


# The 2<sup>nd</sup> European Combined Events Conference

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## Tallinn, Estonia

**T**he 2nd European Combined Events Conference attracted a total of 77 appreciative athletes, coaches, journalists and fans of the combined events from five countries to Tallinn, Estonia, from 30 to 31 January 2013 and provided a strong start for the sixth year of the European Athletics Coaching Summit Series.

The conference, which was organised by the Estonian Athletic Association (*Eesti Kergejõustikuliit*) with support from European Athletics, the Estonian Culture Capital and Tallinn Port, featured an innovative programme of expert presentations, practical demonstrations and sample training sessions that went beyond athletics to touch on gymnastics and even the dramatic arts under the theme “The Secret of Athletics Longevity is ...”.

The man behind the programme, Jaanus Kriisk, said his wish was to introduce different ways of reaching the top in athletics. In many countries, especially smaller countries that have only had a few top athletes, there is a danger of the formation of what he calls “a monopoly of truth”. A world-class athlete’s path to success can come to be seen as the only right way and young athletes for whom that particular approach is unsuitable may have a difficult time if they are forced to follow it too closely. In the worse cases, they may give up the sport altogether.

As combined event athletes normally require a particularly long time to mature, it is necessary to open a discussion on prolonging

athletes’ careers until they can reach their full potential. This conference did just that and in the process a variety of topics were touched, including adaptations of training methodology, the role of parents and the athlete-coach relationship.

According to Kriisk, “a modern coach has to be patient and smart – there are no small or marginal things in world-class sports. Winners are the athletes who train wisely and make fewer mistakes.”

The conference was followed by an international indoor heptathlon, making an impressive four-day combined events festival. “I wrote my friends that in Tallinn I was even breathing combined events”, said the Belgian coach Fernando Oliva.

## Opening

Day 1 comprised presentations given at the conference hotel, the Radisson Blue Olümpia in the centre of Tallinn. The participants were welcomed by federation president Erich Teigamägi and former world top-10 ranked decathlete Toomas Berendsen, both of whom expressed the hope that high-level combined events conferences in Tallinn will become a tradition that can be shared by enthusiasts from all over Europe and beyond.

Highlighting the importance of the combined events in Estonia, Berendsen - who was a part of a golden generation of Estonian decathletes in the 1990s that included 2000

Olympic Champion Erki Nool as well as eight performers over 7500 points from a country of just over one million inhabitants - reminded the audience that it had been 90 years since Estonian athlete Aleksander Klumberg-Kolmpere set the first IAAF recognised world record in the decathlon before going on to win a bronze medal at the 1924 Olympic Games in Paris.

### **The Pros and Cons of a Long Athletics Career for Women / A Parent as a Coach of a Professional Athlete**

*Ludmila Olijars (LAT)*

Olijars based her two presentations on personal experiences as a top 100m hurdler (12.90 sec in 1989) and as a coach whose athletes include her son Stanislav (2006 European Champion at 110m hurdles) and two former European U23 champion heptathletes, Aiga Grabuste and Liga Klavina. She said that she had planned on giving up her own competitive career up at the age of 28 after suffering a trauma and barely failing to make it on to the USSR team. But after she started considering sport as her profession she recovered and was able to stay healthy and compete injury-free for another eight years. Since 1992 it has become more even more feasible for athletes to continued into their thirties because it is possible to make significant money by competing.

She explained that in world-class sport everything depends on physical capability, health, and attitude towards training. The coach must arrange a well thought-through training process. If he/she do this right, relying on scientific research, experience and intuition, then success for the athlete is possible. But longevity comes down to the athlete's will. No one can force even talented athletes to train with full devotion unless the athletes want to do it. They must make their own decisions about what to with their lives. One can do miraculous deeds with powerful motivation, but you cannot train motivation – you either have it or not. Misfortune, injuries and setbacks could have a severe impact on an athlete's motivation, but this is

where the coach comes in. It depends on the coach's mastery to keep an athlete healthy and at the same time achieve great results.

She added that the relationship between the coach and the athlete has a great influence on the success of the training process itself. For female athletes, a lot comes down to emotion and how to say things: loud remarks can trigger tears, quiet but "strong" words could help in unimaginable ways. She prefers to train athletes who become members of the training group's "family". Those who train as an element of their school lessons are often unable to reach their potential.

### **Five Olympics - Five Different Situations**

*Aleksander Tammert (EST)*

Discus thrower Tammert, who competed at five Olympic Games, won a bronze medal at the age of 31 and set his personal best at 33, gave an overview of his long career. He started training under the guidance of his father, Aleksander Tammert senior, worked with Dave Wollmann while studying in the USA and later was self-coached. He said he owes his success to the wisdom of the coaches who gave him the opportunity to develop at his own pace and put the secret for athletics longevity into three quotations: "Better to train too little than too much" (Tammert Sr), "Avoid exercises which can bring injuries" (Wollmann), and "Feel your body" (Tammert Jr).

He said that the foundation for longevity is laid at a younger age, when it is important to learn technique and move forward at a moderate pace, and that progress has to be based on versatility – "the chain is only as strong as it's weakest link" (Tammert was at various times Estonian champion in discus throw, shot put, weight-lifting and power-lifting). He added that an athlete must constantly work on technique throughout his/her career because with the improvement of physical abilities more difficult nuances to technique can be added to improve performance.

He warned against too much emphasis on strength training. He used his own progress table as an example of how results in the discus throw do not necessarily correlate with high strength indicators. For example, in 2006 when he set his personal best 70.82m, his body-weight was at an all-career low – 116kg – and his strength indicators were: clean 165kg, snatch 125kg, squats 200kg, bench press 180kg, forward throw with a 5kg shot 21.50m. But that was also the year he reached his personal best of 3.32m for the standing long jump. When he had his highest body-weight - 127kg - and his strength indicators were: clean 170kg, snatch 130kg, squats 220kg, bench press 195kg and forward throw with a 5kg shot 21.80m his best throw was 67.75m. His standing long jump that year was 3.28m.

Throughout Tammert's career, his father's role evolved - at first he was a coach, role model and guide in the sea of life, later he became a manager and advisor. Tammert finds only positive things to say about training under the guidance of his father and is certain that he would not have wanted to work with many of the well-known authoritarian coaches of the USSR era. He also said that he always valued his rivals, particularly the Canadian Jason Tunks during the period spent in the USA and countryman and Olympic Champion Gerd Kanter. A special place is reserved for the Virgilijus Alekna (LAT), who Tammert says was the world's best thrower and from whom he learned much about work ethic, throwing technique and strength training.



*Aleksander Tammert*

## Using Dramatic Art in the Sports Arena

*Elmo Nüganen (EST)*

Nationally known actor and producer Elmo Nüganen used a workshop-style approach to engage the audience. He started by drawing parallels between the mental aspects of sports and dramatic arts. He compared performing on stage and at athletics competitions, noting the similarities of the preparation process and citing the success factors of talent, the ability to learn and diligence.

He said that he got his courage and inner peace from the director Adolf Šapiro who compared the job of a director to running a marathon – the fact that you don't lead at the beginning doesn't mean a thing, you still have a long way to go. Šapiro said that a lot of young directors work like sprinters, they want to produce a perfect play from the start and pour all their knowledge and skill into it.

In a lively discussion with the audience, Nüganen addressed a number of issues and concluded that both actors and combined event competitors have to forget a bad start, keep calm and focus on the parts of their performance yet to come. One cannot dwell on failures – you still have a whole play or competition ahead of you. And there are many more plays and competitions in the future.

### Practical Sessions

On Day 2, interesting and valuable practical presentations, which included sample training sessions, were led by Olijars, Tammert and gymnastics specialist Bronislavs Konstantinovičs at the Audentes Sports Centre in Tallinn.

Working with a group of young heptathletes in a training session, Olijars explained a number of running and hurdling exercises that are particularly useful for combined events athletes, repeatedly stressing the importance of the right body positions. She used four

mini-hurdles made of wire for improving the movement of the foot during the long jump approach. She suggested a number special exercises on a bench for strengthening weak lower back and body muscles. As the session progressed, the exercise performing skills of the athletes improved significantly-

“The Third Attempt” was the title of Tammert's practical presentation, in which he raised typical mistakes made by decathletes in the throwing disciplines and then stressed that an athlete has to stay calm during a competition and keep good emotions in mind while completing a throw. He recommended doing a lot of repeats and said that athletes should focus on all the things that have gone well in training, because in training your senses have helped you perform hundreds or even thousands of successful throws. Using a young discus thrower he coaches, Piidu Niit (personal best 60.69m), and young decathletes for demonstrations, he reminded the audience that a good throw begins with the feet and is smooth with even acceleration. Well-known for his great technique, Tammert performed some of the exercises himself emphasising throughout that it is vital to maintain balance and feel the ground.

Konstantinovičs entitled his presentation “Gymnastics as the Basis for a Harmonically Developed and Long-lived Body”. He began with demonstrations of simple exercises that should be basic knowledge for track and field athletes. He said very common shoulder and thigh injuries could be avoided by doing regular stretching exercises on a so-called Swedish Ladder. He moved on to demonstrating more complex exercises, reminding the audience that all must be performed correctly in order to avoid injuries and that athletes should progress to the next step in gymnastics training programme only when they are completely ready. For example, you can use different swings in an over-stretch position, so-called “boats”, as preparatory exercises for the handstand, which is necessary when teaching pole



*Ludmila Olijar addressed the participants during her practical session.*

vault. While swinging on the horizontal bar, Konstantinovičs demonstrated how to use straps for increasing the speed of the process. The session wrapped up with demonstration exercises on the trampoline.

## Support

Simultaneous interpretation was offered so the presenters could speak in their mother tongue and the participants could listen in Estonian and English. As two of the participants were hearing impaired, sign language interpreters were also provided.

The lecturer handouts were translated from their original languages into Estonian by decathlete Juhan Kilumets and coach Jaanus Kägu.

All the practical sessions were video recorded and copied on to DVDs for the participants.

## Participant Feedback

In a written post-conference satisfaction survey, 100% of the participants either “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with the statements “The conference as a whole was worthwhile and valuable” and “I would recommend that other coaches and athletes from my country take part in future European Athletics Coaching Summit Series conferences.”

General comments included:

- “It is good this kind of conference is held. I hope it was not the last one.”
- “Everything was well done. This kind of conferences with lectures on international level should be held more often.”
- “This type of sharing experience is very useful to get new ideas and remember old ones.”
- “Thank you for very nice and exciting day. The presentations and practical sessions were all interesting and gave a lot of good ideas for training.”



Conference participant Tiina Torop, a long-time coach, lecturer and winner of the European Athletics Coaching Award in 2012, praised Olijars' presentations said she had carefully dissected hurdling and long jump techniques and teaching methods focusing on key moments. "It was a high-standard performance – a lot of attention was paid to details but at the same time she didn't forget the big picture. People showed a lot of interest and recognition, so it took a remarkable amount of time to answer all the questions."

Huko Linnas, who coaches a group of young combined events athletes, said he particularly liked the aspect of Nüganen's presentation that focused on the attitude towards failure: "you have to set long-term goals; one bad competition doesn't mean it is all over. You can't let setbacks discourage you because they are a natural part of the process of reaching your goals." He also very much liked the fact that Tammert focused his practical session on combined events athletes and described in understandable terms the origins of technical mistakes and how to avoid making them.

Enn Roosi, the former coach of the Estonian national combined events team said he was happy that all lecturers emphasised the need for patience, knowledge and training with proper loads for the athlete's age and abilities. "Too few talented young athletes reach senior level sport because they have trained like adults when they were still children."

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