

Women's Handball WCh (I)

From the beginnings to the early 70s

If you talk about handball you can't pass the beginnings of the game. After all the sport was not just suitable for women but was made for women. The real handball game developed at the turn of the 20th century from different ball games such as netball, games towards baskets, 'Raffball' or 'Turmball'. Games towards goals emerged from these early ball games. A first rulebook was composed by a Danish teacher, Lieutenant Colonel Holger Nielsen. Players were not allowed to run with the ball or to hold it more than three seconds.

The 29th of October 1917 is considered the birthday of handball, as Max Heiser, senior gym manager in Berlin, fixed that the 'Torball' game he had created in 1915 be named 'handball', and as he formulated clear rules. The game should be a possibility for girls to romp around, since he thought that games for boys such as football included too much body contact. Two years later Carl Schelenz, a gym teacher from Berlin, further developed handball by allowing tackling and smaller balls in order to focus on 'throwing' and thus to make it more attractive for both girls and boys. He also introduced dribbling (taken from DE.WIKIPEDIA "Handball"). A kind of game from the Czech Republic was called "Hazena", a form of play on a small field that represents another origin of modern handball.

International matches were already played in the 1920s, however, world championships or tournaments for national teams were out of the question, although the IAHF – the precursor of today's IHF - was founded on the fringes of the Olympic Games in 1928. The association was in charge of games played with hands on a field, including but not limited to handball.

A first outdoor handball tournament for men was played at the Olympic Games in 1936 already and outdoor and indoor world championships were organised two years later whereas women's world title contests only debuted in 1949 – also due to World War Two. Outdoor handball was played in Hungary in 1949. Four nations took part, the tournament lasted four days, and the host team finally prevailed. The format was a round-robin one so that the opening duel where Hungary overcame Austria 7:2 was at the same time the final. Both teams won their remaining matches while Czechoslovakia assured a 4:2 win over France to come in third.

The women had to wait until 1956 to stage title contests again. The Federal Republic of Germany welcomed eight teams, the regulations provided for two qualifying games followed by group matches with two groups of three. Romania gained a 6:5 final win; title defender Hungary finished third. Victorita Dumitrescu (1935 – 2009) from the South-East European team became the first star in women's handball. The Romanian also won the 1960 Outdoor Handball WCh title and the Indoor WCh title two years later.

Another Outdoor Handball WCh was staged in 1960 in the Netherlands. Six teams participated in the tournament including a united team consisting of players from the FRG and the GDR. As stated above Romania won and Austria gained silver. The era of women's outdoor handball came to an end even before the men's one, perhaps also due to the fact that indoor handball became more and more accepted.

An Indoor World Championship had been staged in 1957 already. It is considered the I Indoor World Championship although it was an open-air tournament. 8,000 spectators watched the final between Czechoslovakia and Hungary and witnessed CSSR's clear 7:1 victory. Goalkeeper Kweta Janeckowa, who won the bronze again five years later, was the outstanding player of that tournament. Nine teams, all of them from Europe, took part in Hungary. That changed five years later when the II Women's Handball WCh was organised in Romania. Japan was the sole team from Asia that joined the eight European participants, however, had to settle with last rank. Coaching legend Nicolae Nedef and his colleague Constantine Popescu led their team to an 8:5 final victory over Denmark. Title defender CSSR was rewarded by third place. After the final the host joyfully celebrated its team – as a German proverb has it: “drawing them crowns”. And it is purely literally speaking, as the new World Champions wore crowns of flowers as a headdress when they came to the closing banquet. And they kept dry although the female players were exposed to all weathers at the WCh in Romania. This was meant to change very soon.

At the next WCh, which was organised in the Federal Republic of Germany in December 1965, the host chose comfortable halls. This time just eight teams gathered for the final round – just European ones for the last time. The Hungarians overcame Yugoslavia by 5:3 in the final to win the title. Host Germany came in third. The tournament marked a turning point in the history of women's handball. Two groups of four teams each played a group phase. According to the group rankings placement matches and the finals followed. While women in other sports having a greater role, international handball had to catch up in this regard. This was meant to change in the 1970s.