

The Transcontinental Coach: Juan Carlos Zabala and his forgotten Master

By OLAF BROCKMANN, Vienna

The 2022 World Athletics Championships in Eugene, Oregon, were billed as the prelude to a wide-ranging publicity campaign for athletics ahead of the 2028 Olympic Games in Los Angeles.

Athletics, although the largest Olympic Sport remains in need of such publicity in the United States, where it is far overshadowed by professional sports such as football and basketball.

Even so, athletics events in 2028 will draw on a rich heritage: they will be staged at the Coliseum, the stadium which was at the heart of athletics at the 1932 and 1984 Los Angeles Games.

The Coliseum was the setting for Argentinian Juan Carlos Zabala's legendary marathon finish at the 1932 Olympics. 90 years on, many have commemorated Zabala's exploits.

The crucial contribution of his coach Alexander Stirling is less well known, and in fact largely forgotten in his home country of Austria.¹

It was whilst working as a sports teacher at a Buenos Aires orphanage in the 1920s that Stirling spotted Zabala, began to coach him, and led him to Olympic gold in Los Angeles.

Stirling was born on 30 September 1896 to Nikolaus and Anna Stirling in Staré Brno. He was baptised on 3 October in the abbey church of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary. From the entries in the birth and baptismal register we know that he was baptised as Alexander Vilém (Wilhelm), and that his father worked as a "factory manager of a leather goods factory" [dílvedouci v kozeluzské továrě dele].²

Stirling's family tree can be traced back in a direct line on his father's side to a tenth generation in the middle of the 17th century.

His birthplace had been the historical centre of Moravia since the 17th century and is now the second largest city in the Czech Republic.

Nikolaus and Anna Stirling moved with their three sons Josef, Karl and Alexander from Staré Brno in 1902 to Wiener Neustadt, 50 km south of Vienna.

Stirling's athletics career began in the aftermath of

the first world war. At that time the Spanish flu was raging and there was unemployment, hunger and hardship. Sport played a secondary role. In daily newspapers Stirling was often mentioned in the results, spelled "Stierling". In other publications his name was written at least ten different ways, namely Schiling, Sirling, Sitrling, Stirling, Stierling, Stierlind, Strierling, Stirler, Sperling and Steirling.

In addition, there are different spellings of his first name as Alejandro, Alberto, Alex and Andrew. Although he is almost always referred to as Austrian, he is also listed as Czech, Hungarian, Argentine, Scot or English.

Stirling enjoyed his greatest successes as a high jumper and pole vaulter. In 1919 he became Austrian high jump champion with a height of 1.64 metres, a year later he was runner-up in the pole vault with 3.10 m. Stirling had a talent for showmanship. He was popular as "reinforcement" [Aufputz] at women's meets³, thrilled the audience at "provincial events"⁴ or was starred at the indoor sports festival at the "Ronacher"⁵, a historic theatre in Vienna. Stirling mastered 1.85 m in the high jump with a dive. As this was not achieved in regular competition but a show, this performance was not recognised as an Austrian indoor record. In 1920 Stirling moved from Wiener Neustadt to the Viennese club Rapid, which organised numerous other sports departments besides football.⁶

He married Hermine Maria Strohmeier on 22 February 1922 in Mariazell, but thereafter he only appeared twice in more in newspaper athletics results. Perhaps he concentrated on his profession after his marriage. In the marriage register he is listed as a "trader of deli food".⁷

1923 marked a turning point in Stirling's life. He emigrated to Argentina. It was not surprising that he chose Argentina, as its economy of this country had experienced enormous economic growth from 1918 to 1921.⁸ Official statistics show that Stirling was one of 2,267 Austrians who left for Buenos Aires in 1923.⁹ Even after his departure for Argentina, his family

name was mentioned regularly in the newspapers of the 1920s. His brothers Josef (1890–1968), Karl (1892–1942) and Alexander (1896–1966) excelled in three different sports, Josef as a wrestler, Karl as a weightlifter. Alexander was an athlete and a wrestler, but it is not certain whether he competed.

Stirling set off from Hamburg on the steamship *Württemberg* on 28 April 1923 for his Argentine adventure. The crossing took around four weeks, before Stirling, travelling in third class, reached Buenos Aires. In the passenger list, he is listed as a “goldsmith”.¹⁰ His wife Hermine and daughter Edeltraute followed him a year later.

In the first months of his settlement he competed in Buenos Aires in November and December 1923. The fact that he celebrated three victories and a third place has remained unknown in Austria until now. Yet his successes are remarkable: they represent the first victories of an Austrian athlete overseas. Alejandro Stirling, as he was called in Buenos Aires, was not only mentioned in the results, but also in text and pictures. At the 4th *Juegos Municipales* he won the high jump with 1.68m and the pole vault with 3.40m.¹¹ In mid-December 1923, he won another high jump competition with 1.70 m.¹² With this achievement Stirling was set an Argentinean record.

This is a curious episode of Austrian sports: Stirling, member of Rapid, as Argentine high jump record holder.¹³

He was remembered not only as an athlete, but also as a wrestler. In wrestling he is also mentioned as an instructor, probably teaching boys at the YMCA.

Through the mediation of the Argentine Athletics Federation, Stirling obtained a position as a teacher at the Colonia Hogar «Ricardo Gutiérrez» orphanage.

Stirling's at this school is noted in his personnel file at the Colonia to have begun on 27 August 1925. He was hired as a *professor físico*.¹⁴ Many documents, even his fingerprints, are kept in the Archivo Colonia Hogar “Ricardo Gutiérrez”.

The records contain many pages with the “Legajo personal del empleado Alejandro Stirling”, who was kept at the Colonia with “Núm. 115”.¹⁵

The Colonia Hogar “Ricardo Gutiérrez” was the orphanage where Stirling met Zabala. Zabala was admitted to the Colonia as a nine year old on 16 January 1921.¹⁶ At the very latest, Zabala came under Stirling's ‘wing’ when he was 16 years old.

It is interesting how Stirling himself sees his discovery of Zabala at the Colonia. In his unpublished report “A Life for Sport. Records of a Sports Globetrotter” [Ein Leben für den Sport. Aufzeichnung eines Sport-Weltenbummlers] it says: “There young Zabala caught his eye among his 600 pupils. He took the boy



Alexander Stirling as a high jumper in Buenos Aires, probably on 15 December 1923 when he won a competition on the YMCA sports ground with 1.70 m.

Photo: Archivo General de la Nación AGN, Argentina

because he believed that he could achieve top performance in sports under the right guidance and leadership. During the time he coached the boy, he had to struggle a lot to break his resistance. Stirling led a strict regime. No alcohol, no women, no smoking and adherence to a strict timetable, these were the top priorities for the young athlete.”¹⁷

Stirling's influence on Zabala grew and grew. In 1929 »Zabalito« was released from the Colonia.

An extremely important handwritten note reveals that he was handed over as a minor to “Señor Alejandro Stirling”.¹⁸

Zabala continued to train under Stirling at the Colonia sportsground in Marcos Paz.

His protege enjoyed many successes and showed excellent form. Many successes

Stirling decided it was time for Zabala to visit Europe and face the legendary Finnish runner Paavo Nurmi. Stirling, clearly a man of some vision, planned this tour for autumn 1931.

On 12 August 1931, Stirling set off for Europe with Zabala on the steamship *Massila*.

The crossing took four weeks. They reached Bordeaux on 8 September.

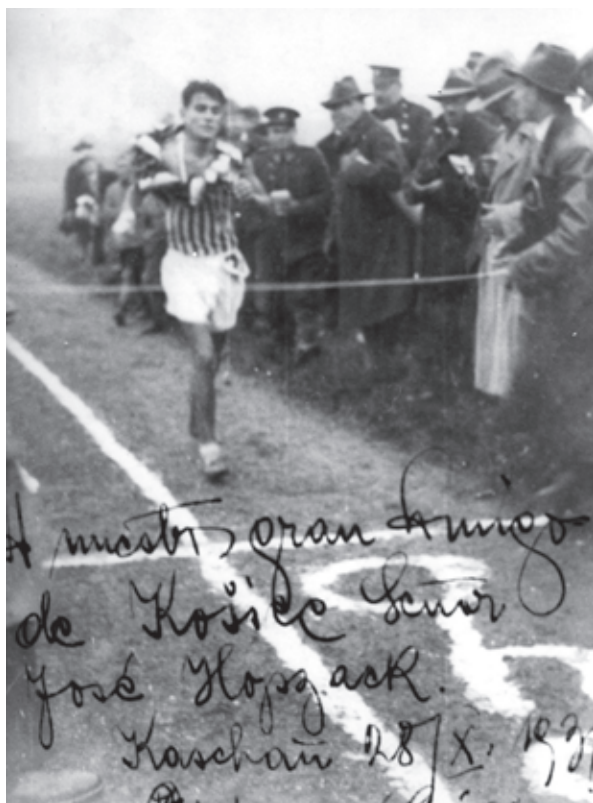
Immediately after their arrival, Stirling and Zabala learned that Nurmi was to compete in a 10,000m race in Berlin on 13 September.¹⁹ It was Stirling who organised the train journey to the German capital. The race took place in “pouring rain”. Nurmi won in 31:19.2 ahead of Max Syring in a German record of 31:26.8 and Zabala 31:44.8.²⁰

From Berlin, Stirling travelled on by train with his adopted son to Wiener Neustadt. There he returned to his parents' house. By mid-September, a race in Vienna for Zabala seemed a possibility.

This was finally fixed for 10 October as a »30,000

Juan Carlos Zabala as winner of the Košice Marathon 1931 (with autographs of Zabala and Stirling). Zabala celebrated an incredible marathon debut with a course record of 2:33:19.

Photo: Košice Marathon Archiv



m world record attempt on the sportsground of WAF "[Wiener Associations Football Club].²¹

Almost all the Viennese newspapers reported that an Austrian, Alexander Stirling, had discovered the talent of Zabala in an orphanage, coached and later adopted him.

Since no Austrian was capable of keeping pace with Zabala, a relay of 3 x 10,000 m with the three best Viennese long-distance runners was to be set against him. To be on the safe side several relays were planned to "pull" Zabala. But in the end no one could keep up with the Argentinian even for a short time. Zabala broke the world record with a time of 1:42:30.4.²²

Stirling himself was proving multi-talented. He was coach, manager, organiser, press officer and a fatherly figure to many world-class runners. In addition, the Austrian had a gift for making the right decisions for his athletes in the short term. This was also evident after Zabala's world record in Hütteldorf. Before leaving for Europe Stirling certainly had no plans for Zabala to compete in a marathon. But things turned out differently.

Vojtech Bukovský, founder of the Košice Marathon, met Stirling in a Viennese hotel a few days after Zabala's world record and suggested Zabala should run in Košice. The race took place on 28 October. Until then, Zabala had not run a marathon, but Stirling felt that his athlete was ready to make his debut at the distance and agreed.²³

From the start of the race Zabala left behind all his

opponents by setting what many believed was an impossible pace thought.

Stirling probably joined the timekeepers in a jeep to follow the race. They finally recorded an unbelievable time of 2:33:19 for Zabala.²⁴

People in Košice still talk about Zabala to this day, "but above all about his coach, who is said to have spent no less than three hours on the phone to Buenos Aires in 1931 and supplied dozens of newspapers with reports about his pupil".²⁵

Before leaving for Argentina, Zabala trained in Wiener Neustadt "full steam ahead for the Games".

Stirling also made Zabala train in snow. "Nevertheless, he is said to have completed 30 kilometres on a snowy running track within two hours."²⁶

² Zabala, by now 20 years of age had to endure more snow before he and Stirling sailed back to Buenos Aires from Hamburg on 23 February on *Cap Arcona*, once again as 3rd class passengers.²⁷

Stirling had expected his protégé's peak to come at the 1936 Olympics. But events went faster than expected. After the European tour in 1931 he lobbied for Zabala to be allowed to travel to the US for preparation much earlier than the other members of Argentina's Olympic team.²⁸

Thus, the American adventure of Stirling and Zabala began on 2 May. According to the passenger list, Stirling travelled on the *Eastern Princeas* "athletic trainer" with Zabala as "student" from Buenos Aires to New York. They arrived there on 20 May.²⁹ The *New York Times* praised Stirling for having made careful Olympic preparations for Zabala.³⁰

Stirling reported his arrival in New York with a postcard to the director of the Colonia, Julio Bertolotto: "Two days ago we arrived here, the trip was very good, there were a few days left to go on to Chicago and Los Angeles. Many greetings to all, to the family and to you, Stirling and Zabalito."³¹

We are well informed about Zabala's Olympic countdown by a flood of reports in US newspapers. Stirling is mentioned often. He was not only coach and manager, but also public relations man; he liked to include himself as Zabala's masseur at photo opportunities. Stirling was a planner with foresight, but also, as we have seen, a man who could make good decisions quickly. He added some races for Zabala at short notice.

Zabala caused a sensation in his first US race when he won a handicap race over 10,000 m in New York on 29 May in 31:36.8.³² From New York the journey continued to Chicago, where Zabala won the AAU 15 Mile Championships on 11 June in 1:20:37.4, missing the world record by 32.8 seconds.³³

43 days before the Olympic marathon, Zabala raced in the *Los Angeles Times Marathon*. Stirl "If Zabala

doesn't win by ten minutes, we will pack up and go back to Argentina without staying for the Olympic Games." Stirling joked to reporters.³⁴

Zabala set a blistering of an opening pace. Stirling accompanied his athlete in a vehicle and saw Zabala pull away from the field with ease. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that at 20 miles came "the inevitable slowing down". Stirling ordered him to abandon race.

The reason was soon revealed. Zabala's running shoes were "completely worn out, his feet badly blistered" Stirling exhaled.³⁵ It was said that his Zabala's footwear were too light and too thin for the hot asphalt in California.

Zabala was not able to run over the next few days. Stirling was in demand as coach, manager and organiser. The Austrian found a "Turkish bath" in Los Angeles where Zabala's feet recovered.

Apparently, under the Austrian's instructions, he kept himself in shape by training on an exercise bike. In the meantime, new shoes with special soles were made for Zabala by Goodyear, even then a traditional shoe factory in Los Angeles.³⁶

With these shoes, Zabala finally resumed training with success. Stirling's optimism returned: "Zabala wins and shatters the Olympic record."³⁷

The story of Zabala's marathon victory has been told thousands of times, a race in Los Angeles that crowned his career and the work of his Austrian coach. All this is well known. But it is interesting to see how the coach himself experienced this memorable 7 August 1932 as a trainer and what the reactions were in his home country.

It was at the latest after Paavo Nurmi was barred from competing³⁸ that Zabala was installed as favourite.

A small detail provides the first mention of Stirling in the reports from race day itself.

At lunchtime in the Olympic village, he ordered Zabala to stop eating: "After you've won the race this afternoon you can eat a whole cow if you feel like it."³⁹

Stirling himself followed the race in an escort car. He watched as Zabala steadily increased his lead. Stirling told him several times to slow down. The coach doubted that Zabala could keep up this high rhythm. The Finns started to run as a team, it was something that Stirling had feared. He had to watch Lauri Virtanen approaching and overtaking Zabala at the 31st kilometre. The coach shouted to his runner: "Use your head!" He told his friends in the car, "I don't think he will win, he has run with excessive confidence in his own strength." It's said Zabala "neither heard nor obeyed" Stirling's orders. He gave him no more chance to win.⁴⁰

When he saw the British runner Sam Ferris overtaking Zabala, Stirling made his way back to the stadium



Juan Carlos Zabala (left) and Alexander Stirling (right) as guests at a Racing Club football match in March 1932.

Photo: El Gráfico, 19 March 1932

as a disappointed man. There he told a group of Argentines that Zabala had lost the race.⁴¹

He now waited for the marathon winner to arrive. When the trumpet fanfares announced the leader, Stirling could not believe his eyes.

It was Zabala who came home first in 2:31:36 ahead of Ferris (2:31:55) and Armas Toivonen (FIN/2:32:12). Stirling who had already written off his protégé, rated Zabala's performance as "almost superhuman" and admitted that his athlete was "better than I thought".⁴² Zabala thanked Stirling after the race, "my friend, coach and surrogate father".⁴³ He confessed that without his guidance he could never have come this far. In the Buenos Aires sports magazine *El Gráfico* Stirling was celebrated as "el padre del campeón".⁴⁴

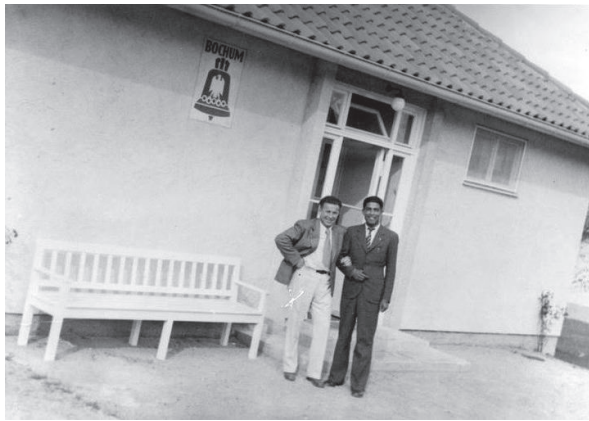
The *Los Angeles Times*, which called Zabala's coach "Alex Sterling", said: "The Austrian saw in the shy, frail-appearing lad the potentialities and the fighting heart of a great runner. He trained and learned to love the boy as his own son. He adopted him legally."⁴⁵ Zabala's story was a possible subject for a film, even for Hollywood crews present in the Coliseum.⁴⁶

The drama of this Olympic marathon was reflected worldwide.

The finish of the race had been witnessed by Austrian fencer Ellen Müller-Preis who had won individual foil gold in Los Angeles. She gave an emotional report of it in her book *Olympiasieg*. She describes a collapse of Zabala, "the wild breaths" after this "murderous race".

Alexander Stirling with marathon runner Luis Oliva in front of the “Bochum” house at the 1936 Berlin Olympic Village.

Photo: Archivo General de la Nación, Argentina



She did not mention Stirling so it seems certain that she was unaware that an Austrian was the coach of the Olympic marathon winner.⁴⁷

Numerous Austrian dailies highlighted that Zabala was known to the Viennese because of his world record achieved in Hütteldorf in 1931. Stirling was acknowledged in many reports.

The *Illustrierte Kronen Zeitung* reported how Zabala's success "is also part of an Austrian success, since his coach, the former Wiener Neustadt athlete Stirling, brought the Argentine to his present athletic height."⁴⁸ *Freie Stimmen* emphasized: "But it should also be noted that Austria's excellent school was represented by Zabala", who was a pupil of the Rapid athlete Stirling.⁴⁹ 24 years later, Stirling described the events of 7 August 1932 in "A Life for Sport".

"On that day my protégé Zabala was in the best physical condition. I was therefore very confident. Admittedly, the weather and wind are not insignificant factors in these races. Since 1920, Hannes Kolehmainen's winning time of 2:32:35.8 has been considered the Olympic record. In Los Angeles, Zabala and the following two runners were faster. For the first time in a marathon race, the winner was the first to leave the stadium and the first to return after a battle against weakness and exhaustion - led with relentless energy. It also happened for the first time that four runners ran simultaneously on the stadium track at the finish. [...] Up to the 30th kilometre, such races tend to run smoothly, but then [...] does the classic race degenerate into a more than gigantic test of the organism and the will. [...] The last 3000 metres were a wild fight, but Zabala held his lead. [...] After three trumpet blasts Zabala came in first. The stadium exploded in cheers. He seemed exhausted, but beamed all over his face."⁵⁰

After the Olympic victory Zabala and Stirling took a rest.

According to the *Long Beach Sun* the duo recovered "under Californian palm trees" in a bungalow on the beach of Santa Monica.⁵¹ Stirling was in the spotlight

with Zabala and enjoyed this attention. But when it came to the topics in the aftermath of the Olympics—turning professional, racing against Nurmi, offers from Hollywood and other openings,—it was Stirling who led the way.

On 9 August, *L'Auto* had announced that Zabala was turning professional and repeated this in their edition of 23.⁵²

But Stirling insisted that Zabala did not intend to turn professional. He underlined this by saying that they didn't accept a movie offer for \$50,000.⁵³

For Argentina's new national hero, the post Olympic period brought receptions, honours and celebrations in Buenos Aires. The festive mood didn't last forever. Zabala split with Stirling and was cast as the villain.

There was little reporting of the disputes in the Argentinian dailies, they seemingly wanted to avoid tarnishing the hero in public.

On 23 March 1933, *La Nación* reported in a short note that the *Federación Atlética Argentina* had suspended the Olympic champion "in view of lack of discipline" for six months.⁵⁴ Finally, there came Stirling and Zabala split, probably in spring 1933.

Both sides kept quiet about mutual accusations.

In the autumn of 1933, however, *Nemzeti Sport* came down hard on Zabala. After an interview with Stirling in Budapest, Hungary's biggest sports newspaper on reflected the time after the Olympic victory. After a period of happiness, joy, gifts, and receptions, "the first differences begin, the first disagreements between coach and protégé, Zabala is a national hero and wants no longer to tolerate anyone above him, their paths parted." the paper stated.

It also reported that Stirling, who appeared as "Schiling" in this text, "is planning a world tour, Zabala is fed up with eternal work".

Nemzeti Sport drew its own conclusion which was surely shared by Stirling: "Fame has gone to the national hero's head." [A nemzeti hősféjébeszálta a dicősség.]⁵⁵

It was not until 1936 that Stirling himself allowed public criticism of his former protégé. Before the Berlin Olympics *The Spokesman-Review* wrote about the events of 1933:

"Stirling didn't like Zabala's training methods and split with Juan Carlos."⁵⁶

That Zabala had not wanted to follow Stirling's instructions after his Olympic victory in 1932 was also reported by *Welt-Blatt*.

After Zabala did not finish marathon in Berlin, this newspaper included an interview with Stirling.

"When asked why Zabala had failed, Stirling shook

his head.” He said the “hard training” had been the reward for winning the Olympics in Los Angeles. “Zabala then broke away from his Viennese coach, he had fledged and wanted to try his luck on his own. Maybe he didn’t train so conscientiously anymore. Nevertheless, Stierling regrets Zabala’s misfortune.”⁵⁷

Zabala and Stirling thus went their separate ways in 1933. The Olympic champion was due to return to the USA in early August.

After the break with Zabala, Stirling continued to train a large group of athletes in Buenos Aires. He undertook another European tour, with Luis Oliva, Carlos Bianchi Luti and Diego Pojmaevich.

Stirling then went back to Wiener Neustadt. Thanks to him, athletics had become a hot topic in Vienna again. The *Sport-Tagblatt* recalled Stirling’s successes as an athlete and paid tribute to the fact that he “also remained a good Viennese”.⁵⁸

Stirling, who was described in the newspapers not only as a coach and manager, but also as a “tour guide”, had organised the return journey. The steamship *Monte Rosa* took them from Hamburg back to Buenos Aires on 10 November. In the passenger manifest, Stirling is listed as “professor”.⁵⁹ Another mission of the “professor” was done.

If Stirling had devoted himself solely to athletics during his first decade in Argentina, a new chapter in his career began in 1934. In addition to what had become a smaller role in athletics, he devoted himself to football, probably for financial reasons. Here, too, the Austrian became a man in demand, in most cases acting as physical trainer but sometimes even in charge as head of football.

Stirling worked for Racing Club Buenos Aires and Olympique Lillois before the second world World War. After 1945 he had a brief spell with 1. Wiener Neustädter SC, then Gimnasia y Esgrima La Plata and Oro Guadalajara. Above all Stirling remained associated with Racing Club throughout his life, even when he again coached and managed world-class athletes as Reinaldo Gorno and Osvaldo Suárez in the 1950s.

In 1934 Stirling began his work at Racing Club. There is a good deal of information in the “Archivo Historico Racing Club Buenos Aires” and the club publication *Racing Magazine*⁶⁰.

After the 1934 and 1935 seasons, he was signed by “Avellaneda” in January 1936. His professional focus, however, was initially on his work for Racing Club again until May 1936. During his four years working for this club, Stirling celebrated his greatest success in 1936 with the third place in the Argentinian championship. In the spring of 1936 Stirling was torn between football and athletics. The Argentine Athletics Federation



Article about Alexander Stirling’s training method with Juan Carlos Zabala. Stirling explained he made for Zabala and explained how had running shoes specially made with heavy lead soles to strengthen the leg muscles”.

Photo: Neues Wiener Tagblatt, 2 February 1939

was trying to recruit him as an official for the Berlin Games. Stirling also tried to get the job himself. For this he needed the approval of his employer Racing Club. The “Archivo Historico Racing Club” on 2 April 1936 shows that he received this clearance.

The club informed Stirling that his request had been granted and that he would be appointed by the Argentine Athletics Federation as “Diréctor Técnico del equipo de Atletas” for the Olympic Games.⁶¹

In 1936 Viennese newspapers reported that Stirling was “bringing another marathon runner to Europe”.⁶² This was Luis Oliva. While Zabala was often the focus of reports in Germany during his preparation for the Games with base in Wittenberg, Stirling was no longer in the spotlight. However, in their preliminary reports from Berlin the newspapers showed pictures of Stirling together with Oliva in the Olympic village and at training. From the articles however, it was clear that Oliva was not in top shape.⁶³

This scepticism was to prove true. In Oliva retired from race as did Zabala.

Stirling’s reaction to Zabala’s abandonment in the marathon is interesting.

In the *Welt-Blatt* it was emphasised again that the Argentine had broken with his Austrian coach after 1932: “He had fledged. Nevertheless, Stierling regrets Zabala’s misfortune. [...] When asked about the reason for Zabala’s failure, Stierling shook his head.” In

Alexander Stirling as guest in Vienna 1953: Story about Stirling, the City of Vienna, the soccer club Rapid Wien and Reinaldo Gorno.

Photo: Racing Magazine, 30 September 1953



the article the suggestion came through that Zabala had no longer trained hard enough. Stirling first told here that he once had Zabala made “specially running shoes with heavy lead soles to strengthen the leg muscles. It was a tough workout, but winning the Olympics was the reward.”⁶⁴

Later, Stirling gave more details about the story of the “Runner with the Lead Soles” [Läufer mit den Bleisohlen]. At an interview with the *Neues Tagblatt*, he presented Zabala’s “three kilogram running shoes”. The reporter wrote: “From the outside, you couldn’t tell much about these things. They looked like other running shoes, except that they looked a bit clumsier. But if you picked them up unawares, you would drop them on the floor. That’s how heavy the inlaid lead soles were. Stierling made his pupil run with them for months in the year of the Olympic Games. At first it was almost a torture for Zabala to run with these weights on his legs and he suffered from terrible muscle pain. But he got used to it and was amazed when he then started running again with ordinary running shoes. His legs flew along easily like feathers.”⁶⁵

After the Berlin Games Stirling continued his coaching career with Racing Club and Olympique Lillois. In 1937 he was engaged by Racing for the last time.⁶⁶

It was not easy to follow Stirling’s career after his return to Europe. In 1938 however, he turned up from summer to autumn as a coach at Olympique Lillois. There he was not only physical trainer but was responsible for tactics as as coach.

Curiously for this club he is listed as “Steirling” and “Englishman— with an incorrect date of the season (1937).⁶⁷ Stirling’s activity for this club is documented,

however, in a couple of reports in different newspapers.⁶⁸

Stirling reported that he “had to give up the coaching position in Lille because of the events of the war and returned to Wiener Neustadt”.⁶⁹

Where he was during the World War II is not clear. According to the “Federal Archives” [Bundesarchiv] in Berlin, Stirling was not a soldier.⁷⁰

It is therefore more surprising that reports of his death appeared in Argentinian publications in 1944.

On 14 June 1944, *Racing Magazine* announced that Stirling had perished: “Alexander Stirling, Former Racing Club Coach, Died at Stalingrad. A Life Entirely Dedicated to Sport”. [...] “Alejandro Stirling, creator of champions, great friend of Argentina, simple, praiseworthy and enterprising man, had to pay tribute to the hour of blood. He was killed in Stalingrad, according to news received from one of his relatives. [...] He wanted to return to our country where he had real friends. In Racing the doors were open to him. [...] Stirling was a very upright and serious man. [...] With Alejandro Stirling has gone a European sportsman who was a great friend of the Argentinians.”⁷¹

On 13 June 1947, *El Gráfico* reported the more positive news that Stirling had survived World War II. “I am in the best of health and would like to return to Buenos Aires,” the paper quoted from letters Stirling wrote to friends.⁷² In September 1947 Stirling, “the dead man”, was back in Buenos Aires and visited *El Gráfico*, where Zabala also welcomed him.⁷³

Stirling did not yet make it clear which club he would work for and whether he would return to athletics. From Stirling’s memoirs there is information about his activities in football after World War II.

These state that he had to stay in Wiener Neustadt until 1947 “because he was refused permission to leave the country for Argentina”.⁷⁴

In 1945 Stirling took over the coaching of the re-established 1. Wiener-Neustädter SC.

Stirling stated that returned to the Americas in 1947, where he initially worked as a football coach in Mexico. From Mexico he returned to Argentina, and in 1947/48 helped Gimnasia y Esgrima de La Plata achieve promotion “from the second to the first division”.⁷⁵ With articles preserved in its archives, the club in La Plata was able to confirm Stirling’s activity.⁷⁶ After La Plata, Stirling worked for Deportivo Oro Guadalajara.⁷⁷

At the end of the 1940s in Buenos Aires Stirling returned to athletics. In Argentina the Austrian produced “two more runners in the following years who were talked about all over the world”.⁷⁸ These were Reinaldo Gorno and Osvaldo Suárez.

In an article published in *La Nación* in 1977, Gorno re-



Reinaldo Gorno (1), Alexander Stirling (2) and marathon runner Exequiel Bustamante (4) at a reception given by President Juan Perón (3) in 1953.

Photo: Archivo General de la Nación, Argentina

lated how Stirling was to him a master and a friend: “Un padre para mí!”⁷⁹ Stirling coached Gorno since the early 1950s, which means that his Olympic marathon silver in the 1952 Olympic marathon in Helsinki behind Emil Zátopek can be attributed to Stirling’s work.

After the Olympic year Stirling undertook the first of several European tours with Gorno in 1953. He was again trainer, manager and tour guide in one. Of course, Stirling chose Wiener Neustadt as his base. As he once had been with Zabala, Stirling was in the spotlight with Gorno. In November, the two were received by Argentina’s President Juan Domingo Perón. A picture preserved in the “Archivo General de la Nación” shows a proud Stirling at the side of the President.⁸⁰

Gorno’s fame continued to grow, especially after his marathon victory in Nakamura 1954. Stirling led this expedition to Japan. Here, accompanied by Stirling, Gorno celebrated the greatest triumph of his career, setting another South American record of 2:24:55.⁸¹ In 1955 Gorno’s high expectations of another triumph were not fulfilled.

Gorno finished fifth in 2:20:28.

The *Track Newsletter*, *Track & Field News* highlighted the quality of Gorno, for which “an enthusiast named Alexander Stirling” was responsible. However, Stirling was once again referred to as a “Scot”.⁸²

At the end of his career, Stirling was lucky to coach Osvaldo Suárez who became one of the most successful Argentine runners of all time. He won 11 gold medals at South American Championships and also won the *Corrida Internacional de São Silvestre* three times (1958–1960).⁸³

In Austria Suárez even competed often for the Viennese club WAC⁸⁴, something that has been forgotten in Stirling’s homeland.



Alexander Stirling and Reinaldo Gorno in Japan 1954. That year Gorno won the famous Nakamura marathon in 2:24:55.

Photo: Archivo General de la Nación, Argentina

However, participation by Suárez at the 1956 Melbourne Olympics 1956 was prevented by the overthrow of President Juan Domingo Perón and the takeover of power by the *Revolución Libertadora* in autumn 1955.⁸⁵ The political unrest in Argentina also disrupted Stirling’s life. He returned temporarily to Wiener Neustadt in February 1956 “to take a longer, well-deserved rest.” Stirling, “regarded as the most successful marathon coach in the world” did not reveal whether he would stay in Austria or return to Argentina. It was hoped that Stirling would work as a football coach in Austria.⁸⁶

But Stirling did return to Buenos Aires. He may have held an Argentine passport as early as 1954, but his citizenship is certainly documented from 1958 to 1964 with passport number 709.183, according to numerous visas. Finally, Stirling coached Osvaldo Suárez, Gumersindo Gómez and Walter Lemos at the 1960 Olympic Games. However, his dream of a final coaching success was not realized in Rome. Suárez finished ninth in 2:21:26.6 in a race won by the great Ethiopian runner Abebe Bikila.

From 1954 to 1964 Stirling was sporadically registered with a secondary residence in Wiener Neustadt. Only on 19 June 1964, after his return from Argentina, was he again registered in Wiener Neustadt together with his wife Hermine. Stirling died there in on 12 July 1966,

He was 70 years of age.

He was buried three days later at the cemetery of Wiener Neustadt field 6, grave 22.

There he rests together with his wife Hermine (1902–1999) and his daughter Edeltraute (1922–2006). Alexander Stirling’s name, however, is not found on this

gravestone. The inscription reads, “Edeltraute Draxler. Stirling and parents”. A photo from the family archive shows that at one time there were also Olympic rings on Alexander Stirling’s grave. Unfortunately, this Olympic symbol has been removed. When and why is not known.

- 1 Stirling is still remembered in Argentina and appears in a recent biography of Zabala: Rubén Aguilera, Eduardo Biscayart and Luis Vinker, *Zabala, el campeón excepcional* (Buenos Aires: CADA, 2022). Parts of this article have previously been published in this book as Olaf Brockmann, “Alexander Stirling, el maestro,” in Aguilera, Biscayart and Vinker, *Zabala*, 205–222.
- 2 Čísloknihy 17141, Brno-Staré Brno u Nanebevezetí Panny Marie; Rodní a křestní kniha; 1896, XV, 345.
- 3 *Illustriertes Sportblatt*, 22 May 1920, 12.
- 4 *Grazer Tagblatt*, 18 June 1920, 12; 19 June 1920, 6; *Freie Stimmen*, 26 June 1920, 5.
- 5 *Sport-Tagblatt*, 29 November 1920, 4; *Allgemeine Sport-Zeitung*, 4 December 1920, 315.
- 6 *Illustriertes Sportblatt*, 21 August 1920, 7.
- 7 *Trauungsbuch 17* (Mariazell Parish 1921–1922), no. 11578.
- 8 Edith Blaschitz, *Auswanderer, Emigranten, Exilanten – die österreichische Kolonie in Buenos Aires. Von den Anfängen bis zum Ende des Zweiten Weltkrieges, unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Jahre 1918–1945* [MA thesis, University of Vienna, 1992], 37.
- 9 Wolfgang Just, *Auswanderung und Auswanderungspolitik in der Zwischenkriegszeit (1918–1938)* [MA thesis, University of Vienna, 1977], 43.
- 10 *Hamburger Passagierlisten*, in *Staatsarchiv Hamburg*, Volume 373–7 I, VIII A1, Book 295, 1020.
- 11 *La Argentina*, 2 November 1923, 9; *La Nación*, 12 November 1923, 6.
- 12 *La Argentina*, 16 December 1923, 7.
- 13 Luis Vinker, *Anuario 1983 de la Confederación Argentina de Atletismo* (Buenos Aires: CADA, 1983), 182.
- 14 Legajo personal del empleado Alejandro Stirling (No. 6/1925), *Archivo Colonia Hogar „Ricardo Gutiérrez”* (Buenos Aires, 1925–1931); see also history of the Colonia: Sandra Jaca and Gustavo Tilleria Berardoni, *Colonia “Ricardo Gutiérrez”. La Historia* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Autores de Argentina, 2020).
- 15 Legajo personal del empleado Alejandro Stirling (No. 1/1925), *Archivo Colonia*.
- 16 Legajo personal del Juan Carlos Zabala (16 January 1921), *Archivo Colonia*.
- 17 Alexander Stirling, *Ein Leben für den Sport* [Aufzeichnungen eines Sport-Weltenbummlers], aufgezeichnet von A. Pattler (Unpublished personal records, written in 1956), 5.
- 18 This handwritten note was added in 1929 at the bottom of Zabala’s Legajo personal from 16 January 1921, *Archivo Colonia*.
- 19 *Reichspost*, 13 September 1931, 8.
- 20 *Prager Tagblatt*, 12 September 1931, 9; *Vossische Zeitung*, 14 September 1931, 5.
- 21 *Sport-Tagblatt*, 6 October 1931, S. 5.
- 22 *Sport-Tagblatt*, 10 October 1931, 2; 13 October 1931, 5; *Neues Wiener Journal*, 11 October 1931, 29; *Neue Freie Presse*, 11 October 1931, 16; *Illustrierte Kronen Zeitung*, 11 October 1931, 27; *La Nación*, 28 October 1931, 6.
- 23 “Ninety years ago in Košice,” *Association of International Marathons and Distance Races* (Athens, 26 January 2021), <https://aims-world-running.org/articles/1594-90-years-ago-in-kosice.html>.
- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 Volker Kluge, “Friedens-Marathon,” in Waldemar Cierpinski and Volker Kluge: *Meilenweit bis Marathon* (Berlin: Sportverlag, 1989), 101.
- 26 *Sport-Tagblatt*, 15 January 1932, 5.
- 27 *Hamburger Passagierlisten*, in *Staatsarchiv Hamburg*; Volume 373–7 I, VIII A1, Book 339, 324.
- 28 Jaca and Berardoni, *Colonia*, 144.
- 29 Passenger list Eastern Prince, in *Archive of the Statue of Liberty* (New York, 20 May 1932).
- 30 *New York Times*, 21 May 1932.
- 31 Stirling, postcard to Bertolotti (New York, 22 May 1932), *Archivo Colonia*.
- 32 *New York Times*, 30 May 1932, 8.
- 33 *New York Times*, 12 June 1932, Section S, 1.
- 34 *Evening Star*, 25 June 1932, 21.
- 35 *Los Angeles Times*, 26 June 1932, 62.
- 36 Jaca and Berardoni, *Colonia*, 144.
- 37 *Cincinnati Enquirer*, 29 July 1932, 10.
- 38 Leif Yttergren, “J. Sigfrid Edström and the Nurmi Affair of 1932: The Struggle of the Amateur Fundamentalists against Professionalism of the Olympic Movement,” *JOH*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2007, 21–31.
- 39 *Los Angeles Times*, 8 August 1932, 9.
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- 42 *La Nación*, 8 August 1932, 1.
- 43 *La Prensa*, 9 August 1932, 4.
- 44 *El Gráfico*, 13 August 1932, 13.
- 45 *Los Angeles Times*, 9 August 1932, 15.
- 46 Modesto Bee, 9 August 1932, 10.
- 47 *Ellen Preis, Olympiasieg*, (Wien: Payer & Co., 1936), 65/66.
- 48 *Illustrierte Kronen Zeitung*, 9 August 1932, 12.
- 49 *Freie Stimmen*, 10 August 1932, 4.
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- 55 *Nemzeti Sport*, 21 August 1933, 11.
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- 58 *Sport-Tagblatt*, 13 July 1933, 1.
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- 65 *Neues Tagblatt*, 2 February 1939, 46.
- 66 Appointment of Stirling as entrenador de equipos profesionales: “Minutes of the meeting of the Board of Directors of 25 March 1937”, *Archivo Racing Club*.
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- 69 Stirling, *Ein Leben für den Sport*, 2.
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- 80 *Archivo General de la Nación*, Buenos Aires, no. 206341.
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- 82 *Track Newsletter*, 26 April 1955, 4.
- 83 Vinker, *Adventuras en las pista*, 89–94.
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- 86 Stirling, *Ein Leben für den Sport*, 2, 3, 5.