

History of Men's Handball World Championships

Part I 1938 – 1960



The first indoor handball world championship in 1938 lasted only two days, which is not surprising, as only four countries were participating. On 5 and 6 February 1938, host Germany, Austria, Sweden and Denmark, under the direction of the International Amateur Handball Federation (IAHF) – the predecessor of the International Handball Federation (IHF) – determined the winners of the round-robin tournament, which thus didn't have a real final. The Germans narrowly defeated Austria in the "final" 5:4. Sweden beat Denmark 2:1, which was enough to win the bronze medal.

However, indoor handball played a rather minor part in the first half of 20th century. In fact, outdoor handball prevailed. In 1936, the Germans had won the Olympic gold medal at the premiere of outdoor handball in Berlin. Coach Otto Kaudynia led them to the victory at the WCh premiere as well, which was also organized by the IAHF. In the final, they celebrated an emphatic 23:0 victory over Switzerland. The team of the world champion included



some players who had also won the gold medal at the Olympics in Berlin and the indoor handball WCh, just like their coach. Austria didn't participate in the WCh, as National Socialist Germany led by Hitler had annexed the Alpine republic in March 1938 ("annexation of Austria").



The tournament mode of the event which had 10 participating teams was unusual: The matches were played in the knock-out system. Three of the five teams, which had won their first matches, reached the semi-final. Sweden and Romania, who had also won their opening matches, had to play in a so-called intermediary round, which was won by Sweden who became the fourth semi-finalist. Romania came in fifth. In the semi-finals of the four-day competition, Germany defeated Hungary, whereas Switzerland prevailed against the Scandinavians who also lost the bronze final against Hungary.

Due to World War II which started in 1939 and the consequences of the war, it was not until 1948 that world championships could be organized again.

It was the first time that the outdoor world championship took place under the direction of the International Handball Federation (IHF) founded in 1946 – this

hasn't changed until now. France had agreed to host the championship. Germany didn't participate, as the country was governed by the victorious powers of World War II and didn't have its own national federation – in addition, several international organizations didn't allow competing with the nation that caused the war at sport events. Twelve teams participated in the WCh; eight of them played a preliminary round whose winners reached the quarter-finals, in which they played against four seeded teams. Sweden, Switzerland, host France and Denmark reached the semi-finals, in which both Scandinavian countries could prevail. Sweden clearly won the final against Denmark 11:4 and secured their first (and only) world championship title in outdoor handball.

Four years later, the 3rd outdoor handball WCh was held in Switzerland. 13 teams competed in this event – they were all from Europe, as already at the previous championship. The Saarland had its own team, whereas Italy and Portugal didn't take part. The qualification was followed by a preliminary and an intermediary round in the knock-out system as well as three placement matches for the places 1 to 6 at the end of the tournament. Germany, represented by a DHB selection of the Federal Republic, and title holder Sweden met in the final, in which Germany clearly defeated Sweden 19:8 and won the title.

Two years later at the indoor WCh, the “Tre Kronors” were all the more successful. Whereas outdoor handball was still more popular in Central Europe in the 50ies, indoor handball more and more prevailed in Scandinavia. It was therefore almost logical that Sweden didn't only host the 2nd indoor world championship in 1954 after a 16-year break, but also achieved to win this tournament. Six teams had announced their participation in the event, which took place from 13 to 17 January, also including the divided Germany with a joint team of DHB (FRG) and DHV (GDR). The Germans won their preliminary round matches against Switzerland and France, whereas Sweden defeated Denmark and Czechoslovakia. The host won the final 17:14 (8:5) and CSSR took bronze.



The next outdoor handball WCh was held only one year later – this time hosted by Germany. A record was broken, as 17 countries participated in this WCh. The teams played in six preliminary round groups and afterwards in two intermediary rounds. The winners of the intermediary round reached the final. The Germans, also benefiting from home advantage, celebrated their next victory – this time over the Swiss, who were without a chance against the DHB selection (25:13).

The other part of Germany, the GDR, organized the 3rd indoor handball WCh in 1958. The fast game in the hall also prevailed more and more in the German-speaking countries in Europe. Brazil was the first non-European country in handball history to participate in a WCh. The host took part with an all-German team – as already in 1954 (and again in 1961). Winning 46:4 in 1958, the Germans also celebrated the highest victory ever in WCh history. They however failed to reach the final after their defeat against Czechoslovakia in the intermediary round. In the final, the East Europeans didn't have the slightest chance against title holder Sweden either – the Swedes clearly won 22:12.

Another WCh took place in the 50ies of the last century: the outdoor handball WCh 1959 in Austria. After the record participation in 1955 (17 nations), only nine countries competed for the world championship title at that time. Belgium, France and Yugoslavia didn't take part. The end result was as usual, given that the Germans are participating – they became world champions. This time, the all-German team beat Denmark and Sweden in the preliminary round and Romania in the final (14:11).