

The javelin: how Finland dominate the most limb-taxing event in athletics

The Javelin: The throwing Finns: are they made or born?

by Matti Hannus

On a freezing cold and rainy evening in May 2002, more than 4,000 people gathered in anticipation at a small sports park at Vantaa near Helsinki. They were there to see some of the best athletes of the world start another competitive season. What they were offered was fewer than 50 token efforts with a javelin - and nothing else, this being the sole event of an unusual meeting carried out in impossible conditions.

Three months later, more than half of the five million citizens of tiny Finland stayed awake through a balmy August night. It was the javelin craze again, this time the World Athletics Championships in Edmonton, Canada, where Aki Parviainen was doing all he could to defend the world title he had won in Seville in 1999.

None of this would be possible anywhere but Finland. The javelin throw - perhaps the most limb-taxing event of the athletics programme - obviously has something that Finns love. And we don't just watch; we are very good at it. A collection of 26 Olympic medals - nine of them gold - plus several World and European titles and various records are proof of that.

If you award points on a declining basis for positions in Olympic finals, Finland's haul is about three times bigger than that of any other country. Even more amazingly - perhaps equalled by only one other Finnish success story, cross-country skiing - this is a tradition that stretches back over generations for more than 100 years.

What can explain this remarkable heritage? Surprisingly, a British sportswriter and athletics historian knows quite a lot about the subject. After witnessing countless meetings in Finland during many summers, Chris Turner fulfilled a lifelong dream and recently went to the small country town of Pihtipudas for a very special occasion. It is a 'sleepy place which basically lives and breathes javelin, for one week each year becoming the worldwide heart and soul of the event,' he says.

Moulded by the climate - and the availability of great teachers

Pihtipudas Javelin Carnival has been the cradle of all the great Finnish champions since it started in 1971. In 1975 the first javelin school for young athletes was held the day before the competitive meet. 'The idea was to show the kids how to throw the javelin and how to train,' Finnish javelin Head Coach Kari Ihalainen recalls. 'Recently more and more people have taken part, and in the last few years there have been more than 200 boys and girls in attendance.'

According to Ihalainen - one of the leading Finnish throwers in the 1980s - the thing that makes the school so special is the fact that ex-throwers serve as instructors. World record holder Jorma Kinnunen, European Champion Hannu Siitonen, Olympic Champion Tapio Korjus and World Champions Tiina Lillak and Kimmo Kinnunen (Jorma's son) are some of the legends that have guided the young generation on its way to the top over the years.

'The Finns have been moulded psychologically by the extremes of their climate,' says Turner. 'Long dark winters and short glorious summers have produced the archetypal strong but silent national character. The javelin suits the Finns, providing an emotional release for all their pent-up feelings. It's the dual release of spear and emotion which the Finns so much enjoy.'

Sociology emeritus professor Paavo Seppanen has been following sport closely for more than 60 years. In his view, the javelin throw is a model of an individual pursuit which doesn't need much equipment or facilities. 'In the countryside, any small boy could make a rudimentary birch or alder javelin and throw it in any open field. Throwing things - along with lifting stones, putting shots, wrestling arms, climbing trees, etc - has always been part of Finnish physical exercise tradition.'

Finland's first world-beater

In 1891 in Stockholm, young pharmacy student Hjalmar Fellman became the first Finnish javelin thrower to beat the rest of the world. Abiding by the rules then in force, he threw 37.82m from a standing position, without an approach run. His training marks - said to be in excess of 44m - were reported as 'phenomenal, perhaps impossible for a human being'.

In the early part of the 20th century, with the world of sports changing, new challenges emerged. After much struggle, Finland became an independent sovereign country in 1917, bringing national pride and identity into the sports picture. Just three years later at Antwerp, an Olympic javelin contest was - for the first and only time - dominated by a quartet of competitors from one country. The photograph of Jonni Myyr... (the winner), flanked by his countrymen Urho Peltonen, Paavo Johansson-Jaale and Julius Saaristo, remains one of the defining moments of Finnish sport.

According to 1964 Olympic Champion Pauli Nevala's amusing definition, 'what a great javelin thrower needs is a combination of egocentrism, guts bordering stupidity, plus lots of ambition and limitless greed to succeed - all of which happen to be scorned by our society!' More seriously, you must know how to train, how to prepare for a meeting, and how to execute the intricate movement that, as Matti Jarvinen once wrote 'takes absolutely all the power available in your body, even if for a flash of the moment only'.

Olympic champion, twice European champion, 10-time world record holder and unbeatable for many years, Jarvinen was the King of the Javelin in the 1930s. An immensely versatile athlete, he could have been a great decathlete (as his brother Aki, twice Olympic silver medallist, was). With the present system of measuring the throws (ie not required to land at an angle), Jarvinen's best efforts would have gone over 80m as early as 1936. He was also a perfect technician and the first javelin thrower to train in a way that would be recognised by today's experts.

The world-famous Finnish way of throwing was actually born with Jarvinen. According to national throwing Head Coach Mauri Auvinen, 'what a champion in this event needs is a born talent purified into sense of rhythm, good mobility and explosiveness. You have to be able to handle the details of the approach run as well. Many of the top Finnish throwers have a natural background of endurance honed by years of cross-country skiing.'

Jukka Viitasalo, an expert in biomechanics and professor at Research Institute of Olympic Sports in Jyväskylä, roughly defines the Finnish way of throwing as 'arching the body to resemble a string of a bow, with the throwing motion taking place straight above the bracing leg - unlike the Czech Jan Zelezny's slightly off-centre throw'.

Every expert consulted for this article agreed in one respect: there really isn't a typical physical mould of a world-class thrower. There have been big men with a great [body mass](#) to carry (as exemplified by World champion and three-time Olympic medallist Seppo Raty) and smaller athletes as well - often with an excellent technique - at or near the top. But the experts also agree that the Finnish body type, usually with a long back and shortish legs, is not a hindrance to success in this event.

The socio-economic route: sport offers a leg up the social ladder

It is by no means a secret that there was money around in Finnish sports as early as the 1920s. Paavo Nurmi's hectic racing schedule on his home tracks as well as in Europe and the United States was the firm background for his later success as a business man and building contractor.

As for the javelin throw, sportswriter Urho Salo tells an interesting story. The late Yrjo Nikkanen - a magnificent natural talent, whose world record of 78.70m from 1938 stood for 15 years - told him he sometimes earned 'an equivalent of an army officer's monthly wages in one meet as an under-the-table payment - and there were many meets like that during the summer'.

According to sports historian Anttoi O. Arponen, 'thanks to his javelin capacity, a poor country boy could become a member of a leading club, at the same time getting better-paid work and climbing higher on the social ladder'.

This year, Aki Parviainen, the latest of those country boys, almost made it in Edmonton. After a five-week lay-off due to a troublesome elbow, he managed to gather all his mental and physical strength into his first throw, putting it out to 91.31m, one of his best efforts ever. It finally proved to be good enough for silver, behind three-time Olympic champion Jan Zelezny of the Czech Republic. (His elbow was at such a breaking point that it had to be operated on a few weeks later.) A junior World champion in 1992 at age 17, Parviainen says he, too, was hurling stones into lakes 'like thousands of other youngsters. I was doing sports from as young as I can remember. Skiing, running, jumping, throwing... Volleyball also was a factor for a while until I decided that an individual sport would suit me best.'

Coaches and fans provide magical link with forefathers

Nevertheless, Parviainen's coach, Leo Pusa, doesn't deny that there are threatening clouds on the horizon, particularly in the women's event: 'Sixty metres is not much to boast about when world class means 68 to 70m. There are so many things today - including very popular indoor ball games - taking young people's interest away.'

Professors Seppanen and Viitasalo have also noted the declining level of fitness among Finnish youth. 'Sitting and staring at a computer day after day doesn't bode well for an athlete's future,' both of them sigh.

Mikaela Ingberg, World and European bronze medallist and a solid competitor for many years - is more optimistic: 'I think that as long as we have success in the senior ranks, there will always be kids wanting to try the event,' she says. According to Head Coach Auvinen, the crop of male juniors in the 17-20 years age group is full of promise at the moment. He still thinks the best throwers will come from the countryside rather than cities.

After witnessing the Pihtipudas Carnival weekend, British guest Chris Turner has absolutely no worries about the days to come. 'One champion inspires the next and so on. Also the continued technical and training knowledge of Finnish throwers, past and present, has done a lot to ensure that the Finnish dynasty continues.'

Coach Ihalainen is certainly not lacking in confidence for the future: 'Finnish javelin has the most glorious history in the world. We also have a unique coaching culture. We have countless indoor facilities for training through the long and cold winter. But most of all, we have the best sports crowds anywhere, still giving all the possible support and incentive to our athletes as they did 100 years ago.'

Urho Salo tells of a Finnish javelin thrower who liked to see his sport almost in divine dimensions. 'Every time I throw and see, after a beautiful arch, the implement hit the ground more than 70 metres away, I feel as if I am united with my forefathers' land. There are no words to describe how proud I am to be a Finn.'