 4–6.

¹⁵ MHSZ 1971; HAVAY 1978: 63–67; MÓNUS 1975: 31.

¹⁶ SZABÓ 2018: 45–57.

¹⁷ UJHÁZY 2018: 3–12.

¹⁸ BOYE et al. 2017: 57–61; HAVENETIDIS et al. 2022: 1567–1576.

The establishment of the Defence Sports Association

Our globalised, complex world needs young people who, in the face of the challenges of the age, have more and more knowledge and skills and, finally, are able to create a strong and resilient community. In addition to physical fitness and skill, sports also seriously shapes character, which is why sport plays a key role in national defence education. Building on this idea, the colleagues with whom we decided to create an organised framework for this within the walls of the Ministry of Defence around 2016 undertook a noble task.

In order to strengthen the relationship between society and national defence, the bill establishing regular sports activities and the institutional framework for the transfer of national defence knowledge, for those interested in military service, was supported by more than 80% of the Parliament. Accordingly, the organisation was established in accordance with the provisions of the law adopted on 22 November 2016.¹⁹

On 11 January 2017, the organisation joined the National Association of Armed Forces Sports Associations, the Budapest Armed Forces Sports Association, the Hungarian Sport Shooters Association, the Association of Hungarian Reservists, the Hungarian Fencing Association, the Hungarian Judo Association and the National Recreational Sports Association of Hungarian Technical and Mass Sports Clubs as was born with the cooperation of the founding members.

From a legal point of view, the Defence Sports Association is a public body with a local government performing national public tasks. This special status – the background and framework of which is given by the already mentioned law – means, on the one hand, that it is separate from other private legal entities organised on a voluntary basis, and on the other hand, it emphasises its priority public task, i.e. the promotion of national defence education.

The organisation's activities are managed by a national-level management but depending on its statutes and the size of its membership, it can also establish regional-level bodies.

Since then, the main pillars of the Defence Sports Association's statutory public service activity have been developed, so on the one hand it supplements the national defence education training in schools with leisure-time, active practical activities, and on the other hand it provides adults with the opportunity to develop their skills, knowledge and physical preparation, which are valuable from the point of view of national defence.

The Defence Sports Association supports the general national defence education and training activities of public education and higher education institutions in and out of class, especially the Cadet Programme.²⁰ It helps teachers and sports professionals participating in the national defence education programme to acquire special pedagogical and methodological knowledge. Centrally and with its member organisations, it organises national defence, sports and leisure programmes and competitions.

¹⁹ A Honvédelmi Sportszövetségről szóló 2016. évi CXXXII. törvény [Act CXXXII of 2016 on the National Defence Sports Federation].

²⁰ Honvéd Kadét Program [Cadet Program] (<https://kadetprogram.hu>).

Results, major projects

Over the past few years, the Defence Sports Association has been constantly expanding, to our great joy, more and more member organisations and partner schools have joined us, and through them, more and more children have had the opportunity to get to know the national defence.

The backbone of the activity is the complex programmes, events and competitions developed in recent years, which consist of the following main programme elements.

Complex national defence sports play a major role in the programme, which not only tests physical endurance and dexterity, but also develops military skills such as orientation, sense of purpose and tactical thinking.

From the point of view of national defence education, forms of exercise that develop self-defences, combat sports and hand-to-hand sports (e.g. judo, fencing, wrestling, karate, taekwondo, etc.) are of fundamental importance.

Among the technical sports, parachuting, diving, sport flying, and mountain and sport climbing are the focus of the programme.

Safety is the focus of the shooting programme for young people, but next to it, the latest techniques and lots of practice ensure the development of proper shooting skills.

In the national defence capability development section, theoretical knowledge can be acquired in areas such as emergency recognition, first aid, prevention, crime prevention, traffic safety, survival skills, cartography, nature walks, orientation, signal communication, radio communication.²¹

The Defence Sports Association and its partners have developed, operate and continue to develop complex programmes from the above elements.

The creation of the Defence Sports Association is closely aligned with the Zrínyi 2026 National Defence and Force Development Programme, as is the Cadet Programme launched in 2017. This programme for high school students is an extremely important and essential element of building a new defence culture.

In the summer of 2023, the Defence Sports Association already has nearly 500 member organisations and through them, it performs its tasks affecting hundreds of thousands of people. In order to develop sports professional aspects and quality programmes, the activities of the large number of member organisations are supported and coordinated by the following divisions:

- shooting sports professional division
- martial arts professional division
- technical sports and driving professional division
- general national defence sports professional division
- cadet and reserve professional division

²¹ Honvédelmi Sportszövetség Hungarian Defence Sports Association <https://honvedelmisport.hu/szovetseg/szakmai-program/>.

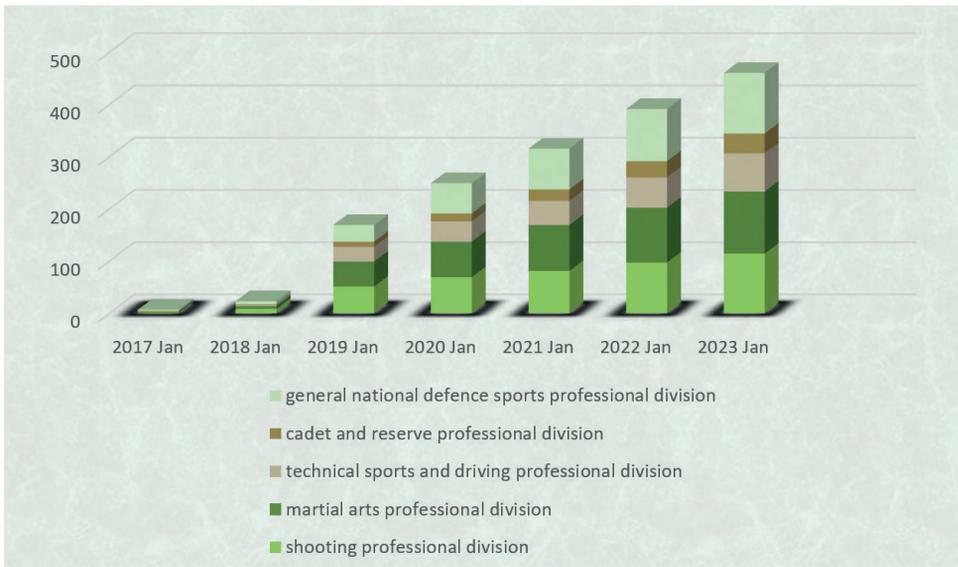


Figure 1: Number of member organisations (January 2017 – January 2023)
Source: Defence Sports Association

The network of National Defence Sports Centres

In 2017, the Government decided to establish National Defence Sports Centres, the aim of which was to involve the broadest possible sections of society in the national defence education programme on a voluntary basis.²² These facilities do not primarily support competitive sports, but rather arouse young people's interest in national defence sports in their free time. National Defence Sports Centres contribute to the promotion of sports culture and national defence by organising sports events, competitions and programmes that promote social resilience and a healthy lifestyle.

These 1,000-square-meter multifunctional leisure sports facilities also have a shooting range, but are also suitable for holding community programmes, combat sports, general skill development sessions and theoretical training. The sports centres were built on the basis of a uniform design. The Defence Sports Association will also operate such a centre in Újfehértó from 2021, and from 2022 in Baja, Balassagyarmat, Szarvas and Szigetvár. The facilities offer a large number of varied programmes, from various training sessions to competitions and summer camps, so they quickly became involved in the sports and social life of the region.

²² A Honvédelmi Sportközpontok fejlesztéséhez szükséges feltételek biztosításáról szóló 1611/2017. (IX. 5.) Kormányhatározat [Government Decree 1611/2017 (IX.5.) on ensuring the necessary conditions for the development of National Defence Sports Centres].

Vision

Our goal is to strengthen the relationship between society and the national defence, to involve as many members of the next generations as possible in the maintenance and development of our country's defence capability.

Having experienced the dangers of the 21st century, we believe that our values, our security and our future can and must be effectively defended through cooperation. We all have a role to play in protecting the Homeland. We want to equip our young people mentally, physically and spiritually, so that they can cope with the new challenges of the global world as effectively as possible, and if necessary, be able to prepare to avert threats to their homeland.²³

Technological advances affect both military operations and sports. The Defence Sports Association must prepare to integrate innovative technologies into defence education and competition systems. For example, drones, smart devices, data analysis and artificial intelligence have provided new opportunities. After all, these enable, among other things, the optimisation of training and performance, the simultaneous competition of teams physically located elsewhere, or the birth of new sports and competitions. The Defence Sports Association must adapt to the changing needs and preferences of the world. To face the challenges, it is necessary to act proactively and involve expertise and innovation in the work. Cooperation and transparent communication with military organisations, civil partners and schools must be further strengthened because this is key to achieving successful solutions.

Summary

It is a generally accepted view that playing sports makes an outstanding contribution to improving the physical and mental health of society, thereby creating a healthy society. At the same time, regular exercise supports the development of community relations and the promotion of the economic activity of the population, but it also plays an important role in strengthening national values and self-esteem. We know that sport shapes the character in the right direction, as it develops personality traits that are not always developed in everyday life. Willpower, perseverance, competitive spirit or discipline and rule-following are competencies that strengthen participation in social processes and are important values for the military as well.

In addition, these are still valuable qualities today, since the historical events taking place today have highlighted the fact that extraordinary armed conflicts and tensions can arise at any time, even in neighbouring countries.

In recent years, the organisation has experienced that introducing young people to national defence sports has many advantages. Physical endurance, health, determination and perseverance, self-discipline, team spirit, self-confidence, mental strength and the ability to manage stress, sense of duty, problem solving and, not to

²³ SIMICSKÓ 2020: 83–91.

mention, patriotism, develop well in young people. All of these are essential elements for a healthy and sustainable society.

We live in an age of crises, we all see the extent to which the international situation is increasing and developing in a negative direction. Considering all this, we think that it was a wise decision to start the activities of the Defence Sports Association years ago, since it now has well-established systems and a serious mass base behind it, thus strengthening the security of our country.

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