



Nándor Hidegkuti's Coaching Activities in Egypt¹

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Abstract:

Nándor Hidegkuti, a former outstanding footballer and coach, is a personality who connects the Arab world and Hungary in the field of sports. This is particularly true in the case of Egypt, as he worked for seven years as a specialist manager in the North African country. After presenting the history of Hungarian-Egyptian sports and football relations, in the present study, I undertake to present the coaching career of Nándor Hidegkuti and, in particular, its period in Egypt, based on contemporary (primarily) press and archival sources. He coached the country's largest and most prestigious club, Al-Ahly, from 1973 to 1980. This period was one of the most successful periods in the history of the club.

Keywords:

Coach, Egypt, Football, Golden Team, Hidegkuti Nándor

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Introduction

If you are in Cairo and visit the headquarters of the Egyptian Football Federation, you can find a special commemorative plaque on the wall. The inscription, which can be read in Arabic and Hungarian, commemorates “two outstanding players of the legendary Hungarian Golden Team”, Ferenc Puskás (1927–2006) and Nándor Hidegkuti (1922–2002). The plaque, inaugurated on 23 January 2011 in the presence of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, does not focus on Puskás’s and Hidegkuti’s excellent football career, but praises their performance as a football manager in Egypt. Grateful Egyptian football fans, and even the whole of Egyptian football community, will cherish their memory to this day, as both of them earned unparalleled merits in the flourishing of the country's football in the period after the 1973 Yom Kippur War. This episode in the life of the two world-famous Hungarian footballers is little known and researched, even though they almost idolize their person on the banks of the Nile. However, we must not forget that Hungarian specialists by that time already had a serious reputation in the “land of the pharaohs”. Before the involvement of Hidegkuti and Puskás, two significant generations of Hungarian coaches were active in the country, and even the beginning of the excellent sports and football relations of Egypt dates back to the interwar period.

History, the Beginning of Hungarian-Egyptian Football Relations

The year 1924 can be considered the starting point of Hungarian-Egyptian football relations. The first clash between the national teams of the two countries took place at the Paris Olympics (Al-Naggar, 2012, p. 138). However, the Hungarian team, considered the probable winner, suffered a heavy three-goal defeat and already in the second round said goodbye to the struggles of the Olympic Games. The result shocked the public. The fact that the event entered Hungarian sports and football history under the name “Egyptian Plague” is a good indication of this (Nagy, 1981, p. 59).

The 1930s brought success and glory to football in both countries. This is one of the golden ages in the history of Hungarian football, the clear culmination of which is the 1938 World Cup finalist appearance. And Egypt became the first Arab African team to play in a World Cup in 1934. In this tournament, the two teams met for the third time (after a match in Cairo in 1932). At the meeting that took place on 27 May, the Hungarian side triumphed this time, with 4:2 (Kopácsi, 2000, p. 28). After outlining the early antecedents, let's move on to the period after the Second World War, which brought about serious changes in the history of both countries. In terms of the development of football relations, we should definitely highlight the year 1953. The Hungarian national football team, at Wembley Stadium in London, “in the match of the century”, won 6:3 over the English team on November 25, 1953. Of course, the triumph of the world could not remain without echoes in Egypt. The defeat of the



British in football had symbolic significance and coincided with the political changes taking place in the country. The 1952 uprising, led by the Free Officers' Movement, swept away the monarchy, and then the republic was proclaimed on June 18, 1953. In this historical situation, the defeat of the "imperialists" in sport naturally aroused sympathy among the Egyptians Hungary and Hungarian football (J. Nagy, 2017, p. 24). The results of the Golden Team (Olympic victory in 1952) were, of course, authoritative in themselves.

It was a special honor for the Arab country that the English-beating Hungarian national team visited Egypt in the last days of January 1954 (Népsport, 1954). In preparation for the World Cup, the Golden Team played five preparation matches during February in the country. The Hungarian national team also played in Cairo and Alexandria; they played against the Misr Bank national team, then against the district national team of Cairo (Feb. 1, Feb. 5), followed by the match against the Egyptian national team (Feb. 12), then the Hungarian team also competed against Alexandria's national team (Feb. 14), and finally ended its tour with an appearance against the Egyptian league selection (Feb. 21). The "raid" for the purpose of preparing for the World Cup was a success, as the national team left it as the winner at the end of all the matches (Nagy, 1981, pp. 202–204). It was also on the occasion of this guest appearance when Nándor Hidegkuti also visited Egypt for the first time, who dazzled the audience with his play and goals and established his reputation among Egyptian football fans.

Sports and Football Relations 1956–1967

After the Golden Team tour, Egyptian-Hungarian football and sports relations developed dynamically in the following years, as evidenced, among other things, by the tours of Hungarian club teams in Egypt. In January 1956, for example, Budapest Honvéd hosted Africa, where he played preparation matches, including with the Egyptian national football team (MTI Sportkiadás, 1956a). In the same year, on 30 December 1956, the Győri ETO football team also started its Egyptian "raid" (MTI Sportkiadás, 1956c). In this case, however, the Hungarian team's appearance abroad did not only serve to build sports relations. The ETO, as the football team of the Hungarian Wagon and Machine Factory, was invited to the country by the general manager of the Egyptian State Railways. For this reason, the purpose of the visit was also to expand and deepen the existing trade relations between the two countries.³

In 1956, a major sporting diplomacy event was the visit of the Egyptian sports delegation to the Hungarian capital on August 17 (MTI Sportkiadás, 1956b). The body, consisting of prominent personalities, arrived in Budapest at the invitation of the National Committee on Physical Education and Sports. Its members include the

³ The North African country was already a significant market for Hungarian mechanical engineering products (e.g. railway cars).

President and Secretary-General of the Egyptian Olympic Committee and the Secretary-General of the Egyptian University Sports Federation. During their stay here for a few days, they studied the organizational structure of Hungarian sport, as well as the sports facilities (primarily the Népstadion). On the Egyptian side, the need to invite Hungarian football teams as a possible means of expanding sports relations was highlighted. The MTI press release also reported that former national team footballer Pál Titkos (1908–1988) said yes to the invitation of the Egyptian Football Federation and thus could begin his coaching career in the country. The coaching appointments of the 1950s marked the opening and first wave of Hungarian football professionals' involvement in Egypt. In fact, the activities of Nándor Hidegkuti or Ferenc Puskás in the 1970s also fit into this line. In any case, Hungarian professionals were present in very large numbers on the African continent during this period and did a lot for the development of football on the continent. (Dénes and Rochy, 1999, p. 72).

Pál Titkos was first the head coach of the Egyptian national team, and then he was entrusted with an equally serious task when he became the coach of the Al-Ahly team (Al-Naggar, 2013, p. 77). He held this post until 1959. However, he was preceded by Vilmos Kertész II (1890–1964), who worked in Alexandria, and Géza Toldi (1909–1985), a former footballer of the Ferencvárosi Torna Club⁴ who coached Cairo's second most important club, Zamalek. In addition to Titkos and Toldi, Ferenc Magyar (1910–1977) also worked in the United Arab Republic⁵ in 1957, and from 1958 Pál Szabó (1903–1986) and Gyula Lázár (1911–1983) also worked in the United Arab Republic (Szűcs, 1958, p. 6). Szabó and Lázár had to act in their capacity as national coaches and taught at the football department of the College of Physical Education⁶ (Szűcs, 1959, p. 6). The former's most important task is to organize coach training; conducting three- and six-month training courses at beginner and advanced levels, while the latter's role was similarly responsible, he had to deal with the management of youth education. These five individuals are therefore the first generation of Hungarian coaches in Egypt. It is no exaggeration to say that they were the think tanks of Egyptian football, the most eminent specialists of this era.

In the 1960s, another “Hungarian contingent” arrived in the North African country. The names of Sándor Kapocsi (1919–1980), László Rákóczi (1926–2016) and József Kovács II (1923–2001) were the hallmarks of this second generation (Németh, 1964, p. 13). All three were promoted to the first-class teams of the Egyptian football league as managers. Kapocsi coached at Seka Hadid in Cairo, Rákóczi at Suez Canal in Ismaila, while Kovács II also coached at an Ismaila club (Szűcs, 1965, p. 12). Meanwhile, the tradition of guest appearances by Hungarian clubs continued. The teams of Honvéd, Ferencvárosi Torna Club and Győri ETO also visited Egypt in the 1960s. We can agree

⁴ The most well-known and successful football club in Hungary.

⁵ The union of Egypt and Syria from 1958.

⁶ In Hungarian: Testnevelési Főiskola, today's Hungarian University of Sports Science [in Hungarian: Magyar Testnevelési és Sporttudományi Egyetem].



with the author of the magazine *Labdarúgás*, who said at the end of the article: “In the land of the pyramids, Hungarian football really has authority.” However, fruitful relations and the development of Egyptian football were temporarily halted by the unexpected war conflict of 1967.

Consequences of the 1967–73 War Period for Egyptian Football

On June 5, 1967, another Arab-Israeli armed conflict began with a surprise attack by the Israeli Air Force (J. Nagy-Al Naggar, 2019, p. 129). The six-day lightning war ended in a complete victory for the attacking party and, as a result, important areas such as the Gaza Strip, Sinai, the Golan Heights and the West Bank came under Israeli control. The Arab League states did not accept the situation and demanded the withdrawal of Israeli troops from the occupied territories. This marked the beginning of the period of the so-called “maddening war”, which lasted about three years. Egypt, meanwhile, wanted to liberate the occupied parts by its own forces, so on March 8, 1969, it launched intensive artillery and airstrikes, as well as commando raids in the Suez Canal area. The fighting dragged on until August 7, 1970, when a ceasefire agreement was reached between the Egyptian and Israeli sides. The difficult political situation in Egypt and the acts of war have, of course, had an impact on the sporting scene, and in particular on football. For four years starting in June 1967, virtually all types of sports activities were discontinued on the territory of the country. The championship was suspended, and the fights did not resume over the next four years. The clubs lost their players, who had to enlist in the army and take part in the fighting. In addition to them, many representatives of the great Egyptian football generation of the 1960s, such as Tarek⁷ and Saleh Salim⁸, or Taha Ismail⁹, retired.

When life finally returned to normal, on October 29, 1971, it seemed that the football season would also start as usual. However, this initiative has proven to be a life-changing one. After only two months, at the end of December, the championship was interrupted again (Magyar Hírlap, 1971, p. 371.). In fact, in the Cairo derby, a clash between the teams of Al-Ahly and Zamalek, disorder broke out after the referee awarded a controversial penalty in favor of the Zamalek team. Supporters clashed with law enforcement, resulting in many being injured. At the same time, similar scenes played out in Mehalla, so the Egyptian Football Federation decided to suspend the league indefinitely.

The following season, 1972–73, had already been conducted and completed in a normal framework, but the 1973–74 football season was again interrupted by a war conflict. Between 6 and 26 October 1973, the fourth Arab-Israeli armed conflict, the so-

⁷ Tarek Salim (1937–2016): Striker for Al Ahly and the Egyptian national team.

⁸ Saleh Salim (1930–2002): The best-known player for Al-Ahly's club, where he spent almost his entire career. He later served as president of the club on two occasions (1980–1988, 1992–2002).

⁹ Taha Ismail (1939-): Legendary attacker for the Al-Ahly team from 1957 to 1970.

called Yom-Kippur War, took place. On the first day of the war, Egyptian troops successfully pushed forward in the Suez Canal area. (This day later became a national holiday in the North African country.) In addition to acts of war, the oil crisis, which began on October 17, 1973, also hit the countries. After the initial successes, the war ended in Israeli victory. Of the Arab countries, Egypt was the only one committed to launching peace talks with Israel. The next period of calmness meant that the sporting life, and thus the football league, could resume.

The Development of Hungarian-Egyptian Sports and Football Relations in the 1970s

The outbreak of the Yom-Kippur War temporarily hampered sports diplomacy between the two countries again. However, the following year, the first step towards a fresh start was taken, when the ministries of education agreed on the mutual visit of different university and college teams in Egypt and Hungary. This is how the Egypt university football team played in Hungary between 20 and 30 June 1974 (Napló, 1975). This was followed by a tour of Egypt by the MAFC (Műegyetemi és Atlétikai Football Club)¹⁰ basketball team in the autumn of 1974 (MNL OL. 01), and in December 1974 a decision was made to visit the Hungarian university football team the following year, in February. However, these relations, as we can see, did not yet concern top-flight sports clubs, but college, university associations. The university team was finally able to visit the North African country on February 8. It was also planned to play a match with Hidegkuti's team, Al-Ahli, where the legendary coach would have taken the kick-off, but this idea ultimately failed.

Examining the documents of diplomatic relations between the United Arab Republic and Hungary, it can be noted that the possibility of developing sports relations was first discussed again in January 1975. Hungary's embassy in Cairo indicated the Egyptian side's desire to expand relations, they wanted to go beyond the framework of cooperation organized solely by educational institutions. The top organ of Hungarian sport, OTSH (Országos Testnevelési és Sporthivatal)¹¹, has shown itself ready to take steps to this end and has indicated this to the Hungarian Embassy in Cairo. At first, the idea of sending delegations of 2-3 people and mutual visits arose (MNL OL. 02). The head of the International Department of OTSH wanted to travel to Cairo to prepare for negotiations (MNL OL. 03). However, after an encouraging start, the stagnation and regression of Hungarian-Egyptian foreign relations began in the following years. This was due to the foreign policy of President Anwar Sadat, who dissolved the Soviet-Egyptian Treaty of Friendship in 1976 and caused great outrage in the Arab world when he also visited Israel on November 19, 1977. These steps have led to a deterioration in

¹⁰ In English: Technical University and Athletics Football Club.

¹¹ In English: National Office of Physical Education and Sports.



relations with the countries of the Eastern Bloc. Of course, this was also true for Hungary, which also had an impact on the development of sports relations between the two countries.

In March 1978, the president of Ismailia SC was looking for a coach to head the city's football team, so he turned to his ambassador in Hungary Cairo for help (MNL OL. 04). The esteem of the Hungarian coaches is well illustrated by the fact that the sports director specifically wanted to see Hungarian professionals on the bench. Ambassador Lajos S. Nagy forwarded the request to OTSH and the MLSZ (Magyar Labdarúgó Szövetség)¹² and asked the competent authorities for a resolution as soon as possible. The answer soon came, but it was dismissive. This is because the federation decided not to recommend sending a Hungarian coach to the Arab country. However, the Hungarian ambassador tried to get MLSZ and OTSH to amend their decision. He was aware that Egyptian-Hungarian relations were deteriorating in many areas, but Hungarian football and Hungarian professionals, including Nándor Hidegkuti, asked for the decision to be reconsidered, citing his reputation (MNL OL. 05). At that time, it even seemed that Hidegkuti would not stay in Egypt any longer. In the end, another Hungarian coach was not sent off, although at that time even Nándor Hidegkuti did not return home from Cairo.

However, not only negative trends have appeared in sports relations. From the summer of 1978, the Egyptian Football Federation, through the Embassy of Egypt in Budapest, indicated to the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the sports authorities its desire to install a Hungarian-born head coach into the bench of the Egypt national football team (MNL OL. 06).

In the request, the person selected, the outgoing head coach of the Hungarian national team, Lajos Baróti (1914–2005), was specifically named. In addition, the Egyptian side wanted to play two friendly matches with the Hungarian national football team in 1979, one of which would have been held in Budapest and one in Cairo. In this case, too, the resolution of OTSH and MLSZ was negative regarding the posting of Baróti, although their decision was justified this time (MNL OL. 07). Lajos Baróti's services were still claimed in the management of domestic football, despite the fact that his retirement was underway. In addition, the person concerned himself stated that he did not wish to accept the invitation (MNL OL. 08). However, the organization of national team matches, meanwhile, progressed well and ended up with an alternative solution, they managed to send a Hungarian coach to the Egyptian national team as well. The new candidate of the Egyptian side was Dezső Bundzsák (1928–2010) (MNL OL. 09). This request has already been positively assessed by OTSH, MLSZ and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, so from the following year Bundzsák was able to start his work as coach of the Egyptian national eleven (MNL OL. 10). The variability of sporting relations is well indicated by the fact that also in the autumn of 1978, the visit of the

¹² In English: Hungarian Football Association.

Cairo Arsenal team to Hungary was also thwarted due to the negative response of the Hungarian side (MNL OL. 11). Although in this case the justification was acceptable, since by that time the season was already in full swing, and none of the Hungarian clubs could have played matches with the Egyptians.

The following year again produced mixed results in sports diplomacy. The initiator was again the Egyptian side. At the beginning of 1979, the Egyptian Football Federation wanted to host the Hungarian Olympic football team from February 15 to 25 (MNL OL. 12). This time there was a positive response from MLSZ, and it was considered possible to go out and play two or three matches. However, there have been a series of negative responses to guest appearances by Egyptian club teams, such as Mansour Sport Club (MNL OL. 13) and Zamalek (MNL OL. 14). The latter club wanted to establish closer cooperation with Spartacus from Békéscsaba, without success.

With two resolutions, I would like to illustrate the dismissive attitude of the Hungarian side; one is dated May 7, while the other is dated July 16. The former document states: "Due to Egypt's foreign policy course, which is currently unfavorable to us, we, for our part, do not encourage the development of Hungarian-Egyptian sports relations" (MNL OL. 15). And the July one: "[...] in the current circumstances, it is not in our political interest to organize spectacular sporting events with Egypt." (MNL OL. 16).

During 1979, it is worth remembering in more detail a sensitive matter. The Videoton football team¹³ hosted Cairo in January 1979, where they also played a friendly match with Hidegkuti's team, Al-Ahly. However, the departure of the football team was not of paramount importance in terms of sports diplomacy, as the presence of footballers was important for Videoton for business policy reasons. This is because the company negotiated with Egyptian companies to assemble and sell TV sets (MNL OL. 17). According to the agreement reached between the teams of Videoton and National, the Hungarian side would also have hosted Hidegkuti's team in Hungary during the year. The designated date for arrival was September 18. However, this invitation was withdrawn by the Hungarian club after learning of the MLSZ's position on the matter (MNL OL. 18). The football association has instructed the clubs that they can no longer play friendly matches or receive guests after the start of the domestic league. However, the National's management has argued that there is a valid contract between the two clubs and that they will firmly insist on visiting Hungary and matches. They took this position until the day before the trip (September 17), but in the end they accepted the decision of the MLSZ at the last minute and so after their arrival on September 18, their program included only trainings, tourist programs and rest (MNL OL. 19).

¹³ Videoton was a company in Székesfehérvár that manufactured electrical equipment. The name of the city's professional sports club originates from here.



Another significant event of the year was the preparation of a wide-ranging Hungarian-Egyptian work plan for cooperation in the field of sports, also at the initiative of the Egyptian side. The four-page document contained very detailed and concrete proposals. Thus, for example, he touched on the exchange of sports teams, the issue of hiring coaches, professional contacts between sports institutions, cooperation in the production of sporting goods, training of sports leaders and even joint research into sport (MNL OL. 20). However, the response from OTSH and the State Department was dismissive. The signing of the Protocol on Sports Cooperation was not considered timely, as “at present it would not be appropriate to develop sports relations spectacularly” (MNL OL. 21).

A real sensation for Egyptian fans was the arrival of Ferenc Puskás in the country, which also dates back to the summer of 1979. The former Golden Team standout moved from AEK Athens, Greece, to Port Said, where he became the coach of the Al-Masry team (Dénes and Jamrich, 1998, p. 261). At that time, he was no longer unfamiliar with the Arab world, having been the head coach of Saudi Arabia's national team from 1976 to 1977. His activity in Egypt eventually became very long, as he managed Al-Masry as head coach for five years, until 1984 (Prantner and Al-Naggar, 2022, pp. 101–103). Nándor Hidegkuti, his former teammate and friend, who was still in Cairo in 1979, met on numerous occasions and had private conversations or discussed professional issues.

Nándor Hidegkuti's Coaching Career

At the time of his contract to Egypt, Nándor Hidegkuti already had more than a decade of head coaching experience. He ended his active football career in 1958 when, after eleven years at MTK (Magyar Testgyakorlók Köre)¹⁴, he nailed the stoplist. After that, almost immediately began his coaching career. He said goodbye to MTK after a year and tried his luck abroad from 1960 onwards. Between 1960 and 1963 he worked in Italy for Fiorentina and Mantua (Zsolt Róbert, 1979, p. 133). With the former club, he successfully played on both the domestic and European stage, as under his leadership they won both the Italian Cup and the European Cup Winners' Cup. After his involvement in Italy, he returned home and served as head coach of Hungarian club teams. In Hungary, he travelled the routes Győri ETO¹⁵ (1963-65), Tatabánya (1966), MTK (1967-68), Budapest Spartacus (1968-71), Eger (1973), interspersed with a short detour to Poland in Rzeszów (1972-73). He achieved his greatest success with Győr when they won the Hungarian championship. This was a special event because the country team after Nagyvárad AC managed to win the championship (Hidegkuti and Fekete, 1965, p. 219).

¹⁴ MTK is a sports club based in Budapest. The club played a decisive role in Hungarian football in the 20th century.

¹⁵ Győri ETO is the team of the machine factory in Győr, founded in 1904.

However, the perception of Nándor Hidegkuti's time at Hungarian clubs and in Poland is not positive overall. There are several articles in the contemporary press in which it is written that he has been “persecuted by bad luck” (Új Ifjúság, 1974) practically since his time in Győr and that he is not able to perform as successfully as one would expect. In January 1967, he returned to the scene of his previous successes, MTK - now as head coach - where, however, he had to fight against relegation from NB1¹⁶ with the long-standing capital team. The club was in a very bad period after a successful European Cup Winner's Cup appearance in 1964 and it would have been necessary for someone to lead them out of this difficult period by doing the right professional work. Nándor Hidegkuti's appointment as coach seemed to be the perfect choice, as he knew the team and its traditions well. However, the championship season did not go as planned. The legendary player of the Golden Team has repeatedly expressed dissatisfaction with the footballers. In July, for example, he promised harsh penalties for offenses committed in private life, poor performance on the field, and tactical indiscipline (Népsport, 1967). To no avail. MTK finished in tenth place. After a disappointing league appearance, Hidegkuti gave an interview to the newspaper *Labdarúgás* in December 1967, in which he again made very critical statements about their players. He questioned their talent, was dissatisfied with their attitude, diligence and dedication to the club. He summed up what to do in a short but tough sentence: “We need a new, different team!” (Németh, 1967, p. 5).

However, he could no longer carry out this task, as the club terminated his contract by mutual consent shortly afterwards, in the middle of the 1968 season. (Magyar Nemzet, 1968). Yet he was not held responsible for the poor performance in the sports press either. According to some news sources, the club's unsettled internal affairs and the interference of influential personalities from various interest groups in football professional issues also made the head coach's job difficult (Nemzeti Sport, 2018). A brief account of his failed crisis management attempt of one and a half years at MTK is also necessary because this situation is comparable to his involvement in Egypt five years later, when he had to settle the affairs of a club in a similarly difficult situation, albeit in other respects. Later, in an interview in Cairo, he recalled with a bitter taste in his mouth a year and a half spent with his former team (Fejér Megyei Hírlap, 1980) and more than a decade later he still resented the way he was treated at his beloved club.

Of course, the picture can be nuanced, as Nándor Hidegkuti has also achieved minor partial successes at this stage of his coaching career. Such was the case, for example, with his assignment immediately preceding the "Egyptian adventure" in Eger, where the band, under his leadership, successfully avoided relegation from the NB1/B league¹⁷ in the 1973 season (Vas Népe, 1973). On the whole, however, it can be stated that the saying “No one can be a prophet in his own country” is also true in his case,

¹⁶ NB1: National Championship, the top flight of Hungarian football league system.

¹⁷ NB1/B: The second division of the Hungarian football league system.



which was often quoted by the contemporary press in connection with his domestic career (Magyar Nemzet, 1973).

Egyptian Appointment and First Year at Al-Ahly

After the season at Eger, it seemed that Nándor Hidegkuti's coaching career might even come to an end. In the summer of 1973, he did not take another job as a specialist manager but took a position in the hospitality industry in search of new challenges. The director of the South Pest Catering Company employed him in the “6:3 wine bar” that opened at that time on Szamuely Street in District IX (Hétfői Hírek, 1973a). In the interview at that time, he expressed disappointment about his time at MTK and could not answer a question about his further career as a specialist manager to the *Hétfői Hírek* reporter. Several big-name foreign clubs were mentioned by the former world-class footballer, from which he received an offer. Offers from Argentina's River Plate, Benfica and even Juventus have been floated, but he has not yet spoken about a possible Egyptian request that came in the coming weeks.

In September 1973 – just a month before the start of the Yom Kippur War – the most well-known club team in the Arab world, Cairo-based Al-Ahly¹⁸ – or commonly known in international club football as – the National¹⁹ signed and seated the legendary footballer of the Golden Team on the bench, offering a salary of less than six hundred dollars a month (Hétfői Hírek, 1973b). When the Hungarian professional took over his coaching assignment, the whole country was just past a period of war, so chaotic conditions prevailed in sports life as well. This was also true for the Al-Ahly football club. In 1967, the board of directors, led by Dr. Ibrahim Kamel Al-Wakeel, announced that military training would be prescribed for members of the club, who would have to volunteer in the popular resistance, as well as fundraising began on behalf of the club in favor of the war effort. As a result of the turbulent conditions that developed in the sports scene, Egyptian football suffered serious losses. However, it was necessary to rebuild not only the football life of the country after 1973, but also the Al-Ahly team. The beginning of the crisis at the club dates back to the period before the war years. They won their last league title in the 1961–62 season. It was from this low point that a specialist had to bring back the “Red Castle” and bring glory to them again. At Al-Ahly, therefore, a systematic construction began, in the framework of which the goal was to cultivate a completely new generation. A number of young people (who, by the way, were university and college students) were incorporated into the adult team. Later, these

¹⁸ The club was founded in 1907 by members of the Cairo Student Union. In 1911, his football team was created. Al-Ahly is a 42-time champion, 37-time cup winner and 12-time cup winner in Egypt. The most successful and well-known team on the African continent.

¹⁹ In the paper, I use both names, simultaneously.

players became famous under the name “El Talamza”, that is, students. The creator of this new concept was Saleh Salim (Assem, 2016).

It was only a question of who would direct the professional work at the largest Egyptian club. His presidency, in particular General and President Abdel-Mohsen Kamel Murtagy (1916–2013) and the aforementioned Saleh Salim, who was now a sports leader, chose Nándor Hidegkuti, who inherited this difficult situation and had to start construction from there in the autumn of 1973. The arrival of the legendary football player was a real sensation in the Egyptian capital. Football fans still remembered well the golden team's guest appearance nearly twenty years ago and Hidegkuti's brilliance. At his presentation, a huge crowd gathered and enthusiastic spectators demanded that he show something of his football skills and talents (Hétfői Hírek, 1973c). In the following weeks, the working weekdays began. By this time, clubs had already passed the preparation period and the season had begun. For now, Hidegkuti made himself familiar with his new place and observing the players of his new team. His assistants and second coaches were former club luminaries Mahmoud Al-Gohary²⁰ and Fouad Shaban. With a rejuvenated squad, the club achieved excellent results in a short time, and after a few rounds it was already the league leader in the autumn of 1973. The 1973–74 football season had however barely begun, matches already had to be stopped in early October due to the outbreak of war. This time, however, the clubs have not been left without a competition this season. Instead of the usual league matches, the so-called “October League”²¹ was held with the participation of the eighteen best Egyptian football teams.

The struggles of the special competition began on March 15, 1974. The organization was further complicated by the fact that the 1974 African Cup of Nations was held in Egypt from 1 to 14 March, where eight African national teams competed. Egypt won the bronze match over Congo and thus finished in third place. Immediately after that, the Egyptian championship, which was held in unusual conditions, started. However, the winner was not Hidegkuti's team, but the great rival Zamalek, which, incidentally, also had a European coach in the person of Czechoslovakian Ján Hucko (1932–2020). Although Al-Ahly did not even reach the final four, nevertheless, their record was not negative: in addition to 4 wins, they played 2 draws and suffered 2 defeats. However, critical and worried opinions still appeared in the Hungarian press, who believed that Hidegkuti would not be very successful in this new environment either.

In the summer of 1974, Nándor Hidegkuti returned home from Egypt for the first time to spend his holidays on Hungarian soil. At this time, an interview was

²⁰ Mahmoud Al-Gohary (1938–2012): Played for Al-Ahly in the 1950s and later became the club's head coach. He was the head coach of the Egypt national football team on two occasions. He won the Africa Cup of Nations as both a player and a coach.

²¹ The name of the cup series has a symbolic meaning, which referred to the Yom-Kippur war in the autumn of the previous year.



conducted with him, in which he was asked about the experiences of the first year and his life outside in general by Tibor Hámori, a reporter of *Népsport* (*Népsport*, 1974). Reading the interview, as well as the additional commentary, we can note the contradiction that, unlike those published in *Új Ifjúság*, *Népsport* evaluated and presented fully positively Hidegkuti's first year in Egypt. According to this, in the period after the shutdown of the first-class football league in October 1973, Al-Ahly only trained, played various friendly matches and travelled on a tour of Africa. There is no reference to the struggles of the “October League”, which began in March 1974, in the interview or in the supplementary texts. There is only one short sentence that refers to the team's performance: “They did not lose anywhere.” However, this is an erroneous statement, since, for example, in the course of the League struggles, the Al-Ahly team was defeated on two occasions.

In the interview, Hidegkuti also talks about how big football fever there is in Egypt. His team's matches are watched by seventy to eighty thousand people, so they should be held in the central stadium in Cairo. However, fanatical Al-Ahly fans not only watch the adult team's competitive matches, but also encourage the second team and even watch training sessions. The Hungarian coach was already learning Arabic at that time, so he did not have any difficulties in communicating with his players. His popularity continued to be unbroken among Egyptians who loved football; many addressed him on the street and recalled his performance in the Golden Team's 1954 guest appearance in Egypt. Nándor Hidegkuti made serious tactical changes to the team already in the first year. It is also mentioned in the article that he introduced the formation of 4-3-3 in order to strengthen the defense. He found the members of the backline too low, against whom it is easy for opposing attackers to win a head duel. However, with the new line-up, he believed that an extra man would be able to help the defence by stepping back from midfield.

Despite the mixed results of the first season, the club had already indicated to him that they would like to extend his contract, which had bound him to Al-Ahly until 1 August 1974. From the interview conducted by *Népsport*, we learn that in the summer he had requests from other countries, such as Panathinaikos of Greece, where he would have replaced his former national teammate Ferenc Puskás on the bench. However, he chose to stay in Egypt for another year.

Honours and Professional Work

The former legendary player of the Golden Team returned to his club during the summer in the hope that the 1974–75 football season in Egypt could go smoothly as usual, and thus he himself could carry out his professional work in calm conditions. This expectation came true and for the first time in many years, club teams were able to play their matches in the Egyptian football league, which lasted from 6 September 1974 to 6

April 1975. It was the nineteenth season since the series was founded in 1948 to run its entirety.

In February 1975, the Hungarian national football team visited Egypt in the spirit of rebuilding sports relations between the two countries. On this occasion, the Hungarian Scientific and Cultural Center in Cairo organized a reception for the team, where Nándor Hidegkuti was also invited as a star guest. The reporter of *Népsport*, Katalin Ruzskai, was present at the event and interviewed the Hungarian coach, with the help of which we can reconstruct the events, the most important events of the 1974–75 season and the professional work at the club (Népsport, 1975b). In February, they have not yet suffered a single defeat and were in first place in the table. It seemed that the unsuccessful period since 1962 would finally come to an end in the club's history and they could celebrate a league title. The long-unseen successes created a euphoric atmosphere among National supporters. Nándor Hidegkuti said in the interview: “If my team wins, a real people's celebration will begin.” The streets of the capital are flooded with crowds of enthusiastic fans – even hundreds of thousands – and everything is covered in red according to the club's colour. The team continued to play its matches in the Nasser stadium, which could accommodate one hundred and twenty thousand people. We also get some information about his players, whom he considered technical, but also saw their weaknesses. Of these, he highlighted two main problems; their indiscipline and lack of fitness. However, the Hungarian coach did a great professional job, the fruits of which seemed to ripen. He broke down their individualistic and selfish style, even by imposing punishments. For example, the team's most talented player, Mahmoud El Khatib²², was banished to the stands after he once ran around the stadium to entertain spectators, holding the ball on his head. The fans continued to attend the training sessions in very large numbers, where they tried to put pressure on Nándor Hidegkuti so that they did not have to watch the exercises, but there was a real game (tasima) going on there as well. However, he did not shy away from the fanatics and ordered them to order. Two “technical terms” were introduced in connection with the quality of the game: ragel and laibe. The former term means man and he applied it when he was not satisfied with the game shown (they won in vain), while in the latter case, using the word players, he praised them.

Two months later, in early April, Al-Ahly was able to really celebrate a championship title. In thirty-four games, twenty-six wins, seven draws and only one defeat were the team's record (Said, 2007a). In terms of both offense and defensive work, the National was the best guard in the league, as they had the best goal ratio (11 conceded on 70 goals scored), so there was no doubt that they deservedly conquered

²² Mahmoud El Khatib (1954 –): He spent his entire active football career with Al-Ahly. He has celebrated numerous league titles and cup victories with his club. He reached the pinnacle of his career in the 1980s. In 1983, he was voted the best player on the African continent. In 1986, he won the Africa Cup of Nations with the Egyptian national team. He had a special relationship with Nándor Hidegkuti. The Hungarian sports press describes this as a relationship between master and apprentice (Népsport, 1984).



the trophy. The Hungarian sports press reported these results in detail only in February 1976, when Zoltán Gyulay published a lengthy article about Nándor Hidegkuti's coaching activities in Egypt in the columns of *Magyar Nemzet* (Magyar Nemzet, 1976). The article contains some inaccurate comments, such as Al-Ahly winning the league again not after eighteen, but only after a thirteen-year hiatus, and the number of goals conceded in the 1974-75 season was not 8, but 11. However, as a relevant, new piece of information from the article, we can learn that the only defeat was suffered by the Port Said team by the Hidegkuti's, and that match featured the youth team.

However, the performance in the 1975–76 season perhaps even surpassed the success of the previous year. In February 1976, after playing fifteen matches, with 42 goals scored and only two conceded, Al-Ahly was at the top of the table. The conduct of the Egyptian Premier League struggles has changed again this year, by the way. The twenty-four first-class teams were divided into two groups of twelve, and at the end of the season, the winners of the two groups could play each other for the title. The most significant achievement for “Ferencváros of Cairo”²³ during the struggles was the ability to triumph at home to Ismaila, unprecedented in Egyptian football history. However, after the 1:0 victory, critical voices appeared in the sports press. The announcer of Egyptian radio, who happened to be the father of one of Hidegkuti's players, criticized the tactics of the Hungarian coach. He also had little regard for the number of goals scored and the number of counterattacks led by National, which (in his opinion) stemmed from a game that was too defensive. However, the team's success and successes spoke in favor of Hidegkuti, so he continued to enjoy the confidence of the club's management.

The core of the squad continued to be young players who, in addition to their sports activities, were studying at a college or university. The club supported them financially, and in addition to their daily allowance and post-match bonuses, they were also provided with a monthly stipend of twenty-five pounds. Footballers who broke the rules and were reticent could expect a fine from their strict coach, “Churchill”. With the help of Zoltán Gyulay's account, we can also track the development of the team from a tactical point of view. According to this, fitness problems no longer appeared in the footballers, as well as they managed to master the previously mentioned 4-3-3 formation. The importance of the former is well illustrated by the fact that Al-Ahly was able to dominate the game especially in the second half of the games, when the less prepared teams were already tired. At the end of his writing, the author of the article praises the work of the Hungarian coach, as he has once again made Egypt's most popular club a big team, and then he also sums up with the well-known phrase why he could not be really successful in domestic football: “In vain, no one is a prophet in his own country”.

²³ The term refers to the fact that Al-Ahly's success is comparable to that of Hungarian Ferencvaros.

An excellent league appearance in 1975–76 eventually resulted in a trophy again for Al-Ahly. As a group winner, in a back-and-forth system, he was able to play a final against the El Mahalla team. The two matches, which will take place on May 17 and May 21, were won by Hidegkuti's side with 1:0 and 4:0, respectively (Said, 2007b). After the conclusion of the domestic league, Al-Ahly was also able to participate in the African Champions Cup, but there the successes fell short. They said goodbye to the series already in the second round after losing to the team of eventual winners MC Alger of Algeria.

This time, Nándor Hidegkuti was asked about the events of the 1976–77 season by a journalist from the *Népsport* newspaper. Dezső Boross interviewed the coach of Al-Ahly in July 1977, when he was on holiday in Hungary (Népsport, 1977). At the end of the Egyptian football season, which ended a month earlier, the Hidegkuti's side were able to celebrate a league title again, in addition to putting the team of big rivals Zamalek behind them in the table. Once again, the club's scoreline was very impressive: in addition to twenty-three wins, only four draws and a single defeat stood by their name (Said, 2007c). It was only because of the unbearable heat that the Hungarian coach had reason to complain. The team's players have suffered a lot of injuries, so in some cases he has also sent reserve players on the field throughout the season. The Hungarian coach used this to explain the tighter final result. After all, his team was only five points ahead of the runners-up Zamalek. In the African Champions Cup, the quarter-finals were the final for the National this time. At the time, eventual finalists Hearts of Oak of Ghana defeated Hidegkuti's team, leaving the continental front without a resounding success. The Hungarian coach also operated with the introduction of tactical changes this football season. He tried to play total football with his team, a term in this case that refers to everyone doing their part in building attacks and defending as well. Adaptation to the new game philosophy was still underway, not all its elements worked perfectly. Hidegkuti was given a free hand in the head coach's job and the club's management accepted the methods that he continued to use to discipline the players. Anyone who questioned his decisions or dared to defy his will had to leave the team, or at least face a fine. At the end of the interview, the future of Hidegkuti was also discussed. He then revealed his further plans to complete his two-year contract with Al-Ahly and then return home.

The 1977–78 season ended with mixed results for the National team. The streak of championships was interrupted, as rivals Zamalek conquered the trophy. In a fierce fight to the extreme, Al-Ahly's team lost the race only because of their worse goal difference. The names of the two clubs had the same score in the table and the number of goals scored (41) was the same, however, Hidegkuti's side finished the season with eight goals conceded, while Zamalek capitulated only seven times in the Egyptian first-tier football league (Said, 2007d). However, this football season did not end fruitlessly for Al-Ahly either, as he took revenge on his opponent in the Egyptian Cup final (Amerikai-Kanadai Magyar Élet, 1978).



The Most Memorable Matches for Al-Ahly's Club from 1973 to 1980

By this time, Nándor Hidegkuti had been out in Cairo for almost five years and had enhanced the reputation of the Hungarian football industry. With three league titles and a cup win, he led Al-Ahly back to the top. From these years we can highlight three important and memorable matches, two of which took place against reputable clubs in international football.

In the spring of 1976, the West German Borussia Mönchengladbach²⁴ team visited Egypt. On April 5, the Al-Ahly team played a friendly match with them, where the final result was 2:2. The association, managed by head coach Udo Lattek, arrived in the African country as West German champions (Népsport, 1976).²⁵ More than a hundred thousand spectators were curious about the clash in Cairo, where Hidegkuti's men stood their ground decently and even achieved a result that could be said to be a feat.

A year later, on 20 December 1977, Bayern Munich hosted the Egyptian capital and played a friendly match with Al-Ahly. The Bavarian star team performed disappointingly in the current German league season and just parted ways with their coach Dettmar Cramer in early December, so they did not travel to Cairo in the best condition. The German specialist was replaced on the bench by Gyula Lóránt, the former excellence of the Golden Team, so a separate “Hungarian match” took place between him and Nándor Hidegkuti. The match against Al-Ahly was reported triumphantly by the best-known Egyptian newspaper, *Al Ahram*, on 21 December, as Hidegkuti's side defeated Bayern 2:1 in a huge surprise (*Al Ahram*, 1977). In the brief report we read that the Munich side could have suffered a more serious defeat if the goalkeeper had not come to their aid in several cases. To be fair, the Bavarians did not feature in their strongest line-up in the clash, although their best player, Gerd Müller, played and scored a goal. The coverage praises Hidegkuti's coaching qualities, primarily because of the personnel changes he made during the match. Interestingly, Nándor Hidegkuti, by the way, later mentioned a 3:2 final result in several interviews.

It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that the most memorable match of Nándor Hidegkuti's seven years as coach in Egypt was the final of the 1978 Egyptian Cup series. The two Cairo gigas, Al-Ahly and Zamalek, clashed in the final. After the latter won the title in a fierce battle, as mentioned earlier, this must have been an excellent opportunity for Hidegkuti's side to fight back. However, the match did not go according to the planned scenario, as the Zamalek team took a two-goal lead and were within arm's reach of bagging this trophy in the 1977–78 season. However, then an unexpected turn of events occurred. Al-Ahly equalized first, then took the lead and finally defeated their

²⁴ In divided Germany, separate football leagues existed. In West Germany, the Bundesliga was established in 1963 as a unified national league system.

²⁵ In divided Germany, separate football leagues existed. In West Germany, the Bundesliga was established in 1963 as a unified national league system.

opponents with 4:2. This incredible resurrection and translation is also considered a unique achievement in the history of Egyptian football.

Ending His Career in Egypt

Nándor Hidegkuti managed Al-Ahli as head coach for two more seasons, until the summer of 1980. Although his contract would have expired as early as 1979, OTSH allowed him to extend his contract for another year. The last two years have brought new successes for the Hungarian coach and his team (MNL OL. 22).

In the winter of 1979, Hidegkuti traveled home for the holidays. A reporter from *Népújság* managed to interview the former legendary footballer, who also reported on the current situation around his team and the state of the league (*Népújság*, 1979). As expected, Al-Ahly were at the top of the table at the time and had a significant seven-point lead over second-placed El Mahalla. In addition, in the second half of the season, their draw was favorable, as they were able to host their biggest rivals on home soil. Hidegkuti proudly revealed that the Egyptian national team is also practically based on the players of his club, and up to twelve footballers will be called up from them to the national team's squad. Of them, the right winger Mustafa Abdul stands out, who is referred to in the sports press only as "Magari" (Hungarian) and his game is compared to the former excellence of the Golden Team. During January, the team Videoton visited Cairo and in order to to build Egyptian-Hungarian football relations competed in a friendly match with Al-Ahli (*Magyar Nemzet*, 1979). It also served as a kind of preparation for Hidegkuti's to continue. The winter foundation was excellent and the National, which had been promising in the league until then, was able to celebrate a championship again at the end of the season. In the season that ended in April 1979, they did not suffer a single defeat and brought the usual excellent performances in other indicators (most goals scored and fewest goals conceded) (Said, 2007e).

In the autumn of 1979, Hidegkuti began his seventh and final season at the helm of Al-Ahli (Hoffer, 1979). From the interview with him at that time, we learn that from the following year, if possible, he wanted to work for a Hungarian club, and then end his coaching career. At that point, however, he was still concentrating on his current duties in Egypt, where he would have been sentenced to life. This season (1979–80) could not pass without successes either, so Nándor Hidegkuti managed to win the championship trophy again with Al-Ahly as the final chord of his activity in Cairo (Said, 2007f).

During the season, Hungarian media managed to interview "Mr. Kuti" in Cairo on two occasions (Egyptian fans referred to Hidegkuti as such). As to January 1980, we have two sources on the further development of his career, as reporters have mostly questioned him about it. To sum up the Egyptian adventure, the only feeling left for



everyone, including Nándor Hidegkuti, was that he could not win the continental Champions Cup with Al-Ahly, so this trophy was missing from the club's collection (FEJÉR MEGYEI HÍRLAP, 06.01.1980). Hidegkuti claims that they have not participated in its struggles since 1975, as the dates of the matches often clashed with the dates of the university exams. However, this statement is not true in my opinion which is based on the well-documented history of the international series. As I implied in the previous chapter, Al-Ahly entered this contest in both 1976 and 1977, although his team did withdraw in 1978.

In an interview with *Népszabadság* at the end of January 1980, Hidegkuti confirmed his intention to leave, and although he talked about his next potential station (contacting an unnamed European club), he also mentioned the possibility of retiring (*Népszabadság*, 1980). Even in a report in early January, he hinted that although he had just reached the peak of his coaching career at the age of 58, he still felt it was time to leave and retire. Nándor Hidegkuti crowned his performance by winning another championship, and in the summer of 1980, he actually returned to Hungary, where he did not take another job as a professional manager (*Képes Sport*, 1980).

Return to Egypt

Hidegkuti's retirement period however lasted only three years when he became a master of the Shabab Al-Ahli team in the United Arab Emirates. So he returned to the Arab world and was active in Dubai for two years (1983–1985) (*Képes Sport*, 1985). Meanwhile, he was also able to talk to the sports press about his experiences in Cairo. In July 1985, the Hungarian national football team played a friendly match with Egypt. Prior to the meeting, Hidegkuti was asked to describe the opponent's playing power and generally outline the current situation in the country's football (*Csongrád Megyei Hírlap*, 1985). The Hungarian coach especially singled out his former player Khatim, whom he considered the most dangerous Egyptian striker.

In Cairo, meanwhile, they seriously thought that Nándor Hidegkuti would be kept with the National club for life. Over the decades, the possibility of his return has been raised almost year after year, but after his involvement in Dubai, he has already considered his coaching career to be effectively over. Nevertheless, the connection was not broken. In January 1993, he visited Egypt for ten days at the invitation of Al-Ahly, where he attended friendly meetings and was consulted in his capacity as an adviser (*Nemzeti Sport*, 1992). His visit, which began as an informal event, soon took on a formal framework. In February 1993, we can already read in the Hungarian sports press that he sat on the bench of Al-Ahly again in an “old boys’ match”. In addition, a more serious task would have been eagerly entrusted to him by the Egyptian Football Federation (*Mai Nap*, 1993). There were plans to take on a role as a consultant for his former club or for the Egypt national football team.

The return to Egypt was finally accomplished, but not at the expected location in Cairo, but in Alexandria, with the Al-Ittihad team (Kisalföld, 1997). Hidegkuti took a job at his new station partly out of necessity, as he and his wife were in financial difficulties. The now seventy-five-year-old professional acted as a consultant for the Egyptian club. His contract with the team lasted until the summer of 1997, which eventually proved to be his last job as a football manager (Nemzeti Sport, 1997).

Summary

In response to a journalist's question in 1997 (Kurír, 1997) Nándor Hidegkuti revealed that he was idolized as a demigod in Egypt. And indeed, this statement should not be considered an exaggeration. The name “Mr. Kuti” sounds familiar to every football-loving Egyptian. They will never forget the achievements and unique successes of his coaching work in the 1970s. This is especially true in the case of Al-Ahly's club, as it was him who built up and re-made the National as the best team in the country. He has produced outstanding players such as Mahmoud El Khatib, who is considered one of the best Egyptian footballers of all time and has been acting as sports director and president ever since, at Al-Ahly, as a matter of fact. In addition to this, we can also mention other virtues of Hidegkuti, such as the introduction of new systems of play, styles of play and training methods, with which he had a serious impact on football in the Arab country. He introduced daily training and warm-ups on the field instead of the locker room before matches. With his professional activities, he continued a tradition that began sometime after the Second World War, since Hungarian specialists and Hungarian know-how were present from the 1950s onwards. His status as a former legendary footballer and his career, of course, served as a good letter of recommendation for football fans. Thus, it is not surprising that the achievements of Nándor Hidegkuti's playing career and coaching career are known and recognized by the public in the country.

Conflict of Interest

The author hereby declares that no competing financial interest exists for this manuscript.

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