



From Costante Lussana to Sara Curtis: when Italian champions wear the uniform

Published on 15/08/2026

On August 13, 2026, in Paris, Sara Curtis stopped the clock at **26"56** in the 50-meter backstroke, winning the European title and breaking the world record she had already set the previous day in the semifinals with 26"63.

It is an extraordinary result for Italian swimming, but it is also the latest chapter in a much longer story: that of the champions who have represented Italy at the highest international levels while simultaneously belonging to the Armed Forces or major State Corps.

Reconstructing it completely would mean going through thousands of results, dozens of disciplines, and generations of athletes. What follows is therefore not intended to be a ranking or an exhaustive list, but a journey through some symbolic names and moments that tell how deeply military sports have impacted the history of Italian sports.

A story that does not begin today and, in some cases, even precedes the birth of the current military Sports Centers.

1920: Costante Lussana, the first carabinieri at the Olympics

To find one of the first symbols of this tradition, we must go back to the **1920 Antwerp Olympics**.

In that edition of the Games, **Costante Lussana** participated, competing in the 10,000 meters: he was the first carabinieri in history to take part in an Olympics.

At the time, the modern Carabinieri Sports Center did not yet exist. Athletes were first and foremost military personnel, and competitive activity coexisted much more directly with service.

It is an important detail because it shows how deep the roots of the relationship between elite sports and the military world in Italy are.

Giuseppe Tosi: the cuirassier who climbed the Olympic podium

Another emblematic figure emerged in the post-war period.

Giuseppe "Beppone" Tosi, a carabinieri and cuirassier, was one of the greatest Italian discus throwers of his time. At the **1948 London Olympics**, he won the silver medal in the discus throw, behind Adolfo Consolini.

A few weeks later, he also set the new European record in the discipline with 54.78 meters, later improving it to 54.80.

Tosi was a five-time Italian champion, three-time European silver medalist, and six-time winner of the International Military Championships.

He was a champion in uniform when the Italian military sports system as we know it today was still largely to be built.

The Army and a tradition that spans the Olympics

The **Italian Army** also has a sports tradition that dates back well before the current organization of the Army Olympic Sports Center.

Already in the Olympics between the two wars, Italian military personnel achieved significant results in disciplines where athletic preparation and military training were often closely linked.

Over time, the Army has built a structure capable of bringing its athletes to the top of very diverse disciplines: athletics, modern pentathlon, shooting, fencing, winter sports, parachuting, swimming, and many others.

Among the most recent results before Curtis is also the world final record set in 2014 by **Riccardo Mazzetti**, an athlete from the Army Sports Center, in the 25-meter rapid fire pistol.

But the historical value of the system does not lie in a single record: it lies in the continuity with which generations of military athletes have worn the blue jersey in major international competitions.

The Sixties: the birth of modern military Sports Centers

The post-war period and especially the Sixties mark a turning point.

The Armed Forces and State Corps began to increasingly structure competitive activity through dedicated sports centers and sections.

In **1964**, for example, the Carabinieri Corps officially established its Athletics Sports Section at the 5th Battalion "Emilia Romagna" in Bologna.

During the same period, the Sports Center of the **Air Force** in Vigna di Valle was also growing.

With the Air Force jersey, on October 10, 1965, Second Lieutenant **Mauro Bogliatto** became the first Italian to clear 2.10 meters in the high jump, setting the new national record.

It was the beginning of a structure that in the following decades would accompany athletes of Olympic and world level.

Marcello Guarducci: Italian swimming starts again with a carabinieri

In the Seventies, another story somehow anticipates that of Sara Curtis.

It is that of **Marcello Guarducci**, one of the great names in the revival of Italian swimming and an athlete of the Carabinieri Sports Center from 1975 to 1983.

In 1977, he set the **European record in the 100-meter freestyle at 51"25**, at a time when Italian swimming was still struggling to consistently compete with the great international powers.

Guarducci participated in the 1976 Montreal Olympics, reaching the finals in both the 100 and 200 freestyle events.

His story also well illustrates what it meant to be a military athlete in those years: upon joining the Corps, he performed regular service in the barracks while simultaneously continuing to prepare for the Olympic Games.

Some of the great champions of the Corps

The sporting history of the Corps would continue to produce champions in numerous disciplines.

In athletics, **Vittorio Visini** was a world record holder in the 20 miles and 3 kilometers walk, as well as a participant in three Olympics.

In 1995, **Michele Didoni** won the world title in the 20 kilometers walk in Göteborg.

And then came champions capable of permanently entering the Italian sporting imagination.

One above all is **Armin Zöggeler**, a carabinieri and luge legend: six consecutive Olympic medals between 1994 and 2014, two golds, six world titles, and ten World Cups. Such a long performance that it constitutes a record in the history of the Winter Games.

Air Force: from athletics records to golds on ice

The Air Force has also built over time a vast tradition of champions, of which only a few examples can be recalled here.

After Mauro Bogliatto's Italian record in 1965, the tradition of the Arma Azzurra continued in athletics and numerous other disciplines.

One of the most recent examples is **Francesca Lollobrigida**, First Aviere Scelto and absolute protagonist of the Milan Cortina 2026 Winter Olympics: gold in the 3000 meters speed skating

with an Olympic record and subsequently gold also in the 5000 meters.

A result that confirms how, sixty years after Bogliatto, the Air Force Sports Center continues to produce performances capable of entering the history of Italian sport.

Navy: water, rowing, sailing, and shooting

The **Navy**, by natural vocation but not only, has built an important part of its sporting tradition in aquatic and nautical disciplines.

Rowing, canoeing, sailing, and swimming have seen over time numerous sailor-athletes wear the blue jersey, to which have been added protagonists of shooting and other specialties.

Among the most significant examples of recent decades is **Antonino Barillà**, a double trap specialist, international protagonist with the Navy and a member of Italian teams capable of achieving even world record performances.

The Navy's contribution is part of the same system that, through different structures, allows the Armed Forces to support disciplines that often outside the major professional circuits would have much less chance of providing athletes with top-level preparation.

Fiamme Gialle: a factory of Olympic champions

Expanding the picture to the **Guardia di Finanza**, a military corps of the State, it is impossible not to mention the **Fiamme Gialle**, one of the most important sports societies in Italian history.

From athletics and walking to rowing, canoeing, skiing, and numerous other disciplines, generations of financiers have won Olympic, world, and European titles.

Among the most recent examples are the Olympic gold of **Valentina Rodini** in the lightweight double sculls rowing in Tokyo and the indoor world record of the 5000 meters walk set in 2025 by **Francesco Fortunato**.

These are different results, but they stem from the same model: offering athletes a stable organization within which to build an international-level competitive career.

Not just sports: the case of Moscow 1980

The history of Italian military athletes has also known bitter pages.

The most famous remains that of the **Moscow 1980** Olympics.

After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Italian government politically adhered to the boycott promoted by the United States. The CONI decided to participate anyway, but athletes belonging to the military corps were excluded from the expedition.

44 Italian military athletes were forced to give up the Games.

Among them was Marcello Guarducci, who was at the peak of his athletic maturity. The judoka Ezio Gamba managed to participate after obtaining discharge from the Carabinieri and won the gold medal.

It is an episode that demonstrates how military affiliation has never been just a sporting designation, but a real condition capable, in certain historical moments, of directly affecting athletes' careers.

A system that has built a part of Italian sport

Over the decades, the military Sports Groups have become one of the pillars of national sport.

The reason is simple: many Olympic disciplines do not have a true professional circuit capable of guaranteeing an athlete a salary, facilities, coaches, healthcare, and continuity in preparation.

The Army, Navy, Air Force, Carabinieri, and Guardia di Finanza have helped fill this gap.

Behind many Italian medals, there is a reality that the general public often discovers only at the podium moment: the athlete winning for Italy is also a soldier.

From Lussana to Curtis, over a century of history

In 1920, Costante Lussana ran the 10,000 meters at the Antwerp Olympics with the Carabinieri Corps.

In 1948, the cuirassier Giuseppe Tosi stood on the Olympic podium in London.

In the 1960s, Mauro Bogliatto set the Italian high jump record with the Air Force.

In the 1970s, Marcello Guarducci brought Italian swimming back to the European top in a Carabinieri uniform.

In between, and after them, hundreds of other military athletes arrived: record holders, world champions, Olympians, and protagonists of very diverse disciplines. The names mentioned in this article are just some milestones of a much broader history, which includes figures and results impossible to encapsulate in a single list.

Today, that ideal line reaches **Sara Curtis**.

Caporal Maggiore VFP4 of the Italian Army, European champion, and above all **world record holder in the 50-meter backstroke with 26"56**.

More than a hundred years have passed since Lussana's Olympic debut.

Uniforms, training, facilities, and even the very concept of professional sports have changed.

One thing, however, has remained: when an Armed Forces athlete steps on the block, enters the track, on the platform, or on the ice with the Italian jersey, it is the whole of Italy competing.

And this time, with Sara Curtis, **the limit to beat for the rest of the world also bears the stars of the Italian Army**.

Sources

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- [Arma dei Carabinieri – Armin Zöggeler and the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics](#)
- [Arma dei Carabinieri – Olympic medal table of the Sports Center](#)
- [Italian Army – Riccardo Mazzetti and the automatic pistol record](#)
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- [Air Force – Francesca Lollobrigida, double Olympic gold in Milan Cortina 2026](#)
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- Italian Swimming Federation - Women's world records in long course: Sara Curtis, 26"56 in the 50 backstroke