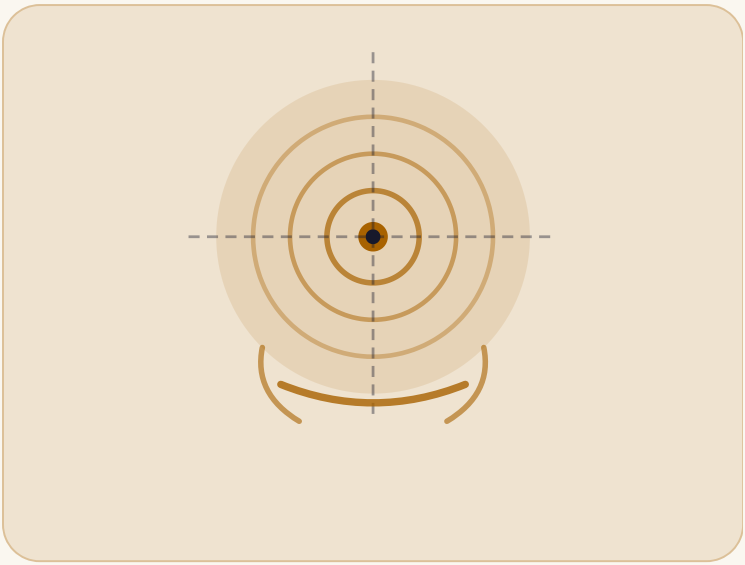

HUNGARY

The shooter who won gold with his left hand

A grenade blast destroyed his shooting hand in 1938. Instead of quitting, he learned to shoot with his left hand and won two Olympic golds.

WHERE	Budapest
WHO	Károly Takács, an army shooter who had to start again with his other hand
WHEN	1938 to 1952

4 min read

CHAPTER ONE

The story

In 1938, Károly Takács was 28 years old. He was a sergeant in the Hungarian army. He was also one of the top pistol shooters in the world. When he fired, the shot almost always hit the dead centre of the target.

People in Hungary knew his name. They expected him to win gold at the 1940 Olympic Games. Army rules used to bar sergeants from the national team. But by 1938, the rule changed. The door was open. He was ready to show his skill.

The day everything broke

Then came the autumn of 1938. Takács was on a training field with his army unit. A live grenade was placed in his hand. Suddenly, something went wrong. The grenade had a defect. It exploded right in his right hand.

The blast tore through his hand. Soldiers rushed him to a hospital in Budapest. Doctors worked for hours. They kept him alive, but his right hand was destroyed. The hand he used to hold a gun and write his name was gone.

Takács spent a month in a hospital bed. Friends came to visit him. They saw a young man whose dream had died. It would have been easy to give up. He could have spent his life asking why this happened.

Instead, Takács made a choice. He did not cry over what was gone. He looked at what was left. He still had his eyes. He still had his mind. And he still had his left hand.

Practicing in secret

As soon as he left the hospital, Takács went back to work. He told almost no one what he was doing. He did not want pity. He wanted to shoot again.

His left hand was weak. At first, he could barely hold a pen. A heavy pistol felt unsteady. His left arm shook under the weight. The kick of each shot hurt his wrist.

Day after day, he went to a shooting range in secret. He learned to breathe slowly and keep his shoulder still. Every day, he fired hundreds of practice shots.

He had to learn from scratch, like a child learning to walk. Slowly, his left hand grew strong. The shaking stopped. His grip became firm. His shots began to hit near the centre of the target.

In the spring of 1939, Hungary held its national pistol championship in Budapest. To everyone's surprise, Takács walked into the hall.

His old rivals rushed over to greet him. They shook his left hand gently. They praised him for his courage to come and watch. They thought he was there as a spectator to cheer for his friends.

Takács smiled and shook his head. “I did not come to watch,” he said quietly. “I came to shoot.”

The other shooters fell silent. Takács took his place on the line. He drew his pistol with his left hand. When the targets turned, he fired with speed and deadly aim.

By the end of the day, Takács had won the national championship. He was the best shooter in Hungary once again. That summer, he helped the Hungarian team win gold at the world championships in Switzerland.

Waiting out the war

Takács was back on top. He set his sights on the 1940 Olympic Games. He was ready to take on the best shooters in the world.

Then tragedy struck. World War II broke out across Europe. The 1940 Olympic Games were cancelled. Four years later, the 1944 Olympic Games were cancelled as well.

For ten long years, Takács had to wait. War raged across Hungary. Cities were damaged, and daily life was torn apart. Many athletes would have lost heart. Their best years were slipping away.

Takács kept training whenever he could find bullets. By the time the Olympic Games returned in 1948, Takács was 38 years old. Many thought he was too old to win.

> **“I am here to learn,” he said before the match. When he won, his rival told him: “You have learned enough.”**
>
> KÁROLY TAKÁCS AND CARLOS SÁENZ VALIENTE, 1948 OLYMPICS

In the summer of 1948, Takács travelled to London for the Olympic Games. He entered the 25-metre rapid-fire pistol event.

Before the match began, Carlos Sáenz Valiente came up to him. Sáenz Valiente was the world champion from Argentina. He asked Takács what brought him to London.

Takács gave a modest reply. “I am here to learn,” he said.

The contest was fierce. Shooters had only seconds to hit five turning targets. Takács stood calm. He raised his left hand. Five shots rang out in rapid bursts.

When the scores were added up, Takács had won gold. He scored 580 points, beating the world record by ten points.

At the ceremony, Sáenz Valiente stepped up to take the silver medal. He looked at Takács and smiled. “You have learned enough,” the Argentine shooter said.

1938	10	2
the blast that took his hand	years of waiting through war	Olympic gold medals won

Four years later, in 1952, the Olympic Games took place in Helsinki, Finland. Takács was now 42 years old. Many people doubted that he could win again.

Once again, he proved them wrong. Takács won gold for a second time. He became the first shooter in history to win two gold medals in a row in that event.

On the podium, the silver medal went to Szilárd Kun. Kun was a young Hungarian shooter Takács had been coaching for years.

Takács competed in a third Olympic Games in 1956 in Melbourne, Australia. He finished in eighth place at the age of 46. Later, he became a full-time coach for young shooters in Hungary.

He lived in Budapest until his death in 1976 at the age of 65. He showed the world a simple truth. When life takes your best hand, train the other one to win.

How it unfolded

- **1938** A grenade explosion destroys his right hand.
- **1939** He wins the Hungarian national championship with his left hand.
- **1948** He wins his first Olympic gold medal in London.
- **1952** He defends his Olympic title and wins gold in Helsinki.
- **1956** He competes in his third Olympic Games in Melbourne.
- **1976** He dies in Budapest at the age of 65.

CHAPTER TWO

What makes it special

Most athletes give up when their best tool is gone. Takács lost his shooting hand at the peak of his career. He did not cry over what was gone. He looked at what he still had, and he went back to work.

OUR TAKE

He did not waste time mourning what he lost. He took what was left and made it his greatest strength.

CHAPTER THREE

What we can learn

1

Work with what you have left

Takács did not focus on his missing hand. He focused on the hand that still worked.

Try this: When a plan breaks this week, write down three tools you still have and use them.

2 Practice in quiet

He did not announce his comeback. He trained alone until he was ready.

Try this: Work on one new skill in private for thirty days before telling anyone.

3 Keep going through long delays

He had to wait ten full years through a world war to reach the Games.

Try this: Pick one goal that has stalled and take one small step on it today.

4 Pass your craft forward

After his wins, he coached young shooters, and his own student won silver.

Try this: Teach one useful tip to a younger peer or team member this week.

ONE THOUGHT TO TAKE AWAY

When your best hand is gone, train the other one.

Sources

International Olympic Committee
Károly Takács - Athlete Profile

Olympedia
Károly Takács Biographical Profile and Results

Encyclopaedia Britannica
Károly Takács - Hungarian Shooter and Olympian

Fact-check note: Some accounts give slight variations of the quote between Takács and Sáenz Valiente, but Olympic records confirm the core exchange and his world record score of 580. Lines marked "Our take" are interpretation. Everything else comes from the sources above.