



## THREE BAGS OF SHOES

Mihály Csukrán, born in Újfehértó, ran altogether almost half a million kilometres in 35 years. The former 1<sup>st</sup> class boxer awaits young people eager to train on his own, self-built sports ground. He has completed the marathon distance 700 times, including an occasion when he was doing it backwards with a skipping rope. He has won at least 250 cups, but he hands them on to others whose sports accomplishments he recognises.

**M**ihály Csukrán got up at 3 a.m. today, too. He cleaned up a bit, ate a banana with which he drank some water, then ran a circle around Újfehértó, which is exactly 12 kilometres.

The sun has only just risen, and yet we are on his sports ground, surrounded by a rusty iron fence. Leaning on the wall, he is lifting dumbbells while waiting for the children. When he has warmed up, he takes off his shirt, but not before apologising for his tattoos. ‘Some idiot tattooed “Life is sin” on my arm,’ he says.

A teenager arrives on an orange bicycle. The boy, “Tiger”, has a surprisingly strong handshake, and I soon realise that he only speaks when asked. To warm up, he hits a tyre with an iron bar 600 times. Heavy thuds echo in the street every three seconds. As a little boy, with an amazing technique, Tiger was able to catch some hornets in a swampy garden, and

holding them in his hands, chased after the other children, who fled from him as if a tiger had been pursuing them. Now I understand his nickname. Péter Balázs attends a secondary school in Hajdúnánás; he is currently in 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Nobody has picked a fight with him yet.

Mihály Csukrán, former boxing champion and multiple Guinness record holder, brings a battered leather ball out of a hut crammed with rusty dumbbells, beat-up stationary bikes and a press-up bench, and gives it to Tiger. The medicine ball contains a thick tile that has been broken to four pieces. It must weigh at least five kilograms.

'You are going to start with "eights", because that's the basis of boxing.' Mihály Csukrán says sternly to Tiger and another boy, "Stallone". Ádám Pásztor is eleven years old and quite thin. When he starts giving roundhouse kicks to the punching bag hanging from the ceiling, even the birds stop chirping. Already in 2007, he became the kempo world champion in his category. He would like to become a policeman or a commando. It was his parents who heard about Coach Misi and his sports ground, where children can train and gain strength.

Tiger and Stallone start throwing the ball to each other. When they catch it, they sit down, then lie down on their back and only then pass the ball back to the other. Watching them from the side, the path of the ball really looks like the number 8.

'I don't work with pumped-up guys who take protein powder. A light heavyweight gipsy boy was nearly offended when I told him that the amount of powder he'd taken would've fed three dogs. Milady, Pitbull, Satan, White-tailed eagle, Ant, Devil, Dog and Ginger, on the other hand, are sportsmen who eat well and train at this sports ground. I take

everyone who is worthy to weightlifting competitions from an early age.'

Mihály Csukrán puts on boxing gloves, then starts hitting a punching bag. The benches standing between the concrete floor and the roof absorb the vibrations. Later, he picks up a skipping rope made of cables and shows me something. (Hemp rope burns if spun around 5,000 times successively.) He jumps for five minutes straight, from one leg to the other, from one side to the other; sort of like a dance. Then, to finish off, he picks up the pace. He is so fast, I cannot even see the cable rope.

Mihály Csukrán was born in 1958. He lived with his father, mother and five siblings at a farm in Vöröstag or as others call it, Bótiszállás, next to the Red Star Farmers' Agricultural Cooperative.

'My father was like Sándor Rózsa, the highwayman. When he went from the farm to Újfehértó, he smashed the ballroom up with his eight-and-a-half-kilogram stick. Nobody looked him in the eye. Sport as such didn't exist at the farm back then, but at the time we attended elementary school, we poured concrete in buckets and lifted them. So, after a few years, we were able to defeat 40-50-year-old men. We mainly beat them at arm wrestling, but we had no qualms about punching them in the chin, either. Then, in 1976, due to a fight ending in an arrest, I had a huge argument with my father, and I told him, almost offhandedly, "I'll run around the globe ten times if I have to! You'll be hearing from me!"'

Let's just stop at this last sentence for a minute. Twenty years after this incident, his desire to distinguish himself became Mihály Csukrán's main drive. First, he was a boxer at the Boxing Department of the Ferencváros Sports Club in Budapest, then, after ten years, in the mid-1980s, he signed

up for the Vasas Sports Club. It would have seemed quite awkward, he says, if he would have been introduced before matches as “Mihály Csukrán, unskilled worker”, so he was put into waterproofing school. As a team leader, he managed forty workers. His team waterproofed several blocks of flats in Budapest. However, he was only interested in boxing, so after a while, he left his job to have a sports career. His boxing team at Vasas became the Hungarian champions. His teammates were, among others, István “Kokó” Kovács, Pál Lakatos, Zoltán Béres, Imre Bacskai and István Turu. When he reached the weight of 100 kilograms, he had a V-shaped torso, the circumference of his arm was 48 cm, his chest was 145-centimetre-wide, and he was able to eat sixteen chicken legs in one sitting. He even became the Hungarian arm wrestling champion in the 70 kilogram category in 1986.

‘There aren’t any cartilages in my nose anymore; if it’s hit, it simply flattens. My role model used to be George Foreman, who returned to the boxing ring at the age of 50 and became a world champion. Sometimes even László Papp, three-time Olympic champion, came down to Vasas SC to train a little. When people stared at him, he said, smiling, “I’m gonna punch you in the mouth, and you’ll have a nose like a church’s door handle”, to which the others replied, laughing, “If you’d been as smart as Gyula Török, you’d have won five Olympic gold medals, not just three.” Besides boxing, I drank, smoked, had a lot of coffee, loitered and got in fights. It didn’t matter if the other person was two-metre-tall, I didn’t care how thick his arms were. I delivered a striking combination to the mental region or twelve consecutive hits, and he was on the floor in an instant. Then I thought to myself, “Are you stupid?! If something happens, you’ll be arrested. What kind of role model are you?!” Around the end of 1989, I decid-

ed that I’d change my ways. I believed that if I broke crazy records, people in my immediate and distant environment would notice me. Oh, and I also had that running vow. So I ran. I regularly ran, for example, as far as the editorial office of the daily newspaper *Kelet-Magyarország* (Eastern Hungary) (later *Új Kelet* [New East]) in Nyíregyháza, 25 kilometres away, to report on my results to the journalists. These records were not autotelic; my aim was the health education of people – mainly children. Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County begins at Újfehértó; the living conditions of the inhabitants are poor, and children have no good examples set for them. I represent a different type of lifestyle, and as far as I can see, more and more people follow in my footsteps.’

He achieved his first Guinness record in 1993, when he ran a marathon backwards, with a skipping rope. In the year 1994, in honour of the Hungarian World Expo, he ran the 42-kilometre distance 200 times altogether, sometimes even four times a week. His accomplishment became a Guinness record; however, the World Expo was cancelled. All in all, he ran 16,000 kilometres in the running shoes he used back then. The pair is now exhibited in the local history museum in Újfehértó. He then wanted to use the 5 million forints he’d collected so far to build another house on the plot next to his own house. The foundation was built, but his money was spent. Then, in 2005, he decided to build a concrete pitch instead, which can be used for boxing, weightlifting, and of course playing football. And every child can come and train with him for free. The daily sports newspaper *Nemzeti Sport* (National Sport) also wrote about him: “One can even be happy penniless.”

‘My mother was ill for 25 years and required constant care. And nobody knows, but one of my father’s legs was amputated in 2003, and for two years, I had to take him out to the toi-

let in my arms. When he was taken to hospital, his roommates knew who I was and had heard that I'd run the marathon distance 500 then 600 times – this made him proud.'

He completed his 400 thousandth kilometre on 16 December 2006. That is ten times the length of the Equator. Nobody has verified the kilometres he has run; his records are documented because he says he has achieved them. His most recent record is also sport related: they played 48 five-a-side football matches in 24 hours in Újfehértó.

'We'll always have enough money for bread and cheap soft drinks. Even though we are poor, we've been able to make something out of nothing. There are a lot of children in Újfehértó whose parents can't afford summer camps, so it goes without saying that I organise summer camps. We put our tents up next to the football pitches of the surrounding villages, then we play football, do push-ups and ride the bike. My vow about running half a million kilometers is all over the press now. I've never even thought, of course, that half a million kilometres would be this difficult to reach. I've used three bags of shoes so far. Two bags were burned, and one was swallowed by the swap.'

Mihály Csukrán welcomes the children eager to do some exercise on the small sports ground every day. In 30 years, he won 250 cups, and he keeps his medals in plastic bags in a lacquered cabinet. He awarded 100 athletes and 95 sports event organisers and mass sport propagators in 11 years. He takes his name off his cups and has a new plate engraved in Nyíregyháza for 1,000 forints. He rewarded the person organising the marathons with a 50-cm-high cup, and he also honours former footballers, retired police officers (because they do not hurt anyone anymore), the mass-sport-propagator teachers, the bicycle-riding postmen and sometimes

even the journalists who report on his accomplishments. He is glad to talk about himself. He has even told me on the phone that someone should finally write: he is the Hungarian Forrest Gump. Well, if we consider one of the most famous lines from the movie, "Run, Forrest, run!"; it certainly is true. Another legendary quote is also true: "Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're gonna get."

Mihály Csukrán donated blood 126 times and used to be a neighbourhood watch secretary. He's been organising mass sport events for more than twenty years now, however, his work has never been recognised in Újfehértó. He does not eat meat; he basically lives on yoghurt with muesli and fruit. Since I do not wish to drink from the tea he is offering me that he always prepares in huge quantities for a week, he makes me smell some balm to cure my cold. He then would like to give me a bag of his homegrown potatoes. At one time, he was playing football with some ecumenicals, who advised him not to kill the animals with pesticides. Since then, he runs along his potato field every day and sweeps the potato beetles into a bucket. No other organic potato compares to his.

'I love sport, but I don't like pumped-up guys who take protein powder,' he shares his fundamental principle with me. Each morning, he chases the stray dogs away with an iron rod, running, then, during the day, plays football for three hours, has twelve boxing matches, sometimes roller-skates, then, finally, if the weather allows, runs around Újfehértó one more time. If he feels nervous, he beats the tyre with the iron rod for half a day. He has also prepared 100 numbered sheets of paper, held together with rubber bands: he has already set the target, now he is just counting down the days. By the time May rolls around next year, he will have completed the 500,000 kilometres. 'If there is another world besides this

one, my parents can see that I've done what I'd promised to do.' Not so long ago, he woke up to his heart aching. He sat up in bed, shook himself, and everything was fine. The old men in the village laughed at him for doing that: 'It's not going to get better by being shaken; it's not an alarm clock.'

\* \* \*

Some years later, one of his legs was amputated. He was so distressed, he even attempted suicide. I visited him again to report on what he had gone through.

'Come in, sir,' shouts a filthy-looking child from the door. The iron gate creaks. The house has cracked walls that have not been plastered for at least 50 years. I am at the edge of Újfehértó, on a muddy street. Three kindergarten-aged children are running around in the living room. They keep knocking into tables and cabinets, and the cups, glass and ceramic plaques tumble and fall. On top of the cabinets, several cups as big as a samovar stand, and loads of medals hang from the doors.

'Stop messing around!' yells the 61-year-old, stubbly man at the misbehaving twins. 'You don't hit the head when doing kempo! Not like that, Gyuszika, not like that! To the chest, to the chest!' he shouts at them. Then, putting his wheelchair into motion, he separates the fighting children with his crutch. As they are moving around, the children accidentally topple over the artificial leg.

Mihály Csukrán, sportsman and boxer, now looks after his niece's three little children who currently have a cold and a runny-nose.

'The five-year-old little boy has just made me laugh so hard. He said that his twin half siblings were one size bigger

than him. And the way he fights! If I slap him lightly, he doesn't run to his mommy; he slaps me back. Just this morning, he punched me in the stomach so hard, I almost had to throw up. They've been spending a lot of time here with me since last summer. Every evening, I give them some pudding, with which we eat apples, mandarins and some other fruits,' he explains his situation. Later, he shows me how he trains their wrists, because a kindergartener cannot be a sissy! A weight hangs on a string from a piece of wood. First comes Milánka and starts rolling it upwards, then comes Gyuszika. 'Roll it, roll it, don't be lazy!' Mihály Csukrán urges them on. He then makes the three children do push-ups, and praises the eldest, Zsombor, by tapping him on the back with his crutch.

'This is how they learn to love sports. I'd also like to add that sport is healthy in the short run; however, if it's taken too far, it's detrimental in the long run. I ran the marathon distance 700 times, and just to warm up, I ran 20 kilometres before competitions. Altogether, I ran 600,000 kilometres! It hurts just thinking about it, now that I'm dying. And now I have this stump of a leg,' he says bitterly, pointing at his non-existent lower leg. His face becomes red with fury.

He wraps a piece of white cloth around the stump, pulls on the prosthetic leg, pushes himself out of the wheelchair, and starts walking around the room with a pair of crutches. He's glad when he can rid himself of these supporting devices and walk to the window steadily. But running is out of the question.

'I was playing football and someone trampled on my foot with a boot. My middle toenail fell off. I didn't go to a doctor, even though I had a wound there from then on. Then I finally went to the clinic in Debrecen, where several experts examined my leg. A professor told me that he'd never seen veins

that had become so worn-out from running. Nevertheless, they'd try to save my leg. And I had great faith in it! However, first, only my five toes were cut off, then my foot and finally, my whole lower leg. I was celebrating my 60th birthday back then, and I was pretty devastated. I wanted to die, so I visited all the hospital rooms and asked everyone for one or two pills. I swallowed a handful of them. My eyes were bulging out and I was vomiting. But I was saved. Then I thought, since they'd saved me, I wouldn't give up!

Of course, without a lower leg, returning to Újfehértó, to Honvéd street, where he'd lived as a marathonist so far, was not easy. He asked his handyman neighbour to prepare a vehicle for him, which he is going to participate with in the Budapest marathon in the autumn.

'I'm going to learn how to walk backwards with it, if I don't die first!' he says, determined.

Running, boxing, and football were the love of Mihály Csukrán's life. He won 450 cups and innumerable medals in 35 years. I can see several hundred of these medals in a plastic box next to his bed. Reusing his rewards, he awarded 20 athletes, 5 sports event organisers and mass sport propagators during the last year. He takes his name off his cups and has a new plate engraved in Nyíregyháza for 1,000 forints. He now makes me lift a cup as large as a samovar off the top of the cabinet, then, while the three children keep shouting "What a big cup!", he washes the cobwebs off it in the bath, and wrenches the plate with his name on it off the cup in front of the children. He received the Károly Szegedi Physical Education and Sports Award in 2006, and he is going to give it to Árpád Kocsis, director of the Budapest Sport Office.

'On 1 May, he will have been organising running competitions for 30 years. He deserves this. He excels in humani-

ty. And you either have that characteristic, or you don't. You can't buy it,' he comments.

He asks me to take the cup back to Budapest. He has neither the energy nor the money to do so.

The three little children then start pushing around the disabled old man's means of transportation, shouting "Wheelchair, wheelchair!". They later begin chasing and hitting each other with pillows, shrieking.

'Okay, then, I'm going to take the cable out of the drawer now, and there will be blood or, as a punishment, we will go into the other room, where the red-eyed skeleton reigns!' Mihály Csukrán yells at them. He then turns to me and whispers, 'I just shake the plastic thing, it says something and its eyes start glowing. They're awfully scared of it.'

The other room holds even more cups and medals. Looking at the photos on the walls, which depict a boxing match, one of the little boys asks, 'Grandpa Miska, are you the one in the white shorts or the grey?'

They then gather around him, among the huge cups. When the red light in the skull flares up, the children flinch and huddle together.

'Once upon a time, in a little house in the forest, there lived a mommy goat with her seven little kids. All of a sudden, the glowing-eyed skeleton knocked on their door... However, a window in the back of the house was open, so the seven little kids climbed out and ran, ran, ran...'

Mihály Csukrán's stern face softens. He continues the tale with his eyes closed.

'And they just kept on running, with the screeching, red-eyed skeleton hot on their heels.'