International Journal of Latest Research in Humanities and Social Science (IJLRHSS)
Volume 08 - Issue 11, 2025
www.ijlrhss.com || PP. 87-94

Volleyball Across the Aegean: From Asia Minor to Modern Greece

Giannakopoulos Anestis[1], Zlatilidis Dimitrios[2], Koutsogiannaki Athina[3], Giannakopoulos Ioannis[4]

[1]*Democritus University of Thrace, Department of Physical Education & Sport Science, University Campus, Komotini 69100, Greece*
[2]*Directorate of Primary Education of Heraklion, Pitsoulaki 73, 71307, Heraklion of Crete, Greece*
[3]*Directorate of Primary Education of Heraklion, Pitsoulaki 73, 71307, Heraklion of Crete, Greece*
[4]*Democritus University of Thrace, Department of Primary Level Education, Alexandroupolis 68100, Greece*

Abstract: This study aims to investigate the presence and transmission of volleyball from Smyrna to Greece through the lens of the social history of sport and the refugee experience after 1922. It seeks to highlight how a sport that originated in a multicultural environment was transformed, following the Asia Minor Catastrophe, into a vehicle of identity, collective memory, and social integration. Early 20th-century Smyrna served as a laboratory for athletic modernization, where clubs such as Panionios and Apollon promoted volleyball as a means of education and progress. After the Catastrophe, this sporting tradition was preserved by refugees who settled in Greece, carrying with them the technical expertise, ethos, and educational values of Smyrna's athletic culture. In Athens, the re-established Panionios led the dissemination of volleyball, organizing the first championships from 1925 and contributing to the establishment of sport as an element of school and communal education. In Thessaloniki, Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) served as the main agent for the introduction and institutionalization of volleyball from 1919 onwards, linking it to pedagogical values such as cooperation and discipline, while functioning as a space for social integration for refugees. In Heraklion, OFI and Herodotos highlighted the importance of the sport in Crete, with OFI establishing one of the first women's volleyball teams in Greece (1928), reflecting the modernizing character of the Asia Minor tradition. The research is based on archival sources, contemporary newspapers (Efimeris ton Valkanion, Empros, Amalthia, Patris, Makedonia, Athlitikos Kosmos, Vradyni), photographic evidence, and secondary literature from historians and sociologists. These sources document the contribution of Asia Minor refugees to the Greek athletic renaissance of the interwar period. In conclusion, the historical analysis demonstrates that volleyball transcended the narrow boundaries of sport, serving as a means of cultural preservation and social cohesion, linking the Asia Minor memory with the formation of modern Greek identity.

Keywords: refuge, sport, modernization, memory, integration.

1. Introduction

The sports culture of Smyrna, from the last quarter of the 19th century until the Catastrophe of 1922, represents one of the most vibrant and multifaceted chapters in the social and cultural history of Asia Minor. As a multinational commercial and intellectual hub, the city fostered a rich network of sports clubs and activities that extended beyond football and Greco-Roman gymnastics to include running, jumping, swimming, tennis, cycling, boxing, and — importantly — volleyball, which had already secured a prominent place in the early 20th century [17].

The rise and rapid spread of organized sports among Smyrna's diverse ethnic communities—Greeks, Armenians, Jews, Europeans, and Ottoman Muslims—was far from accidental. It was closely tied to education, physical training as a vehicle for national and social development, and the vibrant infrastructure of a bustling port city, where new ideas, gymnastic methods, and "modern" forms of recreation circulated quickly [1]-[14]. From the late 19th century onwards, more than twenty sports clubs were established, blending educational, musical, and athletic pursuits. Among the most notable were "Orpheus" (1890) and "Gymnasion," which later merged to form the Panionios Gymnastic Club of Smyrna—a trailblazer in organizing the Panionian Games and a host of pioneering athletic initiatives. Clubs like "Apollon Smyrnis" and others, with comprehensive facilities including football fields with tracks, indoor gyms, and tennis courts, helped position Smyrna as a true "sports metropolis" of the region. The Panionian Games, inaugurated in 1896 as the first annual international competitions for the Greeks of Asia Minor, along with the clubs' active participation in national and international events, not only promoted local sports culture but also facilitated the transfer of technical expertise. By hosting recurring competitions, these clubs fostered networks of athletic exchange, nurtured a sporting elite, and reinforced the concept of physical education as a fundamental element of cultural identity [6].

Special attention must be given to volleyball. Although the sport was internationally established in the late 19th century in the United States, it quickly took root in Smyrna through the activities of local gymnastic clubs. According to available records, Panionios had established a volleyball section even before the Catastrophe. Testimonies report matches as early as 1913, while in 1919 the club made its first official participation in a city championship, securing the title (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Panionios_V.C.). Thus, Smyrna functioned as one of the first organized centers for the sport in the Eastern Mediterranean and, thanks to the presence of schools, gymnasiums, and systematic training activities, produced athletes, specialized trainers, and sports officials who later brought this experience to Greece after 1922.

The prominent position of volleyball in Smyrna can be interpreted both historically and sociologically. First, sport requires relatively simple infrastructure and affordable equipment—a flat surface and a net—which made it easily implementable in schoolyards, indoor halls, and multipurpose club facilities [5]. Second, volleyball was compatible with the educational programs of schools and gymnastic associations, which promoted cooperation, discipline, and healthy physical exercise; thus, it was easily integrated into the clubs' programs as a complementary activity alongside traditional competitions [24]. Third, Smyrna's pluralistic society allowed for intercultural diffusion of sporting techniques and rules. European educators, sailors, merchants, and military personnel from the Allied expeditionary forces stationed in the area brought new athletic practices with them. Inter-community matches, friendly games with naval crews from foreign ships, and international meetings raised the level of competition and expanded the popularity of sports such as volleyball [11].

Furthermore, local newspapers and printed periodicals of the time highlighted interest in sports news, turning matches into social events that attracted audiences and enhanced the reputation of volleyball sections as noteworthy activities within the clubs (newspaper *Amaltheia*, 1919).

2. The Asia Minor Catastrophe (1918–1922) – Historical Context

The Asia Minor Catastrophe was the tragic culmination of a period marked by national ambitions, diplomatic contradictions, and social upheavals that shaped early 20th-century Greece. The period 1918–1922 represents the transition from the Megali Idea fervor of World War I to the profound crisis of Hellenism in Asia Minor, leading to one of the most dramatic moments in modern Greek history [9]. At the end of World War I in 1918, the Ottoman Empire stood on the brink of collapse. The Armistice of Mudros (October 30, 1918) effectively ended its participation in the war and heralded the division of its territories among the victorious powers.

Greece, under the leadership of Eleftherios Venizelos, saw this as the historic moment to realize the "Megali Idea"—the creation of a national state encompassing all Greek populations of the East [8]. During the Paris Peace Conference (1919), Venizelos advanced Greek claims over Thrace, the Aegean islands, and particularly Smyrna and the Asia Minor coast, presenting historical, ethnological, and strategic arguments. The British government under Lloyd George actively supported Greece, seeing it as an ally against Italian and French ambitions in Asia Minor (Jelavich, 1983). In contrast, Italy and France approached Greek expansion with suspicion, seeking to secure their own interests in the former Ottoman provinces.

Meanwhile, a new Turkish nationalist movement led by Mustafa Kemal began to take shape in Anatolia, rejecting the partition of the Ottoman Empire and advocating for a nationally homogeneous Turkish state [25]. On May 2/15, 1919, Greek forces landed in Smyrna under orders from the Supreme Council of the Allies. Officially, the landing aimed to protect Christian populations and maintain order in the region, but it marked the beginning of Greece's military presence in Asia Minor [9]. The initial entry of Greek troops was accompanied by episodes of violence and bloodshed, which the Kemalist movement exploited to strengthen its position and portray Greece as an occupying force.

Despite initial difficulties, the Greek army launched a series of successful operations, occupying Magnesia, Aydın, and much of western Asia Minor. However, the campaign developed into an operation without a clear strategic end, as conditions within the Ottoman Empire changed rapidly and international alliances remained fluid. Internal conditions in Greece deteriorated sharply in 1920 when the November elections overthrew Venizelos's liberal government. Anti-Venizelist forces, led by Dimitrios Rallis and later Dimitrios Gounaris, restored King Constantine, provoking the anger of the Allies. France and Italy withdrew their support, while Great Britain limited its assistance to diplomatic statements. The Greek army in Asia Minor found itself isolated, lacking international backing and facing a home population exhausted by continuous wars [19].

This political shift had profound consequences. Officers who had served under Venizelos were replaced by less experienced anti-Venizelist personnel, weakening military command. Simultaneously, the Kemalist camp gained strength: Mustafa Kemal reorganized the Turkish army, secured support from the Soviet Union in arms and gold, and rallied local forces that gradually evolved into a regular army [25]. In the summer of 1921, the Greek government decided to attempt a decisive strike toward Ankara. The Greek army advanced deep into

Anatolia, crossing the Sakarya River. The ensuing battle (August 1921) was extremely fierce and bloody. Despite initial successes, Greek forces failed to capture Ankara and were forced to retreat to new defensive lines [21].

The failure at the Sakarya marked the end of the Greek advance and the beginning of a gradual collapse. The army suffered heavy losses, supplies were exhausted, and lines of communication were overstretched. The Greek economy could no longer sustain the burden of such a distant war. By 1922, military leadership was disorganized, and morale had collapsed [19]. On August 13/26, 1922, the Kemalist forces launched a major counteroffensive at Afyonkarahisar. Within days, the Greek front disintegrated. Greek forces retreated chaotically toward the coast, and Smyrna was overwhelmed by thousands of soldiers and civilians trying to escape. On August 27/September 9, Turkish troops entered Smyrna, and a few days later, on September 13, the great fire broke out, destroying the Greek and Armenian quarters. The fire and subsequent massacres resulted in tens of thousands of deaths and hundreds of thousands of refugees. Foreign warships anchored in the harbor remained largely passive, allowing only limited rescue of some refugees by humanitarian organizations and individual officers [10].

Smyrna, the most important center of Hellenism in the East, was reduced to ruins. The catastrophe was not merely a military defeat but a humanitarian tragedy, marking the definitive destruction of a centuries-old culture. The Treaty of Lausanne, signed on July 24, 1923, cemented the new reality. Greece recognized the independence of the Republic of Turkey and renounced all territorial claims in Asia Minor and Eastern Thrace. As part of the treaty, a compulsory population exchange was established between the two countries based on religion. Approximately 1.2 million Greeks from Asia Minor, Pontus, and Eastern Thrace left their ancestral homes and settled in Greece, while around 400,000 Muslims from Greek territory relocated to Turkey. The resettlement of refugees represented one of the greatest social challenges ever faced by Greece. Despite the hardships, refugees contributed decisively to the transformation of Greek society: they developed new forms of production, accelerated urbanization, and brought music, professions, and cultural elements that reshaped the country [14].

The Asia Minor Catastrophe left deep marks on the collective memory and identity of Hellenism. Politically, it led to the September 1922 Revolution, the execution of the "Six," and the subsequent fall of the monarchy. Socially, it marked the end of Greek presence in the East and the transition of Greece into a more homogeneous nation-state [18]. Historically, it represented the rupture between the Megali Idea and realistic survival politics. Many historians argue that the Asia Minor Campaign relied more on ideological aspirations than on realistic calculations. Greece in 1919–1920 attempted to assert its geopolitical will in a region contested by major powers, without the means to sustain it [7]. In any case, the Asia Minor Catastrophe was not a "momentary" defeat but a prolonged process of disintegration, shaped by the contradictions of Greek national ideology, weaknesses of political leadership, and shifting international balances. The destruction of Smyrna in 1922 brought the Megali Idea to an irrevocable end and inaugurated a new era for Greece, where the focus shifted from expansion to reconstruction. Despite the trauma and loss, the end of the Asia Minor adventure also marked the beginning of modern Greece, a country compelled to redefine its boundaries, composition, and historical identity.

3. The Resettlement of Refugees in Greece (Athens, Thessaloniki, Heraklion) and Volleyball

The Refugees in Athens

The arrival of approximately 250,000 refugees in Athens and Piraeus after 1922 radically transformed the urban landscape of the capital, which until then had maintained a more administrative and less industrial character. The state settlement policy, implemented through the Refugee Rehabilitation Commission (EAP), led to the creation of new neighborhoods that over time became cultural and athletic hubs of modern Athens: Kaisariani, Nea Ionia, Nea Smyrni, Nea Filadelfeia, and Kokkinia. The refugees brought with them technical knowledge, artisanal skills, and a cosmopolitan ethos that revitalized the city's economy and social life. In the realm of culture and recreation, the founding of new sports clubs provided the Asia Minor Greeks with a means of social integration as well as the recovery of their lost collective identity [18].

The establishment of Nea Smyrni serves as a characteristic example of this transition. Refugees from Smyrna reestablished historic clubs such as Panionios G.S. (relocated in 1923 from Smyrna) and Apollon Smyrnis, continuing the athletic activities that had already flourished in Asia Minor. These clubs did not merely revive football traditions but also promoted "noble sports" such as track and field, swimming, and volleyball, which had been cultivated from the early 20th century in schools and associations in Smyrna and Constantinople. Volleyball, a sport introduced to Greece by American military personnel and physical trainers active in Smyrna before World War I, experienced a renewed boom through the refugees, who brought it to schools and gymnasiums in the capital.

The refugee neighborhoods of Athens quickly became centers of social life, where sports served as a means of collective revitalization. The playing fields of Kaisariani, Kokkinia, and Nea Ionia became sites of social gathering, while the first volleyball teams were associated with local workers' clubs and schools. Sports, and volleyball in particular, assumed a dual role: on one hand, as a vehicle for education and physical discipline, and on the other, as a social instrument for integration, where refugees participated in equal footing with the local population. In this way, interwar Athens evolved into a laboratory of cultural synthesis, where Asia Minor traditions met the modern idea of amateur sport [3].

Volleyball – Athens – Panionios

From 1925 to 1930, Panionios played a leading role in the development of volleyball in Athens. After the arrival of the refugees in September 1922, the club was reorganized and began forming new teams across various sports. In 1924, a volleyball team was established under the guidance of Sofoklis Magnis, the physical education instructor who had accompanied the club from Smyrna. The sport had already gained popularity among the Greek community of Smyrna, and Panionios' activities gave fresh momentum to its promotion [23]. Soon after, other Athenian clubs—such as Atromitos, AEK, and Panathinaikos—along with military and university institutions, created volleyball teams as well, paving the way for the first organized championships.

The first championship was held from 8 March to 17 May 1925, with 11 teams divided into two groups. The matches took place at the Panathenaic Stadium and at the National G.S. gymnasium. National G.S. emerged as the winner, Panellinios as the runner-up, while Panionios and the Hellenic Military Academy reached the semifinals (newspaper *Empros*, 1925). In 1926, the second championship brought together nine teams at the same venues, and the team of the Teachers' College of Physical Education claimed the title (newspaper *Empros*, 1926). The third championship in 1927, featuring 14 participating teams, faced administrative obstacles. The Olympic Games Committee refused to grant the Panathenaic Stadium, but president Dimitros Dallas created a temporary court at the "Luna Park". Eventually, the Committee conceded the stadium for the final (newspaper *Athlitikos Kosmos*, 1927). In 1928, the fourth championship, with 12 teams, ended with Panellinios G.S. as the winner, while in 1929 the Neoi Vyronos took first place among ten participants (newspaper *Empros*, 1929). In 1930, the sixth and final Panionios-organized championship—dedicated to the memory of Dimitros Dallas—was held with six teams, and National G.S. won the title (newspaper *Vradyni*, 1930).

Through Panionios' efforts, the Athenian volleyball championships became firmly established as a recurring institution. Subsequently, in collaboration with National G.S., Panellinios, and SEGAS, they were renamed the "Athens–Piraeus Regional Volleyball Championship," organizing divisions and creating a stable competitive tradition (newspaper *Empros*, 1930).

The Refugees in Thessaloniki

Thessaloniki, which already possessed a strong multicultural identity with Jewish, Muslim, and Greek populations, received approximately 150,000 refugees after 1922, who radically transformed its social and economic fabric [19]. The districts of Kalamaria, Toumba, Nea Krini, and Xirokrini became the main centers of settlement, where the refugees organized themselves into communities with collective forms of action. Local authorities and refugee organizations established cooperatives, schools, and athletic clubs, aiming not only at physical recreation but also at strengthening social cohesion [15].

In 1919, two years before the Asia Minor Catastrophe, the YMCA of Thessaloniki (Christian Association of Young Men of Thessaloniki – ΧΑΝΘ) had already begun its activities in the city, following the international model of the Young Men's Christian Association. From the outset, the YMCA aimed to promote the intellectual, moral, and physical development of young people through education and sports. Within this framework, it introduced new team sports to Greece, such as basketball and volleyball, which had already been established in the United States since the late 19th century. According to the organization's own historical record, "... in Greece, volleyball was introduced in 1919 by the YMCA of Thessaloniki, which served as the gateway for the sport's entry into the country". This fact is particularly significant, as Thessaloniki was not merely a place where volleyball spread, but the very birthplace of the sport in Greece, at a time when society was undergoing profound transformation due to the influx of refugees [22].

From the interwar period onward, Thessaloniki developed into a major center of Greek athletics. Clubs such as IRAKLIS (est. 1908), ARIS (est. 1914), and later PAOK (est. 1926) welcomed many Asias Minor refugees into their ranks, who contributed to the renewal of the city's athletic culture and to the introduction of new sports — among them volleyball [12].

Volleyball – Thessaloniki – YMCA Thessaloniki

Volleyball was invented in 1895 by the American instructor William Morgan, who worked at the YMCA branch in Holyoke, Massachusetts. The official birth date of the sport is February 9, 1895.

The YMCA of Thessaloniki functioned as a kind of *"cultural translator"*—introducing volleyball from the American YMCA and adapting it to the Greek context. Refugees, who were searching for new forms of social interaction and expression in their new homeland, found in the athletic programs of YMCA Thessalonikia space of participation and recognition. The physical educators of the time, such as Georgios Papaïoannou and Ioannis Kanellopoulos—who had encountered the sport in the schools of Smyrna—contributed decisively to its spread across the city's neighborhoods. The social value of volleyball in Thessaloniki during this period was closely connected to the pedagogical philosophy of YMCA Thessaloniki, which viewed the sport as a means of moral education and social harmony. Unlike football or boxing, volleyball lacked an aggressive character; instead, it emphasized cooperation and mental focus—qualities that resonated with the postwar desire for social pacification. Already in the 1920s, YMCA Thessaloniki organized the first internal volleyball championships, held in its facilities and involving students, university youth, and young refugees. At the same time, volleyball was incorporated into the physical education programs offered by YMCA Thessaloniki to local schools, which accelerated its diffusion. Within a decade, volleyball had become a popular activity both in schools and in other athletic clubs of Thessaloniki. In the refugee district of Kalamaria, where thousands of Asia Minor refugees settled, physical education served as a tool of social reorganization. Local schools and sports associations, influenced by YMCA Thessaloniki, adopted volleyball as a key sport for the education and development of young people [22].

In early 1923, local newspapers in Thessaloniki reported the filming of at least two athletic events: (a) a volleyball match between the team of the 1st Gymnasium and the YMCA Thessaloniki team at the "Iraklis" ground on 21 January, and(b) a volleyball match between YMCA and Iraklis (newspaper *Makedonia,* 1923). Many refugees originating from Smyrna and Constantinople—where volleyball was already known through Catholic and Protestant schools—took on roles as coaches and organizers. The YMCA of Thessaloniki, as an institution, thus functioned not only as a sports association but also as an agent of social cohesion. Through volleyball, refugees found a way to integrate into their new communities and to build ties with the local population. YMCA Thessaloniki coordinated the city's athletic clubs and undertook the organization of volleyball, basketball, and football tournaments and championships with the participation of various local teams. In 1924, two volleyball tournaments were organized with teams from sports clubs and schools across the city: *Report Saloniki October 1924*, box "YMCA Archives, Greece, Local Reports," World Alliance of YMCA, Geneva, Switzerland [22].

The first local championship held in Thessaloniki was organized by the YMCA Thessaloniki and took place on its own playing field. Participating in the event were the teams of Aris, Iraklis, PAOK, the Athletic Union of Youth (AEN), and the YMCA Thessaloniki. The organization and supervision of the matches were carried out by the YMCA's physical education department, with V. Katsiotis, president of the athletic committee, overseeing the event. A trophy was awarded to the winning team, and commemorative prizes—medals—were presented to all participating athletes (newspaper *Efimeris ton Valkanion*, 1925).

The YMCA of Thessaloniki participated in the creation of the first local championships and in organizing friendly matches with other cities, such as Athens and Kavala. In 1936, the first Panhellenic Volleyball Tournament was organized by the YMCA Thessaloniki, with teams from Athens and Piraeus taking part. At the same time, the sport was officially introduced into the physical education programs of the Aristotle University and the city's schools. The influence of the YMCA on Thessaloniki's athletic landscape was immense [4]. Historian Skouteris (1986) notes that "... the YMCA, together with private schools and secondary schools, constituted the main pillars for training young people in volleyball during the interwar period". The technical infrastructure it developed—indoor gymnasiums, training programs, and instructor schools—formed the foundation for the later advancement of the sport in Greece. From a sociological perspective, volleyball served as a means of cultivating a collective ethos and social balance. Participation in teams, discipline, cooperation, and the acceptance of defeat as part of the learning process reinforced values that contributed to the reconstruction of the refugee community. Sport in Thessaloniki was not simply a form of "spectacle," but a vehicle of education and social morality [22].

More than any other sports association of the time, the YMCA succeeded in bridging Western athletic modernism with Greek social reality. Within its facilities, refugees, native residents, students, and workers coexisted in an environment of equality and collectivism. Volleyball, with its team-based structure and absence of physical contact, functioned as a safe arena for social coexistence and cooperation.

Refugees in Heraklion

Heraklion, Crete, although receiving a smaller number of refugees (approximately 25,000–30,000), became one of the most dynamic centers for the integration of the Asia Minor population [2]. Most refugees came from the coastal regions of Asia Minor, including Halicarnassus, Smyrna, and Phocaea, and settled mainly in the neighborhoods of Nea Alikarnassos, Estavromenos, and Poros. Despite difficult conditions, they quickly

developed communities with vibrant social and cultural life, including cultural associations, churches, and sports clubs.

The founding of Nea Alikarnassos in 1925 was closely linked to the athletic activities of the refugees. The first organized sports teams in the city, such as Herodotus Nea Alikarnassos (est. 1932), were established by refugee families seeking to preserve the memory of their unique homeland. Within these clubs, volleyball began to emerge as early as the 1930s, primarily through schools and local societies. The sport, requiring minimal equipment, became a favored form of exercise for the youth of the refugee neighborhoods. Gradually, Crete—and particularly Heraklion—developed into a hub for volleyball thanks to the contribution of the refugees. In the postwar period, clubs such as OFI, Ergotelis, and Herodotus established volleyball departments, many staffed by descendants of Asia Minor refugees, thereby embedding the sport into the local athletic culture. The relationship between refugees and sports in Heraklion went beyond competition; it served as a mechanism for social cohesion and collective identity in a community that initially viewed them with caution. Volleyball, with its pedagogical and team-oriented character, reflected the values the refugees sought to pass on to the next generations: cooperation, discipline, solidarity, and integrity [16].

Thus, through athletic activity—especially the development of volleyball—the Asia Minor refugees in Heraklion, as elsewhere in Greece, managed to transform the trauma of uprooting into collective creativity. The sport became a symbol of social integration and, simultaneously, a vehicle of memory, connecting Crete to the cultural heritage of Asia Minor.

Volleyball – Heraklion – OFI

The volleyball department of OFI is one of the club's founding sections, established in 1925. Historical references and photographs confirm that OFI even had a women's volleyball team as early as 1928, training at the historic gymnasium on Idomeneos Street, where football players, track and field athletes, wrestlers, etc. The 1928 women's volleyball team of OFI, formed by the legendary "Hentekia"[1], practiced in the same venue where the football team of OFI competed at the time (photographic archive of the Karousos family, among the founders of OFI—photos from the archive were exhibited at the Basilica of Saint Mark in Heraklion in the exhibition "1923–2003: One Century, One Society"). This serves as confirmation that OFI's volleyball department is among the most historic in Greece (websites: *oficrete.gr*, *ofivolleyball.gr*, and the photographic archive of Markos Naletakis).

Specifically, Theodosios Karousos (the initiator of OFI's foundation) and Leandros Karousos (the first captain in the history of OFI's football department), both originally from Constantinople, were among the founders of the Heraklion Fans Club, which also included sports such as cycling and athletics, in which members of the Karousos family actively participated (*oficrete.gr*).

According to a 1989 report in the Heraklion newspaper *Patris*, 78-year-old volleyball player Loula G. Mari, spoke to journalist Antonis Papoutsakis about the 1928 OFI volleyball team of which she had been a member: "People enjoyed watching the girls play volleyball and would come to the matches, which were held on dirt courts, leaving their hands and knees scraped and bruised. … At that time, there was no basketball in Crete. I focused on volleyball and cycling" she recalled. Loula G. Mari was honored in 1989 by the local Volleyball Association for her significant contribution to the sport.

4. Conclusion

The history of volleyball in Smyrna and its relocation to Greece is not merely a sporting narrative but a cultural chronicle of how human communities transform uprooting into creation and memory into a collective act of survival. In early 20th-century Smyrna, volleyball emerged in an environment where sport served as education, social coexistence, and a form of progressive expression. In Greece, after 1922, the same sport evolved into a symbol of adaptation and renewal for a people who had to reclaim their place in the world.

Smyrna was the cradle of a sporting culture that combined European modernization with the Greek urban spirit. There, in schoolyards and club courtyards, the city's youth learned to cooperate, share, and create a rhythm of collective effort. When the city was lost in the flames of 1922, its sporting tradition did not perish with it. Its people carried it like an invisible treasure in their suitcases, in their memories, in their bodies, in schools, and in the new fields of the refugee neighborhoods. There, among tin roofs and dusty grounds, the nets were set up again—not only those of volleyball, but of life itself.

Volleyball became a mirror of a people who were not entirely defeated, a people who, even when they lost their homeland, retained a spirit of organization, community, and moral refinement. The arrival of refugees in Athens, Thessaloniki, and Heraklion signified not merely a demographic shift in the country, but also a

[1] "Hentekia" is today's Eleftheria Stadium of the city of Heraklion - Crete, located in the Venetian ditch along the straight section of the fortification walls, between the bastions of Pantokrator and Bethlehem.

transformation in the way Greek society understood exercise, health, and teamwork. The new neighborhoods—from Nea Smyrni to Kalamaria and Nea Alikarnassos—became the first postwar "laboratories" of Greek sport.

Sport, as the Asia Minor Greeks knew it, was not mere entertainment. It carried values—it was a measure of culture and identity. Panionios, YMCA Thessaloniki, and OFI were not merely clubs; they were simultaneously schools of social cohesion and bearers of historical continuity. Through these associations, volleyball became synonymous with a new life—a game that connected the old world with the new, the courtyards of Smyrna with the playgrounds of Nea Smyrni, the wooden floors of European schools with the open courts of Greek neighborhoods.

The history of volleyball after 1922 is a story of recreation and renewal. In Athens, the refugees rebuilt Panionios from scratch, bringing not only its name and colors but also the entire athletic philosophy of Smyrna, which emphasized discipline, teamwork, and fair play. The first matches in 1925, organized by Panionios, were more than just sporting events—they were acts of remembrance, symbols of the survival of a culture. Ethnikos, Panellinios, Atromitos, AEK—many of these clubs with refugee roots—became carriers of a new era in which volleyball symbolized modernization and openness.

In Thessaloniki, the YMCA Thessaloniki wrote a remarkable chapter. There, the sport was not merely spread—it was reborn, through the spirit of the YMCA and the American idea of athletics as a means of moral education. Volleyball at YMCA Thessaloniki was not a luxury; it was a social necessity. The ball flying over the net was the gesture of a generation that refused to let its life fade away.

In Heraklion, the thread of continuity took the form of OFI. From its early years, in 1925, the club incorporated volleyball into its program, and by 1928 it had also established a women's team—one of the first in Greece. This is not merely a statistic; it is a social milestone. In Interwar Crete, where gender roles remained strictly defined, OFI gave women the opportunity to participate in a team sport that was dynamic and disciplined. The ball rising over the "Hentekia" did not signify only a game—it symbolized rights, progress, and emancipation.

Through these three hubs—Athens, Thessaloniki, and Heraklion—a new geography of Greek sports emerged. Volleyball was not confined to the courts. It became a school activity, a form of institutional education, and a social instrument. The refugees, with their profound education and inherent sense of community, helped develop a sport grounded in reciprocity and trust.

This athletic transition is also a transition of identity. From the cosmopolitan prosperity of Smyrna to the refugee reconstruction of Greece. From the gymnasiums of European suburbs to the dirt courts of the neighborhoods. Yet, along this journey, volleyball preserved something invaluable: the spirit of equality. Every serve, every pass, every collaboration was a small defiance of defeat, a proof that collectivity can overcome loss. If sport is a mirror of society, then the history of volleyball after 1922 reflects Greece's transition from the era of the Megali Idea to the era of reality. From national expansion replaced by internal cohesion, from war giving way to cooperation, from the pain of uprooting transformed into cultural strength. Volleyball, as a collective act, captures precisely this transformation—from competition to balance, from imposition to interaction.

The sports culture of Smyrna up to the Catastrophe and the transfer of volleyball to Greece is not merely a chapter in Greek sports history. It is a testament to how culture can survive even through destruction. Volleyball, this simple game with a ball and a net, acquired a historical significance that goes beyond the boundaries of the court. It became a vehicle of collective memory, educational ethics, and cultural continuity.

References

[1]. Albanidis, E. (2011). Athletic Activities of the Greek Community in Smyrna from the End of the 19th Century to 1922, Studies in Physical Culture and Tourism, 18(4), 227-237. wbc.poznan.pl
[2]. Andriotis, N. (2020). Refugees in Greece 1821–1940: Arrival, Care, Resettlement. Hellenic Parliament Foundation, Athens.
[3]. Belitsos, Th. (2015). Panionios: 125 Years of Contribution to Greek Sports – The Blue-and-Red Athletic History, Nea Smyrni.
[4]. Bountidou, A., & Tsiompanoudi, E. (2006). YMCA Thessaloniki 1921–2006, Thessaloniki History Center, Thessaloniki.
[5]. Bourdaras, Ch. (2018). The Origins of Volleyball in Greece and the Asia Minor Refugees. Scientific Yearbook of the Department of Physical Education and Sport Science, Athens, 34(2), 67–90.
[6]. Chatzaturian, V. (2019). Panionios 1890: Memories, Militos, Athens.
[7]. Clark, B. (2006). Twice a Stranger: How Mass Expulsion Forged Modern Greece and Turkey, Granta Books, London.
[8]. Clogg, R. (1992). A Concise History of Greece. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
[9]. Dafnis, G. (1997). Greece between Two Wars, 1919–1939. Kaktos, Athens.
[10]. Dobkin, M. (1998). Smyrna 1922: The Destruction of a City, Newmark Press, New York.

[11]. Giannakopoulos, A. (2025). Volleyball from Smyrna, Asia Minor, to Athens with Panionios until 1930. Inquiries in Physical Education and Sport, 23(1), 59–70. https://doi.org/10.26253/heal.uth.ojs.ispe.2025.2280
[12]. Ioannidis, Th., & Kynigopoulos, A. (2006). The History of Sports in Thessaloniki. OPAP, Athens.
[13]. Jelavich, B. (1983). History of the Balkans: Twentieth Century. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
[14]. Koliopoulos, I., & Michailidis, I. (2009). Refugees in Macedonia. Society for Macedonian Studies / Militos, Thessaloniki.
[15]. Koliopoulos, J., & Veremis, T. (2010). Modern Greece A History since 1821, Wiley-Blackwell, Malden, MA and Oxford.
[16]. Lagoudaki, E. (2009). Refugees in Heraklion during the Interwar Period. Dokimakis, Heraklion.
[17]. Linardos, P. (1998). The Smyrna of Panionios. Friends of the Arts, Nea Smyrni.
[18]. Mavrogordatos, G. (2015). 1915: The National Schism. Patakis, Athens.
[19]. Mazower, M. (1991). Inside Hitler's Greece: The Experience of Occupation, 1941–44. New Haven, Yale University Press.
[20]. Mazower, M. (2004). *Salonica, City of Ghosts: Christians, Muslims and Jews 1430–1950*. HarperCollins, London.
[21]. Mechtidis, P. (2020). The Asia Minor Campaign and the Catastrophe. Malliaris, Athens.
[22]. Papadimas, V. (2021). YMCA Thessaloniki: One Hundred Years since Its Foundation, Kyriakidi, Thessaloniki.
[23]. Pappas, N. (2015). The Role of Sport in Social Integration: The Case of Migrants in Greece. Journal of Sport and Social Issues, 39(3), 216-233.
[24]. Solomonidis, Ch. – Lorentis, N. (1967). Panionios Gymnastic Club, Athens.
[25]. Zürcher, E. J. (2004). Turkey: A Modern History, I.B. Tauris, London.

Newspapers Archives

Efimeris ton Valkanion, Athlitikos Kosmos, Makedonia, Vradyni, Empros, Amaltheia, Patris

Websites

oficrete.gr, ofivolleball.gr
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Panionios_V.C.

Anestis Giannakopoulos is a member of the Special Teaching Staff at the Department of Physical Education and Sport Science, Democritus University of Thrace. He holds an M.Sc., Ph.D., and Postdoctoral qualification from the same institution. He teaches the courses History of Physical Education and Sport, and Volleyball. He has published numerous research papers in international and Greek scientific journals (20). He has also participated in conferences both in Greece and abroad, with presentations and publications in the corresponding conference proceedings (150).