

# Summaries

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## **Hannu Itkonen & Seppo Knuuttila: Nurmi, the cold-blooded king of the track**

The year of 1997 saw the centenary of the runner-hero of all times, Paavo Nurmi. In addition to seminars and other events to commemorate him, Nurmi has been the subject of quite a few articles; on one hand, the story of traditional biography has been retold, on the other, when the story has contained numerous words of praise, Nurmi has been recognized as a mythical hero.

In this paper we do not look for previous mistakes or misinterpretations, rather we analyze to what extent Paavo Nurmi has become a symbol of Finnishness. We do not set ourselves to comparing reality to fable because also stories reflect and create reality, and are part of it. This 'open-minded' point of view does not aim at revealing, not to mention at destroying, myths which manifest themselves as strong images and repetitions. In stead, it is pertinent to look at what propensities of the record-runner have been described as Finnishness, and how the identities of citizenry and nationality have been brought to bear upon each other in different times.

Up-lifted by his achievements and world-records Nurmi became the idol created by the press, later also by the radio. Nurmi himself exercised influence on his publicity-image not only by running but also by writing and taking part in many a project. He did not, however, do it unconditionally. Nurmi had his own ways when it came to his class background, belief in 'talent' in sports, perseverance (*sisu* in Finnish), the procedures and rules of sports system, publicity, success, marriage and solitude. One reason for his obstinacy might have been that he was presented to the public as a collective representative of the 'White' (right-wing) Finland, although Nurmi himself emphasized the meaning of individuality and personality in his writings and sayings. Nurmi was depicted as "the Big Lonely Man" with reference to the track and private life, but also as "the Big Reticent Man", which was problematic in relation to the public. In consequence, Nurmi's scarce sayings

have been repeated as if they could encapsulate some rare wisdom. Also this is part of the rhetoric of Finnishness in which the reticence of the Great Men has been considered the sign of worthiness and profundity. It is a paradox that Nurmi defended his individuality in a working-men's sports review (*Työväen Urheilulehti*).

Nurmi run in a dual publicity. Finnish and American sports realities differed a lot in the 1920s. In Finland, the story of Nurmi was that of an athlete who ran Finland onto the map of world. In the national biography from the year 1932 (*Kansallinen elämäkerrasto*) it was surmised that the world by and large knew of Finland only as the distant and wonderful country of Nurmi. The sportsmen in the United States competed for money more openly, in stead, and those who succeeded earned quite well, too. The slow ripening of the sports publicity in Finland is reflected in its attitude towards money-earning races of the two master runners; Hannes Kolehmainen was not, in any case, made culpable of his running for money in the same way Nurmi had been.

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### **Reijo Häyrinen: Paavo Nurmi – how to become a hero by using the finnish 'sisu' (perseverance)**

Finnish athletes were able to compete with almost equal success with American athletes in the Olympics of the 1920s and the 1930s. The medals, 198 in all, won by them naturally aroused wonder – how was it possible for such a small country as Finland to succeed so well? The amount of medals, however, reveals some inclination; they were mostly won in athletics and wrestling. The success was not gained on a wide front. Furthermore, in athletics, the Finns concentrated their efforts on long-distance running and a few individuals were prominent, at first Hannes Kolehmainen, later Paavo Nurmi – 'the flying Finn' who overshadowed many a good athlete. The 12 Olympic medals won by Nurmi brought the concept of 'sisu' forward.

'Sisu' is an ambiguous concept, meaning perseverance, goal-orientedness and -consciousness. The success of the Finns could also be explained by their racial characteristics and political circumstances, especially the relationship to Russia

which added strength to Finnish nationalism. It also provided a handy weapon in propaganda. It should be remembered that the success of the Finns was also based on hopes of social rise and progress in future. This was also Nurmi's stand; he aimed at being the best and he acted on it. His detailed and systematic training programme was the road to the goal. As Nurmi himself put it: "Fitness is not depended on how many times and for how long one performs when training but on how good use is made of them".

Nurmi was also a 'revolutionary': he fought against the rules of amateurism. He realized that the organizers took advantage of his participation in competitions, so it would not be amiss that he himself also profited something from his running. Nurmi took on an ascetic image which was reflected also in foreign comments on Finnish runners. In itself Nurmi was not a superman. Rather, he had built his fitness further than his competitors. Mentally he can be regarded as superior to them; when he was fit, he could dare to run on his own conditions. At the start he might run in the tail-end but finally clinch the win. He was different; his ways of training and practise were many-sided and calculated in ways which became more generally applied only much later. He was hard to himself and became a master through heavy practise and 'sisu'. Nurmi also made himself famous through sports and he was, unlike others, able to utilize his own own value.

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#### **Karin Wikberg Lindroth: The amateur question in the Swedish sports movement during the interwar period**

Accompanied by the English amateur ideal, competitive sports in Sweden was gradually organized in the last decades of the 19th century. In 1903 Sweden's National Sports Association (*Sveriges Riksidrottsförbund, RF*) was formed and common amateur regulations were formulated. The amateur ideal meant, *inter alia*, that the organized sportsman was not allowed to earn money on his sport or compete with professional athletes (*professionister*). During its first decade RF was continuously plagued by conflicts concerning the amateur regulations. Sports leaders and member organizations of the RF threatened with separation which could break up the

young association and the unity of the sports movement. However, RF succeeded in keeping the organization together by working out special regulations for every sport and its so called special organization (*specialförbund*). They were, on a preliminary level, adopted just before the Olympic games in Stockholm in 1912 – the very sports feast that became a successful examination for Swedish amateur sports.

During the interwar period, organized sports strengthened its position as a mass movement as far as membership rolls and diffusion to the countryside are concerned. However, the 1920s started with a crisis of confidence both within the sports movement and within the Swedish Parliament (*Riksdagen*). The state grant was reduced by 50 percent and the first public sports investigation followed immediately. Behind these spectacular events one can trace the tendencies to professionalism, in particular within football and athletics. RF tried to solve the problems in various ways; common regulations were reintroduced, an intense propaganda campaign was carried out and so forth. The big problem, however, concerning compensation for loss of earnings, remained unsolved.

In 1929, special compensation paragraphs were introduced in addition to the recently revised set of regulations. For the first time, Swedish amateur sportsmen were allowed to receive compensation for loss of earnings. Then, it was believed that the amateur question was solved once and for ever. But already within a year the regulations of the international sports federations (including the *International Olympic Committee*) reduced the room for national solutions. It became clear that Swedish amateur sports were in the hands of international opinions and decisions. RF could not do much more than respect international regulations, the alternative being to break relations with all organized competitive sports in the Western World.

Football, a sport of growing popularity and pecuniary well-being, succeeded in extending the narrowly regulated amateurism. The Swedish Football organization (*Svenska Fotbollförbundet*) gained an advantage out of the international counterpart (*Fédération Internationale de Football Association*, *FIFA*), which in 1932 withdrew its amateur regulations

thereby opening the door to all football players irrespective of status as amateurs or professionals. In Sweden (as probably in all comparable countries) this tended to allow room for somewhat more liberal attitudes and practices. So called masked or camouflaged (*maskerad*) professionalism grew up systematically, more or less within the existing amateur regulations.

Development in the 1930s demonstrates an increasing commercialization of competitive sports; resource mobilization behind the great performers increased. Existing amateur regulations resting on conservative values could not limit the growing tendencies towards professionalism. Double standard of morality was the price to pay for taking part in the Olympics and other leading events.

World War II suspended two Olympic games isolating sports competitions to the national level or preventing them altogether. Sweden, assuming neutrality during the War, experienced sports heroes instead of war heroes. But this led to the most scandalous and debated amateur conflict in the country, ending in frustrating trials in 1945–46. Some of the sports heroes were disqualified (Gunder Hägg, Arne Andersson and others) and a lot of sports leaders all over the country were punished. These events formed a turning-point. In 1948 RF took the amateur regulations away from its statutes. In 1967 the amateur ideal was abandoned completely. On international level, however, the Olympic amateur survived somewhat longer – but he (or she) too was, of course, sentenced to death.

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### **Heikki Roiko-Jokela: The Nurmi -debate**

The career of the legendary Finnish runner, Paavo Nurmi, was heading towards its consummation in 1932; he was to run the marathon in the Olympic games in Los Angeles. If won, it would have been his fourth gold medal in row. The dream, however, never came true. It has been suggested that the reason for the failure was sports-political pedantry, and above all, "national envy". The Swedish sports leader and the chairman of the IAAF, Sigfrid Edström, imbued with hatred of Finns, saw to it that Nurmi was suspended on the basis of accusations of professionalism.

In the ensuing debate the Finnish party was unanimous; it regarded the accusations as unfounded rumours. For as long as it was proven otherwise, Nurmi remained an amateur and was to be treated as such. He had to be given a chance to compete in the Olympics. The appeals and arguments of the Finnish Sports Federation were to no avail. In unholy ways of sports-political tricks the participation of Nurmi in the games was prevented – one of the most magnificent careers in sports history was not crowned.

In the debate before the Olympics interest focused on Nurmi himself, the accusations made against him and on the ways the Finns tried to get the suspension removed. After the games the debate veered around the question of amateurism/professionalism. The rules of the IAAF were to be revised to meet the requirements of the times. In many countries national sports federations were dispersed and new sprang up. The question was how sufficiently recompense the expenses of training and the loss of income for the amateur athletes. In the background lurked national interest and the urge to maintain the fame of sports.

For Nurmi as a runner time had run out. The failure to achieve his Olympic dream, uncertainty of his career, injuries, ageing, his disappointment at sports leaders and sports politics, all took their toll. The letter of Urho Kekkonen of the 7th of June, 1934, may have been the final stroke. The sports politicians were to blame. Nurmi himself maintained his status as "The Great Retiree" and "The King of Runners".

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### **Ossi Viita: Were Ville Ritola and Paavo Nurmi friends or enemies?**

Ville Ritola's and Paavo Nurmi's relations with each other varied according to the historical context. While still running, they were combatants. Later, Ritola was partly forgotten and Nurmi celebrated. Since Ritola moved back to Finland, Nurmi and Ritola became friends. They were never enemies.

Ville Ritola who had emigrated to the United States in 1913, reached the elite of runners in winter, 1923. In January, 1924, he arrived in Finland to train for the Olympics to be held in Paris. Nurmi felt threatened. Nurmi and Ritola were

not to compete in the test race for Olympics in Helsinki in May – Nurmi claimed that he was not quite fit to run because of an injury in knee. Nurmi did not like running unfit and especially against someone to whom he might lose. He wanted to retain the image of the unbeaten 'King of Runners'. Notwithstanding, Nurmi had to suffer one blow; Ritola beat his world record in 10 000 metres.

Extra friction in Nurmi's and Ritola's relations was caused by the special arrangements in running order set by Finnish sports leaders in the Paris Olympics. When Nurmi abstained from running 10 000 metres, they persuaded Ritola to give up running 5000 metres and let Nurmi win that race. In post-Olympics races Nurmi beat Ritola twice, in Turku and in Tampere. Ritola did not mind these setbacks, more serious were to come: Nurmi and Ritola competed in the United States in 1925 and Nurmi was still winning. Now Ritola changed his tactics and started to run different races than Nurmi. Ritola took part in the longer distances and beat world records, Nurmi did the same with shorter distances. Ritola was not ready to face Nurmi in longer distances until he felt he was fit enough for it. Their queer competition went on; they started to run the same distances but in different events. They kept eye on each other and tried to beat each others' times.

Before the Amsterdam Olympics, Ritola and Nurmi competed once in Finland. The race was a fake one; they crossed the line together since they did not want to show their real strength. Ritola did not like this kind of theatre. Surprisingly, Ritola beat Nurmi in 5000 metres in Amsterdam. He was quite overjoyed by it exclaiming in the finish: "I beat that devil".

After Ritola's career was ended he was forgotten. He was, however, invited as a honourable guest to the Olympics in Helsinki. He did not want to go. Nurmi and Hannes Kolehmainen played the main roles in the opening ceremony.

Ritola did not consider his Olympic races he had run the toughest. Although they had brought him five gold and two silver medals, he regarded the races in the United States as the hardest to win. He mentioned the American Joie Ray his toughest combatant.

Everything changed when Ritola moved back to Finland in



June, 1971. Nurmi had arranged a sportsman's pension and a flat for him and his family. Ritola and Nurmi became friends. Although Ritola's comments on Nurmi after Nurmi's death were rather sneaky, they could not change this fact. Nurmi's and Ritola's relations to each other were coloured by tough competition, not by hatred, although the newspapers magnified their competition by describing their relations in hostile wordings. Ritola became also accustomed to Nurmi's reticence, what others, who did not know Nurmi so well, could characterize as coldness and pride. Nurmi and Ritola could not have become friends if they had not got along with each other during their sporting careers. Ritola was one of the few who understood Nurmi. This was the basis of their friendship.

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### **Janne Mykrä: The shepherd from Rekola – the heir of Paavo Nurmi?**

Paavo Nurmi was the legend of long-distance running in the 1920s. His achievements in Olympic games and in conquering America have not been surpassed. There grew quite a few good long-distance runners who tried to run in Nurmi's footsteps in Finland in the 1930s. One of the best of them was 'the shepherd from Rekola', Taisto Mäki. He was a talented runner who started proper training when he was already over 20 years old. However, he had earlier practised various sports. Mäki was one of the first long-distance runners who began training as much and as effectively as it is done today. He reached the top international level in the years 1938–1939 when he broke altogether six world records, out of which the first ever under 30 minutes time in 10 000 meters race was the foremost. He had not previously competed on that level because of many injuries. In 1938 he took part in European Championships and won the 5000 meter's race. The World War II vanished his hopes for success in 1940 Olympics. Since then, his career as a top-ranking athlete started to decline. In spite of his achievements, Mäki remained an unknown champion in sports history. He did not match the achievements of the King of Runners, Nurmi, although his talent could have made it possible.



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### **Ville Tolvanen: Competition and spur; the sporting life among the Finnish troops in Karelia isthmus during the continuation war**

The reconciliation between sports federations in Finland paved the way to the unity of the Finns in the Winter War. However, during the Continuation War most of the sports functionaries and sportsmen in their prime were at the front. During the period of trench warfare they started to organize physical exercise there. In the Karelian Isthmus this happened at the end of the year of 1941, soon after the trench war had begun. Competitions were being organized and some mass events were being planned. These activities were hampered by the shortage of equipment. In the company under scrutiny here, competitions were held in skiing. The favourite ball-games were Finnish baseball and volley-ball. Since the year 1943 also orienteering became popular. During spring and autumn and while the troops were at the front sports could not be continued on the same scale. The liveliest year was 1943, and next year could perhaps have been as busy if fighting had not been resumed in June, 1944.

In general, competitive sports lifted the *esprit de corps* and morale as the soldiers usually spurred their own on. Besides, individually performed physical exercises gave added mental strength. Soldiers from many different age-groups could – at least in theory – be gathered for exercise together. It is, however, difficult to unravel to what extent did organized sports endorse positive attitudes towards physical exercise.

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### **Antti O. Arponen: The Finnish sports review celebrates its centenary (1998)**

*The Finnish Sports Review (Suomen Urheilulehti)* was founded by the master of physical training and the 'Father of Finnish Sports', Ivar Wilskman. The first issue of the review came out in March, 1898. The review is the oldest to be published in Scandinavia. At first it was published once, later twice a month. In its heyday, in 1929–1930, it came out three times a week. Since the year 1967, it has come out once a week.

The review was a harbinger in disseminating ideas and news at the turn of the century, in an age when daily newspapers did not write much of sports. Since the Olympics in Stockholm its circulation increased to 5000, but the Civil War in 1918 almost ended its march. The remarkable success of Finnish sportsmen in Olympics in the 1920s inaugurated new rise to the review. Its circulation numbers reached 25 000. Before the World War II they hit the highest, 30 000 – this was at the time of Berlin Olympics.

In spite of increase in circulation, the review was an economic failure for many years, and its owners were often changed. The longest term of ownership was by The Finnish Federation of Sports (SVUL) in 1951–1991. It was, however, problematic for the review to remain exclusively an organ for SVUL, and the circulation numbers stuck to about 20 000 for a long time.

The review had to fight for its existence since the middle-1950s. Daily newspapers have given increasing coverage to sports and also the periodicals carry interest in sports actively. The public watches all the main events as direct broadcasts on TV. In these competitive circumstances a specialized sports review has had to reformulate its editorial policy and line continuously. The review reached its widest ever circulation in the end of the 1980s, almost 50 000, but it has been on the decline lately.

The editors of the review have come from the class of great Finnish sportsmen and -activists, after Wilskman Arvo Vartia, Lauri Pihkala, Toivo Aro, Martti Jukola, Harri Eljanko, Paul Särmeikkö and Aaro Laine among others.