

The Three Musketeers

Reunion at the ITTF Museum

by Chuck Hoey, Curator

The Three Musketeers of Table Tennis are the stuff of legend. Victor Barna, Laszlo Bellak and Miklos Szabados amassed a staggering 84 medals in World Championships (44 Gold!) during the late 1920s and 1930s.

The popular Hungarian trio was invited to England in 1935-36 for an exhibition tour of over 30 cities. The tour was a huge success, with packed galleries of thousands of spectators; club membership rose wherever they played. They were dubbed the Three Musketeers as a result of their daring and spectacular play, using their Table Tennis blades as expert swordsmen.



L-R: Laszlo Bellak, Miklos Szabados, Victor Barna, Hungarian superstars, the legendary Three Musketeers of Table Tennis. Photo: *Table Tennis, How a Sport was Born*, Laszlo Bellak

Earlier in 1935 Barna, Bellak and French Champion Raymond Verger conducted an exhibition tour in France. While traveling by car to one of the venues Victor's car overturned and his playing arm was tragically broken. Though his arm eventually healed, many felt that he lost some of his touch. However, Victor continued to win, including a sweep of prestigious English Open titles in 1938, and World Doubles in 1939.

Philip Reid in his fine biography of Victor Barna comments about the Three Musketeers:

No three players before or since created such an interest in the game of table tennis. Each of the three had a completely different personality. Barna was the supreme artist, the perfectionist: the many with the backhand flick and immaculate defence. Szabados was the possessor of a dynamic forehand and a superb player to watch. Bellak was the clown, but a brilliant player nonetheless. They were a complete team in every sense.

A few years ago I envisioned a special exhibit in honor of these superstars. However, the ITTF Museum had precious little memorabilia to represent them. We had some excellent Barna items, but nothing for Bellak and Szabados. The dream seemed out of reach ... and then came an improbable series of miracles.



Gold medal for the Men's Doubles, won by Victor Barna in the 1935 World Championships. Barna won the Grand Slam in 1935: Men's Singles, Doubles, Mixed Doubles and Team Gold !

Szabados

Out of the blue I received an e-mail from nearby Geneva, from noneother than the son of Miklos Szabados, who noticed the Museum website. Soon afterwards Sandor was able to visit the Museum, and he shared many a great story about the good old days. He enjoyed some old film footage of his father playing Victor Barna, and we talked about preserving the legacy of the 1931 World Singles Champion. A good rapport developed, and on his next visit Sandor kindly presented the Museum his father's bat and medals. Then by another chance contact I found the original 1931 World Championship program, with the Men's tableau neatly handwritten, showing Miklos' path to Gold.



Miklos Szabados bat

The Great Bellak

Next, I attempted to establish contact with Laszlo Bellak, but sadly was unable to reach him before his passing at the age of 95, the last vestige of the Hungarian dynasty during the classic era. A few months later a package arrived from Laci's heirs, who after some deliberations decided that the ITTF Museum was the best place to preserve a lasting memorial to "the Great Bellak", as his many friends lovingly called him.



Medals won by Laszlo Bellak in the 1930s

The trio is now complete, reunited in a beautiful setting after over 70 years – a dream come true! A special Three Musketeers theme exhibit is now in the design stages. Words cannot express my gratitude to those who helped make this happen, and I feel a sense of quiet content that these great legends are rightfully together again.



Classic Barna bat in mint condition, ivorine name insert

Such is one of the top priorities of the ITTF Museum, to salute our Champions and provide a proper place where their legacies can be honored. I urge our veteran World Champions to join your distinguished colleagues by sending medals or a special bat for our Hall of Champions. Contact the curator: museum@itff.com