

## **LAJOS VERMES, THE FIRST UNIVERSITY FENCING MASTER IN CLUJ**

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**ABSTRACT.** Lajos Vermes is the most interesting figure of the Hungarian sport life: he was a renowned sportsman, a sport agitator, organizer and leader, teacher and beside these, he was a fibster, a person who lost his credibility quite often. Even though he devoted his life and fortune to sports he lives in the public consciousness due to his trespassing, famous bluffs and delusions of grandeur. Despite this, he had an important role in the sport life of Cluj. Without him, the local sport life wouldn't have had such a spectacular development at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His name is in tight relation with the development of the sport life in Cluj, the introduction of football, the success of athletics and fencing. He was one of the organizers of every sport competition in the city.

**Keywords:** *Lajos Vermes, fencing master, University of Cluj*

**REZUMAT.** *Lajos Vermes, primul profesor de scrimă al universității din Cluj.* Lajos Vermes este o persoană interesantă a istoriei sportive maghiare: a fost un sportiv renumit, organizator de competiții sportive, profesor de sport. Dar în același timp de multe ori și-a pierdut credibilitatea datorită unor competiții trucate și minciuni publicate în presa vremii. Însă în pofida acestor întâmplări Vermes a rămas în istoria sportivă clujeană datorită influenței asupra dezvoltării mișcărilor sportive de la începutul secolului 20. Fotbal, atletism, scrimă – apariția, respectiv succesul acestor ramuri sportive au la bază activitatea lui Vermes.

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### Vermes' short biography

Vermes' life was defined by this duality: every good action was followed by a slip-up. He honestly believed that he may do anything for the revival of sport life. He financed the building of a sport course and an "olympic village", but he also donated money for the building of railway between Subotica (Szabadka) and Palić (Palics), so a bigger number of sportsmen could come to the "Olympics" organized by him. These competitions were considered the local pre- events of the Olympics.



Graph 1. Vermes Lajos

It would be difficult to write the biography of Vermes, as it would rely on doubtful information. We know that he was born on 27 June 1860 in Subotica. He got his high school degree from a private school in Budapest, and later –as the records show- he worked as a medical externe. According to a story from that time Vermes finished the medical University in Budapest, the Faculty of Arts in Vienna, the physical trainer and firefighter courses in Budapest. He also visited several trading academies in Germany. This biographical information have been provided by Vermes, and the confiding journalists did not bother the check it before publication. Today it is a mystery whether Vermes finished his medical training –probably not- but he used the DR abbreviation before his name regularly and officially. Regarding his artistic and trading education we can feel free to doubt.

Vermes started his sporting career at the National Athletic Club under the guidance of Mauerer János. He won for the first time in December 1877 in gymnastics. After this, a series of great result followed: he became a renowned gymnast and athlete in the whole country, which was seconded by his remarkable cycling results. Free program, rope exercises, running, gymnastics, boxing, pole jump- he had a lot of first places through his career. In 1881 he finished second on the Budapest –Gödöllő bicycle race, in 1882 he was first in the Budapest-Kosice race (Graph 2.).

The whole country respected and admired him, but he could not live with his success. He wanted more in sports. Once he was invited for a gymnastic show. He got on his bicycle and cycled a few hundred kilometers to the site. But before the presentation, because of a bet, he tried several impossible exercises. He fell down and ultimately he could not present his exercise. Even though, he was the first who managed the bike loop. (Killyéni 2010, 26-29)

By 1885 he had over a 100 winnings –which was a great result at that time- and was not ashamed to boast with it. Organizing sport events had a major role in his life, beside his success in sports. At the beginning of the 1880's, he believed, that every door is opened in front of him, he can organize any sport competition, and that his prestige is without boundaries. His problem was that he wanted everyone else to think the same way.

He did not contract qualified judges for the competitions organized by him. Furthermore, he did not increase the league levels, but he produced incredible results: on every competition organized by Vermes at least one remarkable result was reached. If a record was needed, then it was created. He did not bother with the correct measurement of space and time. In the following years there was not one competition without a new record. Soon, the sport events organized by him, and the records reached there were known by the participants as Vermes competitions and records.



**Graph 2.** Vermes on his bike

Vermes' big mistake was that he was not satisfied by these results; he published it in the popular sport paper of the time, in the *Herkules*. This way the whole country and later all Europe heard about the new world record. In most cases the sportsmen of the time questioned the validity of the results, and Vermes was forced to admit his mistakes. Furthermore, he felt free to give out titles like: national, European or world champion, even Hungary's or the world's most powerful man. Later he gave the Hungarian Achilles title on several occasions.

Beginning with 1880 he organized the Olympics of Palić. (Szikora 2012, 16-17.) The competition became popular, so at the beginning of the 1890's he decided to make an effort and build a modern track.

So thanks to him, in 1884 the first sport track of Hungary was built and in 1891 it was covered with asphalt. Bicycle races were organized here as well. Beside the course stood the house of Vermes, the Bagolyvár (Owl Castle). This was used by the sportsmen arriving to Palić – acting as an Olympic center. (Valihora 2008, 37-40.)

His first meeting with the sport life in Cluj was at the end of the 1880's. In 1887 Borbély György, the champion of the Athletic Club of Cluj (ACC) visited Vermes, and invited him to the Transylvanian competition. Vermes accepted, came to Transylvania and gained huge popularity on the sport events and shows. Here, the public admired the country's renowned athlete, he presented such a beautiful exercise, that we haven't seen here in Transylvania. (Siklóssy 1929, 248.) The citizens adored him, and he did not forget this.

### Vermes in Cluj

At the beginning of the 1890's the sport life in Cluj was passing through crisis. There was a need for reorganizing the university's sport life, and any postponing would jeopardize the healthy development of the students. In 1895 the press from Cluj was happy to announce the arrival of Oheroly János, the delegate of the Ministry of Education and Physical Education Superintendent, sent to make up a plan to reorganize the sport life at the Ferenc József University of Science. (Ellenzék, 18th July 1895) Respecting his recommendations, in 1896 the institute invited applicants for the physical trainer and fencing master function at the university. Vermes Lajos got the job and started teaching on 4<sup>th</sup> March.



Graph 3. Vermes on his way to Cluj

The management of the university arranged a gym and fencing room respecting the wishes of Vermes. Beside this, they created a fencing committee chosen from the teachers of the four faculties. The first president of the committee was Dr. Lindner Gusztáv, the members were: Fabinyi Rudolf, Meltzl Hugó, Szabó Dénes and Udránszky László. The university embraced the teaching of fencing by giving place to a modern gymnastic and fencing institute in the new building. (Kilyéni 2010, 75.) This was designed by Meixner Károly and Alpár Ignác and built by Reményik Károly. It was finished in 1902.

From 1896 the Italian fencing became more popular in Hungary, than the Hungarian version. The need for the new style was growing among the students, so beginning with 1898 Vermes Lajos organized fencing academies in Cluj, where he invited well known fencing masters to teach. Garzó Béla, who later became a physical trainer at Kecskemét, Bagaméri Béla, who became a fencing master and worked in Cluj at the beginning of the 1900's and the Sárpy brothers were some of the students who had good results on academic competitions.

Vermes was right, when he realized that for the revival of the sport life in Cluj there is need for an academic club similar to BAAC (Budapest Academic Athletic Club). For the sake of the cause, he organized in May 1901 an academic athletic competition in Cluj. As the records state "at the end of May the president (!) of the Academic Athletic and Fencing Association in Cluj (!) organized a college competition. All six athletic numbers were won by the members of BAAC in the absence of opponents. The competition was organized respecting the mentality of Vermes, in Szabadka style with total disregard of modern athletics. For shot-putting they used an 8 and a half kilogram bullet, the high jumps were executed from a board, the long jumps had a 17 meter long launching course, etc. It is not a miracle, that a vermesi record was set, Gajzágó, who returned after a long period of time as a member of BAAC won the high jump competition with a 182,5 centimeter jump." (Siklóssy 1929, 216.)

In spite of the "vermesi records" he became a dominant figure in the process of creating the sport life in Cluj, when he funded the University Athletic Club of Cluj (UACC) in 1902. This was the third academic sport club in Hungary. (Zuber 1935, 543.) Its first president was count Török Sándor.

Vermes was well respected in Cluj. The renowned confessional schools invited him to train the students in lack of specialists. The Main Catholic Gymnasium invited him to become the institute's trainer in the 1897/98 school year. This situation was eased by the fact that the building of the university and the high school were facing each other. Vermes taught here until 1903/04.

The date of the first football match held in Cluj is a mystery, but we know, that in the spring of 1896, Vermes organized a match for the sportsmen of the UACC at the military parade ground named Bivalyrét (Buffalo Meadow) situated in the suburb. He was the first to introduce and teach football in Cluj, and he had a big role in the promotion of this sport.

Beside the popular ball games of that times, football was gaining popularity. By 1898 Vermes Lajos organized 14 matches for his students in the Hója forest at the edge of the town. (Magyar Polgár, 14th June 1898)

At first the quality of the ground was not considered a problem. The students started playing freely as soon as they found a big enough space. Until the end of the 1890's and the beginning of the 1900's the Hója forest and the Bivalyrét were considered appropriate ground. These matches were defined by the incipient conditions of the field: the grass was not appropriate, the ditches and the holes were filled with rain water, the bad grass led to injuries. The gates were made of portable sticks (pop-up gauge) tied together at the top with a red ribbon. The sticks were taken to the site every time, and were taken back to the gym after every match. (Killyéni 2010, 47.) Before playing, Vermes appointed the field, grouped the students randomly in two teams and ran the match with the help of a whistle. Only the most basic rules and expectations were introduced to the students, and this was enough at that time.

The more frequent and regular matches led to close relationships and the development of team spirit, so the creation of teams was a question of time. In the autumn of 1901 several students from Debrecen came to the university in Cluj, and with the local students they formed the first football team of the city: the Academic Football Team (AFT). The duties were transferred from teacher to students parallel with the development of football and of the organizational skills. In the spring following the foundation of AFT the students were organizing regular training sessions and matches.

The other educational institutes had introduced football as well. They went on the same road from spontaneous playing to the well-organized one, which ultimately led to the foundation of selected teams. The students of the Main Catholic Gymnasium were introduced in the world of football in 1897, when Vermes Lajos became the trainer of the school. The memoirs of Dr. Kis Géza, the former student of the gymnasium confirm the reports written by Vermes in the 1897-98 year book, which states that beside other ball games, they played football as well. (based on Kiss Géza's memoirs, which are part of the sports inheritance of the Apáczai Cs. J. Association)

In the beginning the lack of balls was a serious problem, as Vermes took back his sport in the university's gym after every game. At this time, the gymnasium just like the other high schools did not have balls. From the existing memoirs we can see, that in 1897-1898 the students organized their matches excursively.

The memoirs of dr. Vuchetich Vuk attest the appearance of the new sport. The student from Zagreb arrived to Cluj in 1901, and was surprised by the novelty of this sport, as he had been playing it in the last three years. At the beginning Vermes rarely took out the ball, as at the turn of the century students were playing

handles-ball – a popular ball game. The interest of the students convinced Vermes in the spring of 1901 to introduce football. Despite the initial difficulties and confusion, football soon became popular among the students. Initially the playing was chaotic, but the students loved it. (based on Vuchetich Vuk's memoirs, which are part of the sports inheritance of the Apáczai Cs. J. Association) By 1902 the Catholic Gymnasium and the Unitarian Gymnasium had their own teams, and soon they organized friendlies.

In the early 1900's many sportsmen played a role in the popularization and development of football. Until May 1901 12 matches were organized with the participation of 300 students thanks to the contribution of Paukovich Andor, first year law student. (Magyar Polgár, 11th June 1901) Vermes continued to participate in the organization of the league matches. He was assisted by Aurel Isacu second year law student, Lassel Gyula, the teacher of the Unitarian High School and Hoffman Ferenc, the teacher at the Trading School.

Vermes revived in Cluj, he had the respect and trust of the citizens. The citizens were sport fans, so they were grateful, that the renowned sportsman moved to their city. But Vermes wanted more, than their respect.



**Graph 4.** The gymnastic and fencing institute (around 1905)



He started printing business cards and diplomas, and just like in the past, he used false information to emphasize his importance in the Hungarian sport life. This wasn't surprising, but Vermes committed a bigger mistake, when he gave these diplomas to be signed by the sport leaders of the city, the sponsors. They did not know about the real achievements of Vermes, but believed in him, as he was an enthusiastic sport leader. This action questioned seriously the sport credibility of Vermes.

The diploma was the product of an older wish of Vermes Lajos that of letting everyone know how he was Hungary's biggest athlete. This was the reason why he printed that diploma which proved –obviously with his false records- his best results achieved through his career. These records -10,2 seconds on 100 yards, 197 centimeters in high jumps- were world records at that time.

Vermes' other unforgivable error is related to his leadership at UACC. The past was repeating itself, as he committed the same error as in Subotica. He was convinced that the club should be ruled respecting his and his supporters' ideas. He could not accept that in some cases his opinion did not matter, that his plans were disregarded. So he went on an UACC meeting with a revolver and dispelled the participants. This could not be forgiven. (Zuber 1935, 642.)

This was his life. Due to the loss of credibility he was proscribed for a hundred year, his actions became a source of fiction. But his real sport feats overrun his scams; his course of life is reevaluated. From a hundred years distance his pioneer work as a sport agitator oppresses his excessiveness. The duty of the posterity is to guard his success and his achievements, and to tell the folly stories about him. These actions were taken in the name of sport and in the present they are a source of humor.

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