

# The rebuilding of Azerbaijan

**Just 20 years after independence from the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan has started to make its name known in the rowing world. They have done it with the backing of the government which has overseen the reconstruction and development of the Mingachevir Olympic Training Centre. The government has also provided financing that has brought athletes and coaches from other countries to be part of the Azerbaijan rowing system.**

Under the Soviet sports system the training centre in Mingachevir was used as a winter training destination with its mild climate, calm waters and 18km of uninterrupted rowing possible. The centre went into disuse through the 1990s and it wasn't until 2007 that a concerted effort began to not only bring it back to its former glory, but improve it to a world class level.

In 2010, and with a price tag of 38 million Euros, the centre reopened. The push for its development came directly from President Aliyev who is a big supporter and specified directly to the Minister of Youth and Sport what he expected. The centre contains a swimming pool, gyms, boatshed, weights room, finish tower, spectator grandstand, tennis courts, a

track and hotel and apartment accommodation for coaches and athletes.

Under the coaching expertise of Germany's Ruediger Hauffe, Azerbaijan is putting itself onto the rowing map. Hauffe has been based in Mingachevir since 2009 and already there has been a level of success at the international level. With the help of some Bulgarian imports, Azerbaijan made it to three finals at the 2010 World Rowing Under 23 Championships winning one silver medal and also into a final at the World Rowing Junior Championships.

"At the moment we have only about 100 rowers, from beginner to high performance athletes around the country," says Hauffe. "At the training centre in Mingachevir there are 15 rowers, this is the national team."

Azerbaijan's best rower is Alexander Alexandrov who first found success rowing for Bulgaria. Alexandrov is one of four Bulgarian recruits. "Most of our athletes are students," says Hauffe. "We also have soldiers during their military service and we also have full-time athletes."

The Azerbaijan Rowing Federation hopes to make the sport popular across the country >

Aleksandar Aleksandrov from Azerbaijan won silver in the men's single sculls at the 2010 World Rowing Under 23 Championships.



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Looking towards the finish line on the River Kur at the Mingachevir Training Centre in Azerbaijan.

> especially by introducing rowing to young people. At present very little rowing structure exists across Azerbaijan. There are few clubs and no schools that currently teach rowing.

The Federation is planning that within a few years there will be a greater base of top rowers to compete at national and international competitions. "For this season, the World Cup regattas, the U23 World Championships and Olympic qualification are at the heart of our efforts," says Hauffe.

The Mingachevir centre also hopes to attract other nations to train at the venue. "Right now there is a selected team from Russia training in Mingachevir and other bookings already exist. Our centre is open to everyone. We are very much interested to also welcome foreign teams."

"The climate is very good," says Hauffe, "especially in the autumn and winter months when the rest of Europe is affected by cold

weather, ice and snow, we still have pleasant temperatures. The river flows very slowly and except for rowers and canoeists, there are only fish, birds and nature."

President Aliyev opened the Mingachevir Olympic Centre recently and stated, "Azerbaijan is already a sporting country, everybody knows that. However, rowing in Azerbaijan was not sufficiently

developed in Soviet times. Today we can see it developing. It is not only the infrastructure, but also the professionalism of athletes that is improving. Coaches have been invited from overseas. I am confident that our rowers will represent Azerbaijan at the upcoming Olympic Games with dignity."

● M.S.B.



Toni Boteva of Azerbaijan qualified twice for the A-final at the World Rowing Junior Championships - in 2008 and 2010.

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